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codex alimentarius commission E



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
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Agenda Item 16

JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Twenty-eighth Session,

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Discussion Paper

Prepared by WHO in cooperation with FAO

Implementation of the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health: Action that Could be Taken by Codex

1. FAO and WHO note the report of the 55th Session of the Executive Committee of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and in particular the information that the Executive Committee “*agreed to ask 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).*” The report indicates that such a document would be considered by the next session of the Commission. FAO and WHO are appreciative of the opportunity to engage, as appropriate, with Codex on the implementation of the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (hereafter referred to as the Global Strategy). For these purposes, this discussion paper has been prepared for the 28th session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

2. In preparing this discussion paper, FAO and WHO recognize 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 acknowledge 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 also recognized that such efforts, in order to be appropriate and successful, must include not only scientific support from parent organizations as provided by the Global Strategy, but must also rest on achieving Codex-wide consensus to accord priority to such efforts and on Codex member governments’ commitment to carry out necessary work at the Codex committee level. The immediate goals for FAO and WHO in this matter are the exploration of opportunities for implementation, the best use of resources, appropriate coordination and the development of a process for identifying actions for implementation that include engagement with stakeholders.

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Basis for Initiating Cooperative Efforts

3. There has been increasing interest in seeking the support of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, as appropriate and feasible, in working towards improved health world-wide. The World Health Assembly (WHA) Resolution 57.17 endorsing the Global Strategy called upon the Codex Alimentarius Commission “*to continue to give full consideration, within the framework of its operational mandate, to evidence-based action it might take to improve the health standards of foods consistent with the aims and objectives of the strategy*”.

4. The Global Strategy was developed in response to a request from Member States of WHO. 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 unhealthy diet and physical inactivity. Long-term health and the development or prevention of chronic diseases in consumers, including obesity, heart disease, cancer and diabetes, are in part determined by nutrition and dietary choices. Only a broad coalition of interested parties will ensure the success of the Global Strategy. It would seem that one component in establishing the needed environment for dietary choices rests with food regulators and others with related responsibilities who oversee guidelines and standards related to the foods in the international market-place.

Relevance of the Global Strategy to Codex

5. Codex is an intergovernmental standard setting body that relies on a number of established committees to elaborate standards and related texts relevant to food in the international market-place including its labelling. These activities often require that the committees seek appropriate science or other information in order to formulate specific recommendations to governments.

6. Considerations relevant to any possible actions that could be undertaken by Codex to assist with the implementation of Global Strategy include: (i) which committees have responsibilities most likely to be related to implementation of the Global Strategy, (ii) what is the general nature of the tasks that could be considered and developed as appropriate within the committee(s), (iii) what kind of scientific or other support would be needed, and (iv) overall how should the process be managed and, as needed, coordinated.

7. Two Codex Committees are directly germane to nutrition issues and therefore, presumably 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: *(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.*

8. Careful deliberation about the nature of the specific actions potentially appropriate for either committee is needed before conclusions can be drawn. Nonetheless, an initial consideration of the work of Codex and the goals of the Global Strategy, appears to indicate that labelling activities constitute an important interface between the two. The provisions for nutrition labelling and for label claim statements would enhance the consumer's opportunity to select a healthy diet and thereby promote an 'environment' that would support actions to reduce chronic diseases.

9. Nutrition labelling provides important information about the nutrient content of foods and thus provides a useful tool for consumers to use in selecting foods that make a healthy diet. While there may be value in considering additional components for such labelling, there is also the possibility that there is a need for scientific advice concerning consumers' use and understanding of nutrition labelling in general. The provision of

the best possible guidance on labelling approaches and formats should result in labelling that is clear, visible, easily understood and able to be used by consumers.

10. The adoption of Codex guidelines for use of nutrition and health claims certainly reflects an important tool for the implementation of Global Strategy. However, there are questions as to how these 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 diseases. Again, scientific advice about the nature of the evidence needed to support the use of such claims associated with food is germane to the goals of Global Strategy. Guidance about the science behind diet/health relationships facilitates making conclusions about specific claims important to consumers and helps to identify the correct messages for consumers about healthy dietary choices and the role of diet in the reduction of chronic diseases. Moreover, the crafting of appropriate consumer-oriented message statements about this relationship is also an important component. Scientifically accurate label statements that do not communicate well to consumers cannot be expected to assist consumers.

11. Recognizing that the dietary goals of the Global Strategy have been based on the advances and improved understanding within the field of nutrition, it is possible that the Global Strategy in particular, but other nutrition-related interests in general, would benefit if consideration were given to the possibility of considering amendments to the terms of reference of CCFL and/or CCNFS DU or to establish an ad hoc task force, as appropriate. Related issues may include mechanisms for seeking scientific advice and strategies for dealing with the increased need for data collection and monitoring activities.

12. Finally, while compositional standards for foods would appear to be tangentially relevant to Global Strategy implementation goals, considerable study is required before actions could be highlighted. The general interest is that these standards, while operating to facilitate fair trade and protect consumers from fraud, 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 this may be an issue currently is unknown and requires a cross-cutting and in-depth examination of Codex work.

Next Steps

13. In order to be effective and appropriate, the identification of actions that could be taken by Codex to assist with the implementation of the Global Strategy requires time for development. The effort would benefit from a development process that begins with a careful study of the Codex nutrition-related activities in order to fully and correctly identify the available opportunities for such actions and to identify ways the actions could as much as possible build upon and complement work already progressing within Codex committees. This would enhance not only the possibility that the actions identified would be successful, but also that they would make good use of the limited resources available. Further, a transparent development process that seeks input from stakeholders and Member States would add to the quality of the effort as well as increased support.

14. WHO, as the Organization responsible for implementing the Global Strategy, plans to undertake work to consider appropriate options for responding to the Commission's request to highlight actions. These efforts will be pursued in cooperation with FAO. And, as part of this effort, WHO will solicit stakeholder input. The goal would be to provide a report on these activities to the next session of the Commission. In the meantime WHO, along with FAO, welcome input and comment from the Commission on this discussion paper and on plans for carrying out these tasks during the next year.