

CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
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Organization

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS ON ROLE OF CODEX IN STRENGTHENING NATIONAL FOOD CONTROL SYSTEM IN THE ASIAN REGION – A WAY FORWARD

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Introduction

The FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Asia (CCASIA) was established in 1976 and currently it comprises 23 member countries. The main responsibilities of CCASIA are to define the problems and needs of the region concerning food standards and food control, recommend to the Commission the development of worldwide standards for products of interest to the region and develop regional standards for food products moving exclusively or almost exclusively in intra-regional trade of Asia.

This paper commences with a summary of the main contributions of CCASIA and goes on to highlight the main challenges hampering the ability of Asian countries to address food safety. The paper makes several recommendations as a way forward to overcome these shortcomings. It calls for better networking and closer collaboration to enable CCASIA to be an effective mechanism for its members to discuss and address common needs while strengthening its contribution to global Codex work.

I. Contribution of CCASIA to Codex work

Four decades after its inception, CCASIA has made significant impact and progress in identifying and defining Codex standards to facilitate international trade. CCASIA had developed several regional Codex standards for certain food products traded exclusively intra-regionally, such as *Regional Standard for Chilli Sauce* (CODEX STAN 306R-2011) and *Regional Standard for Non-Fermented Soybean Products* (CODEX STAN 322R-2015). Some standards which had been initiated regionally by CCASIA had been converted to be international standards such as *Standard for Ginseng Products* (CODEX STAN 321-2015).

Currently, several CCASIA member countries are actively involved in hosting various Codex Committees. China is hosting both the Codex Committee on Pesticide Residue (CCPR) and the Codex Committee on Food Additives (CCFA) since 2007; Malaysia, the Codex Committee on Fats and Oils (CCFO) since 2009; and India, the Codex Committee on Spices and Culinary Herbs (CCSCH) since 2013. Recently, the Republic of Korea has been re-appointed as the host of the Ad-Hoc Codex Intergovernmental Task Force on Antimicrobial Resistance, at the 39th Session of Codex Alimentarius Commission, in July 2016.

CCASIA has been an effective forum in bringing national food safety authorities together in the region. Various technical side events, workshops and physical working groups have been held at the occasion of CCASIA to exchange information, to learn lessons from each other and to transfer relevant food safety knowledge among the region.

II. Challenges in addressing food safety in Asia

a) Lack of an efficient national food control system

While significant efforts have been made by countries in the region in improving and strengthening national food control systems, there is still disparity in capacity among countries in the region and lack of recognition of food safety at the policy making level as part of the national development agenda. This has hindered the development of an effective and modern food safety control system that is in line with principles that are being adopted by Codex.

This has resulted in some countries in the region having:

- outdated and inadequate food safety legislation that are able to address existing and emerging food control issues
- inadequate capacity to implement effective food control system such as food inspection and enforcement, food analysis and risk assessment
- inadequate coordination that results in fragmented legislations, weakness in monitoring and surveillance and lack of sharing of food safety information
- difficulties in managing food safety incidents and emergencies due to lack or absence of traceability system to swiftly identify and isolate unsafe food to prevent them from reaching the consumers
- inadequate resources including funding, human resource and infrastructure for improving food control system
- difficulties in using Codex standards in the national context

These inadequacies can impair country capabilities to protect consumer's health. Countries may not be able to adopt or harmonize national food legislation with Codex standards and also to meet food safety obligation in trade agreements, which in most cases uses Codex standards as reference. This includes inability in undertaking equivalence to facilitate trade which can minimise cost of regulatory control for government by reducing the frequency and extent of verification measures.

b) Lack of an efficient national Codex structure and processes

Some countries in the region still have weaknesses in their national Codex structure and processes. An inefficient national Codex structure and processes may result in:

- the lack of consultation process involving all relevant stakeholders to prioritize Codex work and derive national positions on issues of interest being discussed in Codex meetings;
- lack of collaboration between the scientific and research community in the country and the national Codex structure to ensure timely and relevant access to scientific information and data for use in Codex;
- inadequate preparation of national delegates in Codex meetings and their de-briefing upon return to country to understand and act on the implications of any Codex work or decisions at national level.

c) Ineffective participation in the work of Codex

Participation by many developing countries in the work of Codex is very difficult due to cost and capacity constraints. In addition, the lack of staff capability in fully understanding Codex issues is a hindrance in providing national inputs to the work being discussed in Codex. This lack of effective participation may result in Codex standards being developed without adequate consideration on the needs and situation in Asia.

Providing scientific evidence or data generation and conducting risk analysis are critical steps in developing food standards. However, many developing countries do not have the resources and/or mechanisms to generate relevant and quality data thus restricting them in the development of science-based national food standards and from providing the necessary data to enable full participation in the standard setting process of Codex. Therefore, their concerns are not articulated and not taken into consideration in setting Codex standards.

d) Emerging food control issues related to the region

There are several emerging issues which are of concern to the region such as the emergence of antimicrobial resistance (AMR); managing new technologies; food adulteration and food fraud; online retail sales of food and marketing which is the latest trends that is developing rapidly; the use of social media in spreading food scares or crises much in advance before official announcement by food safety authorities or in spreading inaccurate information on food safety; and impact on climate change to food safety. However, there is inadequate capacity for individual countries and lack of coordinated effort in Asian region to address these issues.

III. A way forward

Codex plays a key role internationally in the area of food standards, with its dual mandates of protecting the health of consumers and ensuring fair practices in the food trade. The WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) cites Codex's standards, guidelines and recommendations as international reference point for food safety. Countries may impose any measures that are stricter than Codex, provided that it is based on scientific evidence. The WTO Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement requires technical regulations be based on international standards such as Codex.

The recognition of Codex standards as international reference point under WTO, has seen an increased interest by member countries in the work of Codex. Recognising this importance of Codex and realising the challenges facing the region, CCASIA needs to consider the following as the way forward:

- Having an effective food control system is the foundation in protecting the health of the consumers. It is also important for enhancing international food trade. It is imperative for policy makers to advocate for the highest political commitment to strengthen food control system.
- Countries should, to the extent possible, develop a mechanism to harmonise the food safety legal frameworks to Codex standards. Countries are encouraged to use and adopt Codex text into national legislation and policy. Countries should take advantage of existing tools and guidelines of Codex and FAO/WHO such as risk analysis principles which are science-based in developing and/or strengthening their national food control system.
- Countries should establish a structured consultation process involving all relevant stakeholders to develop coordinated country positions. This will enable countries to contribute effectively to the work of Codex. A prerequisite to enable this would be the establishment of an efficient national Codex structure. Countries are encouraged to use the FAO/WHO diagnostic tool for assessing the status of National Codex Programme and identify areas for improvement.
- Countries in need should take advantage of the Codex Trust Fund (CTF) for capacity building efforts to strengthen national food control system to enhance effective participation in Codex.
- CCASIA should identify and initiate appropriate forum to jointly manage emerging issues on food safety that are of common interest to the region. For example, a joint effort could be initiated to enhance food safety communication to address the rapid spread of misinformation via social media.
- Countries could utilize the activities of interest to Asia (Appendix V of [REP15/ASIA](#)) that had previously been developed as well as relevant FAO and WHO regional strategies and frameworks, to serve as a guidance to strengthen both the food safety infrastructure of its member countries as well as the region's contribution to the work of Codex.
- There should be greater coordination and networking among countries in the region in order to have an Asian voice to present to Codex. This includes the sharing of risk assessment data, especially amongst countries in Asia with similar food consumption and preparation pattern.

IV. Conclusion

Asian countries should play a more significant role in contributing to the work of Codex. Noting the importance of Codex, countries should make greater efforts to align national legislation with Codex standards. CCASIA must work closer together and network better to have a stronger Asian voice in order to remain relevant and be a leader in international food standard setting.