



Central American supermarkets' private standards of quality and safety in procurement of fresh fruits and vegetables

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Abstract

In the context of near-absence of public food safety and quality standards, or the lack of effective implementation of them where they exist, and in order to increase product quality and consistency and differentiate their product from traditional produce retailers, leading supermarket chains in Central America are imposing private standards on their fresh produce suppliers. These are mainly for cosmetic quality, but emerging also are standards for fresh produce safety, in particular for leafy greens and some fruit. They are implementing the private standards at the same time they are cutting costs in order to compete with wetmarkets, via organizational change in the leading chains' procurement systems (shifting away from use of spot markets and traditional wholesale systems toward centralized purchases and use of implicit contracts and specialized/dedicated wholesalers). They are coupling those changes with some actions to resolve idiosyncratic factor market failures facing farmers such as through provision of technical assistance. The implementation of these private standards of produce safety are good for consumers as they are among the few food safety practices by domestic food industry actors. But the tougher standards are a challenge for producers who need to make significant investments, implying the need for investment assistance and support services by governments. The paper presents field study findings for Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua from 2002 to 2004.

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Introduction

Standards for fresh fruits and vegetables (FFV) applied to producers in developing countries have recently figured prominently in the literature in two ways, both focused on trade as opposed to domestic markets. On the one hand, as FFV exports from developing countries have burgeoned over the past decade, the literature has focused on the application of safety and phytosanitary standards by developed countries to developing country exports (e.g., Unnevehr, 2000) as well as the recent rise of private FFV safety standards such as EUREPGAP applied by European supermarket chains (Codron et al., 2002). Some work has focused on company-specific standards and their effects on FFV from growers in a given country, such as UK supermarkets and Kenyan FFV exporters, in Dolan and Humphrey (2000). On the other hand, some studies have focused on how the consumer-driven demand for high quality FFV has translated into developed country supermarkets quality standards (in terms of appearance, size, shape, etc.), and thus standards for FFV from developing country producers – which in turn translated into the need for substantial chemical use by those producers to produce those quality attributes (Thrupp, 1995).

The above discussion misses a major new determinant of standards faced by developing country producers. A decade ago the FFV sector was neatly divided into the export sector and the traditional FFV sector. The latter consists of wholesale markets, mom and pop stores, and open-air markets with essentially no quality or safety standards. Today, local supermarkets have risen to equal or exceed the importance of non-traditional exports in the Central American FFV sector, but there has been no exploration in the literature of how their emergence is affecting, if at all, the quality and safety standards of the FFV sold and consumed in the region.

Local supermarkets tend to emphasize the marketing of FFV of high quality as a way of competing with traditional markets, and this quality tends to be defined mainly in terms of appearance (i.e., spotless, uniform fruits and vegetables in terms of size, shape, color, firmness, ripeness, etc.). Those quality standards, when applied locally just as Thrupp notes in the export market, create an incentive for an increase in the use of insecticides, fungicides, and other production and post-harvest technologies that can harm people.

However, local supermarket demand can also create the incentives to put in practice new technologies and investments that improve control of important health problems, such as fatal diarrhea among children in the region caused by *Escherichia coli*. It may be that the supermarket sector may well have the greatest capacity and incentive to implement safety standards – public or privately formulated – in domestic marketing of FFV.

In this paper we focus on standards the local supermarkets are imposing on suppliers in Central America, and how they are imposing standards, that is, how they organize their procurement system for FFV.

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