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## **Food Safety and Codex**

**Marilena Lazzarini, Consumers International, speaking at:  
'A safer world for consumers – How can standards help?'  
ISO COPOLCO, Toronto, Canada, 24 May 2005.**

Food is different from other consumer products. It is essential on a daily basis for growth and life, and across the world we have the joys of a wide variety of ways of preparing food and a huge diversity of raw ingredients. Food provides nutrition, enjoyment, and everyone needs it!

In this talk I will discuss importance of food safety standards on a global level and particularly discuss Codex, the international food standards agency. I will also talk about how consumer organisations can be better represented at Codex and national levels, and the importance of this for protecting consumer health and safety above trade interests. Consumers do not have the same access to information as food producers which can put consumers in a vulnerable position unless they are properly represented on national and international levels. Lastly, I will explain consumer priorities in food safety and why the spread of genetically modified organisms is a critical new area for food standards.

### **Why are international food standards important?**

It is important to set standards on food safety in order to protect consumers from any harm through what they eat. Harm from food can come from levels of pesticides or additives; or from lack of hygiene in a farm, factory, shop or market place.

Food standards are today increasingly set at an international level often after a process of difficult negotiation between countries. The Codex Alimentarius Commission is the joint WHO-FAO worldwide body that sets harmonised food standards.

International standards offer many advantages. Many countries use Codex's international standards because they lack the means to set food standards of their own. National governments can easily draw reference to standards for particular food items and seek to move their national standards closer to it. Codex standards also serve to reassure countries

of the safety of imported food and can protect countries with high standards of safety from being challenged by the World Trade Organisation.

### **What is Codex?**

Codex is a large organisation and has around 170 members. It is governed by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which sets up various committees and ad hoc task forces that develop food standards. There are 38 of these committees that meet yearly in different countries. There are Committees that focus purely on commodities such as meat, or fresh fruit and vegetables. There are also General Subject Committees – for example the Committee on Pesticide Residues, or the Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems.

For many years, food standards set by Codex were voluntary and non-binding to member countries, this was until the establishment of the World Trade Organisation in 1995. Since then Codex has become the legal reference used by the WTO if there is a trade dispute. It is crucial that consumers participate in setting food standards at Codex.

### **Why must consumer organisations be more involved?**

Both Consumers and industry attend Codex meetings and frequently Industry observers at Codex often far outnumber observers from civil society. Consumer representation at Codex is key to protecting consumer interests. The food industry has a very strong interest in food standards and invariably tries to influence their development in every possible way. Often food standards influenced by industry are detrimental to consumers and only serve to protect Industries own commercial interests. Consumers International's main objective within Codex is to ensure consumers' interests are given the highest priority and not overridden by trade interests. CI has played an active role in Codex since 1970, with regular representation on some 12 Committees, as well as the Commission itself.

### **Consumer representation at Codex and nationally:**

As I have talked about, food standards can be a great advantage to consumers – protecting their health and safety. It is key that this is what food standards do. The kinds of problems with consumer representation are lack of funding, dispute systems and lack of representation from developing countries. In order to protect consumers we need civil society representation models that allow for better and more effective models of consumer participation.

Over the past 2 years, Consumers International have been looking at who is taking decisions in setting international food and product standards. We have identified the extent of consumer participation within international institutions and at the national level. Research from our Global Governance project examines the decision-making processes within ISO, Codex and the World Trade Organization.

Consumer representation at the WTO is essential as international standards become legally binding when they are used within the WTO Agreements on Sanitary and Phytosanitary arrangements and Technical Barriers to Trade.

Not surprisingly, the results of our research indicate that trade facilitation is a growing priority, unlike the concern to protect consumers' health and safety. Institutional changes can and should be made to increase consumer representation at the international level, particularly in the relevant WTO committees, where the day-to-day work on the recognition of international standards is on going.

On the national level, our project has underlined the need for more resources and assistance to enhance effective consumer representation within national delegations. It is currently too difficult -in developing countries - to have this consumer participation at the national level. The mechanisms of transparency and consumers participation at the regulatory bodies are usually very weak. As a consequence, the safety level of products in the market is usually very bad. In Brazil, 20% of the food tested by Idec during the last seven years did not conform to the minimum legal safety standards. The Brazilian federal food agency divulged official data from 2003 regarding residues of pesticides in vegetables and fruits which showed that 22% of the total of the tested samples had levels of residues higher than official authorised limits.

If government policies and positions fully incorporate the consumer perspective before international negotiations take place, it will be subsequently reflected in any international standard or trade agreement.

Encouragingly, at a project workshop last year, a resolution was passed to ensure that the results of Consumers International's work feed back into the work of ISO COPOLCO. At last year's workshop CI encouraged COPOLCO to take forward its work to examine current practices and limitations of consumer participation, and consider developing guidance or a standard for public participation. The report of that working group reflects the output from the Global Governance project stating a need for Benchmarking, Setting of Performance Indicators, Establishment of Funding mechanisms and a need for international guidance on principles and best practices for consumer and public interest participation for standards work and other decision-making processes.

CI welcomes the new initiative seen in the ISO TMB WG for Social Responsibility, which recently held its inaugural meeting, in Salvador, Brazil. ISO has taken steps to improve the balance of representation, in social responsibility standards setting, by providing for equal input from six designated stakeholder categories: industry, government, labour, consumers, nongovernmental organizations and others, in addition to asking for geographical and gender-based balance. This led to a lively meeting, and an improved status for consumers, co-ordinated by CI.

Consumers International believes the balance achieved in ISO needs to be reflected within national mirror groups. Also, further steps are needed to resolve additional problems that under-represented groups, such as consumers and developing countries have, to provide sustained representation at the International level.

### **Consumer priorities in food safety**

A priority of CI has been to ensure that international food standards protect consumer health and safety. CI has done this by working for Codex to be more transparent and to have consumer representation. Many of CI's member organisations have experts working in different aspects of food safety, and CI has worked to ensure that their technical expertise is heard on the international level.

Consumers International works on various committees at Codex related to: biotechnology; food hygiene; animal feed; residues of veterinary drugs in food; food additives and contaminants; and pesticide residues. CI also participates in the Committee on General Principles, and focuses mostly on scientific analysis and risk. Risk, and what level of risk is acceptable, has always been an important debate in food safety and its management. Regulatory measures need to be quick at responding to new developments as science and technology create new methods to produce, store and transport food. Food scares such as Bovine Spongiform and Encephalopathy (BSE) and concern over genetically modified food illustrate the importance of managing food safety risks effectively. The Codex approach to setting standards has primarily focussed on 'sound science'. However, CI considers that the precautionary approach must also apply.

CI was involved in Codex's introduction of Principles for the Risk Analysis of Foods Derived from Modern Biotechnology (i.e. genetic modification). The Codex principles for the risk analysis of GMOs provide a framework for undertaking risk analysis on the safety and nutritional aspects of GMOs.

Genetic modification is a priority area of work for CI. The spread of GMOs is happening quickly and there is insufficient knowledge about the effects on human health and in many countries there is little regulation to protect consumers. GM food should be independently safety tested and peer reviewed. Additionally, the labelling of GM food is needed for post-market monitoring of the potential unintended effects on human health, such as allergies. Some studies have already highlighted the potential for GM food to cause allergic reactions.

CI recently participated in Codex Committee on Food Labelling and lobbied delegates to adopt an international guideline on labelling of GM food. For the first time in many years there was overwhelming support for discussions on labelling of GM food. Only 5 countries out of 55 spoke against discussions, whilst 30 nations openly supported labelling of GM food. The GM debate is continuing in a working group with CI participation. We are

optimistic that the international support for labelling of GM food will be reflected in the outcome.

## **Conclusion**

In order to protect the health of every nation, every country needs an effective food safety program. The food safety programme sets a strategic direction for broader activities from farm to table. However, this can only be achieved through the setting of international standards with the co-operation of national governments, industry and consumers.

Consumer participation is critical in protecting consumer interests. The outputs from such working groups as Global Governance and consumer participation should lead to recommendations for equal, transparent and meaningful participation, but the success of these groups can only be assessed when International standards setting bodies put in place a process that not only allows, but is proactive in seeking a sustainable, balanced stakeholder input.

Genetic modification is spreading rapidly and standards committees and regulatory bodies must keep up with these developments and protect consumers.

*Marilena Lazzarini is President of Consumers International.*

## **About Consumers International**

Consumers International (CI) is an independent, non-profit organisation that supports, links and represents consumer groups and agencies all over the world. It was founded in 1960 and now has a membership of over 250 organisations in 115 countries. CI strives to promote a fairer society through defending the rights of all consumers, especially the poor, marginalised and disadvantaged, by supporting and strengthening member organisations and the consumer movement in general, as well as campaigning at the international level for policies which respect consumer concerns.



## Introduction

- Importance of food safety standards on a global level
- What is Codex?
- Why must consumer organisations be involved?
- Consumer representation at Codex and nationally
- Consumer priorities in food safety

## Importance of international food safety standards

- Consumers worldwide need food and must be protected!
- International standards can provide guidelines to countries that don't have resources to set their own
- Protection from challenges at the World Trade Organization

## What is Codex?

- Food safety standards on a global level = the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex)
- Structure and organisation of Codex:
  - Governed by the Codex Alimentarius Commission which sets up committees
  - Commodity Committees  
e.g. Committee on Meat  
e.g. Committee on Fresh Fruit and Vegetables
  - General Subject Committees  
e.g. Committee on Pesticide Residues  
e.g. Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems
- Codex used as a legal reference by the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

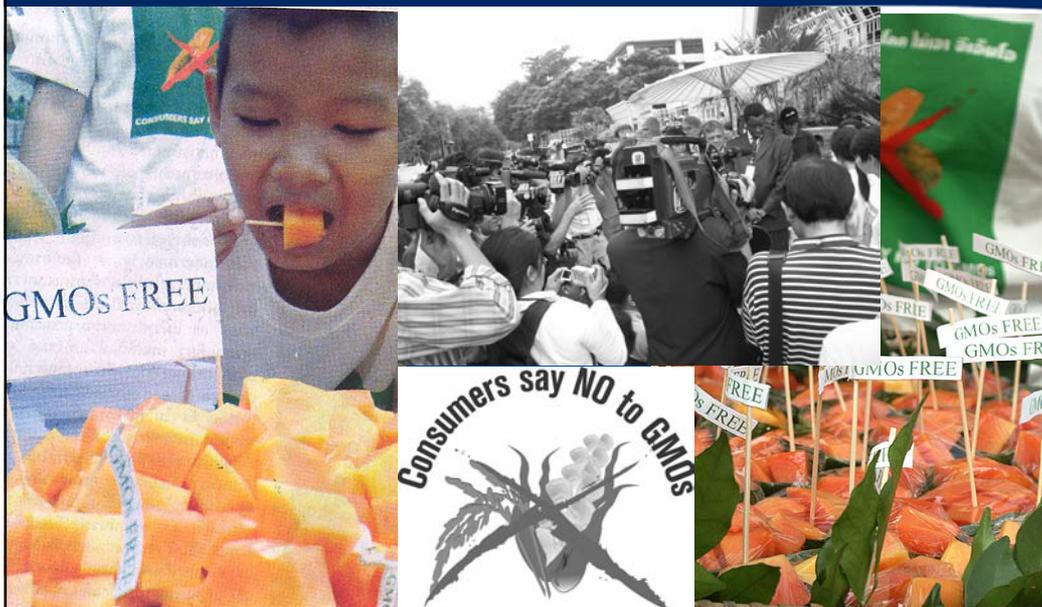
## Consumer representation – it is crucial!

- Consumer organisations need to be involved to protect consumers over commercial interests
- Better and more effective consumer participation is needed at **national** and **international** levels
- Our research on Codex, ISO and WTO indicates that trade facilitation is increasing, unlike the concern to protect consumers' health and safety (CI Global Governance project)
- Where consumer representation is weak consumer safety is at risk
- Balanced representation is possible. CI welcomes the new Working Group for Social Representative Initiatives set up by ISO/TMB
- ISO has taken steps to improve the balance of representation (in social responsibility standards setting) by providing for equal input from six designated stakeholder categories, including consumers, and by asking for geographical and gender-based balance.

## CI's priorities in food safety

- Ensuring representation in setting of international food standards so that consumer health and safety are prioritised
- Codex committees related to: biotechnology; food hygiene; animal feed; residues of veterinary drugs in food; food additives and contaminants; and pesticide residues
- Scientific analysis and risk
- Genetically modified (GM) food:
  - independent, peer reviewed, safety testing
  - labelling of all GM foods

## Launch of GM Campaign



## Conclusion

- Food safety standards are necessary to protect consumer health
- Consumer representation is needed at international and national levels
- Regulatory bodies need to keep up with new developments such as the spread of GM