



ABSTRACT

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Scientific Issues Related to Codex Goals

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With the increase of international trade, particularly during the second half of the last century the need has arisen for a universally acceptable measure to ascertain both a high level of product safety and fair trading practices in international commerce. Science with its proverbial reputation of objectivity has been identified and increasingly implemented in numerous international agreements regulating trade in food.

In the mid 1950s, it was recognized that with the introduction of an increasing number of new additives to bestow on food engendering novel characteristics of quality, new questions as to the safety of these products arose. The toxicological evaluation of hitherto unfamiliar chemical molecules used in the burgeoning food technology of the post-war era became a formidable challenge to regulatory agencies and industry alike. Attempts to face this challenge often went beyond the ability and/or the capacity of individual national regulatory agencies. Moreover, it has become very soon evident that, in this uncharted territory, if national agencies ventured alone to tackle the task of the health evaluation of these new substances, a frequently disturbing heterogeneity of regulations ensued. To remedy this situation, international efforts led to the establishment of institutionalized mechanisms dealing with the safety evaluation of chemicals in food. Initially, following the Conference on Food Additives jointly organised in 1955 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) was inaugurated in 1956. In subsequent years, the scope of categories of substances to be considered was widened to include normal constituents, supplements and contaminants of food as well as residues of pesticides and of veterinary drugs. During the following decades, numerous other national and international organizations contributed to development in this field. With the aim to enhance the level and integrity of the scientific constituent of regulation, new concepts and methods in risk and benefit analysis gave new impetus to the rapid increase of knowledge in several pertinent areas in the evaluation of food safety.

Despite great progress achieved to date, unresolved questions and misunderstandings hamper international efforts to mutually recognize and/or harmonize heterogeneous food regulatory systems. The failure to settle critical issues in the area of the evaluation food safety has repeatedly led to controversies and caused disturbances in international trade in food. Consequently, the subject of food safety has occupied center stage in the scientific, political and public arena as well.

Even provided the optimal outcome of intensive current efforts world wide, a blueprint for a watertight system running with flawless reliability cannot reasonably be expected to emerge. Rather, inherent in the nature of science and of commerce, the need for a well functioning dispute settlement mechanism characterised by a high level of competence, fairness and transparency will unabatedly remain. Nevertheless, progress achieved with realistic expectations in resolving the questions to be discussed in the Keynote Address will result in the enhancement of health protection of consumers as well as in free and fair trade in food all over the world.

