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**Regional Coordination in Strengthening Countries' Participation and Implementation
of International Food Safety Standards**

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1) **Introduction**

Food safety issues have become a main issue for international food trade since the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. The WTO's Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Measures has completely changed the situation of international food trade and resulted in the high importance of international food standards. Under the SPS Agreement, members have the right to take sanitary and phytosanitary measures necessary for the protection of human, animal or plant life or health. The Agreement also accepts sanitary or phytosanitary measures which conform to international standards, guidelines or recommendations to be necessary to protect human, animal or plant life or health. In the scope of food safety, the Agreement recognizes the standards, guidelines and recommendations established by the Codex Alimentarius Commission (known as Codex) as international standards.

Furthermore, the Agreement emphasizes that members shall play a full part, within the limits of their resources, in the relevant international organizations and their subsidiary bodies, in particular the Codex Alimentarius Commission and other organizations to promote within these organizations the development and periodic review of standards, guidelines and recommendations with respect to all aspects of sanitary and phytosanitary measures.

Even though every country recognizes and accepts the high values of participation in the international food standard organizations e.g. Codex, few developing countries can play their full part effectively in this system because of the limitation of resources and capabilities.

2) **Problems of developing countries on participation and implementation of Codex standards**

Codex is the Joint Food Standards programme established almost 40 years ago by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Membership is currently 170. Participation of members in the Codex standard setting process is varied among members. Information was collected to analyze the participation of Codex's members in four Codex Committee concerning food safety in the year 2003. These Codex Committees are:

- Codex Committee on Pesticide Residues (CCPR)
- Codex Committee on Residues of Veterinary Drugs in Foods (CCRVDF)

- Codex Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants (CCFAC)
- Codex Committee on Food Hygiene (CCFH)

The analysis of the information provides interesting results as follows:

- Only 67 out of 170 member countries participated in at least one meeting of the above Codex Committees.
- Ratio of participations in the meetings between developed countries and developing countries is approximately 55:45.
- Ratio of participations in drafting groups/working groups preparing working documents under the above mentioned Codex Committee between developed countries and developing countries is approximately 80:20.
- Ratio of pesticide residue data submitted for evaluation for establishing pesticide residue standards in the year 2003 from developed countries compared to developing countries is approximately 90:10.

This information shows that several member countries did not attend the meetings of the above mentioned Codex Committees. This may be the result of their limited resources and their expectations from attending the meetings. For those countries who attended the meetings, their expected benefits may be high enough for them to invest. From the above information, the level of participation between developed countries and developing countries are much different. Abilities of developing countries, by numbers of countries attending the meetings, is very different to developed countries. However, the abilities of developing countries measured by the level of participation in drafting standards/working documents or submitting scientific data are far less than developed countries. As it is a fact that Codex standards are principally based on scientific data and information, it can be assumed that Codex standards are mostly directed by developed countries unless developing countries improve their ability and participation in the Codex process.

3) Improving developing countries' participation and implementation of Codex standards

The 26th Session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) welcomed the establishment of FAO/WHO Trust Fund for Participation of Developing Countries in Codex Standard Setting Procedures. The Trust Fund, which started in 2004, aimed to increase the participation of developing countries in Codex meetings. The Trust Fund, while solving the problem of limited budget of developing countries attending Codex meetings, cannot significantly improve their ability and participation in the Codex standards setting process. Other solutions such as capacity building within each developing country or regional coordination have to be introduced and implemented.

3.1 Regional coordination: ASEAN experience

The Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional body that brings together and provides coordination among the 10 members of ASEAN. The ASEAN vision 2020 envisaged “*a stable, prosperous and highly competitive ASEAN economic region in which there is a free flow of goods, services and instruments, a free flow of capital, equitable economic developments and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities*”.

Goals of ASEAN countries are to produce and supply foods that are safe and meet requirements of importing countries as well as international standards. Strengthening Member Countries' participation and implementation of international food safety standards, especially Codex standards setting process, is also the main goal of the region. However, due to the different stages of development of food safety and quality standards in Member Countries, the regional

approach has been concentrated on harmonization and networking of food safety and food standards among member countries. Some of the many working groups/task forces have been established for this purpose.

3.1.1 ASEAN cooperation under ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry

a) *ASEAN Task Force on Codex (ATFC)*

The ASEAN Task Force on Codex has been established to serve as a forum for Member Countries to discuss Codex issues of common interest and to possibly identify common positions on Codex issues of importance to Member Countries. It is also a forum to harmonize standards and regulations in ASEAN by using Codex standards as references. Four meetings of the Task Force have taken place in Kuala Lumpur, Bali, Bangkok and Cebu. Many joint ASEAN positions on Codex issues were discussed and agreed. Activities on the strengthening and improving participation of ASEAN countries in Codex, for which a member country was nominated to be a focal point for each Codex Committee, have commenced.

b) *Expert Working Group on the Harmonization of Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) of Pesticide among ASEAN Member Countries*

The main objectives of the programme of this Expert Working Group are for the harmonization to protect consumer's health, the harmonization of standards on agricultural and food commodities among ASEAN Member Countries and to provide Member Countries with a means for coordination and information sharing to reach international standards.

Eight meetings of the yearly Expert Working Groups meeting have taken place. The total number of harmonized MRLs of pesticides which have been endorsed by the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF) is 369, involving a total of 28 pesticides. The number of draft harmonized MRLs in the process of consideration is 258. Even though most of the harmonized MRLs are based on Codex MRLs, more focus is on the harmonization of MRLs for minor crops important to the region for which no Codex MRLs are available. Issues on regional collaboration in the generation of residue data for harmonization and the principles and criteria on harmonization of MRLs are being considered in the Expert Working Group.

c) *ASEAN Food Safety Network*

The 25th meeting of the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry which was held on 21 August 2003 in Malaysia expressed full support for Thailand's initiative on the establishment of the ASEAN Food Safety Network. The Meeting noted that the proposed establishment of the Network would provide cohesive direction for the ASEAN working groups to help resolve recurring problems of non-tariff barriers encountered in the trade of food and agricultural products for ASEAN regarding food safety. Thailand was assigned as the coordinator of the ASEAN Food Safety Network.

An electronic coordination has been set up with the aim of coordinating, networking, information sharing and providing early warning among various national authorities and also working groups/task forces in ASEAN. This is also a forum for on-line bilateral or multilateral discussions.

3.1.2 ASEAN cooperation under ASEAN Health Minister

ASEAN Expert Group on Food Safety (AEGFS)

The ASEAN Expert Working Group on Food Safety under the ASEAN Cooperation on Health Development is developing an ASEAN Food Safety Improvement Plan, which forms part of a comprehensive programme of action to address the impact of globalization and trade liberalization in the health sector.

3.1.3 Inter-regional cooperation

ASEAN has made major strides in building cooperative ties with states in the Asia-Pacific region and shall continue to accord them a high priority. Cooperation with East Asian countries has accelerated with the holding of an annual dialogue among the leaders of ASEAN China, Japan and the Republic of Korea which is called ASEAN+3. In 1999, the leaders of ASEAN+3 countries issued a Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation outlining the areas of cooperation among them. On 8-9 March 2004, a Symposium of ASEAN+3 on Food Safety and its Related Techniques was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand with funding support from the Association for International Cooperation of Agriculture and Forestry (AICAF) of Japan. The Symposium was placed under the ASEAN+3 cooperation framework and served as a platform for the exchange of information and experience on a chosen theme. Food safety was chosen to be a particular topic for this year's symposium. One of the conclusions arising from the discussion during the Symposium was that the presence of developed countries in the Symposium, such as Japan and the Republic of Korea, as well as those more advanced Members of ASEAN, are seen as a great opportunity for the less advanced ASEAN Member Countries to tap the information and experiences in an effort to further improve and strengthen their respective national food safety policies and implementation.

3.2 Capacity building of individual country

To support the successfulness of regional coordination, each member country has to prepare itself to a level that can support the regional activities. Individual countries also need to be ready for the implementation of international and regional food safety standards. Some actions are recommended for individual countries for example:

- Governments should take the necessary steps through national food safety policies, systems and programmes to ensure that food safety considerations form an integral part of their system. The implementation of such controls throughout production, handling, processing and marketing leads to improved food safety and increased competitiveness. These national programmes need to be reviewed to determine level of compliance with international and regional standards. Through national food control systems, governments should provide policies and supporting infrastructures to reach the level of international and regional standards.
- Capacity building to participate in international arena allows developing countries to engage in food safety standards establishment. Developing country government officials need to be able to more effectively use existing trade rules and agreements and to argue for changes in them in a more powerful manner. In order to do this, they should have the capacity to participate effectively in the international standard-setting organizations. Furthermore, they must have the capacity of negotiation not only in international standard setting process but also for market access.

- Investments in infrastructure, technology and research are necessary as part of the overall food safety system development. Investments to improve food safety infrastructure that support better hygiene at the primary step of the food supply chain is needed. Advances in the technology of food analysis for microbes, additives, pesticide and veterinary drug residues, and other foreign matter permit faster, cheaper detection of potential safety problems in foods.

4) **Conclusions and recommendations**

International food safety standards become highly important for the global trade of food commodities. Many countries, both developed and developing, have recognized the need to actively participate in the international food standards organization, particularly the Codex Alimentarius Commission. However, most developing countries are not able to participate effectively in Codex process because of the limitation of budget, expertise and knowledge. One of the ideas for this problem is regional coordination among developing countries.

The experiences of ASEAN on food safety and food standards coordination can be seen as a case study of regional coordination. Some of the main programmes include coordination on Codex issues, harmonization of regional standards, coordination and networking on food safety within the region. The processes of coordination are on-going and need further improvement especially in the area of scientific knowledge and expertise that need to be strengthened. The work programme on data generation/sharing to support standards establishment is in the beginning stages and needs significant supports internally and externally.

It is recommended that programmes on regional coordination be continued and improved to strengthen developing countries' participation and implementation of international food safety standards. The existing programmes may be expanded either by improving capabilities/efficiencies or by increasing members joining the programme. Technical assistance or support from international organizations e.g. FAO, WHO or from developed countries can improve scientific capabilities of the programme and also of each countries in the region.