

Perception of Food Inspectors and Traders on Trans-boundary Food Control Measures of Myanmar

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Food control can be considered the assurance system for trade facilitation in exports and the line of defense for protecting consumer in imports. The food export trading sector in developing countries could benefit, if it can fulfill the requirements of foreign markets; meanwhile domestic consumers can enjoy more choices from healthy market competition. Thus, the developing, agricultural exporting country Myanmar should pay attention on the development of food control system by means of vertical integration to reap the benefits conferred by international food trade. This paper uses two new expressions, (1) Consumers' health interest oriented group and (2) economic interest oriented group to represent food inspectors and food traders. A total of 84 samples is included in this study. The result revealed that not all of the food inspector respondents showed strong confidence in the existing trans-boundary food control inspection in which they were professionally involved. The food trader respondents, at the horizontal firm level, demonstrated appreciation for and understanding of the food safety perspective. Both groups emphasized that food control at the system level needs more cooperation with related departments for better efficiency in trade facilitation and consumer protection.

JEL Codes: Q17 and Q18

1. Introduction

Myanmar is historically an agricultural country that relies on its agriculture exports to earn more foreign exchange and achieve rural development. As 70% of the population resides in rural areas, successful export of agricultural produce is considered to be very important for the stable livelihood of the majority of rural poor citizens. To keep pace with other food exporting countries in this era of globalized food trade, several factors such as commodity standard, consistent supply, reliable food safety standards, efficient logistics, attested inspection and streamlined laboratory services should be emphasized as they are essential prerequisites for agricultural exporting countries.

Food safety is currently one of the most urgent issues confronting Asia as a region and the international community as a whole, due to consumers' concern over food quality and safety which arises from the globalization of food trade, intensive agriculture, environmental pollution, etc.(United Nations Asia Pacific Center for Agricultural Engineering and Machinery 2008). The rising levels of the global food supply's interdependence and cultural exchange between eastern and western parts of the world create the transnational challenges for food safety authorities, as higher risk is likely to arise from longer food chains (Othman 2007). Accordingly, trans-boundary food control measures are one of the keys for success in achieving food safety in the international food trade.

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Proper food control measures protect the public from food-borne illnesses, provide quality assurance for food safety in food trade and promote health and nutritional status of the population (Myint 2007). Improvements in food control can also bring major advantages to food safety authorities, producers and consumers (Campbell-Platt 1994). However, regulatory limits for contaminants and inspection protocols vary tremendously across countries (Allshouse, Buzby & Harvey 2004).

The best-known explanation of the term food control was given by FAO in 2003: "Food control is the mandatory regulatory activity of enforcement by national or local authorities to provide consumer protection and ensure that all foods during production, handling, storage, processing, packaging, transportation, distribution and sale are safe, wholesome and fit for human consumption, conform to safety and quality requirements, and are honestly and accurately labeled as prescribed by law" (Food and Agriculture Organization & World Health Organization 2003).

The foregoing statement implies that the necessity for food control plays the central role in international and domestic food trade. Another suggestion is that the scope of safety concerns must cover the range of different relevant food chains produced within the country as well as those imported into the country (Aruoma 2006).

Thus, food control can be considered the assurance system for trade facilitation, from the point of view of exports. At the same time, when examining imports, food control serves as the line of defense for consumer protection, while providing more competitive advantages for domestic producers. Thus, the food export trading sector in developing countries can benefit if it can fulfill the requirements of the foreign market; meanwhile, domestic consumers can enjoy more choices from the healthy competition within the market.

At WHO's 59th World Health Assembly, States' members urged their governments to ensure that trade and health interests are appropriately balanced and coordinated, and their relevant ministries work constructively to address aspects of the international food trade related to international health (Lee & Marion 2009). The most efficient way for demonstrating food control measures is not necessarily restrictive to trade but rather ensures that developed food safety standards are based on sound scientific evidence and, where possible, are consistent with the international standards (Martin et. al. 2003). It can imply that there is a need to make striking the right balance between trade and health interests to increase the effectiveness of food control for both safety and smoothness of trade flow.

Very few studies have been conducted about the food control system in Myanmar. According to a study conducted in 2012, Myanmar's food control system was found conventional, as it mainly focuses on the primary health care approach while relying on reactive measures (Wai & Yamao 2012b). In this trans-boundary food control system, the old-style bottle neck checking just before export is still practiced, while taking little appreciation on standard and quality issues. This approach results in a situation in which Myanmar's primary produce can export solely to the countries with fewer SPS regulations and lower technical barriers and/or to the Myanmar produce re-exporting countries that can provide the food standards and SPS-related requirements needed for the end-users of profitable markets in developed countries. MOST¹ the ministry responsible for standardization admitted that there was technical regulation information gaps between the National Standard Body and the Trade Promotion Organization (Myanmar Scientific and

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Technological Research Department n.d.).In fact; standards facilitate trade while providing basic technical regulations.

In reality, conventional food control is quite common in developing countries where adverse incidents are less frequently reported. However, food control in such countries is no less important due to higher level of exposure of contaminated foodstuffs than in developed countries (Hanak et al.2000).The rudimentary, outdated food control system of developing countries might provide adequate protection but it would apparently be difficult to meet the needs of export market requirements (Caswell 2003).

The selected respondents in this study are divided into two main groups: (1) the consumers' health interest oriented group: or the food inspector group and (2) the economic interest oriented group: or the food traders group.

(1) Food Inspectors (Consumers' health interest oriented group) Being the persons of the third party inspection, food inspectors are practitioners of food control for consumer health interests. However, their role is important not only for the success of the export–import food trade and but also for achieving food safety. The effectiveness of the food control system also relies on inspection protocols and inspectors. At the individual level of inspection service, inspectors are quintessential in food control because they are the key functionaries who have day-to-day contact with the food industry, food trade and often the public (Food and Agriculture Organization & World Health Organization 2003).Competent inspectors who are adequately trained and equipped for food inspections are vital in ensuring consistent, transparent, and effective food inspection (Othman 2007).Food inspectors' perception, skills and knowledge are the most important factors for the efficiency of inspection procedures (Food and Agriculture Organization 2006).

(2) Trans-boundary Food Traders (Economic interest oriented group) These food traders are users of food control in their respective food chains for economic interest. Exporters and importers are the traders of the trans-boundary food trade who are important for earning more foreign exchange achieved by successful exports and for enhancing domestic food security attained by safe food imports.

Thus, it is important to find out how these two opposite interest groups would response about the existing food control system. No previous study of its kind was found.

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of food inspectors and traders involved in food trade. It is believed that their perceptions would be useful for the improvement of trans-boundary control measures and safety in food trade.

In the next section, food trade types, respective organizations, key informants and an assumption for this empirical investigation are presented. In the third section, the results of perceptions of the inspectors and the traders are mainly reported. In the final section, we conclude with the findings of the existing food control system, based on the investigation.

2. Materials and Method

2.1 Geographical Area and Samples

The respondents consisted of food inspectors (n=60) employed in the three inspection services and food traders (n=24) (twenty one pulses exporters and three palm oil importers) who were engaged in the export-import food trade. All the respondents were from the city of Yangon, which is the main hub of conventional food trading.

Given the geographical situation of Myanmar, conventional trade (by air and sea) and border trade (by land) are two common types of trans-boundary trade. However, this study included only the conventional maritime trade that uses food control largely and effectively for safety.

2.2 Data and Methodology

This study was performed between March and April 2012. Eighty-four total stakeholders were involved. The study employed a qualitative approach.

The data² were collected by using semi-structured and structured questionnaires, from the respective organizations and firms. Discussions were also held with the key informants, who shared their experiences willingly and encouraged the survey team in obtaining invaluable information.

Information and secondary data were collected since 2011. The collected data were examined during and after collection. Simple descriptive analysis was employed to analyze frequency, percentage and standard deviation. Face to face interviews were conducted for in-depth knowledge.

In this study, it is presumably assumed that (1) all food inspector would have strong confident on the existing food control system and (2) food traders would response with no interest on the need of cooperation among related departments for the food control system efficacy. That assumption could expect if they view the condition of food control system being as the typical one that doesn't need to be improved. That assumption can be rejected simply when both groups response differently.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Demographic Characteristic of Food Inspectors

Demographic characteristics of the food inspectors are shown in Table 1. The majority (95%) of the respondents was male and it is due to the nature of inspection work³ that is more suitable for men. Only one inspection team had female inspectors who were engaged in managing field of the inspection. No significant age gap was present among them with the average age of 39 years.

During inspection procedures, newly appointed inspectors had to work together with experienced inspectors to learn and share their experiences. The majority of respondents attended in-house training and more than half of the respondents attended training conducted by other departments, as attending training is an essential priority for new

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inspectors. Nearly two third were graduated and about one third hold certificates in education. It was found that the inspector-respondents were well-trained and possessed the competent level of education.

With regard to the inspectors' sector-wise responsibility, more than one-third (38%) of the respondents were responsible for the export sector while less than one fifth (16.7%) were responsible for the import sector. Meanwhile nearly half (41.7%) of the respondents were responsible for both sectors. Almost all of the inspectors used both quality and quantity parameters in inspection.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the food Inspectors(n=60)

Statements	Frequency	%	S.D	Mean
Gender			1.05	0.219
Male	57	95		
Female	3	5		
Age			1.46	3.17
18-25	5	8.3		
26-33	21	35		
34-41	11	18.3		
42-49	9	15		
50- 57	11	18.3		
58-65	2	3.3		
65 and above	1	1.7		
Education			0.9	1.58
Bachelor's Degree	42	70		
Master's Degree	1	1.7		
Other	17	28.3		
Attended Training				
In-house	56	93.3	0.25	0.93
Other departments' training (local)	32.53	53.3	0.5	0.53
Other departments' training(foreigners)	9	15	0.15	0.36
Responsibility			0.91	2.03
Export	23	38.3		
Import	10	16.7		
Both	25	41.7		
Method of Inspection				
Inspection of Quantity	57	95	0.22	0.95
Inspection of Quality	59	98.3	0.13	0.98

3.2 Inspectors' Perception Towards Existing Food Inspection and Control System

Five principal questions were asked to know the inspections' perception on the existing food control system, the inspection methods used, the scope of the methods and their perception of food safety. In addition, they were requested to state additional suggestions if they wanted to provide more comments than the structured questions asked for.

It was found that more than half (66.7%) of the respondents had the perception that the scope of the existing inspection method is sufficient. However, not all of the respondents thought that the scope of inspection for food control is sufficient, even though they were professionally involved in food control as practitioners. It is an interesting point for this

study because of the assumption mentioned. That's why the additional follow-up questions are needed to ask more about their perception on food control measures. Accordingly, the study found that most of the respondents (81.7%) had the perception that the existing inspection method needed more cooperation with other related departments for the efficacy of food control. Meanwhile, 15% of the respondents had the perception that the existing method was merely an acceptable level for the efficacy of food control. Nearly half of the respondents (41%) willingly gave suggestions for improved food control. According to the interviews, majority of the respondents supported the use of more stringent food control.

3.3 Perception of Trans-Boundary Food Traders

Five similar principal questions were asked to the food traders respondents⁴. They had the opportunity to provide additional suggestions as well.

More than one-fourth of the respondents (29%) strongly agreed and most of the respondents (70%) agreed that food safety is important among buyers' claims. This result indicated the significance of respondents' understanding and acceptance of the importance of food safety, even though they were traders with economic interest. Nearly two third of the respondents (62%) agreed that the existing method used at the organizational level is sufficient for food safety. However, the majority of the respondents (75%) thought that more cooperation with the related departments is needed at the system level for the effectiveness of food control. Most of the respondents (75%) responded that the inspections method used are merely acceptable for consumer protection and the smooth trade flow.

Regarding standard and specification in trading, importer respondents replied that they had their own sale contract specifications. All of the respondents agreed with the quality aspects such as the information received from suppliers, the inspection protocol of inspectors for FDA testing and the testing of laboratory technicians, were satisfactory. According to the interviews, exporter respondents said they used private standard and specification for export. Some demanded the responsible department to update the existing specifications that needs to be revised. Traders used private standard and specification for their trading.

The need for more cooperation with the related departments was emphasized by majority of both groups. Moreover, the major concern in managing quality problems due to insufficient infrastructures in the food control system was suggested by some of the respondents.

4. Conclusion

Food control plays a critical role in food trade by providing safe food for consumers. Not all food inspectors showed strong confidence in the existing trans-boundary food control system. They suggested more cooperation among related departments for food control effectiveness. Trans-boundary food traders showed appreciation for and understanding of the food safety perspective at the horizontal firm level. The fact that the existing food control at the system level needed more cooperation with the related concerned departments was emphasized. Both groups responded the opposite of the initial assumption. It highlighted that there is a need to emphasize on the effectiveness of the existing food control system. The growing level of export and the risks arising from illegally

imported food products indicated the need be mindful of standardization issues and SPS measures. Lack of specification and standards creates vulnerability both in the protection of consumers from contraband food and in the smoothness of trade flow. Investments in Myanmar's food control system development should be considered so as to protect consumers and facilitate trade.

5. Limitation

There is no theoretical literature review in this paper. Food control scholars, however, stressed the value of health and trade interests in international food trade. The paper considers the food inspector group and the trader group, being as the opposite groups especially in a manner of job responsibility, because inspectors have to ensure safety and quality of foods for consumer protection and traders have to overcome the inspection process for trade success.

Endnotes

1. MSTRD-the Myanmar Science and Technological Research Department operates under the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) which is responsible for the standardization of all products and goods at the National level.
2. To yield representative result as much as possible, the selection of export and import companies was conducted with the suggestions of the Myanmar Pulses, Beans& Sesame Seeds Merchants Association-MPBSSMA and the Myanmar Inspection and Trading Testing Services Ltd-MITS. However, the dispersal of business firms across the city made obtaining a larger sample size difficult. Moreover, Palm Oil Import Company declined to answer the questionnaires or to provide interviews because it faced the problem of entering smuggled adulterated food items including edible oil, through trans-boundary trade routes, that hits the domestic edible oil industry adversely.
3. Especially taking representative samples from cargoes or containers
4. Food-trader respondents comprised of both exporter respondents and importer respondents. Even though they did food trade in opposite direction, they were regarded under the same group who are with economic interests. They were requested to answer questions about the origins of their produces (ex: raw pulses), produces collection methods, storage along the marketing chain, etc. In this paper, however, the discussion focuses mainly on traders' perceptions of food control.

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Appendix A

Perception Questions for food inspectors

- (1) the existing scope of inspection method used is enough for efficient food control
(I think so, I don't think so, I am not sure)
- (2) the inspection method used are the best method for food control measures (Strongly agreed to disagree: 3 point scale)
- (3) the inspection method used are enough for food control measures
(Strongly agreed to disagree: 3 point scale)
- (4) the inspection method used should be acceptable for consumer protection and smooth of trade flow
(Strongly agreed to disagree: 3 point scale)
- (5) Regarding efficacy, the existing food control at the system level is
(Acceptable to some extent, Need more cooperation with the related department, No need to change)

Perception Questions for food traders

- (1) the existing scope of inspection is sufficient for efficient food control
(Yes, no, not sure)
- (2) the inspection method used at the organization level are
(The best method, Sufficient for food safety, acceptable for consumer protection and smooth of trade flow)
- (3) the inspection for food safety is important among buyers' claim
(Strongly agreed to disagree: 3 point scale)
- (4) the inspection method used should be acceptable for consumer protection and smooth of trade flow
(Strongly agreed to disagree: 3 point scale)
- (5) Regarding efficacy, the existing food control at the system level is
(Acceptable to some extent, Need more cooperation with the related department, No need to change)