

Food Safety Risk Assessment at the International Level: Do Existing Mechanisms Ensure Unbiased Outcomes?

WORKSHOP

October 3, 2007

Room Silva Casa, World Trade Institute, Berne, Switzerland

Background Information

The workshop will focus on food safety risk assessment at the international level. Experts from academia, private industry, national regulatory agencies and international standards-setting bodies will share insights regarding risk assessment and the ways in which relevant actors interact in the multi-lateral context. The workshop seeks to generate an improved understanding of 1) the characteristics of the process for developing international food safety standards which ensure that outcomes are not biased towards specific national or private interests and 2) possible mechanisms for further enhancing the system's ability to generate unbiased outcomes.

Mechanisms for developing international standards for food safety were in place before the SPS Agreement came into force over a decade ago. However, for WTO Members the SPS Agreement defined an explicit relationship between domestic SPS measures and international standards. The SPS Agreement identifies the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) food safety standards as the relevant benchmarks for determining whether a food safety measure adequately addresses risk factors without introducing unnecessary distortions into trade in food products. These benchmarks may also be used within the context of WTO dispute settlement in evaluating compliance or non-compliance with legal obligations under the SPS Agreement. This link to international legal obligations has altered the context in which food safety risk assessments are conducted, possibly generating new pressures from national or private sector interest groups on the system of risk evaluation at the international level, in the context of Codex.

The Codex functions in a multi-lateral framework, with national representatives deliberating international standards in committee and sub-committee meetings. Simultaneously, the Codex operates scientific sub-committees which conduct risk assessments on individual substances drawing together scientific information and analyses through submissions from national Codex members. The Codex seeks to ensure representation of broad constituencies through submission of data from diverse sources from the public and private domain, as well as through the scientific assessment of these risks. However, given the importance of the outcomes of the Codex scientific evaluation committees for national standard setting, ensuing trade flows and returns to producers, the private sector is likely to have an interest in those outcomes. Indeed, criticism has arisen that Codex decision making is increasingly influenced by commercial interests.

This workshop draws on the experience of experts from different specializations and different professional backgrounds in order to analyse whether and how commercial or national interests enter the Codex decision making process with a particular focus on the risk assessment stage. Relevant questions include:

1. What are the linkages between relevant academic research and national and/or international regulatory bodies?
2. What is the respective role and relevance of public (national and international) and private funding in research for risk assessments?
3. How do consumer and producer stakeholder groups interact with other bodies within the system?
4. How do national and international regulatory bodies interact?
5. What are the characteristics of the Codex process of(for?) developing international food safety standards which ensure that outcomes are not biased towards specific national or private interests?
6. Do alternative approaches exist? Would it be feasible and desirable for an international pool of experts to have an increased role in carrying out risk assessments rather than valuating risk assessment produced by others?