

Developing countries urged to set international food standards

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have issued a joint statement calling on countries, particularly developing ones, to develop international food standards for trade.



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Participation is essential if countries are to reap the benefits of booming global trade and prepare for imminent technological changes. Developing countries, in particular, should invest in the capacity and skills to achieve effective engagement in institutions and multilateral bodies such as the WTO and Codex Alimentarius - the world's primary international food standards setting body.

The publication '[Trade and Food Standards](#)' offers a concise explanation of how international food standards are set and applied. It advocates for deeper involvement by developing countries in both the harmonised food standard setting processes in Codex Alimentarius and the WTO's Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Committees.

"When food standards and international trade work hand-in-hand, they help to ensure food safety, as well as improved nutrition across the globe. This can help to promote growth and development, and to deliver on many of the new Sustainable Development Goals," said WTO director-general Roberto Azevêdo.

Engagement that is more effective has also the potential to make the international \$1.7 trillion market in agriculture products more inclusive, allowing small-scale food producers and processors to participate in large-scale value chains. To achieve this, governments must devote attention and muster national consensus on their food policy priorities.

Such an approach is increasingly imperative in a time of growing consumer concerns about microbes, pesticides, food additives and nutrition and of greatly increased technological abilities to control the quality, safety and origins of food products.

“Food safety and food standards are crucial to unlock the potential of an important tool to fight hunger, which is trade,” said FAO director-general José Graziano da Silva. “Public and private sectors, operators from all parts of the food value chain, civil society organisations, academic and research organisations - all have essential roles in developing sound and credible systems of food safety management.”

Road map to engagement

The central body for food standards is Codex Alimentarius, jointly run by FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO). Codex, whose 188 Members represent 99% of the world's population, has since its establishment in 1963 promulgated food standards, guidelines and codes of practice covering almost 200 food commodities and more than 300 food additives and defined almost 5 000 maximum pesticide residue limits.

The WTO's SPS and TBT Agreements set out the basic rules on how governments can apply food safety and animal and plant health measures, as well as technical regulations for policy objectives including human health and safety, environmental protection and consumer information. The SPS Agreement makes specific reference to standards developed by Codex for food safety and WTO members frequently refer to these standards in discussions in the TBT Committee.

While emerging economies have recently begun to increase their participation in key Codex and WTO committees, levels of participation by many least-developed country members remain low.

Key message

One key message of the book is that countries will get most value from participating in such work if they bring together government officials and agriculture, health, industry and trade experts, as well as consumer and producer groups, to identify national food safety and quality priorities and identify possible means to address them.

Challenges ahead

The publication also illustrates some of the drivers of change in the area of food regulation - digitalisation, new production and processing technologies, and e-commerce, as well as labelling trends, new trade deals and changing dietary and consumer preferences - that will all have an increasingly profound impact on the food trade and food safety landscape.

Traceability of food products is increasingly obligatory to allow for the rapid response to outbreaks of foodborne disease. Methods to measure radiation, pesticides and other chemical contaminants in foodstuffs are increasingly sensitive and underline the growing importance for developing countries' capacities to assess associated risks and to appropriately manage and communicate them.

Such developments pose formidable challenges to many developing countries, where food control, inspection and certification systems are often in their infancy and supply chains are often fragmented and not well developed. The WTO, FAO and others have created a partnership, The Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF), to disseminate best practices and support projects to help developing countries enhance market access by complying with international standards.

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