

International Seminar on Setting Food Safety Standards  
Organized by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality  
[www.minlnv.nl/foodsafetyjune2008](http://www.minlnv.nl/foodsafetyjune2008)

**Opening remarks by Carlo Trojan, Chairman of the seminar  
June 9, 2008**

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning and welcome to all of you to this International Seminar on setting food safety standards. A particular welcome to the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food quality, Gerda Verburg. I would like to congratulate her Ministry for organizing this Seminar. A particular welcome as well to the representatives of FAO, World Health Organization and the World Organization for Animal Health. We are thankful for their cooperation in this event. We are looking forward to the keynote speech of Prof. Dr. Rudi Rabbinge and to the introductory remarks of the representative of the WTO. This afternoon we will address horizontal issues such as risk management, cost of compliance and the development- and consumer perspective. We have a lot of distinguished international experts convening in this seminar who will discuss in the coming days the major challenges in the realm of veterinary medicine, contaminants, biological agents and pesticides. I am particularly happy with the strong representation from developing countries.

The main subject of this Seminar is how the setting of food safety standards, including control, inspection and approval procedures, affect international trade particularly exports from developing countries.

We are in a somewhat paradoxical situation. On the one hand we are trying at this very moment to conclude the Doha Round, which should lead to a substantial reduction of tariffs and domestic support. On the other hand we see all kind of non-tariff barriers coming to the forefront. Particularly amongst developing countries there is a growing skepticism about the new market access opportunities which further trade liberalization may offer. What is the use of quota and duty free access for LDC's if you cannot meet the standards in the importing countries? This is particularly the case as far as SPS issues are concerned. Due to technological developments we see constantly improving methods of detection. As a consequence producers and exporters are in fact facing increasingly stringent standards. In some cases laboratory analysis seem to prevail over the actual risk of public health.

Moreover SPS issues are not a stand alone factor affecting international trade and export opportunities of developing countries. Food quality standards-both public and private- are increasingly dictated by consumer preferences and values of the western society. Sustainability criteria and non-trade concerns-such as animal welfare and labor conditions- are part and parcel of this development. This brings us more and more into the grey zone of non-product related production and process measures (PPM's).

Private standards may fall outside the scope of the WTO rulebook but are often becoming quasi-governmental and certainly do affect export opportunities of developing countries. Some practices-such as food miles- are moreover misleading for consumers and discriminating in relation to developing countries.

At least as far as sanitary and phytosanitary measures are concerned we have a detailed legal framework in the SPS Agreement. WTO members have the explicit right to take measures to protect human, animal and plant health as long as they are based on scientific evidence, are necessary for the protection of health and do not unjustifiably discriminate amongst foreign sources of supply. The SPS Agreement is also a far reaching one. It calls upon countries to harmonize their SPS measures and to base them on internationally agreed standards. It argues in favor of “equivalence”, which importantly allows one country to make the case that its measures meet the same level of protection as another’s country’s although the measures differ. The focus is on the outcome: “is the product safe?” rather than exactly describing the means of ensuring the safety of products. It also includes the very useful concepts of “regionalization” and “pest free area’s”.

Too often these concepts remain just that and countries remain hesitant to apply them.. Are regulators not prepared to give up their national way of looking at food safety or is there insufficient level of confidence between national regulatory authorities. I hope this Seminar can also address these more overarching questions.

Special and differential treatment is a well-known concept in the WTO rulebook. It also figures in Article 10 of the SPS Agreement. The concept does not translate easily in the realm of SPS safety. Safety is after all safety and compliance with requirements which cannot be modulated. An alternative way of helping developing countries is technical assistance. The needs of many are enormous-improved infrastructure, water availability, laboratory capacity etc. The international community is developing efforts in this respect. The E.C. initiative “Better training for safer food” is a good example. But more efforts are required.

A forthcoming paper of the International Food and Agricultural Trade Policy Council (IPC) argues that there is also scope for some better “streamlining” to facilitate the imports of food from developing countries, which is after all what the SPS Agreement exhorts us to do. Facilitating trade from developing countries and ensuring safety of food imports need not to be mutually exclusive. By examining the ways in which US and EU, and other countries, could agree on some shared approach of verifying their compliance with standards, or organizing joint inspections, we are in fact meeting both objectives. Even if the mission of food regulators is domestic consumer protection it should include to the extent possible the development objectives of their national governments. I hope this is also an issue to be addressed in this seminar.

The very fact that Minister Gerda Verburg has agreed to open this Seminar underlines the importance the Dutch Government attaches to the subject. Minister you have the floor.