

Plenary Session 5

MEETING CONSUMERS' NEEDS IN THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

Overview

Two international organizations that are particularly relevant to food fortification concerns in Asia and the Pacific are the World Trade Organization (WTO), formerly GATT, and Consumers International.

WTO represents the interests of governments by establishing rules for international trade. Since fortified food products may be traded internationally, the WTO perspective is an important one for both governments and producers. Two agreements are of interest to food fortification, the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade, and the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, the former dealing with standards, etc., and the latter with food safety and animal and plant health.

Consumers International represents consumers through a large network of consumer organizations around the world. It deals in depth with matters concerning food fortification, in particular labeling and advertising of fortified products, and has extensive recommendations with regard to nutrition, food policy, manufacturing, and production. The main concerns are for accurate and responsible labeling, for policies to ensure delivery of fortified products to those in most need, and for care in the manufacture of such products so that the fortificants are available and there is no danger of overdose.

Global Trade and the Food Industry: The Asian Challenge

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The WTO establishes rules for international trade through negotiations. Its two main principles are nondiscrimination between different foreign and domestic sources of supply, and transparency, to make trade more predictable. All WTO agreements are binding on all members and can be enforced through dispute settlement.

The main WTO agreements concerning food fortification are the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT agreement), and the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS agreement).

The TBT agreement is the more applicable of the two with regard to food fortification and applies to all technical regulations, standards, and conformity assessment procedures. WTO members have the right to establish technical regulations, as long as they are consistent with the TBT agreement. The key provisions of the TBT agreement are

- legitimate objective, e.g. health protection;
- no unnecessary obstacles to trade; and
- harmonization—use of international standards.

Both the TBT and the SPS agreements contain similar provisions regarding

- transparency—notifying regulations at a draft stage;
- nondiscrimination;
- equivalence/mutual recognition;
- no more trade-restrictive than required; and
- technical assistance.

The SPS agreement applies to a subset of technical regulations that deal with food safety and animal and plant health. In food safety, it deals specifically with risks from additives, contaminants, toxins, and disease-causing organisms and applies to fortification only where food safety is concerned.

The SPS agreement goes further than TBT in requiring that all SPS measures be based on science. Members have to base their regulations on risk assessments or use international standards. Codex standards are explicitly recognized. Both agreements have technical assistance provisions, e.g. to help a country comply with importers' food safety regulations. □

Perspectives on Food Fortification from the Consumer Movement

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Consumers International (CI) is a federation of some 250 consumer organizations in 111 countries and territories. CI strives to foster social justice by protecting the rights and responsibilities of all consumers, particularly the poor, powerless, and marginalized. It aims to contribute to creating an enabling environment where all people have the strength, information, and support to have what they need to live in comfort and safety, and are able to participate and have influence in decisions that affect their lives. Further, CI aims to enhance democracy and human development through supporting the growth of a strong consumer movement in all parts of the world.

The extent to which food fortification affects consumers' diet, and their subsequent purchasing patterns and changes in behavior, is little understood. Fortified products are labeled and advertised so as to claim to offer some nutritional advantage. What claims may be made and which ones are prohibited depend on each country's legislation. However, many consumers are unaware of the exact nutritional content of foodstuffs and the contribution that any one food makes to the diet. Where educational campaigns are mounted to promote changes to the national diet (whether to prevent deficiencies, to promote health, or to prevent diet-related illness), consumers' awareness is increased. Consumers then become more susceptible to foods claiming to overcome such problems.

Food fortification and food enrichment policy can be, in principle, a necessary component of social development and a medium-term approach to achieving food security in terms of nutritious food for the dietary needs of all consumers. However, food fortification and food enrichment policy can be successful and sustained only to the extent that national and international policy on food fortification—both private and public—works in favor of and not against consumer rights.

The labeling and advertising of foods make it difficult for consumers to make sensible choices about diet. Labeling regulations should be enforced, and consumers protected by the existing legislation. Health claims should not be permitted, unless justified and approved by the competent national authorities on the basis of scientific evidence. If permitted, they should be formulated so as not to mislead consumers. There should be a list of criteria that decide what is and what is not an acceptable health claim. Consideration should be given to developing a list of acceptable health claims at the international or regional level, allowing for national variations.

Many fortified products are aimed at particular groups, such as young children. In these cases, fortification should be adjusted to the group's particular needs, and RDAs should be determined at the appropriate level, and declared on the nutrition panels of the labels of all such products.

Where there is insufficient consumption of certain micronutrients, fortified foods can be of benefit. However, there should be a clear nutrition policy. Individual countries should retain the right to have mandatory fortification in response to particular national nutritional problems.

Public health recommendations should ensure the delivery of appropriate fortification to groups most in need. To determine this, there is a clear need for standardized surveys among consumers throughout the region about the adequacy of their nutritional intakes and nutritional status.

Where liberally fortified foods are freely available, it is important that the original, nonfortified foods should be readily available for those consumers who prefer them. This is particularly important because basic foodstuffs such as bread and milk are excellent sources of micronutrients without fortification.

Fortification should take into account the availability of that nutrient in each particular case, taking note of such technical problems as calcium precipitation in soy milks, and the biological availability of micronutrients in particular situations.

Many fortification amounts are inaccurately stated on the label. Urgent measures by manufacturers and enforcement authorities are necessary to improve the accuracy of the information given to the consumer. Declared nutrition contents must be accurate: quality assurance must be improved. Amounts should be analyzed on a regular basis to

ensure that products are correctly described on the labels.

The use of genetic engineering to improve nutrient content of foods requires caution and consideration of a number of factors other than health safety. CI's advocacy in the elaboration of standards, guidelines, and codes of practice includes also environmental impact; food security; the precautionary principle; and sustainability, ethical, cultural, and religious factors. Consumer choice should be considered in its entirety and not limited to the right of informed choice through labeling. □