In recognition of regional standards as important means for ensuring safe and fair food trade among countries in a given region, FAO and WHO, with the financial assistance of the Codex Trust Fund, organized a training workshop on “Understanding Regional Standards” on November 4th, 2012 in Tokyo, Japan. This workshop was held prior to the 18th Session of CCASIA.

Regional standards are developed to reflect food safety/quality issues related to specific food products of particular relevance to a given region. While regional standards constitute an important part of Regional Codex Coordinating Committees work, it has been observed that CCASIA member countries are not fully aware of the procedures and the rationale to prepare and submit new proposals for regional standards that are soundly supported by adequate justification (including evidence/data) and aligned with regional interests.

The objective of the meeting was to strengthen participants’ understanding of Codex regional standards scope, procedures, and the rationale behind them.

Background information was provided through presentations on:
- Role of the FAO&WHO regional coordinating committees;
- CCASIA Regional Strategic Plan;
- Codex procedures on preparing and submitting proposals for new work;
- Four case studies outlining experiences and lessons learned in the development of regional standards (Soy sauce – Japan, Insects – Lao PDR, Durian – Thailand, Ginseng – Republic of Korea)

A working group exercise session was held to identify topics of common interest which could be suitable for development of regional standards. These topics were used during the workshop as examples to support the discussion. Participants were encouraged to share experiences in challenges they faced with regional standard development and the training team facilitated discussions to identify solutions to those issues.

Among the subjects considered during the working group exercise, the following were identified and used to guide discussion and subsequently presented to the wider group:

- Turmeric (a rhizomatous herbaceous perennial plant of the ginger family)
Produced regionally but traded internationally. The group noted that development of an international standard might be more appropriate in this case. The group also noted the relevant ongoing discussion in the Commission to establish a subsidiary body on spices, aromatic herbs and their formulations whose terms of reference might encompass turmeric.

Dried fish – “Maldive fish” (traditional sun dried tuna from the Maldives)
- This product is widely consumed in the southern part of Asia, both as food and as product to improve flavour. The group noted that a clear scope/product categorization would be needed.
- The importance of referring to other relevant work done in Codex, and in particular by CCFFP, was also noted.

Edible insects
- A discussion paper on edible crickets and their products is already on the CCASIA agenda.
- The group noted the difficulty in obtaining trade data as these products are primarily traded informally
- There would also be a need to consider other relevant implications related to production systems (wild harvest vs farmed) and trade in live vs processed.

Coconut gel/ nata de coco
- This product is also produced regionally but traded internationally so might need to look at an international rather than regional standard
- The group noted the need to consider the nature of the product and also to determine whether it is already covered by other relevant Codex texts.
- It was also noted the need to consider if other regions produce/trade this product.

Key discussion points emanating from the workshop are summarized below:

Codex Standard development and Regional Coordinating Committees

The workshop noted that:

- The Coordinating Committee provides a forum to identify priorities in the region and to facilitate collaboration between countries to progress these issues. Additionally, regional standards are an important part of regional committee work and are reflected in the CCASIA Strategic Plan.
- Prioritization is required to ensure the effective implementation of the CCASIA workplan.

Project document development

The workshop noted that:

- New work proposals need to follow the Codex procedures, and in particular that the submissions are fully supported by adequate justification (including evidence/data) and are aligned with regional interests.
- Members should consult with other countries and the Chair of the relevant Committee when preparing project document for new work.
- Trade limited to within the region (intra-regional trade), versus global trade is a key decision point for determining whether a standard should be regional or international and the Coordinating Committee can assist in this process. However, there are exceptions to the
requirement of intra-regional trade in developing a regional standard, in consideration of the work load of relevant committees, type of commodity and expertise required.

- The scope of the proposed standard needs to be wide to ensure the interests of many countries can be reflected. The scope also needs to be well defined so the feasibility of standardization can be determined, to facilitate data collection and to ensure clear project document development.
- Food standards work undertaken by other bodies needs to be considered when considering new work.
- There is a significant resource investment in leading the development of project documents and initiatives to assist countries in undertaking this work need to be developed.
- The SPS Agreement references only global standards as baseline and not regional standards.

Data availability

The workshop noted that:

- Data availability is critical for proposals and collaboration between countries is needed. eWG and pWG are useful processes to help gain such data.
- Non-availability of data prevents risk analysis work from being undertaken.
- Data collection within countries is reliant on the input from many agencies.
- The absence of consumption and contamination data can be addressed in some instances by the GEMS regional food diets and Total Diet Studies.
- Improved linkages between regional standard development and the regional work of FAO and WHO, may help assist in addressing data gaps.