Annual Codex Alimentarius Commission Meeting to Adopt New International Food Standards

This article originally appeared in World Food Regulation Review and is reprinted with permission.

During the forthcoming 40th session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC40), to be held in Geneva from 17 to 22 July 2017, many new and revised international food standards will be adopted. Furthermore, CAC40 will supply momentum for more strategic discussions on the future of international food standard program development that will take place regarding food safety (e.g. residues, contaminants, food additives), product identity (e.g. food standards on some spices), information to consumers (e.g. labelling and nutrition labelling) and technical and scientific aspects (e.g. methods of analysis). CAC40 will also be the occasion of broader strategic discussions on the role of Codex Alimentarius “norms” and the decisions of other UN bodies (e.g. WHO/WHA resolutions). CAC40 will also adopt a series of more introspective decisions regarding its work program, budget, officers, and countries elected to sit on the Executive Committee of the CAC.

Codex Alimentarius Commission annual meeting is the ultimate and exclusive moment where food standards are adopted.

Food safety managers from all over the world will meet soon in Geneva, Switzerland, to adopt new and revised international food standards, guidelines or recommended codes of practice, and other recommendations or statements developed by Codex Alimentarius’ specialized bodies (i.e., Codex committees). In general, decisions taken by the CAC are adopted by consensus (no vote). Codex standards and related texts are voluntary by nature, but they aim to have a positive impact on global consumer health protection; ensuring fair practices by governments and business operators on food in international trade; helping consumers to make well-informed choices; and act as references in case of trade disputes arbitrated at WTO level[1],[2]. This article covers some of the topics on forthcoming CAC agenda, with a short background information and a brief analysis.

Adoption by CAC40 of new and revised standards, guidelines and recommended codes of practice and other recommendations developed since July 2016 by the Codex Alimentarius specialized bodies (i.e. the Codex Alimentarius committees and ad hoc intergovernmental task forces)

This recurrent part on the CAC meeting’s agenda is the most important part, as it adopts inter-governmental norms, put forward to it by specialized bodies or worked out by correspondence (i) on food and intermediate food (composition and general and specific labelling, including nutrition labelling), (ii) on food processing, handling, storage conditions (hygiene), (iii) on contaminants and residues (e.g. heavy metals tolerance levels, pesticides and veterinary drugs residue levels), (iv) on food additives (and flavourings, specific and generic), (v) on official control methods of analysis and sampling plans, or broader texts on import inspection and export certification systems and mutual recognition or equivalence.
Adoption of new norms

Most noteworthy is that the Codex Alimentarius Commission is to adopt standards on some spices and culinary herbs as the outcome of the work carried out by the most recently-created Codex Committee, on Spices and Culinary herbs (CCSCH) chaired by India. It is worth noting that this is also the end of the elaboration of a standard on two intermediate foods, one on dairy permeate powders (which was elaborated by correspondence only, a novelty for a new standard, under CCMMP remit and chaired by New Zealand) and another one on unrefined shea butter, in a quite unusual move in-deed towards Codex standards on food intended for further processing. Another trend which is worth noting is the leeway left to regional coordinating committees to develop Codex “norms” for products traded in priority in those regions or food practices in such regions (e.g. unrefined shea butter, yacon, doogh, laver products, street-vended foods in Asia). The Codex Committee on Food Additives made good progress in completing most of the re-view of long-standing draft food additives provisions (some pending since 1999!) and drastically reduced the backlog towards the future completion of the General Standard on Food Additives (GSFA), which is expected to be fairly completed (with the exception of the alignment work) in 2022.

Revision or amendments to existing Codex existing norms or the CAC Procedural Manual

It is worth noting that in its effort to keep pace with food industry innovations, and as part of its mandate, the Codex Alimentarius Commission will also adopt a series of important revised norms, among which are technical adjustments to the provisions for olive oils and pomace olive oils, to certain canned fruits, complete alignment of food additives provisions between GSFA and several foods covered by vertical standards (e.g. preserved tomatoes and other types of processed tomatoes, frozen fish and fish products), amendments to existing standards and regional standard (e.g. Tempe).

The CAC will also adopt a comprehensive revision of the Recommended Code of (Good Hygiene) Practice on Fresh Fruits and Vegetables. Maximum tolerable levels for lead and arsenic in edible fats and oils (fish oils) are proposed to be adopted, consistent with the ALARA (as low as reasonably achievable) principle. In areas where some guidance is needed to prevent the presence of contaminants in foods, CAC is going to adopt new Codes of Practice for their prevention and reduction, e.g. arsenic contamination in rice; mycotoxin contamination in spices.

CAC also regularly adapts key provisions of its Procedural Manual, which includes more than a little administrative guidance, as it will see some technical sections revised with adoption of the re-vised principles for the Establishment of Codex Methods of Analysis and the Revised Nutritional Risk Analysis Principles and Guidelines for Application to the Work of the Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses.

Finally, the long-standing issue of a maximum residue limit (MRL) for recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST) is still on the CAC agenda, al-though it is unlikely that this complex issue will be reopened this year.

Review of some texts reaching the middle of the adoption procedure: permission to go further or being returned in the step process for further elaboration by the specialized Codex body in charge
Here it is worth noting Codex Alimentarius Commission efforts in developing important standards for typical intra-Africa or intra-Near East regionally traded food products. A landmark progress is to be noted on an important food commodity for some Latin American countries on a food standard for Quinoa. Codex Alimentarius is thus fulfilling one of its objectives in promoting developing countries’ food products through Codex standards, which will enhance their regional and international trade.

Revocation and discontinuation of some existing norms or norms under development upon recommendations from specialized Codex bodies

This part on revocation and discontinuation is generally a consequence of (i) adoption of newer texts which render obsolete or redundant already adopted Codex texts (e.g. this is the case for a number of Codex standards on quick-frozen fruits vegetables or canned pineapple); or when several maximum residue levels are developed in parallel and that one is adopted as a standard, all the others are then discontinued i.e. MRLs for ivermectin), or

(ii) corresponds to depreciation of the momentum around the idea to develop a certain number of texts (e.g. no example to mention in this year batch).

Reports and recommendations from the Codex Alimentarius Executive Committee

The Codex Alimentarius Executive Committee (CCEXEC) will hold its 73rd meeting immediately before the CAC40 and will prepare recommendations to CAC40 and address some issues on its own. In particular, CCEXEC73 will review a decision tree on how to allocate new work on topics where the Committees are adjourned sine die, or no longer exist (work by correspondence more routinely) with a proposal to create a so-called “super committee” which would meet in Rome or Geneva immediately before CCEXEC or another commit-tee meeting in the year. The concept of a “super committee” is still to be further worked out by CCEXEC, and for sure, such an innovative idea is expected to draw some great attention both at the CCEXEC and the CAC meetings.

CCEXEC73 will prepare important recommendations to the CAC40, which are generally largely followed by the CAC, on (i) Codex Budgetary and Financial Matters (ii) FAO/WHO Scientific Sup-port to Codex and (iii) Relations between FAO and WHO Policies, Strategies and Guidelines and Codex Work. Parent organization the World Health Organization (WHO) will use this opportunity to suggest changes to the CAC procedural manual to “impose” on the Codex Alimentarius Commission the development of soft-binding rules on nutrition, nutrition labelling, marketing or breast-feeding to reflect further non-binding World Health Assembly’s Resolutions. On CAC’s future strategic plan (2020-2025), CCEXEC73 will guide the CAC on how the Codex alimentarius work program could further contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, based on some recommendations from FAO and WHO.

CCEXEC73 will also give recommendations on whether the European Specialist Sports Nutrition Alliance (ESSNA) and the International Food Authenticity Assurance Organization (IFAAO) may join the Codex Alimentarius
Commission as observer organisations.

Other matters raised throughout the year by Codex specialized bodies and specific policy and related matters discussions with issues raised by WHO and FAO

This agenda item will allow the Codex Alimentarius Commission to address issues raised by Codex Committees regarding their internal strategies, work program or administrative matters.

CAC40 has been asked to acknowledge the Codex Committee on Spice and Culinary Herbs (CCSCH) strategy to develop a generic template for any future standard on spices and culinary herbs, based on the experience acquired by CCSCH with the development and finalization of standards on e.g. thyme, cumin and peppers.

CAC40 has also been asked to take a decision with regards to the fate of the Codex Committee on Processed Fruits and Vegetables (CCPFV) and consider the possibility to work e.g. by correspondence for any update of existing standards related to these commodities; as most of the processed fruit and vegetable products in international trade are now covered by Codex norms and the next priority is keeping them up to date and coherent with the rest of the Codex Alimentarius.

CAC40 has been called upon to discuss and “take a clear decision” on the standard on mozzarella, to tackle the remaining issues on technological justifications for the use of preservatives and anticaking agents - such as surface treatment on mozzarella with high moisture content - and on the draft standard on processed cheese. The standard on pro-cessed cheese is a more complex issue and CAC40 will have to spend time in answering the following questions: “(i) Is “processed cheese” a product that is amenable to standardisation?; (ii) What would be the rationale and justification for continuing work; and, (iii) If there were to be no international standard, what are the alternative options open to mem-bers to deal with diverse national preferences with regard to product composition and use of stabilisers and thickeners, bearing in mind the wide range of products in trade?” - while hoping that no ancient controversial debate may arise again (e.g. parmesan and/or revision of the 39-year-old standard on “extra hard grating cheese”).

CAC40 is to provide guidance on how to make progress in the revision of the scope and product definitions and future work on the draft standard for non-centrifuged dehydrated sugar cane juice to Colombia chairing the Codex Committee on Sugars, working by correspondence.

CAC40 is to discuss to allocate resources to interpretation and translation services into Russian language for the Codex Committee for Europe, as countries where Russian is an official language (e.g. Belarus, Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, etc.) do attend such meetings.

New work on Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) Codex standards and related text
This issue is one of the most critical areas where the involvement of UN agencies and standard setting bodies like Codex Alimentarius is critical to address maybe one of the biggest threats to humanity and food supplies. The proposal - which is likely to be largely supported by all delegations - is two-fold: (i) revising the existing Codex Alimentarius Code of Practice to Minimize and Contain Antimicrobial Resistance adopted in 2005 and (ii) developing a new Codex Guidance on “Integrated Surveillance of Antimicrobial Resistance”.

The revision of the existing Codex Code of Practice to Minimize and Contain Antimicrobial Resistance is aiming at addressing risk mitigation measures including all uses of antimicrobial agents along the food chain and provide updated information, in particular with regard to (i) determining and addressing the gaps that exist in the Code and up-dates to language, references, or tools, that are necessary; (ii) strategies that prevent or reduce the need to use antimicrobial agents; (iii) the inclusion of references to the lists of Critically Important Antimicrobials; (iv) the respective responsibilities of all involved in the production of food along the food chain, from primary producers to end consumers, including those involved in the production, selling, distribution and application of antimicrobial agent sand ; (v) the use of antimicrobials as growth promoters.

Regarding the new Guidance on Integrated Surveillance of Antimicrobial Resistance, the objective is clearly to adopt, within the Codex Alimentarius, some guidance for countries to apply at the level of the food chain, the same surveillance systems put in place in animal production and human health. An AMR surveillance system is defined as “integrated” when it includes plans to cover both antimicrobial resistance and antimicrobial use[3].

Both texts are meant to take into consideration the outcomes and recommendations of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the WHO and World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) Experts Meeting(s) on AMR, and to provide a further framework that countries may implement in accordance with their capabilities but within a reasonable timeframe. A stepwise approach will be foreseen to properly implement all the elements of the revised Code of Practice and the new Guidance.

It is suggested that both texts are developed by correspondence through a dedicated working group, but no physical meeting is foreseen at this stage unless the concept of a “super committee” may be tested on that topic. Discussions and adoption of these new tasks on AMR will be advertised as one of the greatest achievements of CAC40, and as a typical example of what FAO, WHO and OIE coordination with the Codex Alimentarius Commission should be.

**FAO/WHO supports for Codex Alimentarius on (i) scientific risk assessments, (ii) capacity building and trust fund for participation to Codex Alimentarius meetings for countries with limited resources**

Historically, the role of FAO and WHO has been to provide the resources for scientific risk assessments. FAO and WHO are also holding joint secretariats for several food safety risk assessment bodies[4]. FAO and WHO are also convening “FAO/WHO Expert Consultations”, aimed at addressing other issues (e.g. new genomic methods, emerging diseases, etc.). CAC40 will also discuss the continuation of the FAO/WHO trust fund for enhancing the participation of representatives of countries with limited resources to Codex Commit-tees, Commission, and other...
groups. But, as is frequently the case, the main issue is how to finance such work.

Relationships of Codex Alimentarius with other international organizations such as (i) UN and UN-alike OIE, IPPC, IAEA, WTO, UNECE, OECD, (ii) intergovernmental OIV, IOC and (iii) semi-private ISO[5]

This agenda item on CAC meetings is generally a reporting session by other international organizations about their activities and how they may contribute to the work of Codex Alimentarius specialized bodies and task forces. Some delegations may seek clarifications about apparent contradictions between current explosion of national food standards drafted by ISO member countries/agencies, even on foods unstandardized and not covered by any Codex Alimentarius standard, whereas ISO itself has a clear memorandum of understanding with the Codex Alimentarius Commission of not developing any food standards at ISO level.

Elections of a new Codex Alimentarius Commission Chair and its two vice-chairs, election on a regional basis of Codex members (countries or regional organization) to sit within the Executive Committee, appointment of country chairing regional coordinating committees and designation of countries hosting Codex specialized bodies

This is regular house-keeping, but this year is very interesting because the Chair and the three vice-Chairs of the Codex Alimentarius Commission are being completely renewed. So, a new team may mean a new impulse to Codex Alimentarius.

Kazakhstan nomination as the chairing country of the FAO/WHO (Codex) regional coordinating committee for “Europe” is expected to be endorsed by CAC40 to replace the Netherlands. The other five regional coordinating countries will be Kenya, India, Chile, Iran, and Vanuatu.

The USA is expected to be elected on a regional basis for the “North America” Codex region, re-placing Canada, and New Zealand will be replaced by another country from the South West Pacific. The other five members will be reconducted on a geographical basis are Nigeria, Malaysia, Norway, Mexico and Lebanon.

A tribute is expected to be paid to the tremendous work accomplished by the current chairperson, Mrs Awilo Ochieng Pernet, especially in promoting Codex Alimentarius standards throughout the world.

Other matters related to budget, work program, strategic objectives and other issues

This is the regular house-keeping discussions for any UN-type of organization, body or program, and the CAC40 decisions will be mostly based on the recommendations which will come out from the CCEXEC73 meeting. There
are important is-sues and very UN-like driven both in terms of procedures and decision-making process.

CCEEXEC73 and CAC40 will discuss the interest in a Codex committee to work on some of the standards developments through electronic working groups, and they are likely to give a mandate to the Codex Alimentarius secretary to develop enhanced guidance to countries chairing such electronic working groups.

[1] See the “hormones” case at https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/cases_e/ds26_e.htm

[2] See the “Sardines” case at https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/cases_e/ds231_e.htm

[3] Effective AMR surveillance systems also need to be cross-sectoral, with surveillance conducted utilizing appropriate microbiological and epidemiological data from humans, animals, crops, and food, and data on antimicrobial use among hu-mans, animals and crops. Other guidance documents were developed jointly - or individually - by FAO, WHO and OIE, but the intent of such Codex guidance is to help developing countries to build their own integrated surveillance system of AMR through the network of food safety regulators. The Guidance aims at covering (i) best approaches to integrated surveillance of AMR (ii) key components of integrated surveillance of AMR (i.e. sampling sources, target microorganisms, sampling de-sign, laboratory testing, data management, analysis and reporting, etc.); and (iii) Incorporation of information from integrated surveillance into risk analysis.

[4] JECFA (food additives, contaminants, and residues of veterinary drugs), JMPR (pesticide residues), JEMNU (nutritional risk assessments) and JEMRA (microorganisms (bacteria, molds, virus) risk assessment, i.e. food pathogens)