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THE NEED TO BUILD THE CAPACITY OF CONSUMER ORGANISATIONS FOR IMPROVED PARTICIPATION IN CODEX

SUMMARY

The role consumer organisations can have in strengthening the capacity and effectiveness of food safety and control systems in developing countries cannot be underestimated. From the standards setting process to the monitoring of foods in the marketplace, consumer organisations provide a critical yet neutral voice in supporting government efforts to improve the safety consumers face in the market place. Their involvement furthers consumer confidence in government systems and processes.

However for them to play their full role, more work is needed to build the capacity of these organisations and also ensure their voice is heard within policy making processes. Consumers International has been successful in strengthening consumer organisations' ability to contribute to food safety issues. However these efforts need to be supported directly by Codex Alimentarius. Consumers International acknowledges the trust proposed by both FAO/WHO and are hopeful that some of the proceeds from this fund will be used to address the issues on capacity building of consumer organisations raised by this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumers International (CI) has been involved in representing the consumer interest at Codex for 30 years. The processes and procedures in Codex are long and complex, involving discussions and debates at national, regional and international meetings. In order to ensure that the work of Codex addresses the needs of consumers, it is important for consumer organisations to input and be represented at all three levels (the national, regional and international). Currently the ability of consumer organisations to input and be represented varies widely. Consumers International is well represented at the international level, at least for some Codex Committees, and consumer representation in Codex has been good at some regional and national fora. However, consumer representation at the national level in some countries is poor or non-existent. In addition, Consumers International is unable to keep up with the increasing number of fora at the international level.

Over the past three years, Consumers International has been running a project to increase consumer involvement and influence in the decisions made by the Codex Alimentarius Commission. The specific aim is to strengthen the capacity of consumer organisations in developing countries and in Central and Eastern Europe to participate in and have an impact on the Codex decision-making process. The project seeks to enhance consumer influence at national, regional and international levels.

To date (as reported in a mid-term review by an independent consultant, in November 2000), the project has been successful in increasing the number of consumer organisations which participate in Codex work and other food related issues. Consumer organisations with knowledge and training in these areas have also increased. It should be noted, however, that Consumers International and its members have limited resources. Moreover, it strongly believes that the role of capacity building lies with all stakeholders, i.e. governments as well as sub/regional and international bodies, as they all stand to benefit from increased participation by consumers.

In the Codex Alimentarius Commission Report of the 24th Session, held in Geneva 2-7 July 2001 (Alinorm 01/41), under the heading 'Report by the Secretariat on Relations between the Codex Alimentarius Commission and International Non-Governmental organisations (Agenda Item 5B) in paragraph 34, it states: 'The Commission, recalling its earlier decision that meetings of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies should be held in public, noted the importance of facilitating such participation in practice.' This clearly highlights the responsibility to promote participation.

Some specific needs which should be addressed through capacity building activities/initiatives are identified in this paper. This meeting has created an opportunity for us to present some of the most obvious needs, and we are hopeful that practical initiatives will be taken to address the concerns.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Lack of capacity affects the consumer movement in two ways: in participating actively in national, regional and international negotiations and secondly, in monitoring agreements, protocols, guidelines and standards developed at international fora. Capacity building is necessary to address these constraints. Enhanced capacity within the consumer movement will increase ability to share information amongst consumers, participate in decision making, and raise public awareness. This, in turn, ensures better informed standards.

Most of the consumer organisations in developing countries, Africa in particular, are fairly young and staffed by volunteers on 'shoe-string' budgets. Most of them lack the capacity to sufficiently influence the political, economic and sociological environment in which they operate. They often lack the capacity to effectively represent consumers at national, regional and international levels. It is worth noting that developing countries are not homogenous in their capacity building requirements.

Many things affect capacity. This paper will discuss only five issues which are crucial to improving consumer participation in Codex. Human and physical resources, training, access to information, linkages and networking and an effective regulatory system. These are discussed in more detail below.

RESOURCES

- Most organisations in developing countries need capacity building in human and physical resources to enable them to follow up debates, conduct awareness programmes and participate in the numerous Codex Committee meetings. The volume of work produced in Codex requires at least one full time person attending to issues and coordinating work. In order to be successful, an individual who can commit to following the long debates in Codex over time is needed. Financial support is needed in consumer organisations to enable them to hire staff who can concentrate on this work.
- By its nature, Codex meetings and debates are protracted and members would benefit from financial support to enable them to attend the various planning and committee meetings. The consumer movement benefits most by working at the national level and any support channelled to that effect will go a long way to improve the impact of discussions.
- Many countries, especially developing countries and countries in transition, lack access to appropriate computer hardware and software for meaningful participation. This would include affordable, fast and reliable Internet and e-mail connections, which would allow consumer organisations to access documents and download large files in order to follow the proceedings of meetings and contribute to their progress.

TRAINING

- Codex issues are technical in scope and lengthy in procedures; the consumer movement needs to participate in training workshops and seminars on issues under discussion to increase their understanding. Consumers International has obtained grants allowing it to organise and run training sessions for its members in its various regions. However, a deliberate policy coupled with an invitation and financial support to attend FAO/WHO or national/regional training programmes will go a long way to enhance the programmes offered by the consumer movement.
- The consumer movement in developing countries needs to be empowered to conduct research and tests so that they can also submit their own authentic data. They would welcome invitations to related conferences, meetings and training workshops or to any joint ventures. International organisations should support public research to provide a counter balance to industry sponsored research. Because of their independent nature (e.g. no funding from industry, no industry advertising) and mission to empower and provide reliable information to consumers, support from international organisations can further the availability of objective, non-biased results.

INFORMATION

- The role of international organisations in providing validated and objective information is important. This should be maintained where it exists and developed elsewhere, as this is crucial in the development of capacity building for Codex work and food issues. Deliberate effort should be made to produce user-friendly materials, which help to disseminate information in a clear and simple way.
- Peer reviewed scientific information is necessary for assessing the capacities of new technologies, e.g. biotechnology and its products for meeting developing country needs. Funding for continued access to scientific information would help meet this objective.

- Educating the media is important in many countries, as this is the primary way many consumers and farmers receive information pertaining to food safety. In addition to the Internet other approaches to information dissemination are also needed. These could be through the traditional print, radio and (in some countries) television programmes as well as conferences, dialogue groups and the like. Consumer organisations need to develop their ability to work with the media and an effort should be made to train both journalists and consumer leaders on issues of importance, for mutual benefit. Funding would be necessary in order to organise training sessions where both parties were invited to participate.
- Some consumer organisations need scientific information, as well as economic market data or market intelligence, in order to determine how well or how wisely Codex standards or guidelines can be implemented in their countries. Support, along with funding, is needed to achieve this objective.

LINKAGES AND NETWORKING

- Developing information networks would also be useful in increasing regional interlinkages. Use could be made of existing networks and building upon these in the first instance. Regional collaboration would be welcomed when possible, although such efforts are not always easy to undertake. This could be particularly important in developing information networks on risk assessment methods.
- Capacity building through networking should encourage discussions and information-sharing on food safety issues of interest, such as risk management and monitoring of food products and of public health. This may include more specific issues such as genetic markers for terminator genes, harmonised methodologies for detection of modified genes, certification & labelling of genetically engineered foods and organic foods.
- Cooperative efforts should be made to disseminate information through the Internet. Journals, conferences and other meetings of scientists, regulators and policy makers would also be useful.

REGULATORY SYSTEM

- An appropriate and effective regulatory system should embody three general principles. It should establish comprehensive and rigorous systems for ensuring safety for human health and the environment as well as of food and feed – whether produced through conventional means or through using novel methods, such as genetic engineering. It should implement those requirements through an open, transparent and inclusive process. And finally, it should provide the public with information to make informed choices and decisions in the marketplace, through clear and non-misleading labelling. The consumer movement in developing countries is keen to work on regulation of food safety generally and on specific emerging issues such as biotechnology and is hopeful that they will receive financial support to work on these issues.

We support the proposed trust fund of both FAO/WHO and are hopeful that some of the proceeds from this fund will be used to address the issues on capacity building raised in this paper.