

Ethical issues relating to the food industry

1. Principles

- The production of food should not be considered an unethical activity in itself, rather the reverse.
- Overindulging in even the most 'healthy' of food products can be detrimental to health and in particular lead to obesity, an increasing problem in rich societies.
- Some food products may need to be consumed in moderation if they are to be part of a healthy balanced diet due to their mix of ingredients e.g. sugar, salt, fats and other additives.
- The Church should encourage individuals to follow healthy balanced diets that are within their means.
- It is important to review all aspects of the food industry, including the conditions in which animals are reared, crops are grown, food is processed and products are marketed. The relationship between the producers, processors, retailers and consumers also needs to be scrutinised.
- Consideration should also be given to the positive contribution to society by the food industry.

2. Exposure

The manufacture, marketing, and distribution of food in general are unlikely to be a matter of ethical concern. However, there will be particular areas of concern. In such cases there may be a level of exposure that will result in a company being excluded from Epworth portfolios. This approach would seem less appropriate with products such as breast milk substitutes that can be either life saving or life-threatening depending on the circumstances in which they are used.

3. Methods of production and distribution

The production of food raises a number of issues that need to be considered. The packaged food industry essentially consists of manufacturing using farm produce. Clearly hygiene, quality control, health and safety considerations are of great importance. The following are among the issues that should be considered:

- Animal welfare in the meat products industry.
- Use of child or bonded labour, or employment of illegal immigrants. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards provide useful benchmarks in this area.
- Improper use of pesticides, antibiotics, and other chemicals.
- Misuse of water resources and the consequent impact on local farmers.
- Soil degradation and other environmental damage to the land.
- The sale of imported agricultural products that involves high transport costs and therefore unnecessary carbon emissions.
- Growing genetically modified crops.

4. Marketing issues

Marketing issues are a major ethical concern relating to the food industry. It would be inappropriate for the Church to benefit uncritically from the financial success of companies that encourage unhealthy and unbalanced diets. Areas of difficulty would include:

- Marketing campaigns that could encourage obesity.
- Packaging that leads to excess purchases with implications for obesity.
- Wasteful over-packaging.
- Aggressive marketing campaigns aimed at the vulnerable (e.g. promoting chocolate and other confectionery products to children).
- Inappropriate marketing campaigns (e.g. sports equipment for schools that require the purchase of a large number of confectionery or snack products).
- Sponsorship that seems aimed at promoting ethically inappropriate food products.
- Misleading information or failure to label clearly contents that could be of concern.
- Negotiating exclusive contracts for vending machines, (e.g. soft drink machines in schools where there is a captive audience).
- Vending machines that sell only 'unhealthy' food or drinks.

5. Marketing of breast milk substitutes

Breast milk substitutes and in particular their marketing have been a major source of ethical concern for many years. Consequently the following unique requirements have been developed:

- Recognition of the status of the International Code on Breast-Milk Substitutes.
- Marketing of breast-milk substitutes in developed countries in accordance with local regulations.
- Marketing of breast-milk substitutes in developing countries in accordance with the International Code.
- Management systems in place to ensure compliance with the International Code.
- Audit systems in place to monitor management compliance with the Code.
- Willingness to investigate allegations of Code breaches.

6. Fair trade and trade justice issues

A sustainable growth strategy indicates having regard to the wider interests of all parties, including owners, lenders, employees, suppliers, customers/clients and the local and wider community. Therefore:

- Involvement in the production and sale of fairly traded products that guarantee a fair price to producers in developing countries would be seen as a positive contribution to society. This could also involve the adoption of programmes to support farmers and local communities generally, such as inviting consumers to pay a slightly higher price which is passed on to producers.
- However poor practice in relation to developing communities and indications that supermarket chains abuse their buying power to the detriment of farmers would be seen as a negative contribution to society. This may also have resonance with the UK farming community.
- Driving down prices for the consumer may be ethically inappropriate if it is the result of the abuse of market power. For example, it might benefit rich consumers, normally in developed countries, whilst giving poor farmers an inadequate reward for their labour.
- Respect for trade justice issues and avoidance of lobbying activity that disadvantages poor producers and countries.

7. Environment

Companies should be encouraged to treat the environment with respect. This may include:

- The adoption of and compliance with a robust environmental policy.
- A clear policy to limit and evaluate the use of antibiotics, pesticides and herbicides.
- A responsible approach to the use of genetically modified food.
- Policies to reduce the company's carbon emissions, and evidence of their efficacy. This could involve giving preference to locally grown produce, and a policy of reducing sales of imported or out of season foodstuffs.
- Policies that support bio-diversity (e.g. evidence of respect for living organisms).
- Avoidance of bad practice (e.g. the destruction of original forests to make way for food plantations).
- Respect for traditional land tenure practices and the rights of small farmers.
- Awareness of the problems of producing unwanted foodstuffs and consequent waste products.

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