CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

World Health Organization

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Agenda Item 12 **CX/NFSDU 18/40/13**

JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME
CODEX COMMITTEE ON NUTRITION AND FOODS FOR SPECIAL DIETARY USES

Fortieth Session

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DISCUSSION PAPER ON GENERAL GUIDELINES TO ESTABLISH NUTRITIONAL PROFILES

(*Prepared by Costa Rica and Paraguay*)

1. Introduction

Nutrient profiling is defined as the science of classifying or ranking foods according to their nutritional composition, and which may be used by Governments for reasons related to preventing disease and promoting health. (WHO, 2018)[1].

It has a variety of applications, such as to define criteria for regulating/ self-regulating marketing to children, to guide innovation and the reformulation of food products to make them healthier, and to establish voluntary or mandatory criteria for foods available within the school environment.

Food labelling has been one of the most common applications of nutrient profiling in developed countries. Voluntary labelling schemes have been in existence for more than twenty years, starting with the Coronary Prevention Group Banding Scheme in the United Kingdom, which was published in 1986. This was followed by the Swedish Green Keyhole Scheme that was launched in 1989. Today, it is still used in a variety of front-of-pack nutrition labelling systems, guiding consumers in making better informed decisions and promoting healthy lifestyles.

2. Issue

To develop general guidelines to establish nutrient profiles for labelling purposes.

3. Brief overview of the situation

a. Background

During the 44th Session of the Codex Committee on Labelling (CCFL), Costa Rica and New Zealand presented a conference room document (CRD 12), which emphasized that information analyzed by the electronic working group (eWG) on "Front-of-pack nutrition labelling" indicated that there is a proliferation of different nutrition labelling systems at the global level. Furthermore, nutrient profiles are used to complement these systems. Thus, they recommended that the CCFL request that the Codex Committee on Nutrition and Food for Special Dietary Uses (CCNFSDU) prepare a new study to establish general guidelines for the development of nutrient profiles, in accordance with existing Codex provisions and available scientific documentation, including documents prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO). The CCFL agreed to inform the CCNFSDU about the new work and to ask it to consider how it could contribute (REP18/FL, para. 50).

[1] Available at: http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/profiling/en/. Consulted on 27 July 2018.

The CCFL presented its request at the 39th Session of the CCNFSDU, as specified in document CX/NFSDU 17/39/2 Rev.1. Furthermore, as detailed in the REP18/NFSDU report, Para. 157 to 161, Costa Rica, speaking also on behalf of Paraguay, took the floor to present CRD4, explaining that the guidelines for the establishment of nutrient profiles would complement the CCFL's efforts with respect to front-of-pack-labelling. They also proposed that an eWG be established to refine the scope of the new task and to draft a project proposal, or, as an alternative, that a circular letter be sent to members to collect information on existing nutritional profile models.

The Committee agreed that discussions on this topic would be postponed until the next meeting and that Costa Rica would analyze any relevant issues, in the event that a circular letter would need to be sent out after the 40th session of the CCNFSDU.

b. Problem

Countries have adopted different approaches in implementing WHO strategies to improve the quality of food for their people, by establishing legislation for food marketing, front-of-pack nutrition labelling, nutrition declaration criteria and by regulating foods available in the school environment, *inter alia*, thereby assisting consumers to make healthier food choices, taking into consideration the extent to which they contain critical nutrients linked to chronic non-communicable diseases.

Private and public nutrient profile strategies have also been developed to determine how the food industry labels foods, using graphics or symbols on products, as a way to provide nutritional information to consumers or to identify products as "healthy". Nutrient profiles are therefore considered to be regulatory tools to prevent misleading health claims about specific properties in foods. (FINUT, 2016).

The 2010 WHO report mentions a guide to adapt, implement and develop nutrient profile models and their different uses. It also stresses the need to validate and compare existing approaches in order to establish a set of guiding principles to enable national and regional authorities to make effective and proper use of models. However, no further information could be found on this Guide, nor on its validation. Codex Alimentarius itself provides no guidance or guidelines on establishing nutrient profiles, leading countries to develop their profiles based on inconsistent criteria.

The multiple interpretations of nutrient profiles may cause confusion and impede trade. Therefore, a procedure for systematic validation and comparison of different approaches is needed, as is the application of a series of scientific principles that will guide national authorities and ensure that they apply the most suitable and effective model.

Finally, this problem has serious economic implications for developing countries involved in food production and trade, since they will have to adjust their packaging to satisfy any labelling requirements of their trade partners.

Thus, establishing recognized international guidelines for the development of specific nutrient profiles for labelling could facilitate the work of countries who are seeking to develop their nutrient profile, while also reducing trade barriers.

c. Scientific basis of Codex

The Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (DPAS), approved by the WHO in May 2004, established governments' right to request that information be provided on key nutritional aspects, as proposed in the *Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling* CXG 2- 1985, since consumers are entitled to accurate, scientifically-based information. Information on the nutritional composition of food products should be standardized and clear to allow consumers to make healthy choices.

In 2009, WHO started work on an evidence-based framework and guiding principles that Member States and Regions could adapt in developing and implementing nutrient profiles of foods for various uses, such as marketing of foods to children, nutrition and health claims, graphics and symbols on product labels, information and education, provision of food to public institutions and the use of economic tools to guide food consumption. Moreover, it indicated that developing guidelines on nutrient profiling could contribute to the implementation of Objective 3 of the Action Plan for Non-Communicable Diseases - WHA61.14 - (WHO, 2010), which is to "promote interventions to reduce the main shared modifiable risk factors for non-communicable diseases: tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol".

Codex Alimentarius has become a highly respected global benchmark for consumers, food producers and processors, national food regulatory bodies and for the international food trade; it has also had a tremendous impact on the mindset of food producers and processors, as well as on consumers. Its influence extends across continents and it has made an immeasurable contribution to consumer health protection, ensuring fair practices in the international food trade. Codex standards are also considered to be scientifically-justified and are accepted as benchmarks against which national measures and regulations are evaluated.

4. Conclusion

Codex should develop a set of guiding principles for the establishment of nutrient profiles for food labelling, so that they may serve as a standardized international benchmark in emerging discussions on regulations governing front-of-pack nutrition labelling. These should be scientifically-based, clear, transparent and impartial, and should facilitate international trade of food products.

Similarly, for labelling systems to effectively support healthy diets, they should be used in conjunction with an educational, consumer-awareness and communication process that also promotes healthy nutrition.

5. Recommendation

It is recommended that CCNFSDU agree to start new work on Guidelines to establish nutrient profiles (see Appendix I – project document) and to establish an electronic working group to:

a. Discuss and analyze the attached draft document (Appendix I), with a view to undertaking further work.

b. Identify and review nutrient profile models developed in recent years, in order to create a global inventory. A circular letter will be issued, requesting the relevant information.

c. Develop general standardized principles for establishing nutrient profiles, for use in front-of-pack labelling systems, in accordance with existing Codex provisions and available scientific documentation, including documents prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO).

d. Review the *Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling* (CXG 2-1985) for the purpose of developing additional guidelines and facilitating the use of nutrient profiles, using as reference, work previously undertaken by the World Health Organization (WHO) in this area.

6. Bibliography:

Nutrient profiling. Report of a WHO/IASO technical meeting, London, United Kingdom, 4–6 October 2010.

INFORME CIENTÍFICO -TÉCNICO FINUT. Published by la Fundación Iberoamericana de Nutrición (FINUT) Granada, Spain, 2016.

APPENDIX I

PROJECT DOCUMENT

DEVELOPING GUIDELINES TO ESTABLISH NUTRIENT PROFILES

1. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF WORK

Development of standardized general guidelines for establishing nutrient profiles for use in front-of-pack labelling systems, nutrition education programs and the food industry, in order to encourage the development of healthier foods and diets for consumers, based on solid scientific evidence.

Revision of the *Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling* (CXG 2-1985), for the purpose of developing additional guidelines and facilitating the use of nutrient profiles, based on previous work that the World Health Organization (WHO) has undertaken in this area.

2. RELEVANCE AND TIMELINESS

The differing interpretations of currently available nutrient profiles can lead to confusion, and thus, a systematic comparison of different approaches and the development of general principles are required to ensure that countries and organizations may use any profile that has been deemed effective, suitable and scientifically-based.

This proposal refers to the creation of guidelines to assist governments (or other stakeholders) in the use of interpretive nutrient profiles in front-of-pack labelling schemes and to assist food industries to reformulate or develop products with a healthier nutritional composition.

The inventory exercise undertaken by the eWG on “Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labelling” of the Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL) has revealed that there is an increasing number of Codex members that have already introduced or plan to introduce front-of-pack nutrition labelling systems. However, the Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling (CXG 2-1985) make no reference to the use of nutrient profiles in labelling.

Codex Alimentarius is the international organization recognized by the World Trade Organization in the area of food regulation and it has 189 member countries. Therefore, this is an opportunity for all member states and organizations to evaluate and discuss the methodologies developed to establish existing nutrient profiles and recommended by different organizations, and consequently to create international standardization that will help to protect public health and eliminate trade barriers arising out of inconsistencies in the existing methodologies.

3. MAIN ASPECTS TO BE COVERED

The *Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling (CXG 2-1985)*, in Section 5, allow for the use of supplementary nutritional information, however, further clarification is needed. Thus, the proposed work will seek to strengthen and establish additional guidelines that include general principles for the development of nutrient profiles.

The proposal is to develop specific guidelines that may or may not be incorporated into the Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling (CXG 2-1985). However, this will not be decided until after the work has been completed.

4. ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE CRITERIA FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WORK PRIORITIES

General criteria

Simplified nutrition information in nutrient profiles can provide consumers with a better understanding of the nutritional composition of foods and encourage them to make healthier food choices. It may also prompt food manufacturers to reformulate their food products to improve the nutritional quality of the foods they offer to consumers. Improving people’s nutrition by giving them healthier options would improve the risk profile of non-communicable diseases worldwide.

Criteria applicable to general matters

(a) *Diversification of national legislation and its potentially negative impact on international trade*

Several countries have adopted, or are planning to adopt, simplified nutrition labelling systems that use nutrient profiles, either on a voluntary or mandatory basis. Given the increased prevalence of these systems worldwide, standardization at the global level is essential, as a means of eliminating trade barriers.

(b) *Scope and the defining of priorities for different aspects of the work*

Review Codex texts, including the *Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling* (CXG 2-1985), in order to develop guidelines on the use of nutrient profiles

(c) *Work already undertaken by international organizations in this area and/or suggested by the relevant international intergovernmental body (ies)*

Report: "Nutrient Profiling: Report of a WHO/ International Association for the Study of Obesity (IASO) Technical Meeting" (United Kingdom. 4 – 6 October 2010). Published in 2011

(d) *Amenability of the proposed subject to standardization*

Nutrient profiles are inputs used in the implementation of labelling systems, and thus the objective of the proposed work is to review existing documents to develop additional guidelines that support the use of nutrient profiles, incorporating them into current guidelines or into a separate document.

(e) *Considering the global magnitude of the problem*

Simplified nutritional information on food labels has become a topic of global interest. This is because recognizing the impact of non-communicable diseases and the threat they pose to public health, promoting healthier diets for consumers and encouraging manufacturers to improve the nutritional quality of the foods that they supply are all areas in which countries around the world could benefit from proper guidance.

5. RELEVANCE TO THE CODEX STRATEGIC CODEX OBJECTIVES

The proposed work aligns with the Commission's mandate to develop standards, guidelines and other international recommendations to protect consumer health and to ensure fair food trade practices. The new work that has been proposed will contribute to the implementation of Strategic Objectives 1 and 3, as described below.

Strategic Objective 1: Establish international food standards that address current and emerging food issues

There is an increasing interest in and use of nutrient profiling in simplified front-of-pack nutrition labelling in several countries throughout the world. This proliferation of systems may create confusion and serve as a barrier to trade. Currently, there are no international guidelines on best practices for the establishment of these profiles.

Providing guidance to countries that intend to use nutrient profiles in front-of-pack nutrition labels would help to create some level of global standardization.

Strategic Objective 2: Facilitate the effective participation of all Codex members

Bringing this issue to CCNFSDU will enable all members that have an interest in nutrient profiling to participate in the discussions.

6. INFORMATION ON THE RELATION BETWEEN THE PROPOSAL AND OTHER EXISTING CODEX DOCUMENTS

The proposal bears some relation to the *Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling* (CXG 2-1985) and these guidelines are applicable for all categories of pre-packed foods.

7. REQUIREMENT FOR AND AVAILABILITY OF EXPERT SCIENTIFIC ADVICE

None identified at this stage. There will be an opportunity to consult with the relevant bodies during the process, if the need arises.

8. NEED FOR TECHNICAL INPUT FROM EXTERNAL BODIES

No need identified at this stage.

9. PROPOSED TIMELINE

Subject to approval by the Commission in 2019, the development of the Guidelines will be submitted for consideration by CCNFSDU in 2019 and expected to take four session of CCNFSDU or fewer depending upon the relevant inputs and agreement from members. Final adoption by the Commission is foreseen for 2023.

Proposal for CL QUESTIONNAIRE

ON GENERAL GUIDANCE FOR ESTABLISHING NUTRIENT PROFILES FOR FOOD LABELLING

Please answer the following questions in the format below. You may elaborate if you have additional information or evidence to support your answer or include a link to access this information.

Name of Codex member country, organization or observer country: _____

1. Does your country/ organization believe that the Codex Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling provide general guidance for establishing nutrient profiles in food labelling? Yes or No. Please justify your answer.	
Yes/ No	**Justification (Please quote the specific paragraphs in the Codex Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling, to which you are referring)**

2. If the answer to question 1 is NO, which text, paragraph or section of the Codex Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling do you feel should be adjusted to address this issue?
[Indicate text/ paragraph/ section]

3. Has your country/ organization developed a nutrient profile? Mark with an X. **Yes__ (proceed to question 4) No__ (to the end of the questionnaire)**

4. What are the general features of the profile that has been developed?					
Country/ Region of application	**Implemented/ or proposed**	**Voluntary or mandatory**	**Who developed the profile? (government, industry, other)**	**What critical nutrients does it include?**	**Is it based on categories or groups of food?**

5. What were the criteria used to develop your nutrient profile? Please justify your answer.		
Nutrients that were considered /included in the system	**Foods that are considered important to the diet of your country**	**Tools used to develop the nutrient profile**
6. How will your nutrient profile be used?		
7. Has the nutrient profile been validated?		
Yes/ No	**Justification (Please give details on the validation process).**	
8. What benefits, difficulties and limitations have been observed in using the nutrient profiles that you have developed and implemented?		
9. Do you have statistical data on how your nutrient profile system has impacted the consumer?		
10. How often is your nutrient profile evaluated?		