

INFOODS: the international network of food data systems^{1,2}

Nevin S Scrimshaw

ABSTRACT A 1983 conference organized by United Nations University proposed an international network of food data systems (INFOODS) to address the need for and limitations of food-composition databases. Concerns of INFOODS include the acquisition and interchange of quality data on the nutrient composition of foods; the development of standards and guidelines for the collection, compilation, and reporting of food-component information; and support of a worldwide network of regional data centers for the generation, compilation, and dissemination of information on food composition. One goal of these centers is to assist in the development of appropriate national databases, especially in developing countries. Much has been accomplished by INFOODS, despite limited resources. Several important documents on food composition have been published, an international journal of food composition has been established, a directory of existing food-composition databases has been compiled, specific recommendations for the construction and use of food-composition databases have been developed, and a system of food nomenclature and coding has been created. Regional food-composition databases have been established throughout the world, with the goal of creating computerized systems that permit easy availability and interchange of food-composition data between regions and countries. In 1993 the Food and Agriculture Organization renewed its interest in the food-analysis capability of developing countries by becoming involved in INFOODS efforts. *Am J Clin Nutr* 1997;65(suppl):1190S-3S.

KEY WORDS INFOODS, United Nations University, Food and Agriculture Organization, food composition, tables, regional data center, food-composition database, nutrient composition

INTRODUCTION

Most of the time, the final objective of methods of assessing dietary intake is to calculate specific nutrient intakes from intake data. The reliability of such calculations depends not only on the accuracy of food-consumption estimates but also on the food-composition data on which these estimates are based. There is, therefore, an equal need to recognize the inadequacies of food-composition databases and the difficulty of matching foods as they are eaten to entries in those databases.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, food analyses were carried out in several Latin American countries. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) sponsored compilation of a regional food

table for Latin America by the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP); the table was published in 1961 (1). Subsequently, FAO published food-composition tables for Asia in 1972 (2), for Africa in 1968 (3), and for the Middle East in 1970 (4), even though the available data for these areas were fewer and less reliable than those for Latin America. FAO then phased out its work on food composition and no new regional food-composition tables were published for 20–30 y except for one on the Near East that was published in 1982 by FAO (5). Subsequently, no regional tables appeared until 1994, when one for the Western Pacific was published (6). Of course, many national tables have been developed over the years.

A group concerned about the inadequacy of available food-composition data, especially in developing countries, met in January 1983 in Bellagio, Italy, in a conference organized by United Nations University (UNU) with participation by FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO). The purpose of this conference was “to explore the needs for, and current limitations of, food composition data bases. . . and to propose what was needed” (7). Out of this conference came the design and scope of the International Network of Food Data Systems (INFOODS). Its purpose would be to “promote international participation and cooperation in the acquisition and interchange of quality data on the nutrient composition of foods, beverages and their ingredients in forms appropriate to meet the needs of government agencies; nutrition scientists; health and agriculture professionals; policy makers and planners; food producers, processors, and retailers; [and] consumers (7).”

The 1983 conference identified the most important aspects of INFOODS as providing a network of regional data centers and an organizational and administrative framework for various expert task forces and serving as the generator and repository of special international databases, the stimulator of national database programs, and a general and specific resource for persons and organizations interested in food-composition data on a worldwide basis.

The executive summary of the conference report emphasized a series of specific recommendations to UNU that have been wholly or partly implemented to a remarkable degree, considering the limited resources that have been available (7). These recommendations are discussed below.

¹ From the Food and Nutrition Programme for Human and Social Development, United Nations University, Toyko.

² Address reprint requests to NS Scrimshaw, United Nations University, Box 500, Boston, MA 02114-0500. E-mail: unucpo@inf.unu.edu.

