Using International Data: Conclusions

John C. Klensin[1]
INFOODS Secretariat
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Data from across national and regional boundaries have been important for some time, and are becoming more so. People travel and migrate and bring their food styles with them to countries where those foods are neither well-represented in tables and databases nor easy to reproduce exactly with locally-available ingredients. However, considerable effort is required for the intelligent use of data in one country that were developed in another. There are difficulties in the identification of foods[2], in cooking techniques and methods used to estimate or impute values for mixed foods[3], in conventions about nutrients[4], and in conventions and methods of reporting and presenting information[5].

The presentations in this session examined issues in data originating outside the United States in various regions of the world. They identified, although to different degrees, several common obstacles to data availability and use. These included:

It is still very difficult to locate data.

Finding data of interest depends to a great degree on personal contacts. Detailed directories published in various parts of the world and the overview produced by INFOODS cover tables and other printed materials much better than they cover actual databases. The comparative listing of software systems and associated data formerly produced annually for this conference has no equal elsewhere. In general, one must find an expert in a particular country or region and ask her or him what is available or for additional people to contact.

There are consistency problems with names, food identification, and nutrients.

No "system" or "magic bullet" will make these difficulties disappear, since they result in large measure from real differences in foods and scientific theories and assumptions. However, for some types of problems and uses, the importance of precise identification and even precise values may have been significantly exaggerated. More research is needed on the topic of "how much difference does it make?".

These are particularly important considerations for systems intended to precisely name, and thereby identify, foods. At the best, these systems provide only partial solutions to very complex problems. For other problems and approaches, they may be largely irrelevant. The field has not yet established a critical literature of evaluations, especially comparative evaluations, of naming and description systems.

Choices of software have come to dominate choices of databases.

Where data are processed with computers, people tend to choose software that is attractive from a human interface and language standpoint as long as required data seem to be available. Less attention is paid to issues of data quality. Similarly, for at least some purposes, consistency of the results of calculations is seen as more important than the accuracy or representativeness of those calculations. These approaches can pose particular problems when data are compared across national or regional boundaries, since they often result in a reduced availability of the kinds of descriptive materials needed to evaluate inter-database or inter-table consistency. The field still lacks a literature of critical evaluations of databases and, especially, software packages and a consensus about how to perform such evaluations.

International coordination is getting better in some places, worse in others.

INFOODS is increasingly operating on the regional basis which was intended. Several of the regions are

very strong and have active programs. INFOODS works with them to facilitate inter-regional activities and coordination and to provide technical advice and, as a result, has fewer programs of its own. The lack of a functioning regional organization for North America may eventually pose problems for people in this region trying to work with data from outside of it.

While the availability and use of "international" data can be very helpful, and is sometimes vital to an adequate understanding of nutrition or health status, obtaining and using such data in a scientifically-responsible way is difficult. INFOODS and its associated regional groups continue to be very active in this area. There are gradual improvements as a result of these, and other, efforts that actually focus on international issues, rather than expecting all other countries to conform to one's own local preferences and needs.

[1]INFOODS Secretariat, Room N52-457, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139.

[2]Truswell AS, et al. "INFOODS Guidelines for Describing Foods: A Systematic Approach to Describing Foods to Facilitate International Exchange of Food Composition Data". *J. Food Composition and Analysis* 4, 1 (March 1991), pp. 18-38 provides an international perspective on this issue.

[3]See Rand WM, et al. *Compiling Data for Food Composition Data Bases.* In press, United Nations University. To appear late 1991.

[4]Klensin JC, et al. *Identification of Food Components for INFOODS Data Interchange.* Tokyo: United Nations University, 1989.

[5]Klensin JC. *INFOODS Food Composition Data Interchange Handbook.* In press, United Nations University. To appear late 1991.