

THE SIDE EFFECTS OF FREE TRADE

Unhealthy business

Globalisation has brought with it the threat of disease and food safety

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THE benefits of trade liberalisation have been well detailed: Tariff concessions and greater exchange of goods and services, for instance. But even as countries seek free trade agreements, a recent meeting of regional health ministers has shown that not all is rosy when it comes to trade liberalisation.

A Singapore Ministry of Health spokesperson told TODAY: "There was consensus that globalisation and trade liberalisation had brought many benefits but also new challenges, including the threat of emerging infectious diseases and food (and product) safety in a globalised supply chain."

Such risks, said the spokesperson, "were clearly apparent in the Sars crisis of 2003 and the recent melamine scare".

Officials from the Association of South-east Asian Nation (Asean) as well as China, Japan and South Korea met last month during the Third Asean Plus Three Health Ministers meeting in Manila to address concerns over the "adverse impact" of trade liberalisation on health.

Highlighting food safety as one area for collaboration, the ministers "condemned strongly unscrupulous business practices and cover-up by any entity".

They agreed that melamine, an industrial chemical that had been added to Chinese dairy products sparking a global scare, "should never be added deliberately to any food product".

In an email to TODAY, the World Health Organization (WHO) said that trade liberalisation increases the opportunities for sourcing and moving products all over the world. As such, "food safety becomes more an issue that needs to be tackled at the international level".

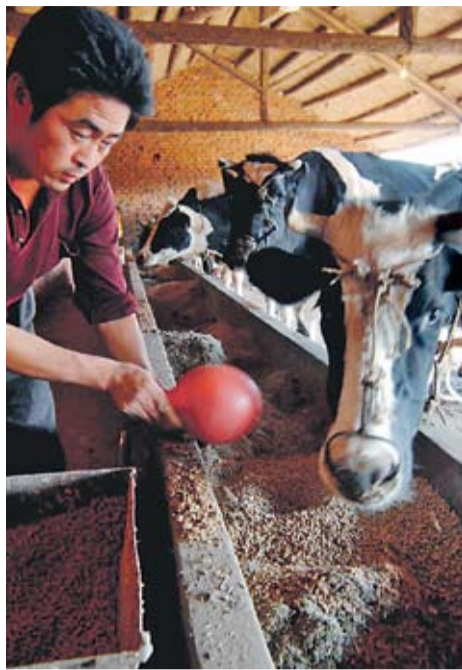
While food safety is high on the list of a few countries, such as North America and Japan, "it needs to be higher on the agenda of all countries," said the WHO, or it will be "impossible or very difficult to bring changes across the different ministries with sometimes competing interests, priorities and agendas".

DON'T BLOW FOOD SAFETY, MELAMINE ISSUE OUT OF PROPORTION

But senior fellow Bill Durodie of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) cautioned against paying too much attention to food safety.

"Governments want to be seen to address public concerns. But this could make things worse because when governments divert a lot of their resources to discuss food safety, it can make people imagine that food safety is a big problem," he said.

There are "on occasion" a few issues that may justify such fears, but "keep melamine in proportion," said the co-ordinator for the Homeland Defence Research Programme.



EPA

Many will claim to be ill from the chemical, but "these things take on a dynamic when people think they have been exposed. They become truly ill through fear".

More importantly, he said, "food scares have very little to do with food safety". Constantly bombarded with warnings such as terrorism, avian flu and toxic food, people become more fearful, he explained.

So, is the spread of melamine-contaminated food products a sign of things to come with the liberalisation of trade? "It may point to some systemic problem within the entire Chinese food production and supply chain area," said Dr Durodie. "But exposing the Chinese to the world market is probably the fastest way of addressing these issues."

FREE TRADE BRINGS FASTER SOLUTIONS

With trade liberalisation, checks and balances can move more easily across borders, counteracting the presence of harmful products.

"While problems can develop quite quickly, solutions also develop much faster," he said.

A case in point: During the Sars period in 2003, scientists in South-east Asia worked all day and passed the information on to teams in Europe at night, who then handed it to their American counterparts.

Associate Research Fellow at RSIS Ng Sue Chia added that trade liberalisation allows opportunities to monitor the regional food supply chain "from a more holistic 'farm-to-fork' and 'whole-of-economies' perspective".

Meanwhile, the WHO advised governments to "be aware of the possibility of importing products with hazards not usually found (in them)".

Governments should gather as much information on product origins and ingredients, to help them decide if additional testing is needed.

And since the authorities "cannot and should not test for everything," said the WHO, the industry must be made responsible and "adopt a culture of safety first before profit".

In a joint statement, the regional health ministers have asked their senior officials to gather information on the possible implications of international and regional trade and trade agreements for health and health policies.