**Quality of food**

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| I HAVE lived in the US for long periods, but earlier this year was the first time in over two decades that I stayed in the UK. I noticed immediately that the quality of edible products was much better in the latter although my purchases were from a corner store as compared to the US, where I used to shop at a high-end organic market.This intrigued me no end since both are advanced countries with consumers conscious of what they eat. What might account for this noticeable difference in quality, at least as far as taste was concerned? I decided to do some amateur sleuthing, and the findings revealed much of interest. While these may not account for the actual explanation, the conclusions are ofenough generalinterest to merit discussion in Pakistan.The 1(ey to the puzzle may lie in the overarching principles governing food safety regulation since all commercially marketed foods today include some form of additive or another.Abstracting away from the specifics of the US-UK cases, one can identify two very different perspectives. In the first, producers have a lot of leeway in the use of additives and the onus of proving that some may be injurious to health is on consumers who have recourse to the judicial process to conclusively prove their claim. This may be called the `legislative` approach and can characterise the practice in the US. Here, interest groups, lobbyists, and for-profit industries have a lot of power while consumers are on the defensive with conclusive proof taking years if not decades to accumulate, especially when experts are payrolled by giant conglomerates.In the second, the logic is reversed. Here, regulators require producers to prove beyond reasonable doubt that an additive is safe for human consumption before permission is granted for its use. This may be called the `precautionary`approach and can characterise the situation extant in the EU, whose rules still apply in the UK. Here, the onus of demonstrating safety is on the producers and consumers are advantaged.My belief that I was onto something meaningful was strengthened by a strong recent message from officials in the US to the UK regarding a post-Brexit trade deal.The message communicated the condition that the UK would have to accept imports of meat from growth-hormone treated cattle and chlorinated chicken, both of which are prohibited under existing EU rules.The furious reaction to this demand in the UK proves that the issue of additives with unproven implications for human health is a contentious one that bears examination at a conceptual level.The situation in Pakistan is such that weliterally do not know what we are eating.Does anyone know or care about the prevalence of foot-and-mouth disease in the cattle whose meat we consume every day? We are not aware of the principle under which the food we eat is being regulated nor the standards to which producers are being held. It is undoubtedly the case that some regulations exist on paper but implementation is nonexistent. Even where instruments of implementation are in place, they are quite likely to be marginalised by the recourse of producers to side-payments.Take the case of water. Tap water is unsafe for drinking and all natural sources are by now contaminated by household, industrial, and agricultural effluents. Even the poor have to resort to bottled water if they care about their health and that of their children. But even amongst the brands of bottled water, it has been shown more than once that many are unsafe. Yet, they remain on the market. Also, what about the ingredients of mineral water sold in villagesand small towns? The combination of contaminated food, unsafe water, polluted air and adulterated medicines is so lethal that a terrible malady like cancer may be acquiring the incidence of chickenpox. Every third family has one or more members dying or sufferingfrom the disease. This is no doubt great for the industry of (ill) health in the country.Hospital, laboratories, doctors, quacks and pharmacists are having a field day. All their income is a positive contribution to our sick economy, but at a huge cost to the general productivity of labour. The relative cost of maintaining the human body is very high in Pakistan consider the proportion of income of the average person spent on bottied water and medicines.What then is to be done? It is futile to expect anything from the state. All governments have failed on this count, and one that is obsessed with preventing homecooked food from reaching Rana Sanaullah cannot be expected to be any different.This is a matter where consumers have to fight their own battle through civic pressure and legislation. It might help if someone can uncover a forensically verihed video of a regulator dancing with the owner ofa slaughterhouse.m The writeris the author of Transgressions: Poems Inspired by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, 2019. |  |