Global harmonisation of food regulations

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Scientists have decided that the time has come to put an end to disparities in food regulations between countries. There is no reason why food safety should be different depending on where a person lives. The following article provides an explanation on the why and – most importantly – the how.

During a meeting between a number of food scientists at the occasion of the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT), representatives of the International Division of IFT and of the European Federation of Food Science and Technology (EFFoST) discussed the adverse consequences of the differences in food laws and regulations between countries. On the one hand almost a billion people suffer malnutrition or hunger, while at the same time in the same world, governments presume to protect their populations by destroying huge amounts of food they deem unsafe. When a food is indeed unfit for consumption, this is an acceptable and necessary response. However, food is also sometimes destroyed because it contains or might contain minute amounts, e.g. parts per billion and even on occasion parts per trillion, of certain chemicals. Regulations may require the total absence of certain chemicals, the so-called 'zero-tolerance' requirement. While in the 16th century it was already well-known that "All substances are poisons; there is none which is not a poison. The right dose differentiates a poison from a remedy" (Paracelsus, before 1541), scientific data show that very many 'toxic' substances are essential for the human body to survive. Examples include vitamins and metals such as iron, selenium and molybdenum. Here, precisely is the crux of the matter. What is a safe food and what is food safety? The literature on the subject has exploded in the past decade, however, if one were pressed to positing a universally accepted definition of food safety, one would find this an exceedingly difficult if not impossible challenge. Simply stated, judging food safety is judging acceptability of risks; a normative, qualitative, or frequently a political activity.

On the other hand, consumers demand more nutritious and fresh food, available all year round. This requires preservation. Then again, consumers increasingly shun chemical preservatives and similarly dislike off-flavours resulting from traditional thermal preservation methods. Moreover, the latter destroy much of the vitamins and antioxidants that they have learned are needed to remain healthy. As a consequence the food industry and governments have spent huge funds on developing novel preservation technologies. Approval procedures and requirements for such technologies differ from one country to another. These differences hamper the introduction of new technologies as proving their safety according to the differing protocols of many countries is prohibitively expensive.

So, clearly, globally harmonised food regulations, based on sound science, would offer important benefits: no undue destruction of food and no unnecessary repetition of testing for purposes of demonstrating product or process safety.

In 2004, EFFoST and the International Division of IFT, supported by Food Safety Magazine and Elsevier Science, initiated the 'Global Harmonization Initiative', GHI in short.

CHARTER

The goal of the initiative is to ensure the global availability of safe and wholesome foodproducts for all consumers.
To achieve this, undue barriers to free trade that masquerade as food safety protections must be vanquished. Such barriers include differences in regulations and legislation between countries globally. The international scientific community must, therefore, work towards achieving global consensus on the science underpinning food regulations and legislation.

This will be achieved through attainment of the following objectives:

1. Identifying relevant scientific organisations
2. Inviting and encouraging the participation of these scientific societies in the global harmonisation initiative and inviting their members to join in this activity in their field of expertise
3. Identifying relevant non-scientific stakeholders
4. Establishing effective communication between non-scientific and scientific organisations
5. Inviting all stakeholders (organisations and individuals) to identify and submit key issues requiring attention
6. Prioritising key issues with the subsequent formation of working groups to draft white papers or consensus statements regarding the scientific validity of these issues
7. Steering working groups to assess the best available evidence and discuss their findings with the scientific community, working towards building consensus
8. Publishing results on a per issue basis in journals, magazines and newspapers
9. Publishing collections of resulting consensus statements in book form
10. Presenting results and participating in appropriate conferences
11. Making results available to all stakeholders, particularly those responsible for developing or amending regulations and legislation, global communicators, risk managers and assessors

All of these will be done in an open, transparent manner, to avoid bias or the appearance of bias, political or otherwise.

The goal of GHI is to ensure the global availability of safe and wholesome food products for all consumers. This concept was embodied in the first draft of the GHI charter, during its first workshop in April 2005. The draft charter was developed and published on the GHI website, www.globalharmonization.org , for comments. The finalised version of the charter is provided in Figure 1. It is important to note that GHI will not attempt to change any food regulation or law directly. Rather, GHI will attempt to reach consensus among food scientists and technologists, worldwide on the science that underpins such regulations. The philosophy is that if global consensus is obtained and published, stakeholders will use such information to achieve the desired changes.

Since its inception, a number of other scientific organisations have joined GHI, including IUFoST (International Union of Food Science and Technology), the National Center for Food Safety and Technology in Chicago, as well as universities in many countries.

Since 2004, GHI has convened and/or participated in symposia, seminars and workshops. These meetings have occurred in Chicago, Hamburg, Paris, Sofia, Cork, Nantes and The Hague.

The meetings have considered the following subjects:

- The process for achieving global scientific consensus
- The mechanics for developing a consensus process
- Establishing a system to identify candidates for membership (from all countries)
- Determining criteria for the qualification of experts
- Prioritising issues that require consensus

During most meetings, the question has been raised as to whether GHI was wasting energy and time by repeating what is currently being done by other international organisations. The answer is no, as GHI certainly does not wish to duplicate efforts. Rather, GHI plans to use available scientific data or complete reports as the basis for consensus. Furthermore, GHI is the only organisation that addresses individual scientists from all over the world and does not seek consensus between organisations or governments, but between scientists and technologists, globally. It is for that reason that GHI is very deliberate in its approach to identifying and qualifying experts. It is also for these reasons that GHI is currently establishing a global Supervisory Board, whose task will be to safeguard the impartiality, integrity and overall transparency of the consensus process. Finally, GHI does not accept funding from industry or governments, but solely from scientific organisations.