

Codex Alimentarius Uncovered

It sounds like something straight out of a conspiracy theory – the shadowy Codex Alimentarius Commission has been quietly making decisions about the food we eat for decades. With obesity and malnutrition reaching record highs in the UK, **Leonie Nimmo** asks whose interests they have really been protecting.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission is a cog in the giant machine that controls the global trade of food.

This is made up of multiple supra-national bodies, including Codex's parents, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Under their facilitation, Codex has been developing standards, guidelines and recommendations for the trade of food since 1963. These cover a range of issues, such as maximum pesticide residues, food additives and food labelling.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) governs global trade and ensures that nation states do not commit the terrible crime of going against the current neo-liberal trade system. Described on the Codex website as 'fair trade', this system prevents countries from utilising mechanisms that are interpreted as barriers to trade. Some of these policies, such as taxing imports or subsidising exports, could be used to protect domestic industries or agricultural production, which is not usually permitted by the current system. Other policies are more contentious, and include the labelling of genetically modified food and refusing to allow imports of products not considered safe by the importing country. This is where the Codex recommendations come into play.

Countries in the global South have long had their ability to utilise protective trade policies stripped away by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. In the industrialised North, however, we are used to dictating terms rather than being dictated to.

Codex and Consumers

The potential for Codex recommendations to conflict with national laws, at least in Europe, is to some extent limited, because the national delegations that make up the Codex Commission are also key players in shaping national legislation. In the case of the UK this is the Food Standards Agency. If these delegations agree to Codex recommendations, which are decided by consensus, they are unlikely to go against them at a later date. Where an issue is contentious, Codex negotiations can wrangle on for years, and issues that cannot be agreed upon are eventually thrown out.¹

In 2003 the Codex rules were changed to allow the European Community to join as a bloc. The European position on Codex-related issues is therefore shaped in Brussels prior to Codex meetings, and a large part of food law across Europe is already harmonised under the single market.

Consumers that wish to have their say in Codex decisions have two possible routes: through national delegations and through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have official observer status. A stumbling block on the first option is that national delegations will only take consumer concerns to Brussels if they are in line with their government's position.² NGOs such as Consumers International may present an easier route, but there are restrictions in place that mean that only certain groups qualify for observer status. Although the Codex Commission's stated purpose is to protect consumers from dangerous foods, it has no actual requirement to listen directly to what consumers want – the onus is on consumers to make themselves heard. This situation is compounded by the obscure nature of the organisation, which few people have heard of, fewer still understand and whose very name (which is Latin for Food Code) is a beacon for conspiracy theorists.

Corporate Collaboration

Conversely, the Codex Commission stands accused of being unduly influenced by corporate interests, represented by trade bodies with observer status. A peek behind the scenes indicates that this does deserve further scrutiny.

The International Life Sciences Institute (ISLI) is one such organisation. Its members, which are solely companies, include the Big Daddies of biotech, biofuels, and pharma: Cargill, Monsanto, Bayer, Dow Chemical, Pfizer and GlaxoSmithKline. Food manufacturers include Mars, Kraft, Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Unilever, and Tate & Lyle.³ The ISLI's 2009 Annual Report states that 68% of its revenue for that year came from its members. Only 5% of this went to research, whilst a total of 81% was spent on 'General & Administrative, Meetings and Other Programme Expenses.'³ Yet it has vigorously denied being a lobby group.¹¹

The ISLI has worked closely with the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA). This is, ostensibly, a scientific advisory body feeding "independent scientific expert advice" to the Codex Commission.⁴ Its work is "of fundamental importance to the Codex Commission's deliberations on standards and guidelines for food additives, contaminants and residues of veterinary drugs in foods".⁵

In 2006 a summary of the evaluations on food additives that had been made by JECFA since 1956 was published by none other than the ISLI.⁶ The electronic publication was sponsored by the ISLI and is available online on what appears to be a joint JECFA/ISLI website. The initial list of additives was also put together by the ISLI.⁷

Not so Independent

The work of Codex Alimentarius is presented as being based on independent, objective science. Collaboration between the ISLI and one of Codex's most important scientific advisory bodies throws up some serious questions about just how objective this science is. That the ISLI's members indirectly funded this piece of work points towards an extremely cosy relationship.

In 2007 ISLI India hosted a conference on risk assessment that was attended by key Codex figures. Further collaboration between the ISLI and the FAO is apparent on the ISLI India website, notably a conference on 'Next Generation Technologies for Healthy Foods', in which they were in "technical collaboration".⁸

In 1997 a joint WHO/FAO report concluded that the use of high carbohydrate foods (which include foods high in sugar) could reduce the risk of obesity in the long term.⁹ Dietary guidelines which were developed for South Africa based on WHO

guidelines were subsequently rejected by the South African Department of Health because they did not include guidance on sugar.¹⁰ In 2003 WHO published research contradicting the 1997 report.

In March 2010 Ethical Consumer attended a conference on Codex hosted by Lancaster University, where Ezzeddine Boutrif of the FAO, whose mandate includes Codex, spoke. He was quizzed by Dr. Eric Millstone, Professor of Science and Technology Policy at the University of Sussex, about alleged systematic bias of Codex towards corporate interests. Boutrif acknowledged that there had been problems in the past but said that things had changed "dramatically" in the past seven to ten years.¹

Some of the food additives on Codex's approved list are highly controversial, such as the sweetener aspartame, which campaigners have been trying to have banned for years.¹⁴ It was approved by JECFA in 1981 and the Commission has not subsequently reassessed this additive.¹³ If it is generally accepted (amongst those in the know) that in the past the integrity of the panel of experts' research was allegedly compromised, it is surprising that the standards, guidelines and recommendations they helped to develop still stand.

Boutrif also acknowledged that Codex Alimentarius was not orientated to the public and that more could be done to address this. Perhaps we can anticipate a time that Codex will come out of the shadows and make more of an effort to communicate with the people it claims to protect: consumers.

An extended version of this article will be available at www.ethicalconsumer.org.



References: 1 Ezzeddine Boutrif, The Future of the Codex Alimentarius workshop, Lancaster University, 16th March 2010 2 Telephone interview with Mike O'Neil, Food Standards Agency, 12th May 2010 3 ISLI Annual Report 2009, available from www.isli.org [accessed 25/05/2010] 4 www.codexalimentarius.net/web/jecfa.jsp [accessed 25/05/2010] 5 Understanding the Codex Alimentarius, Third Edition, World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome 2006. Available from ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/a0850e/a0850e00.pdf [accessed 25/05/2010] 6 <http://jecfa.isli.org/> [accessed 25/05/2010] 7 <http://jecfa.isli.org/section1.htm> [accessed 25/05/2010] 8 www.isli-india.org/photo-gallery.htm [accessed 25/05/2010] 9 www.fao.org/docrep/W8079E/w8079e09.htm#obesity [accessed 25/05/2010] 10 www.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0042-96862003000800010 [accessed 25/05/2010] 11 www.nature.com/nbt/journal/v28/n1/full/nbt0110-22.html# [accessed 25/05/2010] 12 Diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2003. Available from www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/publications/trs916/en/ [accessed 25/05/2010] 13 <http://jecfa.isli.org/evaluation.cfm?chemical=ASPARTAME> [accessed 25/05/2010] 14 For example, "MP calls for ban on 'unsafe' sweetener", Guardian 15/12/05.

The International Food Code

A view from Robert Verkerk PhD, executive and scientific director of the Alliance for Natural Health International (www.anhinternational.org)

Processed foods full of additives and out-of-season, cosmetically perfect fruit and veg that taste of surprisingly little are now commonplace in European supermarkets. Over 85% of the compound animal feed used to raise European farm animals are now genetically modified (GM). This is a far cry from the days of getting most of your fruit and veg from the local farmers' market or the local greengrocer.

The trend towards globalisation has caused massive changes in so many areas of our lives, among the most profound being the origin, nature and quality of the food we eat daily.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission is heavily influenced by some of the most powerful industries on the planet, including the food, agricultural, biotech and pharmaceutical industries. Codex's stated purpose is to ensure that global trade is facilitated and trade barriers are removed, while also ensuring that consumers are adequately protected. It is therefore no great surprise that Codex has seen fit to 'green light' many GM foods, food additives, pesticide residues, synthetic hormones and other intrinsically unhealthy food components. It also has substantially dumbed down organic standards, making them more accessible to large agricultural players. Consumer interests are often seemingly low on Codex's list of priorities.

The guidelines, standards and recommendations produced by Codex are not actually laws. They do however provide a template for laws and are regarded by the World Trade Organization (WTO), which effectively acts as the arbitrator in any global trade dispute, as the internationally agreed benchmark. The WTO's status as Codex's 'policeman' has been asserted with the ten-year long dispute between the USA and Canada, on one hand, and the EU on the other, over synthetic hormones in US and Canadian beef that the EU refused to accept on the basis of health concerns. For the privilege, the EU had to fork out around US\$130 million annually. It's easy to see how smaller countries would simply be unable to resist pressure from the all-powerful minority.

If you want to find out more about Codex, as well as to get involved in the campaign to influence and raise awareness about Codex, go to www.anh-europe.org.

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