
Global Governance of Food and Agriculture Industries

Edited by Reba A. Carruth

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Comestible food commodities and delicacies imported from overseas bring exotic flavours and nutriment for consumers worldwide, enhancing the enjoyment of food consumption and, consequently, driving an increasingly globalised economy. Food is necessary not only for human survival; it provides an emotional appeal in almost every human culture and lubricates the enjoyable social aspects of everyday living.

Food (domestic as well as imported) can also be a source of danger, harbouring pathogens, toxins, allergens, or aesthetically unappetising contaminants such as insect parts or rodent faecal pellets. Finally, food in global trade also serves as a useful pawn in the international trading games where one nation seeks an advantage over the other in various forms of domestic industry protectionism – ‘You should buy my excess food, but I don’t want any of your (inferior/hazardous/unpalatable) comestibles’. Food is, then, far more than simply a fuel to feed the human animal, and far more than merely another pedestrian commodity in international trade.

These varied aspects of what might be a simple exchange of edible goods between global trading partners transform the exercise into complex negotiations juggling food safety, international trade advantages, often perishable commodities, market opportunities and consumer demand (or otherwise), compounded by the covert agenda of protectionism all too often hiding under the

spurious cloak of food safety or environmental sustainability.

Not surprising, then, that regulation of food in international trade is a complex maze of often conflicting, sometimes even incompatible, governing policies and procedures. Attempting to understand global governance of food and agriculture industries is not for the fainthearted.

A handbook to help chart those rapidly changing seas would be a welcome addition to the library of interested parties everywhere. Reba Carruth endeavours to navigate these waters with a collection of chapters arranged into four topic groupings: *Global governance and regulation of food safety*; *Transatlantic food safety regulation and the governance of global agri-food industries*; *Regional and global regulatory harmonization and governance of food safety* and *Related competition in global food and agriculture industries*. For any but the most die-hardened economic and trade policy wonk, these section titles alone are a sure cure for insomnia; don’t expect to see this book on Oprah.

While the chapters are strong on descriptive economic and regulatory policy information, they are (generally) weak on critical policy analysis and the science. Few chapter authors have a scientific training, and it shows. I cringed, for example, reading on page 83 that Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE, ‘mad cow’ disease) was caused by ‘pirons’. Was this simply a typo compounded by sloppy proofreading? Nope,

there it was again, in the index, indicating that the simple but telling error was not the fault of the typesetter or editor, but sheer technical ignorance.

More substantially, the scientific perspective is missing from fundamental questions. Much of the regulatory discussion relates – properly – to agricultural biotechnology, a hot topic demanding scholarly treatment and analysis. But before launching into a descriptive accounting of various biotech regulatory policies, almost all of which are founded on risks to environment or health safety posed by biotech derived products, no one seemed to ask or address the foundational question – What risks? The working assumption in most regulatory policy circles, but challenged and dismissed in scientific studies – is that products of biotechnology are inherently more hazardous than products of ‘conventional’ technologies. As well, the book misses opportunities to explore the potential benefits of (appropriately regulated) products of biotechnology. In the chapter on food safety in Africa, for example, the discussion of the hazards associated with the frequent and dramatic mycotoxin contamination of maize fails to mention the potential public health benefit of adopting biotech-derived *Bt* maize, with its documented dramatic reduction in mycotoxin content.

The faults are not limited to the scientific aspects. For example, in the chapter on food safety in the NAFTA region, FDA is claimed to be the sole arbiter of biotechnology food safety and labelling in the USA; this ignores USDA’s considerable responsibilities in this realm. Another example: The crucial chapter on governance of biotechnology is grossly out of date, with almost all discussion and references coming from the early years of the millennium. Missing is the rapid adoption of biotech crops worldwide, major technical advances, important domestic and

international litigation, and important policy revisions of the last several years.

I don’t wish to give the impression that the book is all bad; there are indeed some bright spots. Ariane König’s chapter provides a concise and accessible description of governance of food safety in the European Union, a labyrinthine and byzantine (if not bizarre) bureaucracy. To many, this helpful chapter alone is worth the price of admission. And other chapters also do carry some useful descriptive information.

Perhaps the problems with this book are due to Carruth being a very busy person. She authored or co-authored nine of the 14 chapters. While this may provide a sense of homogenous consistency often lacking in a multi-author compendium, it at the same time negates the usual advantage of multiple perspectives to help illuminate complex concepts. Carruth, unfortunately, got it the wrong way ‘round, missing the opportunity to combine the smooth homogeneity advantage of a single-author monograph with the multiple perspectives of a compendium. Instead, she combined the narrow perspective disadvantage of a monograph with the inconsistent delivery of a collection of disjointed chapters.

In spite of these scientific and editorial deficiencies and infelicities, the book does collate much useful information – if not critical analysis – relating to international food and agriculture trade policy. Policy nerds interested in this topic should have this book, but would be advised to also have a selection of other resources to provide scientific and technical perspectives, as well as some real scholarly critiques of poor policy.

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