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**ADVANTAGES OF IMPLEMENTING CODEX ALIMENTARIUS
STANDARDS FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

**NICOLAE I. OPOPOL, PRESIDENT
Republic of Moldova National Codex Committee**

The strategic task in the field of agriculture production, which faced the Republic of Moldova (RM) after gaining its independence, was to provide for the safety and high quality of food products. It was recognized that addressing this problem could serve to promote its goods on world markets. In spite of appearing simple, implementation of this task turned out to be a difficult task as the country had no experience in this type of activity and it had not sought the experienced help of international organizations. Earlier collaboration with the World Health Organization of the United Nations (WHO) had dealt primarily with the organization of health care. Information was not available on the international organizations interested in addressing problems of nutrition, food quality and food safety, as well as problems of food caused diseases on the whole.

The initial information on available experience in this sphere was received from FAO. We realized that reaching sound solutions on all-important problems in the field of nutrition, including food quality and safety would only be possible in close collaboration with the world community.

Privatization, which took deep root in RM, resulted in liquidation of large collective state-farms, food processing complexes, dairy herds, pig-farms, etc. These were mainly restructured and their property, such as land and animals, was distributed to the general population. Producers have experienced a sharp decline in production and loss of markets similar to other countries in transition. In order to promote international trade, the Moldova Government began the process of harmonizing national standards with more stringent EU international requirements related to WTO requirements. In their turn, food producers had to meet international and EU trade

demands on food quality. This has been a very difficult task since most of the producers face many problems, including:

- the high-cost of modernization of outdated equipment;
- an uncertain and still dwindling supply of raw materials;
- lack of experience in marketing; and,
- limited knowledge of foreign market requirements on quality, particularly, HACCP implementation.

RM inherited its entire legislative, regulative and methodological base from the Soviet Union as well as the state system of food safety and food quality control, including all political aspects of this activity. At present, the state system covering the entire food chain from raw materials to the consumer, including import/export operations, is carried out by five Ministries and Departments: Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry (MOAFI), Ministry of Health (MOH), Department of Standardization and Metrology (DOSM), pre-shipment inspection, and the National Plant Quarantine Service.

All of the above agencies maintain their own inspection and laboratory networks at central and local levels, which often leads to overlap and duplication of control activities. The agencies are paying attention mainly to the processing and distribution sections of the food chain and some forms of in-plant control are applied to finished products. The concept of producers having responsibility for food quality and safety has only made its first steps both in industry and among official control authorities. At present, there are not enough applications of the internationally accepted pro-active production line procedures such as Good Manufacturing Practices, Good Hygienic Practices, and Quality Assurance Systems.

The rights and interests of consumers have been established in a law enacted by the State Department of Standardisation and Metrology. However, due to the lack of related non-government organisations, they are unable to properly (effectively raise independent initiatives or to become involved in regulatory and control activities.

All of these problems, along with the necessity to integrate into the world community, induced the government of RM in 1997 to begin negotiations with the Codex Alimentarius Commission for membership. In 1999 these negotiations were successfully completed. The next step, after a period of preparation, was for RM to enter the WTO in 2001.

In 1999, based on the proposal of two ministries (MOH and MOAFI), the National Codex Committee (NCC) was created as the main consultative organ of the Government to standardise requirements on food safety and food quality and to harmonise them with international requirements as well as to promote healthy nutrition principles. The NCC established 11 working groups whose membership included leading national specialists and experts. Among the working groups are those related to general subject Codex Committees (General Principles, Food Additives and Contaminants, Pesticides Residues, Methods of Analysis and Sampling, Nutrition and Food for Special Uses) and to Codex commodity committees (Meat Hygiene, Milk and Milk Products, Cereals, Pulses and Legumes, Sugars, Fats and Oils, etc.).

Since the moment of its creation, NCC has become a real organ for developing the policy of introducing Codex recommendations into practice. The main strategic objectives of NCC activities are:

- development of measures to implement the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement), as well as decisions related to WTO Notification Procedures.
- harmonization of the national norms and regulations on food quality and safety with Codex recommendations.

On the whole, improving the food safety and quality system requires a well-coordinated and integrated set of actions. The Moldavian experience has shown that capacity building and technical assistance needs include at least the following items:

Basic infrastructure – setting up, equipping and maintaining food control services, administration and laboratories.

National food control strategy - a multi-disciplinary activity involving a number of government agencies as well as the food industry, consumers and academic/research institutions. This activity requires:

- *close collaboration* among all the participants, with clearly defined responsibilities for each, in order to make effective use of available resources;
- *clear objectives* with a well designed plan and operational responsibilities defined for all components of the system;
- *a monitoring provision* to enable the evaluation of the effectiveness of the food control strategy on a continuing basis so that adjustments can be made as necessary.

Food legislation - the establishment of food laws and regulations as the first necessary step in establishing an effective food control system. This work takes into account the obligations of countries under the WTO, SPS and TBT Agreements. Attempts should also be made to base food safety and quality requirements on standards, guidelines and recommendations adopted by Codex Alimentarius. Legislation should be flexible enough to allow it to deal with developments in technology, emerging hazards, changing consumer demands and new requirements for trade.

Food inspection services - well planned food inspection programs with a sound understanding of their duties and responsibilities and close collaboration with other food control services. This requires adequate management, training and equipment.

Collaboration and cooperation of control agencies - all agencies should be involved in food safety and quality work in an integrated and coordinated manner to ensure the adequate control of all aspects of food safety and quality throughout the food chain and to maximize the effective use of limited resources.

Food control laboratories - a sufficient number of adequately equipped laboratories and trained analysts using acceptable analytical methodologies to support the monitoring, compliance and enforcement activities of the food inspection services. The overall quality of the work of the laboratories is addressed by implementation of an analytical quality assurance system meeting international standards.

Scientific and technical expertise - the assessment of risk and food safety measures management should be based on priorities both from a human and economic perspective.

The food industry bears responsibility for meeting all food quality and safety regulations and all segments of the food chain have responsibility for establishing food safety and quality controls. The food industry should be trained on the application of good agricultural, hygienic and manufacturing practices and the use of the HACCP System.

Participation in the work of international organizations - in order to contribute to and benefit from the work of international organizations such as Codex Alimentarius Commission, every country must strengthen its ability to participate effectively in these organizations. This is accomplished by establishing National Codex Committees that enable countries to prepare national positions related to Codex work.

Communication and exchange of information - the establishment of clear lines of communication between interested agencies to provide for a regular exchange of information related to technical assistance activities. *These communications may be carried out in the following manner through:*

- the regular meetings of involved agencies;
- the inventory of technical assistance needed;
- the inventory of technical assistance provided;
- the roster of experts in various subject areas;
- the compilation of resource or reference materials;
- information on training, workshops, seminars, etc.

At the same time, development of a many-sided activity recommended by CAC requires a lot of efforts, including the material ones. Answering this problem in the Republic of Moldova was facilitated by FAO, which in 2000, at the request of the Government, realized the project “*Strengthening the Organization of a National Codex Committee*”. The project assessed the country’s food control system and indicated ways for a rapid change of the situation. In the framework of the project many methodical and organizational questions were solved. International experts visited RM from Bulgaria, Slovenia, Norway and from the Codex Committees directly. NCC activity was also strengthened by the at-site study of other countries (Norway and Denmark) that contributed their experience in this field.

One of the most important principles to consider in establishing a national Codex Committee activity is its complex character. In our opinion, the activity should include advancing a legislative base and creating a normative base working with policy-makers at all levels as well as with food producers and consumers, etc. Among these tasks the legislative base is considered fundamental to promoting and stimulating the activities of different Ministries, Departments, public organizations and private persons to provide for food safety and high food quality. In this direction the Parliament of RM has approved additionally the Certification Act (1999) and Standardization Act (2000). The Food Act is currently being developed and the Act on Sanitary-Epidemiological Protection of Population of 1993 is being updated.

As a result, the comprehension in RM of the importance and significance of international recommendations formulated by Codex has changed radically. The factors that promoted this situation are the following:

- Bringing the strategy, tactic and concrete Codex recommendations to the notice of all stakeholders related to the food chain, namely, the import-export inspecting bodies, the

- education system addressing these problems (universities and colleges); policy-makers at different levels, and the mass-media;
- Creating the national structures, with development of relative legislative acts, promoting coordination of the activities of all economic agents on the problem of food safety and food quality;
 - Establishment of the State Commission as a national inter-departmental organ for the coordination of measures aimed at the security of the sanitary-epidemiological welfare of the population, including food safety;
 - Creating the National Information and Notification Center for the presentation of information to countries and international and public organizations on all enacted, newly adopted or updated legislative documents which regulate food imports and food exports; and creation of a database with information on this subject;
 - Translation and publication of Codex Standards and Recommendations in the state language as well as bringing them to the notice of all stakeholders;
 - Information for the public through mass media (TV, radio, press) on the role of Codex Alimentarius and the significance for the national economy, etc.

Meanwhile, overcoming conflicting departmental interests is continuing to be a serious problem in solving some questions of addressing a sound food import-export inspection. This activity is, as before, distributed among several departments without well-defined functions for each. As a result, there are excessive bureaucratic difficulties along with the elements of duplicated functions that result in increased inspection costs. Due to the recognition of this actual problem, the government is studying the possibility to create the only one state system for conducting import-export inspection.

Many important measures are at the final stage of implementation or realization. Among them one can name:

- carrying out the revision of schedules for the relative departments of the Technical, Medical, Agricultural and Cooperative universities and colleges;
- studying the capacity for creation of a single centre for specialization and advanced training of all specialists in the field of laboratory control and import-export inspection;
- strengthening the work on involving consumers, producers, public organizations and mass media into addressing the problems of food safety and food quality.

As a result of the above strategies and actions in the Republic of Moldova, the outlooks are changed on a great many food quality and food safety problems that were unknown or only partly known before. This is expressed in the following:

- The high-level officials responsible for planning and organization of the food industry, international trade, import-export inspection, etc. have begun to take into account the problem of food safety in government policy. As an example, the Governmental Decree of 27.11.2001 "*On strengthening the measures on consumer protection*" has approved a related plan of activity. As its main measure, the plan includes the development of the above-mentioned Food Act.

- Food producers began to realize the degree of their responsibility for the safety of their production and to take measures in this direction. Two examples: food enterprises are implementing ISO quality standards; the persons, responsible for the realization of inner control, and processing enterprises are mastering and implementing the HACCP system. Full realization of these measures at the leading enterprises of food industry will be completed in coming years.
- Many farms have expressed their desire to grow organically produced foods that would, after corresponding certification, be proposed for sale to consumers.
- Some shifts have taken place in international trade where the Republic of Moldova has a special interest. Moldavian food has become more and more known in many European and Asian countries. As a positive example, exports have increased in particular for wine, fruits, vine, fruit and legume juice, etc.

From the viewpoint of implementing Codex standards in the new independent states, the experience of the Republic of Moldova may be very useful.