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Codex needs to find new standards

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Started with 30 members in July 1963, Codex Alimentarius Commission, a principal joint organ of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) has grown to include 185 member governments, one member organisation and 220 observers. The results that Codex delivers, its science-based decision-making; its participatory nature and truly global membership contribute to Codex's credibility and high reputation as a standard-setting body. Codex has contributed to bringing about safer and more nutritious food around the world.

Over the last five decades, Codex has done much to strengthen national food safety systems and foster international food trade, which has grown from $22 billion in 1963, to more than $1.3 trillion. It has been helping governments to improve access to healthy, nutritious food, and provides standards to guide people who depend directly on agriculture and the food system for their livelihoods.

Codex has become an important reference for the work of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which it refers as the ultimate standard setting body for food safety in its Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Measures. The WTO agreement is designed to help countries protect their populations with food safety and health standards, while discouraging them from using those standards to block competitors unfairly. Codex has helped countries to compete in global food markets, while also improving food safety at home. Much of the work done by Codex can translate directly into national legislation. It includes thousands of safe-maximum levels for pesticide residues; veterinary drugs; contaminants, and food additives.

However in the fast changing economy and globalisation, José Graziano Da Silva, Director-General of Food and Agriculture Organisation, speaking at the 50 anniversary of Codex Alimentarius Commission last year in Rome, expressed concerns by saying "New food borne diseases are emerging, or being identified, new food products emerge and new production methods. This means that we need new standards. Codex must keep pace with a changing world in which transportation, communication and scientific development move at a much faster pace than before with direct and significant implications for food safety."

The other point Codex needs to address is to establish its mark and also increase its interaction with consumer associations and more participation at country level. For that it has to strive for even more collaboration, across different sectors, across national borders, and among different jurisdictions. Agencies such as FAO, WHO, Codex, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) are working closely on designing a framework of standards, guidelines and codes that can live up to this ideal.

Commenting on the challenges before the commission, Margaret Chan, Director-General of World Health Organisation (WHO) said, “Safe and nutritious food sustains human life, ideally in good health. Unsafe food can cause disease, sometimes in very large outbreaks. Contaminated food can be deadly, usually taking its heaviest toll on the very young and the very old. Hence hunger and undernutrition, and all the adverse consequences for health, continue to be priority issues of international concern. Talk about food security is on the table in discussions about sustainable development and the post-2015 development agenda.”

The world food supply has changed dramatically. Food production is increasingly industrialised. Distribution networks now span the globe. The notion that fresh fruits and vegetables have distinct seasons has all but vanished. This has brought some advantages. Hunger has receded in many parts of the world, and dietary diversity can introduce significant health benefits. But this has brought in a negative effect as well.

Margaret Chan further said, “Economic integration and the globalisation of food trade mean that a single meal can contain ingredients from all around the world. The complexity of the food chain has increased, introducing more critical points where something can go wrong. And when something does go wrong, it often does so on a grand scale. Investigations of outbreaks can involve multiple countries on multiple continents. Recalls can be massive, with huge economic losses. Consumer confidence can be shattered, and take a very long time to recover.”

Realising the importance of nutrition and food labelling, Codex is now addressing the issues of obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases which often exist side-by-side with undernutrition, through its nutrition and food labelling committees. It is going to be tough task

for Codex to introduce greater balance in the world's food supply. "This is what we all want to see. Safe, nutritious, and health-promoting food for all, whether home grown or a product of international trade," adds Margaret Chan.

Codex commission, which is continually examining new concepts and systems associated with food safety and the protection of consumers against health hazards is also scrutinising the application of biotechnology, food processing and production of raw food material. These topical matters provide some insight into the direction that the Commission's activities are likely to take in the future.

Scientific developments in fields relating to food, changing attitudes of consumers, new approaches to food control, changing perceptions of government and food industry responsibilities and changing food quality and safety concepts will present the Commission with new challenges and, conceivably, the need for new standards. Looking at these Codex activities of the future will differ considerably from what they have been until now.

"The consumer protection elements of the Codex Alimentarius are currently gaining in importance, while the compositional or 'recipe' elements of individual commodity standards do not appear to attract as much interest as before. At present, interest in the quality aspects of Codex standards remains, although the importance attributed to such issues in the future will depend on community attitudes and demands," points Margaret Chan.

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