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**CONSUMER ACTIVITIES RELATED TO FOOD SAFETY
AND QUALITY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

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Consumer Organisation Activity in Central and Eastern Europe

Consumers International, the global federation of 265 consumer organisations worldwide, works closely on food safety and quality issues with consumer organisations in the Central and Eastern (CEE) region. Currently Consumers International has two programmes in the CEE region, a 3-year Food Safety project and a 3-year Codex Training programme, the codex programme being the first policy training Consumers International has run for its members in this region.

Most of Consumers International's 30 member organisations in Central and Eastern Europe are less than 10 years old. With markets opening up a variety of goods has become available, but with that also problems. As the market developed, misleading advertising, unsafe and poor quality goods, bad services and lack of redress have been major issues. In terms of food issues there is a great deal of similarity in the challenges each country faces, such as regional and international harmonisation alongside their national regulations. The prominent issues consumer organisations are trying to tackle are, food hygiene, food labelling, lack of regulation and enforcement, additives, safety of products, GM foods, food contamination and identification/traceability.

Current CEE consumer organisation research and campaigning on food standards:

Some of the activities CI's members are carrying out under the two capacity building programmes;

- The Bulgarian Consumer Federation has carried out and published comprehensive comparative research on food labelling, and found that enforcement must urgently be improved to protect consumers against fraudulent foods. They have also been running a high profile media campaign on food product safety and quality.
- The Lithuanian National Consumer Federation is carrying out quality and safety testing on a range of foods, surveying consumers on concerns and preferences and building up data on food complaints.
- The Romanian Association for the Protection of Consumers has launched a consumer information campaign and carried out extensive consumer surveying on labelling needs, particularly for GM Foods, and are lobbying for the setting up of a National Consultative Codex Committee in Romania.
- In 2001 the Ukrainian Consumers Association (UCA) identified banned GM crops growing in the Ukraine. Since this finding they have been involved in a Government Working Group. UCA have positions on all aspects of GM foods and are continuing dialogue with their government on imports, state testing, registration and use of GM products in the Ukraine. UCA has also been providing educational material to farmers, young people and those in rural areas.
- Poor hygiene in meat production is a problem in Croatia. The Croatian Association for Consumer Protection works a great deal on meat hygiene, and will be holding seminars for small meat producers this year and hosting 'round tables' which they have successfully held before, with producers and enforcement agencies. They are also providing advice to consumers about consumer redress after purchasing or consuming harmful products.

Successes and Obstacles Related to Food Policy Experienced by Consumer Organisations in Central and Eastern Europe***Obstacles –***

One issue repeatedly reported by many of our member organisations is that enforcement of food standards is a major problem in their countries. The inspection bodies do not have the capacity to cope with the need. This is compounded by the fact that much fresh foods are bought from stalls at food markets, for example in Macedonia this is estimated to be 40-50%, which are more difficult to regulate.

Another major problem is the lack of a formal consultation system between government and consumer organisations. One example of the formal structure which should be in place is a National Consultative Codex Committee (NCCC). There are National Consultative Codex Points (NCCP) in all but a few of the CEE countries.

The role of an NCCP is set out in the Codex Procedural Manual. A core function of an NCCP is to act as the liaison point with various parties including consumer representatives to ensure the government is provided with an appropriate balance of policy and technical advice on which to base its decisions. However, consultation with consumer groups in this region is extremely low. A 1995 global survey found that consumer groups in CEE countries were the lowest consulted.

Of a survey in 2000 of Consumers International members in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia, only one was represented on their national food standards body.

Successes –

Some of Consumers Internationals members are tackling the problem of non-functioning NCCC's themselves. An example of a successful meeting was held in Bulgaria in April 2001 that included government, food industry and consumer representatives. More than 40 participants attended this two-day seminar, where issues important to the region were discussed. The meeting helped to build relationships between the Bulgarian Consumer Federation, the Ministry of Agriculture, other government representatives and food producers. It was the first such meeting of its kind. However, this was a 'one-off' meeting enabled by Consumers International funding under the codex programme. The Croatian Association for Consumer Protection are also planning to follow this model.

Some of CI's members in the CEE region have developed their expertise in regional and international policy through being involved in CI's codex training; and are now drafting papers, writing reports and representing CI's membership at codex meetings. This policy expertise in the consumer groups would be an asset to national delegations. The value of consumer input is wide ranging:

'Government should obtain the consent of the governed; citizens have a right to participate meaningfully in public decision making and to be informed about the bases for government decisions. Relevant wisdom is not limited to scientific specialists and public officials; participation by consumers and a diversity of groups and individuals can provide essential information and insights about a risk situation. Non-specialists may also help design decision processes that allow for explicit examination, consideration, and weighing of social, ethical, and political values that cannot be addressed solely by analytical techniques, but also require broadly participatory deliberation.' **U.S. National Research Council. Understanding Risk: informing Decisions in a Democratic Society. Washington, DC, National Academy Press, 1996.**

Consumer participation in national food policy development is very successful in some countries, for example in Norway. The Norwegian Consumer Council is funded by its Ministry of Agriculture to participate in the national delegations in the Codex Committee on Food Labelling, the task force on Biotechnology, the Codex Committee on General Principles and the Codex Commission meeting. A benefit to the government is that the Norwegian Consumer Council have drafted position papers on health claims and on functional foods for the Norwegian National Consultative Codex Point. The NCC has found that this has resulted in better communication with their government and food authorities. Due to the funding, the Norwegian Consumer Council are now experienced in international food policy and one member of staff is now responsible for working with various Ministers on international strategy. The Norwegian Consumer Council are funded by their Ministry of Agriculture to run seminars for government and non-government organisations for discussion on food policy, and also funds training of the Norwegian Consumer Council staff on public speaking. The Norwegian Consumer Council are publicly very active which builds the trust of the consumers in their government. The case of Norway is a good example of how the government and a consumer group are working together benefiting each other, and ultimately Norway's consumers.

Recommendations:**(1) National Consumer Consultation**

Governments need consultation with consumer organisations to inform them of consumer needs, perceptions and information related to issues under discussion in order to develop national policy. It is important in the CEE region to establish links and strengthen co-operation between government departments and consumer organisations for reasons outlined in the previous section. A great deal of expertise is available in Consumers International's member organisations, and many are building up very useful data banks of consumer research. A successful example of consultation through formal mechanisms is National Consumer Councils, e.g. in the UK, Norway and Italy.

(2) Training to Strengthen the NCCP and Its Ability to Consult with Consumers in the CEE region

This is necessary to improve both the credibility and the effectiveness of the codex process. Training for NCCC's to function properly is necessary in the CEE region for those responsible for developing the national position in consultation with consumer representatives and other interested stakeholders. NCCP's should hold regular public meetings with, and constantly strive to involve, qualified participants from these parties. CEE countries need assistance to achieve these objectives. CI would like to see FAO and WHO facilitate training for government and consumer groups so that they can more effectively participate in the national policy making process, manage food safety concerns and strengthen food safety control systems in their countries.

(3) Use of FAO / WHO Funding to Support Capacity Building in CEE

Global surveying has revealed differences in balance between transitional and developed countries representation in global food standard discussions. Governments in the CEE region are in-transition but face many problems which are closer in similarity to developing countries compared with developed countries. The CEE countries are under-represented in the codex process and must be included in the process for a number of reasons including facing greater food-related risks and have less protection. In 2001 the Codex Alimentarius Commission agreed that capacity building in developing countries for their effective participation in Codex should be the highest priority. CI welcomes the initiative of the Trust Fund and hopes that FAO and WHO can facilitate funding for CEE governments. Building the capacity of transitional countries should improve their ability to effectively consult with consumer organisations and other interested parties. This will enable transitional countries to more effectively manage food safety risks, improving quality management, the quality and safety of products in the domestic market and will increase the confidence and trust of consumers.

Thank-you to the Consumers International members who contributed to this paper.

Founded in 1960, **Consumers International** (a non-profit organization) formerly IOCU, is a federation of consumer organizations dedicated to the protection and promotion of consumer interests worldwide through institution-building, education, research and lobbying of international decision-making bodies. An independent foundation, Consumers International has 265 members in over 120 countries.