Right to “Healthy” Food

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consumers International (CI) is a world federation of consumer groups which, working together with its members, is the only independent and authoritative global voice for consumers.

CI was founded in 1960, and its work on behalf of consumers is needed now more than ever in today’s globalized world. Our modern movement is essential to guaranteeing a just, safe, and sustainable future for consumers in a global market that is increasingly dominated by transnational companies. Our goals are ambitious, and in the coming years, we want to increase our strength and influence.

The mission of CI is to build a powerful international movement to protect and strengthen consumers throughout the world, working to create a world in which people have access to safe and sustainable goods and services: a world in which they can exercise their rights as consumers and can use their power as a group to help consumers throughout the world.

The following values govern CI’s actions:

- The highest standards of ethical conduct;
- Independence from businesses, government, and party politics;
- Mutual respect and solidarity among our members;
- Integrity, transparency, and accountability;
- Inclusiveness.

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2. RIGHTS OF THE FOOD CONSUMER

Since its inception more than 40 years ago, Consumers International has carried out a series of actions to combat *inter alia* fragmented and insufficient regulatory frameworks, poorly supervised and regulated food safety programs, misleading advertising, insufficient product labeling, and foodborne diseases.

CI’s basic lines of action have focused on research, training, and technical assistance for member organizations in food-related areas, such as food security, Codex Alimentarius, nutrition, and food safety. It is recognized for its involvement in the Pan American Commission for Food Safety (COPAIA) since that commission was formed and for its support of consumer organizations’ participation in national and international regulatory entities and for encouraging consumers to take part in the Codex Alimentarius National Committees in an effort to influence the development of food standards.

A series of rights guide the behavior of the consumer movement in food safety:

1. The human right to food;
2. Governmental guarantee of food safety;
3. The right to education about healthy food;
4. The right to a healthy and sustainable environment;
5. The right to be informed about healthy food;
6. The right to redress and to compensation for harm or damage;
7. The right to participation and representation without discrimination.

The dissemination and promotion of these rights has been the basis of the campaign “Wholesome Food, Safe Food, Responsible Consumers” carried out by Consumers International in past years with the technical support of PAHO. The goal of this campaign has been to contribute to national policies designed to reduce microbiological and chemical hazards as well as other risks to human health caused by food in order to promote healthy, safe, and responsible consumption habits among consumers by viewing food safety as a human right and the responsibility of all the links in the food chain.

The objectives of the campaign were:

To reinforce knowledge and highlight the importance of subjects related to food safety among consumer leaders, heads of consumer organizations, and end-consumers, taking a comprehensive approach from the farm to the end-consumer;

To promote application of good production and marketing practices among producers, processors, and marketers;

To make consumers aware of their rights and responsibilities with regard to food and to inform the end-consumer about good practices for the healthy handling and consumption of food.
3. THE CONSUMER’S ABILITY TO CHOOSE AS A MEANS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO SAFE AND NUTRITIOUS PRODUCTS

Since 2005 and as a result of its participation in the ALCUE-FOOD Project and the survey on “Food Safety, Quality, and Labeling from the Perspective of the Latin American Consumers Movement,” which was financed by the European Union, Consumers International has been providing information about the opinions that consumer organizations and other relevant actors hold with regard to food safety subjects.

In the June 2006 survey, which can be viewed in its entirety on the ACLUE-FOOD website, CI highlighted the main areas of interest related to food safety. These centered on three subject areas:

- The legal framework for food labeling;
- The perception consumer organizations have of food safety and related information systems;
- The perception consumer organizations have of individual consumer behavior as it relates to the safety and quality of food purchased in the local market.

The following organizations took part in this survey: Consumidor Argentino (Argentina); Instituto Brasileiro de Defesa do Consumidor (IDEC, Brazil); Comité de Defensa de los Derechos del Consumidor (CODEDCO, Bolivia); Organización de Consumidores y Usuarios de Chile (ODECU, Chile); La Tribuna del Consumidor (TRIBUNA, Ecuador); Centro para la Defensa del Consumidor (CDC, El Salvador); Fundación por los Derechos del Consumidor (FUNDECOM, the Dominican Republic); Asociación Peruana de Consumidores y Usuarios (ASPEC, Peru); and Consumidores y Usuarios Asociados (CUA, Uruguay).

The primary conclusions drawn from the survey included the following:

- The food regulation system must be strengthened, so that producers and suppliers comply with laws and regulations in this area or suffer the appropriate penalties;
- Greater effort is needed to develop more consumer-friendly food labeling systems and to build food labeling capacities among consumer organizations;
- There are weaknesses in FBD monitoring. Providing support to overcome the limitations of the national FBD Epidemiological Surveillance Systems will increase the possibility of controlling these diseases;
- Withdrawal of products from the market: there are no effective mechanisms to withdraw from the market foods that are dangerous to consumer health, and in many of the countries, there is no free access to public information about dangerous foods. The number of products withdrawn from the market is probably much smaller than the number of transgressions that occur;
- Traceability is needed to instill consumer confidence in food safety and to strengthen the capacity of official regulatory agencies to recover and/or remove products from the market rapidly, if they do not comply with safety regulations. CI-Santiago has studied this subject in particular, and a detailed analysis can be found on the ALCUE-FOOD website. The survey conducted basically confirms that the main social actors are interested in traceability; they are interested in different traceability

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2 Foodborne diseases.
communication methods, and that the primary information consumers need with regard to traceability is the origin of the food and the food production process.

- The appropriate government agencies should be trained on application of the Consumer Protection Law and how it fits in with food safety and quality control systems.
- The forthright attitude of consumer organizations in filing complaints and enforcing consumer protection and food laws has a clear effect on the behavior of consumers in the market with regard to the unsafe food item. They stop buying the product if there are complaints and if existence of the problem is publicized.

4. HOW GOVERNMENTAL CONSUMER PROTECTION AGENCIES AND OTHER CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS CAN PROMOTE A HEALTHY FOOD

Over the last two years, consumer organizations, working on their own initiative and in conjunction with Consumers International, have focused on activities in the fight for safe food and healthy food. Some of the subjects that Latin American and Caribbean consumer organizations have addressed in recent years include:

- The sale of street food;
- Genetic modification and increased agricultural toxins;
- Misleading weight loss advertising;
- Salt and water in chickens;
- Potassium bromate in bread products;
- Labeling of genetically modified soybean oil;
- The human right to water;
- Foreign bodies in food;
- Food advertising and obesity;
- Labeling of genetically modified foods;
- Withdrawal of obesigenic food advertising;
- Technical regulations for evaluating the safety of human health in the consumption of genetically modified products;
- Consumption accidents;
- Food additives in soft drinks;
- Regulation of gluten-free food;
- Restriction of alcoholic beverage advertising;
- Communications media and obesity;
- Food dyes;
• Salt content in instant soups;
• Olive oil fraud;
• Expired canned foods;
• Trans fats in food;
• Sweeteners in food;
• Milk adulteration;
• Additives and child hyperactivity.

Consumers International in turn is carrying out two global campaigns:

“Junk Food Generation:”2 its goal is to lobby the World Health Organization to implement an International Code to ban the marketing of unhealthy food to children. Consumers International and the International Obesity Task Force have produced recommendations for a Code on Marketing of Foods and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children. The goal of this code is to apply a global standard to protect children under 16 years of age from the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages. It includes, among other measures:

• A ban on radio and TV advertising that promotes foods high in fat, sugar, and salt;
• No promotion of foods high in fat, sugar, and salt in schools;
• No use of cartoon characters, celebrities, competitions, or free gifts to market foods high in fat, sugar, and salt.

“Street Food:” its goal is to recognize that the sale of food on public streets is a legitimate activity and to persuade local authorities to improve sellers’ access to sanitation and final waste disposal. It also seeks to convince local authorities to provide basic and accessible hygiene courses for food vendors.

As a means of integrating governmental and nongovernmental consumer protection agencies, the Food Safety and Risk Communication Seminar was held in Santiago, Chile in May 2007, at the request of FAO and with the support of Consumers International.

The goal of the seminar was to teach civil society consumer organizations and governmental consumer protection organizations that risk communication is one of the elements, in conjunction with risk assessment and risk management, that comprises the risk analysis strategy, and to present the new publication developed by FAO/WHO: “Food Safety Risk Analysis: A Guide for National Food Safety Authorities.”

With FAO support, 22 food safety professionals from consumer organizations and consumer protection governmental organizations participated in the seminar from the following countries in the Region: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, El Salvador, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. Four observers from Chile, Panama, and Peru also participated using their own funds.

The seminar concluded with a plenary session in which the participants worked together to draft conclusions and recommendations, based on the consensus of the representatives from the civil society agencies and governmental entities present:
• Construct a gateway or website that includes:
  - Systematized information regarding risks, including the methodological structure for risk communication;
  - Creation of an early warning network;
  - Assessment of national capacities for risk communication; and
  - Development of a study to analyze the elements of risk communication in the risk analysis process;
• Promote the collaboration and participation of civil society and governmental consumer organizations involved in food safety risk communication and risk analysis;
• Build a virtual network of governmental consumer agencies and civil society consumer organizations in order to share experiences and technical expertise, etc. in risk communication (request support from FAO to create this network, identify financing, maintain the databases, etc.)

It should be pointed out that construction of Food Risk Early Warning Systems is currently a matter of varied interest in the Region, bringing together the efforts of PAHO, FAO, and the European Union. This coincides with the interest of different governmental agencies working in food protection (Ministries of Agriculture, Ministries of Public Health, Consumer Protection Agencies) and of intergovernmental agencies willing to provide technical assistance. This is an unbeatable opportunity to coordinate this amenability and build national and regional early alert systems, incorporating the participation of all relevant societal actors, including nongovernmental consumer protection organizations.

5. PROMOTION OF HEALTHY FOOD AND CODEX ALIMENTARIUS

For many years the consumer movement has been involved in food standardization and in protecting consumer health. This can also be seen at the regional level with its uninterrupted participation for 10 years in the Regional Codex Alimentarius Committee. The consumer movement, along with governments and food producers, has been key in seeking balance between protection of consumer health and fair trade practices. Its role in committees on Hygiene, General Principles, Food Labeling, Food Additives, and Pesticide Residues has often been noted for its fresh and innovative contribution, making it possible to improve the results obtained by these committees. It has been a tough hill to climb, particularly the now epic 15-year battle in the Committee on Food Labeling to sustain the unimpeachable right to information in the labeling of genetically modified foods. At the same time, the consumer movement, through the respective Ad Hoc Working Group, has been a key actor in reaching a consensus on establishing standards to evaluate safety risks in the production of these foods.

Without the contribution of the consumer movement in these debates, this balance could and would be inexorably tipped in favor of the increasingly powerful food industry lobby.

The participation of consumers from the Region has been clearly underrepresented from the beginning, considering that it often relies solely on the volunteer work of technical personnel with a specific societal responsibility, and, since external support has ceased, lacks the resources to be included in the relevant meetings that would benefit from its contribution. This a major problem that must be addressed because it denies all relevant societal actors this specific point of view, which is the result of
daily work in consumer defense and of societal regulation of problems caused by food. Inclusion could potentially improve the nature of Codex decisions and reduce costs stemming from decisions that were not fully analyzed. COPAIA should propose to RIMSA that it express its interest in having the Trust Fund or some FAO/WHO support system to endorse the participation of the consumer movement in the main international and regional meetings, so that food safety decision-making can benefit from the contribution of these relevant actors.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ACTIVE AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF CONSUMER ORGANIZATIONS

Consumers International and its member organizations, in the various position papers it has presented over time to COPAIA, the Regional Codex Committee, and the Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean on Food Safety has continually expressed its concerns and recommendations to governments. For the COPAIA 5 meeting, we propose the following recommendations from the consumer perspective:

Governments should support an International Code to ban the marketing of unhealthy food to children;

Effective mechanisms should be developed to withdraw from the market foods that are dangerous to consumer health. For that purpose, implementation of Food Early Warning Systems is considered a valuable tool for the protection of consumer health;

Governments and international organizations should effectively support the participation of the consumer movement at national, regional, and international Codex meetings;

Governments should strengthen the FBD Epidemiological Surveillance Systems to make considerable improvements in FBD monitoring;

Governments should support consumer organizations in implementing the “Wholesome Food, Safe Food, Responsible Consumers” campaign whose goal is to disseminate and promote consumer rights with regard to food;

Governments, intergovernmental organizations, and cooperation agencies should support consumer organizations in their institutional strengthening process, in capacity building, and in formulating, financing, and sponsoring food safety and healthy and responsible consumption projects;

Governments should promote the mechanisms needed to ensure the active participation of consumer organizations in the preparation and/or modernization of national food safety systems, using tools like advisory committees, public hearings, public consultations, and technical groups.

7. REFERENCES

1.  www.alcuefood.org

2.  www.junkfoodgeneration.org