



Codex Alimentarius and the International Politics of Food Irradiation

What is Codex?

*Codex Alimentarius*¹, literally translated from Latin, means “food code.” The Codex Commission sets standards for food that include the following: labeling; additives; contaminants; methods of analysis and sampling; hygiene; nutrition and foods for special dietary uses; import and export inspection and certification systems; residues of veterinary drugs in foods; and pesticide residues in foods.

The United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) created the Codex Alimentarius in 1963.



What is Wrong with Codex?

Although Codex claims to have “broad community involvement” to increase consumer protection with internationally recognised scientific food standards, its achievements fall flat under scrutiny. Codex does not rely on community involvement in its decision-making process; decisions are made by governmental appointees behind closed doors. A close examination of Codex’s position on food irradiation shows that Codex should not list “consumer protection” among its achievements.

The bottom line is the single international reference point which facilitates World Trade Organization (WTO) style liberalized trade, allows a small number of corporations to control a large share of the global food market.

Is Codex’s Decision-Making Process Democratic and Accountable?

While Codex counts 163 member countries representing 97 percent of the world, the delegates to Codex who actually make the decisions are appointed by national governments, not elected by the people. Codex claims that delegations include senior governmental officials, academics and industry representatives. Delegates represent national and/or industrial interests, not the interests of the people. Final decisions are left to members, usually without observer participation. This undemocratic.

The decision-making process places the delegates’ responsibility to conglomerate interests and destroys accountability to the people who the delegates are theoretically representing.

What is Codex’s Role With Food Irradiation?

Codex claims to pursue its “clearly defined objectives in a disciplined and scientific way.” In the case of food irradiation, however, Codex has proceeded in a decidedly unscientific manner, putting public health at risk. Though Codex regulates food irradiation as a “food additive” within the jurisdiction of the Codex Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants (CCFAC), the agency has largely ignored many toxic chemicals formed by irradiation, including benzene, toluene, methyl ethyl ketone. Codex has also dismissed findings that link irradiation byproducts 2-alkylcyclobutanones (2-ACBs), which have never been found to occur naturally in any food, to cancer development and genetic damage.

How Does CCFAC Make Decisions?

CCFAC depends on several sources of information in evaluating food additives. In the case of irradiation, CCFAC draws from the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committees on Food Additives as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the International Consultative Group on Food Irradiation.

As shown in an October 2002 report by Public Citizen and GRACE, *Bad Taste: The Disturbing Truth About the World Health Organisation's Endorsement of Food Irradiation*², the WHO has relied on a very small number of faulty studies in declaring food irradiation safe. This unscientific and shoddy work is the foundation of acceptance of food irradiation across the world.



The IAEA owes its loyalty to the nuclear industry and thus works with governments to apply nuclear technologies. It is impossible for the main advocate of nuclear

technology to advise Codex in a disinterested, scientific manner because of its vested interests in the speedy and complete adoption of food irradiation.

Where Does ICGFI Fit In?

The final player in the politics of international acceptance of food irradiation is the International Consultative Group on Food Irradiation. ICGFI meets in secret, led by undemocratically chosen leaders with close ties to the private food irradiation industry. ICGFI, which has 45 member nations, helps set food safety standards for the WTO, which has more than 130 member nations. This represents the interests of the few dominating the needs of many.

In one example, ICGFI decided in a private meeting in Geneva that any food could be safely irradiated at any dose without a quorum; only 22 of 45 member nations were represented at the meeting. That decision is now in the hands of Codex to implement.

What's the Real Deal with Codex?

Codex has not relied on disciplined, dispassionate or scientific advice in setting standards for food

irradiation. Instead, the decisions and regulations recommended by Codex are used as a starting point for the facilitation of international trade.

Both the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards (SPS) of the WTO, and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) follow Codex's lead and encourage the international harmonization of food standards from a trade perspective.



A product of the Uruguay Round of multinational trade negotiations under the WTO, the SPS Agreement cites Codex standards, guidelines and recommendations as the preferred international measures for facilitating international trade in food. As such, Codex standards have become the benchmarks against which national food measures and regulations are evaluated within the legal parameters of the Uruguay Round Agreements.

Codex has become an instrument of the liberalization of international trade, another part of globalization's "race to the bottom," instead of a method to protect the food supplies of peoples across the world.

In short, Codex is an undemocratic and unaccountable institution. While it might have been founded with noble purposes in mind, it has become a measure by which profit is made at the expense of people. In the case of food irradiation, proponents never fail to point out the nods of approval from Codex and the WHO without considering the decision-making processes and industry influences behind the scenes.

¹ Information concerning Codex from its website, at www.codexalimentarius.net

² Available at www.citizen.org/documents/BadTaste.pdf



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