

Codex Alimentarius Commission

The **Codex Alimentarius Commission** was created in 1963 by FAO and WHO to develop food standards, guidelines and related texts such as codes of practice under the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme. The main purposes of this Programme are protecting health of the consumers and ensuring fair trade practices in the food trade, and promoting coordination of all food standards work undertaken by international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

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http://www.codexalimentarius.net/web/index_en.jsp

Die von der Codex Alimentarius Kommission seit 2001 angenommen wurden unter dem folgenden Link im Internet abrufbar ist: http://www.codexalimentarius.net/web/standard_list.do?lang=en

Codex Alimentarius

- Regeln für die Lebensmittelqualität (Codex Alimentarius, Regeln für Kontrolle¹, <http://www.codexalimentarius.net/>).

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The Codex Alimentarius, or the food code, has become the seminal global reference point for consumers, food producers and processors, national food control agencies and the international food trade. The code has had an enormous impact on the thinking of food producers and processors as well as on the awareness of the end users - the consumers. Its influence extends to every continent, and its contribution to the protection of public health and fair practices in the food trade is immeasurable.

The Codex Alimentarius system presents a unique opportunity for all countries to join the international community in formulating and harmonizing food standards and ensuring their global implementation.

It also allows them a role in the development of codes governing hygienic processing practices and recommendations relating to compliance with those standards.

The significance of the food code for consumer health protection was underscored in 1985 by the United Nations Resolution 39/248, whereby guidelines were adopted for use in the elaboration and reinforcement of consumer protection policies. The guidelines advise that "Governments should take into account the need of all consumers for food security and should support and, as far as possible, adopt standards from the ... Codex Alimentarius" of FAO and the World Health Organization.

The Codex Alimentarius has relevance to the international food trade. With respect to the ever-increasing global market, in particular, the advantages of having universally uniform food standards for the protection of consumers are self-evident. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) both encourage the international harmonization of food standards. A product of the Uruguay Round of multinational trade negotiations, the SPS Agreement cites Codex standards, guidelines and recommendations as the preferred international measures for facilitating international trade in food. As such, Codex standards have become the benchmarks against which national food measures and regulations are evaluated within the legal parameters of the Uruguay Round Agreements.

The purpose of this booklet is to foster a wider understanding of the evolving food code and of the activities carried out by the Codex Alimentarius Commission - the body responsible for compiling the standards, codes of practice, guidelines and recommendations that constitute the Codex Alimentarius.

¹ seit 1962; 169 Staaten sind Mitglieder, Festsetzung von Lebensmittelstandards, Lebensmittelkennzeichnungsregeln, Lebensmittelrecht und -hygiene

ANCIENT TIMES

Evidence from the earliest historical writings indicates that governing authorities were already then concerned with codifying rules to protect consumers from dishonest practices in the sale of food. Assyrian tablets described the method to be used in determining the correct weights and measures for foodgrains, and Egyptian scrolls prescribed the labelling to be applied to certain foods. In ancient Athens, beer and wines were inspected for purity and soundness, and the Romans had a well-organized state food control system to protect consumers from fraud or bad produce. In Europe during the Middle Ages, individual countries passed laws concerning the quality and safety of eggs, sausages, cheese, beer, wine and bread. Some of these ancient statutes still exist today.

A SCIENTIFIC BASE

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the first general food laws adopted and basic food control systems put in place to monitor compliance. During the same period, food chemistry came to be recognized as a reputable discipline and the determination of the "purity" of a food was primarily based on the chemical parameters of simple food composition. When harmful industrial chemicals were used to disguise the true colour or nature of food, the concept of "adulteration" was extended to include the use of hazardous chemicals in food. Science had begun providing tools with which to disclose dishonest practices in the sale of food and to distinguish between safe and unsafe edible products.

Report of the First Meeting of the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Nutrition, 1950 *- an extract*

"Food regulations in different countries are often conflicting and contradictory. Legislation governing preservation, nomenclature and acceptable food standards often varies widely from country to country. New legislation not based on scientific knowledge is often introduced, and little account may be taken of nutritional principles in formulating regulations."

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

In the Austro-Hungarian Empire between 1897 and 1911, a collection of standards and product descriptions for a wide variety of foods was developed as the *Codex Alimentarius Austriacus*. Although lacking legal force, it was used as a reference by the courts to determine standards of identity for specific foods. The present-day Codex Alimentarius draws its name from the Austrian code.

Milestones in the evolution of food standards

ANCIENT TIMES

- Attempts are made by early civilizations to codify foods

EARLY 1800s

- Canning is invented

MID-1800s

- Bananas are first shipped to Europe from the tropics

1800s

- The first general food laws are adopted and enforcement agencies established

- Food chemistry gains credibility and reliable methods are developed to test for food adulteration

LATE 1800s

- A new era of long-distance food transportation is ushered in by the first international shipments of frozen meat from Australia and New Zealand to the United Kingdom

EARLY 1900s

- Food trade associations attempt to facilitate world trade through the use of harmonized standards

1903

- The International Dairy Federation (IDF) develops international standards for milk and milk products. (IDF was later to be an important catalyst in the conception of the Codex Alimentarius Commission)

1945

- FAO is founded, with responsibilities covering nutrition and associated international food standards

1948

- WHO is founded, with responsibilities covering human health and, in particular, a mandate to establish food standards

1949

- Argentina proposes a regional Latin American food code, *Código Latino-Americano de Alimentos*

1950

- Joint FAO/WHO expert meetings begin on nutrition, food additives and related areas

1953

- WHO's highest governing body, the World Health Assembly, states that the widening use of chemicals in the food industry presents a new public health problem that needs attention

1954-1958

- Austria actively pursues the creation of a regional food code, the *Codex Alimentarius Europaeus*, or European Codex Alimentarius

1960

- The first FAO Regional Conference for Europe endorses the desirability of international - as distinct from regional - agreement on minimum food standards and invites the Organization's Director-General to submit proposals for a joint FAO/WHO programme on food standards to the Conference of FAO

1961

- The Council of the *Codex Alimentarius Europaeus*

adopts a resolution proposing that its work on food standards be taken over by FAO and WHO

1961

- With the support of WHO, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Council of the *Codex Alimentarius Europaeus*, the FAO Conference establishes the Codex Alimentarius and resolves to create an international food standards programme

1961

- The FAO Conference decides to establish a Codex Alimentarius Commission and requests an early endorsement by WHO of a joint FAO/WHO food standards programme

1962

- The Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Conference requests the Codex Alimentarius Commission to implement a joint FAO/WHO food standards programme and to create the Codex Alimentarius

1963

- Recognizing the importance of WHO's role in all health aspects of food and considering its mandate to establish food standards, the World Health Assembly approves establishment of the Joint FAO/WHO Programme on Food Standards and adopts the statutes of the Codex Alimentarius Commission

TRADE CONCERNS

The different sets of standards arising from the spontaneous and independent development of food laws and standards by different countries inevitably gave rise to trade barriers that were of increasing concern to food traders in the early twentieth century. Trade associations that were formed as a reaction to such barriers pressured governments to harmonize their various food standards so as to facilitate trade in safe foods of a defined quality. The International Dairy Federation (IDF), founded in 1903, was one such association. Its work on standards for milk and milk products later provided a catalyst in the establishment of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and in the setting of its procedures for elaborating standards.

When FAO and WHO were founded in the late 1940s, there was heightened international concern about the direction being taken in the field of food regulation. Countries were acting independently and there was little, if any, consultation among them with a view to harmonization. This situation is reflected in the observations of international meetings of the time.

CONSUMERS' CONCERNS

In the 1940s, rapid progress was made in food science and technology. With the advent of more sensitive analytical tools, knowledge about the nature of food, its quality and associated health hazards also grew quickly. There was intense interest in food microbiology, food chemistry and associated disciplines, and new discoveries were considered newsworthy. Articles about food at all levels flourished and consumers were bombarded with messages in popular magazines, in the tabloid press and on the radio. Some were correct, some incorrect - but all were intended to absorb interest and many were overly sensational.

Despite the questionable quality of some of the information disseminated, however, the outcome was an increase in the public's food consciousness and, consequently, knowledge about food safety gradually grew.

At the same time, as more and more information about food and related matters became available, there was greater apprehension on the part of consumers. Whereas, previously, consumers' concerns had extended only as far as the "visibles" - underweight contents, size variations, misleading labelling and poor quality - they now embraced a fear of the "invisibles",

i.e. health hazards could not be seen, smelled or tasted, such as micro-organisms, pesticide residues, environmental contaminants and food additives. With the blossoming of well-organized and informed consumers' groups, both internationally and nationally, there was growing pressure on governments worldwide to protect communities from poor-quality and hazardous foods.

The problem of food additives

In 1955, the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Nutrition recorded that:

"... the increasing, and sometimes insufficiently controlled, use of food additives has become a matter of public and administrative concern."

The Committee also noted that the means of solving problems arising from the use of food additives may differ from country to country and stated that this fact:

"... must in itself occasion concern, since the existence of widely differing control measures may well form an undesirable deterrent to international trade."

A DESIRE FOR LEADERSHIP

Food regulators, traders, consumers and experts were looking increasingly to FAO and WHO for leadership in unravelling the skein of food regulations that were impeding trade and providing mostly inadequate protection for consumers. In 1953, WHO's governing body, the World Health Assembly, stated that the widening use of chemicals in food presented a new public health problem, and it was proposed that the two organizations should conduct relevant studies. One such study identified the use of food additives as a critical factor.

As a result, FAO and WHO convened the first joint FAO/WHO Conference on Food Additives in 1955. From that Conference eventuated the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) which, more than 40 years after its inception, still meets regularly. JECFA's work continues to be of fundamental importance to the activities of the Codex Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants as well as to the Codex Commission's deliberations on standards for food additives.

The development of food commodity standards in the 1950s*

- Stresa Convention - Introduced the practice of naming and specifying the composition of particular cheeses
- ECE Committee on Inland Transport - Set quality standards for fresh fruits and vegetables moving in trade in Europe
- FAO and ECE - Set requirements and analytical procedures for determining the purity of fruit juices
- ECE - Set standards for quick-frozen fruits and vegetables
- IDF - Set standards and labelling requirements for milk and milk products

*All the activities listed here have since been taken up by the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

INTEGRATING NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTIVITIES

While FAO and WHO furthered their involvement in food-related matters, a variety of committees set up by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also began working in earnest on standards for food commodities. In time, the work of those NGO committees was either assumed by or continued jointly with the appropriate Codex Alimentarius commodity committees and, in some cases, the non-governmental committees themselves became Codex committees.

A demonstrated need for harmonization

The Codex Alimentarius came into being in response to a widely recognized need. It did not just happen. It was the product of a long evolutionary process involving a wide cross-section of the global community. Many people representing many interests and disciplines were involved in the process, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that, as long as the need perceived by those people remains, so the Codex Alimentarius will remain.

INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION AND COOPERATION

Two landmark years in the foundation of the Codex Alimentarius were 1960 and 1961. In October 1960, the first FAO Regional Conference for Europe crystallized a widely held view when it recognized:

"The desirability of international agreement on minimum food standards and related questions (including labelling requirements, methods of analysis, etc.) ... as an important means of protecting the consumer's health, of ensuring quality and of reducing trade barriers, particularly in the rapidly integrating market of Europe."

The Conference also felt that:

"... coordination of the growing number of food standards programmes undertaken by many organizations presented a particular problem."

Within four months of the regional conference, FAO entered into discussions with WHO, ECE, OECD and the Council of the *Codex Alimentarius Europeaus* with proposals that would lead to the establishment of an international food standards programme.

In November 1961, the Eleventh Session of the Conference of FAO passed a resolution to set up the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

In May 1963, the Sixteenth World Health Assembly approved the establishment of the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme and adopted the statutes of the Codex Alimentarius Commission.