NUTRITION ISSUES AND FOOD STANDARDS

Food standards development in Malaysia: nutrition-related aspects

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Developments in food standards in Malaysia, with particular reference to nutritional aspects, may be conveniently grouped into three main areas, namely (a) the food quality control programme of the Ministry of Health, (b) food standardization and certification scheme of the Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM), and (c) activities related to FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission.

The food quality control programme[1–3]. Malaysia is in the process of undergoing rapid industralization. This includes rapid development of the food industry and technology, and extensive growth in production and sale of food. The impact is not only on the local market but on the import and export trade as well. Rapid socioeconomic development has resulted in an increased migration of rural population into the urban and peri-urban areas with a change in the lifestyle of Malaysians, including changes in their food habits and food consumption patterns. Presently, more people are eating outside for convenience and this has resulted in the thriving and lucrative business in restaurants and food hawking. Consumers now rely more on processed and convenience foods in the preparation of their daily meals.

These developments have led to the need for a systematic approach in the implementation of the Food Quality Control (FQC) Programme in the country, executed through a system of administration at central, state, district and local authority levels. The Sale of Food and Drug Ordinance 1952 was considered inadequate to meet the demands and challenges of modern day food safety issues in the country and was therefore replaced by the legislation and regulations currently enforced in Malaysia, namely the Food Act 1983 and Food Regulations 1985. In response to requests from the food industry, consumer bodies and improved knowledge, several amendments to the 1985 Regulations have been made, namely in 1987, 1988, 1990 and 1991. The Committee on the Drafting of the Food Regulations, comprising members from various government departments and institutions, meets regularly to discuss issues pertaining to requests for amendments.

Several codes of practice and guidelines have also been drawn up under the food quality control programme. These include the following: food hygiene (1980); export of frozen cooked prawns (1980); processing and refining of edible palm oil, palm olein and palm stearin (1985); hawkers/street food (just completed, awaiting implementation); and guidelines for school canteens (1989). In addition, there are local authority by-laws pertaining to food hygiene and safety which are complementary to the main food legislation.

The Food Quality Control (FQC) Unit of the Ministry of Health Malaysia was established in 1974 to function as the central agency in-charge of the food safety programme in the country. The general objective of the Unit is to help protect the public against health hazards and fraud in the preparation, sale and use of food. Greater emphasis is given to the preventive and promotive aspects of food control rather than legal enforcement. The Unit strives to motivate and promote safe and hygienic preparation, handling and sale of food in all sectors of the food industry. The Unit also motivates the public and provides the consumers with adequate information on the importance of eating safe and quality food.

Continued emphasis is given to high risk groups such as school children by regular inspection of the school canteens and hostel kitchens. Poor food handling practices among the food handlers is given due emphasis, with extensive health education activities conducted to overcome the problem. Close collaboration with other agencies related with production and sale of food, consumer organisations and food industries is being continuously strengthened.

The Food Act 1983 and Food Regulations 1985 stipulate specific provisions for warranty, procedure for taking samples, labelling, food additives and nutrient supplement, packages for food, incidental constituents and over 300 food standards. The main nutrition-related aspects of the Regulations 1985 are in regulations 388 to 393, governing the sale of special purpose foods which include infant formula, cereal-based foods for infants and young children, low energy foods and formula dietary foods. In addition, wherever relevant, considerations are also given to the impact of other standards on the dietary and nutritional needs of communities. Currently being drafted is a set of regulations for the sale of follow-up formula for young children. The development of these regulations frequently refers to foreign and international standards, especially those of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. For food products specific to the country, reliance is placed on local research data and expertise. The food industry is also consulted, eg through the various associations set up for specific groups of foods or through the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers.

Food standardization and certification scheme[4,5]. In a rapidly developing food industry, it is necessary for the Malaysian manufacturers to maintain and upgrade their product quality in order to keep pace with development both at home and abroad. In addition, the local manufacturers should bear in mind that even local consumers are becoming more educated, more well-informed and thus more demanding in their requirements. It was thus felt essential for the complementary development of the country's technological service infrastructure through agencies such as SIRIM which would provide on-the ground assistance in the technical upgrading of industries, particularly in the area of production of goods and services of a variety, quality, performance and safety level that would meet the demands of the Malaysian consumer and find acceptability in foreign markets.

The Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM) was established to serve as the national nucleus with the basic role of encouraging and stimulating technological development in Malaysian industries through its activities of standardization, industrial research as well as provision of a wide range of technical services. It was established with the merger of the Standards Institution of Malaysia (SIM) and the National Institute for Scientific and Industrial Research (NISIR) under the Laws of Malaysia Act 157 of 1975. As the National Standards body, the role of SIRIM is to monitor the country in the field of standardization and promote quality assurance for the industry. Its involvement with other International Standard bodies will ensure that Malaysian Industry is in a parallel development with the latest developments of technology in the field.

Malaysian standards are prepared by the Technical Committees (TC) (now renamed as Working Groups) consisting of representatives from government departments and agencies, commerce and industry, research organizations, consumer bodies and other interested parties, to ensure representation from all sectors of the community. These groups of people participate in active discussion based on the 'consensus principle'. After consideration by the TC the draft standard is circulated locally and internationally for public comments for a period of three months. Any comments received would be discussed by the TC before being submitted for approval by the relevant Industry Standards Committee (ISC). One of the eight ISCs established is the Food and Agriculture ISC which makes final recommendations to the Standards Committee (StanCo) for approval as a Malaysian standard. As at April 1993, SIRIM has prepared a total of 1770 Malaysian Standards, which includes 270 food standards, prepared by some 20 TCs. Malaysian standards cover product specifications, methods of sampling, methods of test, codes of practice, grading of products and glossary of terms. Many of these food standards are for major food items in the diet of Malaysians and are obviously

of nutritional significance, including starch, cereal and products; poultry and meat products; marine foods; dairy products; fruits and vegetables; and oils and fats. Nutritional considerations in many of these standards include minimum and/or maximum nutrient levels.

SIRIM operates schemes of Supervision and Control to products which conform to Malaysian Standards. Such goods are therefore marked with the SIRIM Standard Mark. The certification system used by SIRIM is of that of Type Testing and Assessment of factory quality control and its acceptance, followed by surveillance, which will take into account the audit of the factory quality control and the testing of samples from the factory and the open market. The response from the Malaysian food industry to the certification schemes operated by SIRIM has been encouraging. There has been an increase in the number of licences for food products over the years. In 1980, there were only 10 licences, and in the middle of 1993, the figure has increased to 71. With the trend towards the adoption of good manufacturing practices, quality consciousness and consumer awareness, it is hoped that the figures would increase even further in the near future.

Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) activities in Malaysia[6]. Malaysia became a member of CAC in 1969, and the Standards Institute of Malaysia (now known as SIRIM) was appointed the Contact Point. A National Codex Committee (NCC) was established in 1984, with SIRIM serving as the secretariat. Members of the NCC are senior officials from 18 governmental and non-governmental organisations involved with health, agriculture, food, industry and trade, who are in a position to make decision and policies regarding Codex matters. Nine National Codex Sub-Committees and one Working Group have been established. Malaysia supports fully and participates in the activities of Codex, in cognizance of the benefits of such participation to the country, the industries, and the consumers. In January 1992, the NCC, in collaboration with SIRIM, successfully hosted the 8th Codex Coordinating Committee Meeting for Asia. In conjunction with the Meeting, the Second FAO Workshop on Street Foods was also held.

Two of the Sub-Committees formed under the authority of the NCC are closely related to nutrition, namely the Sub-Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses (NFSDU) and the Sub-Committee on Food Labelling. These two Sub-Committees, established in 1988 and 1990 respectively, have followed closely and promoted the activities of the CAC. The Institute for Medical Research was appointed the Secretariat of the Sub-Committee on NFSDU. Membership of the Sub-Committee comprises nutritionists, dietitians and food scientists in nine government departments, agencies and universities. Other members may be co-opted from time to time as deemed necessary. The primary objective of the Sub-Committee is to assist and facilitate the functions of the NCC, particularly with respect to nutritional aspects of foods and matters pertaining to foods for special dietary uses as defined by the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

The Sub-Committee has studied in detail various Codex drafts and standards on foods for special dietary purposes, and made recommendations for amendments to the NCC. Most of these proposals have been endorsed by the national Committee, and transmitted by the Secretariat to the Codex Committee meeting for consideration. Some of the standards considered include foods with low sodium, infant formula, follow-up formula, canned baby foods, processed cereal-based foods for infants and children, gluten-free foods, formulated supplementary foods for older infants and young children, formula foods for use in weight control diets and dietary supplements. The Sub-Committee is also directed from time to time to study matters related to nutritional aspects of other Codex drafts and Codex standards, particularly those related to food labelling. To ensure close collaboration between the Sub-Committees on nutrition and food labelling, the Chairman of the former Sub-Committee is also a member of the latter. Some of the drafts on labelling were referred to the Sub-Committee for initial considerations and comments, eg labelling of and claims for prepackaged low-energy or reduced-energy foods for special dietary uses, general guidelines on claims, draft nutrient reference value for food labelling purposes and guideline for the use of the term 'natural'.

These developments in food standards are fairly recent activities. They have, nevertheless, proceeded with determination in spite of various constraints. Improvements are continuously being made to the implementation of the programmes outlined, learning from past mistakes and experiences of neighbouring countries and the international community.

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