

codex alimentarius commission



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
ORGANIZATION
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

WORLD
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION



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Agenda Item 2 b)

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JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

CODEX COMMITTEE ON FOOD LABELLING

Thirty-fourth Session
Ottawa, Canada, 1 – 5 May 2006

MATTERS REFERRED BY FAO AND WHO: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GLOBAL STRATEGY ON DIET, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND HEALTH

DISCUSSION PAPER
Prepared by WHO in cooperation with FAO

Background

1. In 2003, the World Health Assembly (WHA) Resolution 56.23 on the Joint FAO/WHO evaluation of the work of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) called upon the CAC to give higher priority to setting science-based standards for nutrition-related issues and health. This resolution urged Member States to “make full use of Codex standards for the protection of human health throughout the food chain, including making healthy choices regarding nutrition and diet.”
2. In 2004, the WHA Resolution 57.17 endorsed the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (Global Strategy) and referenced Resolution 56.23 above. It requested the CAC to continue to give full consideration, within the framework of its operational mandate, to measures which it might take to contribute towards improvement in the health standards of foods consistent with the aims and the objectives of the Global Strategy.
3. The Global Strategy was developed in response to a request from Member States. It reflects an international public health initiative intended to guide the development of an enabling environment for sustainable actions at individual, community, national and global levels that, when taken together, will lead to reduced disease and death rates related to poor quality diets and inadequate physical. Evidence indicates that long-term health and the development or prevention of chronic diseases, including obesity, heart disease, cancer and diabetes, is in part determined by nutrition and dietary choices.
4. Only a broad coalition of interested parties will ensure the success of the Global Strategy. Food regulators and others responsible for overseeing guidelines and standards related to the foods in the international marketplace can play a role in facilitating the selection of foods by consumers, which are well suited to their health and lifestyle needs.
5. WHO has introduced the Global Strategy during sessions of the CCNFSU and CCFL and to the 55th Session of the Executive Committee of CAC (February 2005). The Executive Committee asked “WHO, in cooperation with FAO, to prepare a document highlighting the action that could be taken by Codex, in the framework of its mandate, to facilitate the implementation of the Global Strategy.” (ALINORM 05/28/3, para 90).

6. A joint WHO/FAO discussion paper was prepared for the 56th Session of the Executive Committee and the 28th Session of the CAC (CAC/28 LIM/6, July 2005). The CAC agreed with a recommendation of the Executive Committee (ALINORM 5/28/41) that FAO/WHO produce a more focused document for consideration by CCNFSDU and CCFL. A discussion paper similar to this one was forwarded to CCNFSDU.

Considerations Taken Into Account by WHO and FAO

7. In preparing this discussion paper, FAO and WHO are cognizant of the fact that the Global Strategy is a relatively new initiative and that time must be allowed for Member States to consider the initiative overall and to consider the ability to link it with Codex activities. Moreover, the organizations recognize that Codex has a considerable number of important public health and trade-related tasks to address in general and therefore appreciate that the success of any new work requires consideration of not only its relevance to the mandate but also its ability to build upon and be integrated with on-going work. Finally, it is envisioned that actions to implement the Global Strategy within Codex may take a variety of paths including support from the Commission and support from FAO and WHO in the form of expert advice. Successful strategies will depend upon the support and interest of Member States. This, in turn, may take many forms including project document development within committees. For the present time, FAO and WHO are exploring opportunities, the best use of resources, and the need for stakeholder support and interest.

8. Two Codex committees include areas of work which are directly related to nutrition and therefore have potential to assist with the implementation of the Global Strategy as appropriate within the framework of the mandate to Codex. The Codex Committee on Food Labelling works to: (a) *to draft provisions on labelling applicable to all foods; (b) to consider, amend if necessary, and endorse draft specific provisions on labelling prepared by the Codex Committees drafting standards, codes of practice and guidelines; (c) to study specific labelling problems assigned to it by the Commission; (d) to study problems associated with the advertisement of food with particular reference to claims and misleading descriptions.* The Codex Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses (CCNFSDU) is tasked as follows: (a) *to study specific nutritional problems assigned to it by the Commission and advise the Commission on general nutrition issues; (b) to draft general provisions, as appropriate, concerning the nutritional aspects for all foods; (c) to develop standards, guidelines or related texts for foods for special dietary uses, in cooperation with other committees where necessary; (d) to consider, amend if necessary, and endorse provisions on nutritional aspects proposed for inclusion in Codex standards, guidelines and related texts.*

Topics of Interest to WHO and FAO

9. WHO and FAO are interested in obtaining information regarding: (i) the nature of the tasks that could be considered and developed as appropriate within the CCFL, (ii) the kind of scientific or other support which would be needed, and (iii) the appropriate means to manage the process, and as needed, coordinate within Codex overall.

10. More specifically, the provisions for nutrition labelling and for label claim statements would enhance the consumer's opportunity to select foods which contribute to a healthy diet and thereby promote an 'environment' that would support actions to reduce the incidence of chronic disease and common risk factors.

10a. Nutrition labelling provides important information about the nutrient contents of food and thus provides a useful tool for consumers to use in selecting foods that comprise a healthy diet. Clearly, CCFL has an important role in this area, but CCNFSDU also has responsibilities. There may be value in considering additional components for such labelling as well as the benefits of providing nutrition labelling for all food products. There may be a need for scientific advice concerning consumers' use and understanding of nutrition labelling in general so as to provide the best possible advice on labelling approaches and formats so that the labelling provided is clear, visible, easily understood and able to be used by consumers.

10b. The adoption of Codex guidelines for use of nutrition and health claims certainly provides an important asset for the implementation of the Global Strategy. However, there are questions as to how such claims may be further elaborated and particularly how they should be substantiated. The absence of international science-based criteria undercuts the ability to come to conclusions about specific claims and may delay the ability to get messages to consumers about healthy dietary choices and the role of diet in the reduction of chronic disease. Again, scientific advice about the nature of the evidence needed to support the use of such claims is food is germane to the goals of Global Strategy. Guidance about the scientific evidence underpinning information regarding diet and health relationships facilitates decisions about specific claims which are important to consumers and helps to

identify the appropriate messages for consumers about healthy dietary choices and the role of diet in the reduction of chronic disease. Moreover, the crafting of appropriate consumer-oriented message statements about these relationships is an important component. Scientifically accurate label statements that do not communicate well to consumers cannot be expected to assist consumers.

11. Additionally, food composition standards may be relevant to the Global Strategy. These standards, while intended to facilitate fair trade and protect consumers from fraud, should not serve inadvertently as an impediment when manufacturers wish to formulate 'healthier versions' of food products with, for example, lower levels of saturated fat or sodium. The extent to which food composition standards may be an issue currently requires consideration and it is noted that the concerns are cross-cutting within Codex as well as complex. Also of interest is whether standards may serve as incentives to produce healthier food options.

12. Recognizing that the dietary goals of the Global Strategy have been based on the advances and improved understanding within the field of nutrition science, it is possible that Global Strategy in particular but other nutrition-related interests in general would benefit if the 'management' of nutrition issues overall within Codex were addressed in some way as appropriate and feasible. Nutrition as a topic area cuts across at least two committees at the same time it stems from a growing and complicated set of scientific findings that impact health. There may be a benefit in a clear and transparent system for providing advice on nutrition as it relates to Codex. While considerable study must take place in order to explore the feasibility of an initiative and to develop options that would be workable and sustainable, there seems to be few disadvantages in looking for a strategy to identify, prioritize, and manage topics that relate to nutrition within Codex and to integrate such activities into the development of timely guidelines and standards. Related issues may include mechanisms for seeking scientific advice and strategies for dealing with the increased need for data collection and monitoring activities.

FAO and WHO Request for comments from CCFL Members

13. WHO in cooperation with FAO are prepared to draft an 'actions document' for implementing the Global Strategy within Codex. To guide the organizations with this effort, FAO and WHO request comments and suggestions from CCFL members on the matter in general and on the topic areas highlighted directly above.

14. To this end, FAO/WHO have established an electronic forum so that Committee members can provide their comments to the two organizations as FAO and WHO work towards drafting the 'actions document.' The e-Forum can be accessed at <http://www.who.int/nutrition/>.