

Codex Alimentarius Commission

Organization: Codex Alimentarius Commission

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Description For several millennia, governing authorities have sought to devise rules to protect their subjects and citizens from dishonest practices in the sale of food. Egyptian scrolls prescribed the labelling to be applied to certain foods. In ancient Athens, beer and wines were inspected for purity and soundness, and the Romans had a well-organized state food control system to protect consumers from fraud or bad produce. Such efforts by governments continued into the nineteenth century when food chemistry came to be recognized as a reputable discipline and the determination of the "purity" of a food was primarily based on the chemical parameters of simple food composition. When harmful industrial chemicals were used to disguise the true colour or nature of food, the concept of "adulteration" was extended to include the use of hazardous chemicals in food. Science had begun providing tools with which to disclose dishonest practices in the sale of food and to distinguish between safe and unsafe edible products. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire between 1897 and 1911, a collection of standards and product descriptions for a wide variety of foods was developed as the *Codex Alimentarius Austriacus*. Although lacking legal force, it was used as a reference by the courts to determine standards of identity for specific foods.

After the Second World War, international trade in agricultural commodities and processed foods increased significantly. More and more countries devised rules and standards for safe and nutritious foods. Seldom were these rules consistent from one country to another and often they were used as a means to restrict trade. Two new United Nations organizations, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) became concerned with these problems. In 1955, they convened a joint conference on food additives. This initiative spawned other activities by these same organizations that led in 1961 to the creation of the Codex Alimentarius, an international code of food standards, the name inspired by the food code in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. In 1963, agreement was reached on the establishment of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC), a body responsible for managing the Code. The CAC was directed to protect the health of consumers and to work towards fair trade in foods by developing international food standards that could then be approved by nation-state governments.

One hundred and sixty-three countries were members of the CAC in 1998, representing 97 percent of the world's population. Since its founding, it has set up an elaborate system of specialized committees that deal with standards related to food additives, contaminants, labelling, risk

assessment, and so on. These committees develop draft standards that are then approved at a meeting of the Commission.

The importance of the Codex standards and of the activities of the CAC increased significantly following the Uruguay Round Agreements for the multilateral trading system in 1994. Country participants in this round of negotiations recognized that measures ostensibly adopted by national governments to protect the health of their consumers, animals, and plants could be discriminatory or be used as barriers to trade. Consequently, they concluded the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) and the Technical Barriers to Trade agreements, which were included among the Multilateral Agreements on Trade in Goods, annexed to the 1994 Marrakesh Agreement which established the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The SPS Agreement acknowledges that governments have the right to take sanitary and phytosanitary measures necessary for the protection of human health. For example, if a government had evidence that canned mushrooms from a particular country had dangerously high levels of bacteria harmful to human health, it could ban the importation of that product under the SPS Agreement. The Agreement does require them, however, to apply those measures only to the extent required to protect human health. In its preamble, the Agreement suggests that agreement on harmonized international standards will facilitate these objectives and in Article 3 enjoins member states to participate fully in the CAC in pursuit of these ends. The TBT Agreement seeks to ensure that technical regulations and standards, including packaging, marking and labelling requirements, and analytical procedures for assessing conformity with technical regulations and standards do not create unnecessary obstacles to trade. Article 2.6 makes a similar statement to that found in Article 3 of the SPS Agreement on the importance of member-state involvement in international standard setting bodies like CAC.

These explicit institutional linkages between the Codex standards, the activities of the CAC and the World Trade Organization have increased the importance of the CAC as a global governance body. Important aspects of the debates over genetically modified organisms and foods have been addressed at Codex, both in the area of standards for risk assessment and for food labelling. In addressing these kinds of issues, the CAC strives to remain committed to science-based work. Experts and specialists in a wide range of disciplines have contributed to every aspect of the code to ensure that its standards withstand the most rigorous scientific scrutiny. Moreover, the activities of the Commission have been a major stimulant to food safety research in many countries and to the exchange of information based on this research.