New Opportunities for International Harmonization: The New Codex Committee for Spices and Culinary Herbs

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1. Historical perspective

History reveals that the motivation behind the renowned voyages to the Indian land was the search for spices. Approximately 96% of the global production of spices and culinary herbs currently takes place in developing Asian, African, Near East and Latin American countries; however, some European Union countries and the United States are also beginning to initiate commercial production. In recent years, the global production of spices and culinary herbs has risen from 6.5 million mega tonnes (MT) in 2004 to over 10 million MT in 2011 and, with demand increasing rapidly, has now reached 14.5 million MT in 2013-14.

Although international production and trade of spices and culinary herbs has escalated exponentially, there remains a marked lack of globally-recognized and harmonized standards for these commodities across all facets of production, from harvesting and storage to processing, packaging and consumption. This lack of international standardization frequently creates challenges with regard to fair practices in the food trade, such as compliance with various national import requirements, frequent revision of standards by countries, and product specifications unilaterally demanded by buyers.

Being a country with a significant stake in the international trade and commerce of spices, India took the lead in proposing the need and necessity for a Codex Committee for spices and culinary herbs before the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) which brings together over 185 countries under its fold on food related matters. Spices, herbs and their formulations are assuming greater relevance in the world today. However, production, processing, exports and imports are not on a smooth platform on account of the prevailing disharmony in quality standards for over 100 types of spices and herbs, which can be further sub-grouped based on features, species and formulations.

2. Varying quality standards among spices and culinary herbs

Given that spices and culinary herbs are an integral part of global cuisine and are traded and consumed all over the world, appropriate standardization for quality parameters to ensure the protection of consumer interests and safety and fair practices in trade is required. In view of the fact that the main producers of spices are in developing countries, the lack of harmonized and globally accepted standards can prove to be detrimental to fair trade. Administrations in consuming countries have enactments of law to strictly ensure the quality and safety of the products consumed and used by their populations. It has been a consistent challenge to conform to various import requirements as the country legislators and its consumers raise their standards from time to time, paving the way for trade barriers. Specifications...
unilaterally demanded by buyers in the face of nonexistent common international standards leads to trade barriers for exports by most developing countries. In fact, there exists a vast variety in the standards for spices and culinary herbs across countries and, in many cases, there are no standards at all. This calls for a vital need to consider establishing harmonized international standards under the CAC to address this gap. Currently, there is wide variation and inconsistency among quality standards for spices and culinary herbs internationally, which can be marketed in many different forms, including whole spices, ground spices, cracked or crushed spices, dehydrated spices, spice mixes and blends, spice oils and oleoresins. Some standard setting international organizations, such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), the American Spice Trade Association (ASTA), the European Spice Association (ESA), and national organizations such as India’s Food Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and Agmark, have set certain quality criteria for some spices and herbs; however, the standards set by many of these organizations differ with respect to one another which has contributed to disharmony the standards for quality parameters of spices and herbs.

3. Roadmap for the establishment of CCSCH

At the 35th Session of the CAC in July 2012, India submitted a proposal outlining the need to establish a Committee to deal exclusively with the quality parameters of spices and herbs. Subsequently, a discussion paper for the establishment of such a committee was presented to each of the six FAO/WHO Coordinating Committees throughout 2012-13. The feedback from the various Coordinating Committees contributed to reframing the initial discussion paper, which was then circulated via the Codex Secretariat for review by members. At the 36th session of CAC in July 2013, when Codex celebrated its Golden Jubilee, India’s efforts culminated in the decision of the CAC to form the Codex Committee on Spices and Culinary Herbs (CCSCH) with the following Terms of Reference:

(a) To elaborate worldwide standards for spices and culinary herbs in their dried and dehydrated state in whole, ground, and cracked or crushed form.

(b) To consult, as necessary, with other international organizations in the standards development process to avoid duplication.

4. Interactions with other Codex Committees on matters of interest regarding spices and herbs

Spices Board India is broadening its participatory role in other Codex General Subject Committees on matters of interest related to spices and herbs, such as the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene (CCFH) and the Codex Committee on Pesticide Residues (CCPR), in order to have a direct impact on the issues under consideration. For example, India co-chaired, with the United States of America, the CCFH electronic Working Group (eWG) on the “Proposed Draft Code of Hygienic Practice for Spices and Dried Aromatic Herbs”. As well, India presented two conference room documents (CRD) at the 45th Session of the CCPR, held in 2013, which proposed for consideration the elaboration of Maximum Residue Limits (MRL) for certain pesticides in cardamom, cumin, black pepper as well for curry leaves. Another proposal for new work on the establishment of the maximum level of aflatoxins in spices was put forth by India and is to be considered at the eighth Session of the Codex Committee on Contaminants in Food (CCCF) in early 2014.

5. Relevance to the Codex Strategic Objectives

The CCSCH, led by India, will play an important role in the development of Codex standards for spices and culinary herbs and will also support important Codex strategic objectives, such as ensuring fair practices in the food trade by promoting sound regulatory frameworks through the review and development of Codex standards and related texts for food quality. The Committee will meet with the objective of promoting maximum and effective participation of member countries, giving particular attention to strengthening National Codex Contact Points and National Codex Committees by encouraging hosting and/or co-hosting of Codex sessions in developing countries. CCSCH will enhance sensitization for Codex work in developing countries, which are also the main producers of spices and culinary herbs, and also promote capacity in those countries and strengthen their overall national Codex structures.

6. The first session of CCSCH

India successfully hosted the first Session of the Codex Committee on Spices and Culinary Herbs (CCSCH1) in February 2014 in Kochi, India. The Secretariat of the CCSCH, operating from the Spices Board India, hosted the participation of 107 delegates from over 40 countries and seven Observer organizations, in close liaison with the Codex Secretariat in Rome and the National Codex Contact Point of India, located within the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI).

Discussions focused on the work management modalities of the CCSCH, mechanisms for prioritization of work, new work proposals and activities of other international organizations relevant to the work of CCSCH. The outcomes of the first Session included agreement on new work proposals and identification of responsibilities, subject to approval by the 38th session of the CAC in July 2014. The task of preparing a draft
Standard for Black, White and Green Pepper for circulation for comments at Step 3 of the Codex step procedure has been delegated to an eWG, led by India and co-chaired by Cameroon and Indonesia. The draft standard for cumin will be developed through an eWG chaired by the European Union and co-chaired by India. Argentina will chair the eWG for Oregano with the support of Greece as its co-chair and an eWG to develop a draft standard for Thyme will be chaired by the European Union and co-chaired by Switzerland. It has been decided that India will again be chairing the eWG to advance a discussion paper on the classification of spices and culinary herbs. It has also been decided that the prioritization of the work undertaken by the Committee will be based upon priority-setting “criteria applicable to commodities”, as set forth in the Codex Procedural Manual. It has also been proposed by the Committee to hold twelve CCSCH sessions at intervals of 18 months in order to accomplish its objectives.

7. Conclusion

India has now initiated strategies for the harmonization of global standards for spices and culinary herbs, taking into consideration international and national legislations and other available standards and specifications that are based on scientific data. The Committee will develop quality parameters for spices and culinary herbs while taking into account references on other associated parameters from other horizontal Codex Committees.

Concrete and concerted effort through Codex can pave the way towards the elimination of trade barriers and strengthen the global food sector through harmonization of standards.