

# Brave Benin - How one small African country made a brave stand at Codex

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**FAO Building and Codex Meeting Place – July 2013**

“There is no wealth but life.” - John Ruskin

Monday morning in Rome began as only summer mornings in that city begin, with cerulean blue skies blemished only by the merest wisps of clouds. An early, cooling breeze swept the streets as I made my way to the opening day of the 36<sup>th</sup> session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission meeting in Rome, this first week of July 2013, held once again in the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) building.

## **Vitamin and Mineral Values**

Those who have been following the National Health Federation’s efforts at Codex since the mid-1990s already know that at the Codex Nutrition Committee meeting in Dusseldorf, Germany in 2009, the NHF singlehandedly launched the opposition that stopped the Australian delegation and others from “dumbing down” these Nutrient Reference Values (NRVs).

Australia and its supporters had wrongly proposed that **lower** NRVs be adopted for certain important vitamins and minerals, including Vitamin C. For example, the “Proposed Draft Additional or Revised NRVs for Labelling Purposes in the Codex Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling” suggested reducing the Vitamin A NRV from 800 micrograms down to 550 micrograms, Vitamin C down from an already abysmally low 60 milligrams to 45 milligrams, Thiamin down from 1.4 milligrams to 1.2 milligrams, Niacin from 18 milligrams down to 15 milligrams, Magnesium down from 300 milligrams to 240 milligrams, and so forth.

These values are already at subsistence levels; and in order to enjoy optimal and robust health, most consumers need far more than the miserable amounts that Codex would parsimoniously dole out to them. Yet Australia and its supporters are so fixated on **reducing** the values even more that they have blinded themselves to the real science showing the absolute need for more nutrient intake, not less.

Fortunately, thanks to NHF and its key supporters India and Iraq at the 2009 meeting, the Committee wisely chose not to move forward with any of those proposed NRVs and instead held the work back for further review and study. Nearly four years have passed since we first stopped these NRVs from being adopted, and each year of non-adoption has been a victory for NHF, and for you. Unfortunately, that winning streak has come to a dead stop.

It started with last year’s Nutrition Committee meeting in December 2012, where three women (the Chairwoman and the Australian and U.S. delegates) decided to split the vitamins and minerals into two groups: One that was considered “**suitable**” for adoption; and a second group that was considered “**unsuitable**” and would need further work. The Chairwoman ignored the strong objections of five delegations (Malaysia, Iran, South Africa, the International Dairy Federation, and the NHF) to decide that “consensus” existed and the “suitable” list could go to the Commission for approval.

### **Seven Months Later**

It has continued with the Commission meeting this first week of July. The cooling breeze that had helped propel me on my way to the meeting became instead a steady stream of hot air as Codex delegates discussed the “suitable” NRV standards for vitamins and minerals. It was one of many such standards and guidelines being considered for adoption by the Commission, but it became one of the most contentious.

This time Australia was completely silent. In a kind of hidden tag-team maneuver, it was now the United States’ and the European Union’s turn to push forward the worthless NRV standard. The U.S. delegate said that it was in favor of the standard being adopted at Step 5/8 (i.e., just short of final adoption at Step 8), the EU said it supported the United States, as did the ever-eager American lapdogs Chile and Costa Rica. The Chairwoman of the Codex Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses (CCNFSDU), Pia Noble, was asked her opinion and of course said that the CCNFSDU had carefully considered the science and recommended its adoption. This was a lie. Seven months earlier, three women had pushed the standard forward while

three women (and NHF and IDF) had opposed it, all while the rest of the Committee sat on their hands. Hardly “careful consideration.”

The NHF naturally spoke up in opposition to approval of the NRVs, arguing that they called for a reduction across the board of 20% to 66% of the B vitamin NRVs, increased Calcium NRVs in the face of a reduction in Magnesium NRVs (the exact **opposite** of what modern nutrition tells us should be done), and promotes, at best, subsistence nutrition when optimal nutrition is called for here. *“These are standards that would only allow consumers to put one foot before the other, barely avoiding slipping into the grave, as they shuffle through life. Consumers deserve better, they deserve optimal nutrition that allows them to maximize their potential and quality of life,”* I said to the delegates.

Only the International Dairy Federation (IDF) spoke up alongside the NHF against advancing the NRV standard, based primarily upon the increase in the calcium NRV to 1000 milligrams, which would result, IDF argued, in the curious paradox of milk no longer being able to be promoted as a “rich source of calcium.” The delegates seemed unmoved by this argument.

So, seeing no country delegations supporting the NHF and IDF position, Chairman Sanjay Dave (pronounced “Dah-vey”) was on the verge of declaring the vitamin-and-mineral NRVs adopted at Step 5/8 when NHF interrupted with a request for the floor.

*“Mr. Chairman, NHF would propose that since the Commission seems determined to advance the NRV standard here at least the calcium portion of the standard be withheld and sent back to the Committee to be considered along with magnesium. Magnesium and calcium are twin minerals and it is absurd to determine one value without determining the other at the same time. They should not be separated like this.”*

When Chairman Dave asked if there were any country delegations supporting NHF’s proposal, there was a long silence as he slowly looked around the room. Papers rustled and stirred as some delegates shifted uncomfortably in their seats. I looked around the room too and wondered what had happened to our previous supporters.

Malaysia? *Silence.*

Russia? *Nyet.*

Iran? *More silence.*

South Africa? *Nothing.*

India?

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