

codex alimentarius commission



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
ORGANIZATION
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

WORLD
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION



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Agenda Item 6

CX/AFRICA 00/6

JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

CODEX COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR AFRICA

Fourteenth Session

Kampala, Uganda, 27 – 30 November 2000

CONSUMERS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE WORK OF NATIONAL CODEX COMMITTEES AND NATIONAL CODEX CONTACT POINTS

INTRODUCTION

The Codex Alimentarius Commission was established in 1962 to implement the food standards programme of FAO and WHO. One of the principal purposes of food quality control and standards activities is protecting the consumer against health risks and commercial fraud. Safe and adequate food supplies are essential for proper nutrition. Not only must foods have appropriate nutritional content and be available in sufficient variety and affordable prices, but they must also not endanger consumer health through chemical or microbial contamination and be honestly presented.

The FAO/WHO Conference on Food Standards, Chemicals in Food and Food Trade, which was held in March 1991, made recommendations to improve the involvement of consumer organizations in the work of Codex. The CAC at its 21st Session endorsed the recommendations, and requested its subsidiary bodies to involve consumers in their Codex decision-making processes. National member governments were also encouraged to do likewise. Since then, the issues on consumer participation in the work of Codex have been on the agenda of the CAC.

At the 22nd Session of the CAC and during the debate on the involvement of non-governmental organizations in the work of the CAC, the Observer of Consumers International¹ supported the convening of seminars and workshops, especially in developing countries, to explain the activities of the Commission and offered through its offices in developing countries to support this. The observer recommended improvement of transparency through the involvement of independent NGO consumer organizations and the strengthening of NGO participation in National Codex Committees and in national delegations to Codex meetings; the inclusion of consumer representatives as observers in the Executive Committee, JECFA, JMPR and other FAO/WHO expert consultations; the continued dissemination of Codex publications on the Internet and the possible establishment of a trust fund to improve consumer participation in Codex activities.

¹ ALINORM 97/37, para. 156

At its 23rd Session in Rome (July 1999), the Commission² expressed full support for efforts to enhance the participation of consumer organizations in the development of food standards and also in relation to Codex at the national level. It agreed that it was highly desirable for consumers and their organizations to participate in training activities designed to establish or strengthen Codex Contact Points or National Codex Committees. Several delegations which attended the 23rd Session stated that whereas consumers, their organizations and other interested groups could be involved in the development of standards, official food control activities to determine compliance with standards and regulations were the responsibility of government authorities and the legal system.

The Commission noted that in some developing countries consumer organizations were not well established, the educational level of consumers was low, scientific or technical expertise was unavailable, and resource constraints and communication problems did not allow consumers to participate effectively in the process. The need for training was especially highlighted. The Commission made recommendations which included the following:

- ◆ Recommended that consideration be given by FAO and WHO, in co-operation with consumer organizations, to the development of guidelines or models for enhancing consumer participation in Codex and food standards work at the national and international levels;
- ◆ Noted that there was little support for the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme and related FAO and WHO programmes to identify funds to support expanded participation of Consumers, International-Non-governmental Organizations in Codex, stating that any resources available to Codex should be directed first to developing countries of the Commission;
- ◆ Recommended that FAO, WHO and national governments work with national and international consumer organizations to improve the dissemination of Codex information to consumers;
- ◆ Recommended that FAO, WHO and national governments invite consumer organizations to participate in national, sub-regional or regional workshops and seminars relevant to Codex matters; and
- ◆ Proposed that Regional Coordinating Committees continue to take the opportunity to provide a forum for the exchange of experiences on the ways and means of developing consumer input into National Codex Committees and Contact Points.

During its 13th Session which was held in Harare (November 1998), the Codex Coordinating Committee for Africa (CCCA), considered *Consumer Participation in Codex Work and Related Matters*. During the debate which followed, the Observer from Consumers International (CI)³ stated that a sub-regional office of that Organization for East and Southern Africa had been established in Harare and that a subregional office for West and Southern Africa was established in Dakar. The observer pointed out that much progress had been made in the Region in increasing consumer's participation in Codex work. However, the CI wished to see more progress in practice and requested Member governments and National Codex Committees to include one consumers' representative in the National Codex Committee and to cover all expenses related to that participation. The Observer called for training of consumer leaders on Codex issues to assist in the application and monitoring of the use of Codex standards at the national level. The Observer also recommended that workshops for

² ALINORM 99/37, paras.38, 39, 41 & 43.

³ ALINORM 99/28, para.39.

journalists be undertaken to inform them about Codex issues and help in the launching of media campaigns to promote Codex standards. Several delegations attending the Session spoke on how far they have involved consumer groups in the work of Codex in their various countries.

The CCCA⁴ recognized the important role of consumers at national level in elaborating national standards and developing national positions on Codex issues. The Committee noted that involvement of consumers in Codex was inhibited by lack of resources and scientific expertise. The Committee also noted that the workshops organized by FAO to develop or strengthen national Codex structures always recommended the involvement of consumers organizations, but it was pointed out that technical assistance provided by FAO was normally directed to support government structures.

CONCLUSION

In recognition of consumers' rights to express their interests in the Codex decision making process, the Commission urges member governments to continue to take the opportunity to provide a forum for the exchange of experiences on the ways and means of developing consumer input into National Codex Committees and Contact Points. Based on this premise, the Commission requests to be informed of progress made by member governments in this direction.

Delegates and interested Consumer Organizations are therefore invited to provide information as requested by the Commission.

⁴ ALINORM 99/28, para. 50.