

The Codex Alimentarius and its Linkages to the WTO and Pure Food Laws in Pakistan

In recent years, we have witnessed a spike in government-led crackdowns on the sale of fresh milk in Pakistan.

So, what is happening?

Regulatory authorities claim that the majority of fresh milk samples collected for testing are diluted by the ‘adulteration mafia’ or have traces of harmful chemicals (above national permissible levels). Under the pretext of protecting consumer health, provincial governments are using the provincial Pure Food Authorities to curb ‘unsafe’ practices. In Punjab, one of their strategies is to eventually ban the sale of fresh milk, which is an important and affordable source of nutrition for millions of households while also being a crucial source of livelihood for millions of small farmers, a majority of whom are women.

In a country where water-borne infections run rampant and 70% households nationwide drink bacterially contaminated water, such a singular focus on the safety standards of milk is questionable. Undoubtedly, TNCs are pushing these regulatory mechanisms to capture the dairy sector and allied sectors.

Let us explore what is actually behind this drive for safe and hygienic milk.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission and Codex Standards - the Globalization of Food Safety Standards and Key Players

The World Trade Organization (WTO), through the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement and the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Measures, has been using the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) as a front to control food and agriculture production in the third world. The SPS Agreement calls on countries to harmonize national standards with international standards (Article 3.1) and recognizes Codex standards, guidelines and recommendations as the international reference point for food safety. At the same time, the TBT Agreement instructs signatory states to develop their regulatory capacity and law enforcement systems in order to implement standardized policies (Article 2.6).

(For more information on the SPS Agreement, please refer to Primer 1 in this series)

So, what exactly is the Codex?

The ‘Codex Alimentarius’ or ‘Food Code’ is a set of internationally devised, approved and adopted food safety standards that cover a diverse range of food products at every stage of production. Codex standards are championed as a credible determinant for ensuring safety and quality standards for food products, including milk and other dairy products. In context to the SPS Agreement, the export-oriented, globalized food standards outlined under Codex are forming the basis for production, processing and packaging policies related to the dairy sector in Pakistan.

As discussed above, the WTO uses the SPS and TBT Agreements to

back the Codex; the SPS Agreement is concerned with food-safety related provisions such as permissible levels of additives and contaminants while the TBT Agreement is concerned with non-food related safety provisions such as packaging and labelling.

It needs to be highlighted that the CAC was jointly formed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to act as the international food standard-setting body. FAO and WHO play an active advisory role in Codex's standard setting activities, including but not limited to organizing expert meetings, supporting Codex committees and facilitating countries in passing national legislation in line with Codex standards.

Codex alimentarius commission



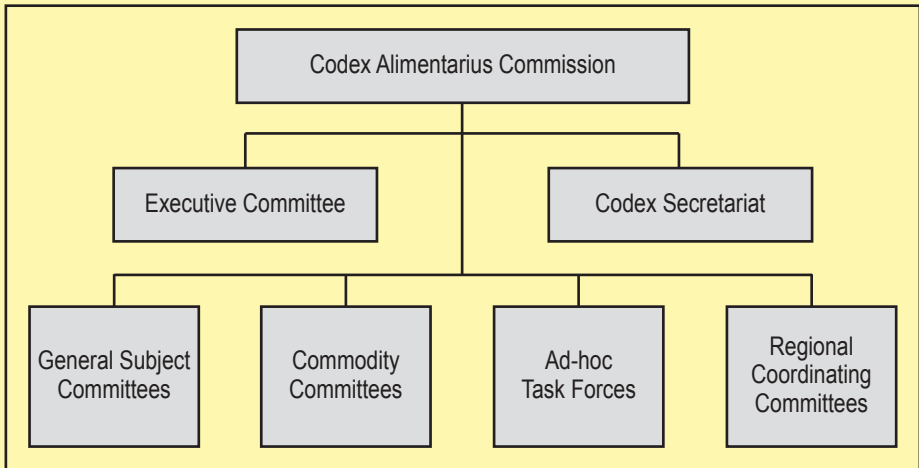
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So, what are the repercussions of adopting these food standards?

While the CAC has a diverse membership comprising of 188 Member Countries, 1 Member Organization (EU) and more than 230 Observers (NGOs, intergovernmental organizations and United Nations agencies), Codex food standards are formulated by only a fraction of the member states, mostly developed countries. In the subsidiary bodies, third world countries are only represented in the coordinating committees while the General Subject Committees and Commodity Committees are dominated by the likes of Canada, UK and Switzerland. Therefore, it is only expected that these standards exist to protect the global interests of transnational corporations in first world countries; having a uniform set of standards across diverse markets grants them ease of doing business.



The regulations stipulated by the Codex for the dairy sector based on WTO's SPS mechanisms are stringent and impossible for small and landless farmers to comply with – hence an easy way to eject them out of the market! (For more information on impacts on farmers, please refer to Primer 4 in this series). Essentially, these standards weed out all other smaller entities since they cannot afford or access the legal services and/or production regulations required by international standards. In this way, TNCs have captured profitable markets that have been forcibly opened through WTO and other bilateral and multilateral trade agreements.

Needless to say, TNCs actively lobby governments, both in the first and the third world, for the rigid implementation of these regulations – after all, it gives corporations a golden opportunity to strengthen their hegemonic control over markets by pushing out small producers from the dairy sector!

Mandatory Pasteurization and the Ban on Fresh Milk – a corporate agenda

By implementing WTO-backed agreements, policymakers and private sector players in Pakistan are complicit in undermining the rights of small dairy producers in rural areas, the majority of which are women. In Punjab, the biggest province of Pakistan, the Punjab Pure Food Authority, a provincial agency for regulating food safety and hygiene, seeks backing from health and medical experts to ban fresh milk in Pakistan and implement a mandatory pasteurization policy.



For thousands of years, households in South Asia have produced safe and nutritious milk for human consumption through traditional practices. Now, as a result of aligning domestic regulations with international regulatory guidelines, the pasteurization process has been industrialized. The regulatory systems only recognize processes such as pasteurization.

zation to be legitimate when they are performed in licensed facilities with in-house testing laboratories and sophisticated equipment, which is almost impossible to comply with for small producers.

Moreover, if international standards set by international regulatory bodies are enforced, all milk must be packaged with the following details: manufacturing and expiry date, company name and product name (branding), and company address. This is to ensure the traceability of all saleable milk products at any stage in the supply chain. The Codex standards deem ‘traceability’ to be a crucial tool to ensure food safety for consumers by providing authentic product information, as well as allowing for effective recall of products at any stage of the food chain in case of any food safety concerns/emergencies. However, Please note, food traceability is also being considered as part of the ‘arsenal’ for intellectual property protection in the food industry.



The outcome is predictable – complex, time-consuming and costly processes like pasteurization are only affordable for big industry players and companies like TetraPak, who dominates the global market for packaging of processed milk.

Ease of International Trade: The Harmonization of Food Safety Standards– an anti-farmer approach

Transnational corporations profiting from international trade are the biggest proponents for the harmonization of food safety standards; similar processing and packaging standards across different markets allows them to cut down on production costs. Company-processed, pre-packaged food products make up the largest chunk of agricultural food trade. Therefore, it is clear that the push towards corporatization, standardization and trade liberalization is geared towards facilitating TNCs in capturing international trade. In no way do the inequitable rules of international trade prioritize local production for local consumption!

It is important to understand that global trade which is predominantly in the hand of TNCs from very rich capitalist countries, mostly the G7, is being backed by a complex web of institutions, policies and mechanisms. For instance, the WTO with all its agreements, the IMF and the World Bank as well as UN bodies serve the imperialist agendas of capitalist entities.



There is an urgent need to repeal all pro-corporate neoliberal agricultural policies that are detrimental to small producers with emphasis on rural women's access to decent livelihood and replace them with laws that sustain local and indigenous food production systems and guarantee control and access to markets for farmers!

For more information and further analysis on the ways in which global dairy corporations are snatching away the livelihoods of small and landless farmers, please refer to the other primers in this series.



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