EDITORIAL

FOOD QUALITY AND SAFETY- POLICY IMPLICATION

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Urbanization is affecting food habits in a way that requires government facilitation if the food we eat is going to be of high quality, nutritious and safe. The poor carry a double burden of disease and malnutrition as they tend to develop obesity, diabetes and cardiac problems occasioned by poor eating habits (food high in refined carbohydrates, fats, and salt) and at the same time, could develop malnutrition and get exposed to communicable diseases due to a bad environment such as use of contaminated water.

An urbanizing society will need easy to prepare, well packaged convenience foods but much more wholesome in terms of nutrients and other quality characteristics, and also safe and affordable.

Policies that support science and technology to push the frontiers of knowledge to solve problems and address challenges as they occur and use of ICT and education to get the knowledge to farmers and others who matter is important.

As we educate farmers, consumers and policy makers too need to be educated on what is and is not possible. Science communication needs to be simple and well targeted and this responsibility sits on the scientists.

Policies need to be comprehensive, to address needs throughout the food chain, to promote healthy diets for all citizens whether they are in the urban or rural areas, and promote nutrition-in the lifecycle. Agriculture and food quality and safety should not operate independently of each.

Likewise, food imports have to be checked for quality and safety. A healthy citizenry will be easier to govern and will also contribute to national development.

In this issue 16, we have a comprehensive review paper on mycotoxins by Dr. Bhumi Narsimha Reddy, which speaks volumes about an issue that seriously damages African grains.

Already African grains are lost through poor post harvest handling; further farmers do not realize maximum yields due to poor crop husbandry, and now to make it worse, what is saved has aflatoxin infestation. Unfortunately, many consumers are not aware of the dangers embroiled in what they eat because the grain looks normal even when it contains unacceptable levels of aflatoxin.

Hybrid cereal grains which are high yielding have come out of many years of research. These seeds can multiply yields manyfold. This is even demonstrated by extension workers on farmers’ fields. Yet, many farmers still do not adopt these seed types, why? As an African who was brought up on a Kenyan small holder farm, I can confidently state that the keeping quality of the harvested grain very much determines the adoption of certain seed types by the farmer. I can also state that traditionally, farmers knew how to tell when grains were dry enough for storage. They did not need to use scientific means to measure moisture content. When the high yielding seed was first introduced, many farmers got excited, grew their crop, harvested it, and kept it the same way they kept traditional grass. But there was considerable disappointment and a damaged food system many farmers would find their prime grain rotten and
infected with weevils. Investments in time and finance would yield only frustration. Can anybody blame such farmers when they decide to abandon the “new” seed and resort to their land race seed?

Unfortunately, the crop breeders would only concentrate on high yielding research and pay hardly any attention to the performance of the grain in terms of palatability and storage qualities.

It is therefore encouraging to see abit more effort going into grain storage, for example the hermetic storage technology that is now being promoted, having had its roots in the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) based in the Philippines. Because this technology does not use chemicals, it should be attractive to consumers. One hopes also, that it will be affordable. Food safety is a concern to all.

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