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GUEST EDITORIAL [2]

Removing barriers to the movement of food across borders

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Always when I receive the announcement of a new issue of AJFAND, I immediately read the editorial and then look up the articles that are of interest to me or I feel should have the interest of colleagues, whom I subsequently alert about it. AJFAND is certainly a journal of high quality and many of the articles are not only of interest to Africa. When invited to write a guest editorial, about a topic of my choice, logically I accepted, but I had no clue yet about the subject of the editorial. If I write an article, I feel it should have contents that matter and will help at least a few readers a little ahead in their endeavours. As the highest priority of my activities is with the Global Harmonization Initiative (GHI) whose goal it is to achieve consensus on the science of food regulations and legislation to ensure global availability of safe and wholesome food products for all consumers, I felt I should focus on the availability of safe food in Africa, remembering the many famines in several parts of Africa in the past decades.

GHI was initiated in 2004 because it became apparent that huge quantities of wholesome food were destroyed in a world with a billion people starving. Reasons: differences in food regulations between countries, regulations that usually lacked a scientific basis and in addition scientifically unsupported misinformation by people (often fake scientists) and organisations that successfully tried – and often still try - to make money out of it. Very persistent is the misinformation that GM food is unsafe, while *all* scientific evidence proves the opposite. This misinformation leads to thousands of people starving to death in the early two-thousands in Africa, while GM food was available in the harbours[1,2]

The founders of GHI felt that it was time to address these issues attempting to reduce the legal destruction of healthy food. During the following years, GHI and its members learned much about the food safety and security problems in the world. Maintaining differences in

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regulations has benefits for bad intentions, such as masking protectionism. It became also clear that even with good intentions those involved in developing, executing and maintaining regulations often lack the knowledge to understand what safety and risk actually mean and thereby come to the wrong conclusions, wrong advice to regulatory authorities and consequently to wrong decisions; resulting in both huge food and financial losses. As a very recent example, in The Netherlands in the past half year, three million healthy chicken and millions of eggs were destroyed for legally correct but scientifically absurd reasons[3].

Contrary to our initial thoughts, general scientific consensus is not the problem; usually about food safety issues, scientists agree. The point is that scientists communicate most of the time only with each other while they need to communicate with the rest of the society as well. Scientists do not make regulations, these are made by officials, instructed by politicians who (at least in many countries) listen to the common people, their electorate. Consequently, education – at all levels –, as well as understandable correct communication is essential, in any society. GHI has working groups (WG) about scientific topics, but also a WG on Education while one on Communications is being set up now, with experienced science communicators.

Africa has good scientists (which becomes obvious when you pay attention to AJFAND but also from publications by African scientists in international journals) although their numbers are low and thereby possibly also their influence on the society. While in the western world the number of scientists (in full-time equivalents) is above 5000 per million inhabitants, sometimes even above 8000; in Russia >3000; in most of Africa it still is (often far) below 500 per million. As this is the total number of scientists, the number of food scientists is much lower. My recommendation is to mobilise all the food scientists to have them work together on several objectives. Firstly, they need to explain to youngsters that food science (including food chemistry and food microbiology) is interesting and badly needed to ensure sufficient food in the decades to come. Africa needs many more food scientists than there are now. Secondly, however, food scientists need to realise that to remove barriers to the movement of food across borders, food safety laws and regulations need to be the same in all countries and that there are no reasons to justify differences, perhaps with very few exceptions that have to do with local habits and adaptation to certain diets (i.e., growing up with or without cow's milk). The most urgent issues need be identified and be the first targets for harmonization. Waiting for politicians to harmonize will simply take too long due to disputes, bureaucratic procedures and potentially even lack of interest. In intergovernmental organisations participants represent their government and arguing often is to defend the position of that government, not the interest of the consumers. A voluntary multinational scientific organisation that writes recommendations based on good science may have an impact and the more so if the recommendations are endorsed by a global organisation. Smart politicians may use these recommendations to show that they are wiser than others because they will help to realise changes in regulations that help people getting more and safer food. It will be hard for the official organisations to disprove such recommendations (and why should they?). The purpose should, however, not be to demonstrate that the existing collaborations between countries are not needed but to help the members with sound scientific advice. Similar to the Codex Alimentarius committees, which do good work, but helping them with consensus papers may help to make faster progress.

In conclusion, therefore, I recommend African food scientists to set up African GHI working groups to address issues that play an important role in Africa and need to be resolved as soon as possible. The members of the African WG should not hesitate to consult GHI members from other continents. Members are scientists who are motivated to improve and harmonize food safety regulations and therefore, they will help when asked. Drafted recommendations may be sent to experts in other parts of the world, using the GHI Ambassador network. Comments from these experts – supported by evidence – should then be taken into account to produce a new draft. This will be an iterative process until all differences in opinions have been resolved. Thereafter the document can be published as an official GHI document in AJFAND or otherwise, to be used by stakeholders.

I am convinced that African food scientists will make a difference for the future of Africa.

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Further reading

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