



World Health
Organization



International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN)

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INFOSAN Information Note No. 4/2008 - Codex Alimentarius

Codex Alimentarius The International Food Standards

SUMMARY NOTES

- Codex Alimentarius Commission, a joint intergovernmental body of FAO and WHO, has worked since 1963 to create harmonized international food standards to make food safer and trading practices fairer.
- With 176 countries and one member organization, the Commission represents over 99% of the world's population. In addition, civil society participates through over 200 observer organizations.
- The Commission has adopted hundreds of food standards, codes of practice and guidelines and thousands of maximum limits (for food additives, contaminants, and pesticide and veterinary drugs residues), which are contained in the *Codex Alimentarius*.
- The vast majority of food products traded internationally are covered by Codex standards and related texts. The standards contribute to ensuring the safety of the global food supply and help facilitate international food trade that was worth about 700 billion US dollars in 2005.
- The Commission's work, which is based on scientifically assessed risks, complies with health and safety requirements set by the World Trade Organization.

What is the Codex Alimentarius?

The *Codex Alimentarius* (Latin for "food code") is a collection of international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice whose main purpose is to protect the health of consumers and ensure fair practices in food trade. The *Codex Alimentarius* serves as the basis for many national food standards and related regulations.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission – jointly sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) – held its first session in 1963 and presently meets annually, alternating between Rome and Geneva. Today it has 176 Member countries and one member organization and over 200 international governmental and non-governmental organizations, which attend as observers.

The Commission and its subsidiary bodies (see Annex 1 for structure) provide a neutral forum for discussion of various topics related to food safety and trade. Representatives from governments, consumer groups, industry and academia meet to exchange views about food safety and trade and to adopt standards. The *Codex Alimentarius* promotes safer food and makes world food trade run smoothly by promoting the harmonization of standards. Since 1995, Codex standards and related texts have become international benchmarks for food safety under the World Trade Organization's Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement). The SPS Agreement requires that health and safety requirements for food should be based upon sound scientific assessment of risk. For Codex, this scientific advice is provided by various expert bodies convened by WHO and FAO, such as the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives, the Joint FAO/WHO Meetings on Pesticide Residues and the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Meetings on Microbiological Risk Assessment. If measures stricter than Codex standards are proposed at the national level, these have to be scientifically justified, i.e. based on risk assessment.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission works closely with the other standards-setting bodies mentioned in the SPS Agreement – the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), located in Paris, and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), located in FAO in Rome. Recently the Commission has strengthened collaboration with the standard setting activities of OIE relative to animal production food safety, in recognition that effective management of food safety risks demands a food chain approach from primary production to consumer.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission - an open forum – ready to discuss new and challenging issues

After 45 years of work, the Codex Alimentarius Commission is as relevant as ever and it would be hard to imagine a world without it. The Commission is always prepared to tackle new and challenging issues, on the initiative of its members, including:

- examining ways of testing the safety of genetically engineered food;
- setting rules for better informing consumers about the nutritional contents of foods;
- managing the risks for foodborne pathogens such as *Listeria*, *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*; and
- assessing and reducing the risk to human health associated with the presence in food of bacteria that have become resistant to antibiotics.

Benefits for all actors in the food supply chain

Consumers

Today consumers enjoy a variety of food from all over the world. However, there is a risk that this food may be unsafe due to contaminants or additives, or may contribute to unhealthy diets due to nutrient content. Thanks to the *Codex Alimentarius*, rules for food labelling, food additives, pesticide residues, contaminants, food hygiene and more provide a foundation for ensuring food safety and nutrient content of food. Therefore, consumers can be more confident about the safety and quality of the food they consume, regardless of its origin.

Food exporters

In an ever-expanding global market, exporters have eagerly embraced universal, uniform *Codex Alimentarius* food standards. More and more countries participate actively in the standards setting of the Commission and have adopted the standards on food production and processing, thereby facilitating food trade.

Food producers

Food producers including farmers and fishers, have a vital role in feeding the world. The Codex Alimentarius Commission assists them by developing standards that cover various types of food, including fats and oils, milk and milk products, fish and fishery products, and fruits and vegetables, to name only a few. Once producers meet these standards, they can be sure that their products are safe and of high quality and importantly, acceptable in export markets.

Developing countries

FAO and WHO have capacity building programmes to help developing countries comply with *Codex Alimentarius* standards and improve food quality and safety. Assistance includes helping countries to revise their food laws and regulations in accordance with *Codex Alimentarius* and strengthening their national food control systems (management, inspection and laboratory services).

The Codex Trust Fund

The FAO/WHO Project and Fund for Enhanced Participation in Codex (Codex Trust Fund) was launched in 2003 by the Directors-General of FAO and WHO to help developing countries and those with economies in transition to enhance their level of effective participation in the Codex Alimentarius Commission. This is a vital step towards ensuring that the Codex system is inclusive, participatory and equitable.

The Codex Trust Fund provides support to eligible countries to:

- prepare for and participate in Codex Committees and related meetings;

- participate in Codex training courses to enhance participation in Codex meetings; and
- enable countries to prepare and present scientific/technical positions and data related to the work of Codex.

Presently 133 countries are eligible for support from the Fund and are invited to submit annual applications which are considered in the light of their development status and the funds available. The main goal of the Fund is to assist countries to progress through a series of stages until national resources can be used to continue to support Codex activities.

To date the Trust Fund has received over 5.4 million US dollars from 12 countries as well as the European Union. Countries that once benefited from the Fund now consider contributing to it - for example, in 2008 Malaysia will become the first developing country to do so. Over 600 participants, mostly from the least developed countries, have attended Codex meetings with the help of the Fund and have submitted reports on how participation has been useful to their countries. In addition the Fund has supported over 100 participants to attend Codex training courses in regions. These training programmes are based on an FAO/WHO training package for enhancing participation on Codex. The training package describes the Codex organization and procedures, the scientific basis for its work, and provides guidance on developing national Codex structures and activities. The course is available on CD-ROM and the Internet. To access this course free of charge visit the FAO website http://www.fao.org/ag/agm/agms/capacity_tools_codex_en.asp.

To learn more about the *Codex Alimentarius* and to find out how to reach the Codex Contact Point in your country, visit the Codex Alimentarius web site at: www.codexalimentarius.net

For information on the FAO/WHO trust fund visit: <http://www.who.int/foodsafety/codex/trustfund/en/>

For more information on the FAO/WHO Codex training package contact: elarningcodex@fao.org

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INFOSAN serves as a vehicle for food safety authorities and other relevant agencies to exchange food safety information and to improve collaboration among food safety authorities at both the national and international level.

INFOSAN Emergency, embedded in INFOSAN, links official national contact points to address outbreaks and emergencies of international importance and allows for the rapid exchange of information. INFOSAN Emergency is intended to complement and support the existing WHO Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN).

INFOSAN is operated/managed by WHO, Geneva. It currently includes 167 Member States.

More information is available at: www.who.int/foodsafety

Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme

