



JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME
CODEX COMMITTEE ON FOOD IMPORT AND EXPORT INSPECTION
AND CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS

Twenty-fourth Session

Brisbane, Australia

Assessment of the experimental approach for intersessional Physical Working Groups (PWGs)

Prepared by Australia, Chile and the United Kingdom

Background

1. At the 23rd Session of the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS23) in May 2017, the Chair recalled concerns expressed by developing countries regarding the implications of resource constraints for their regular attendance at PWG meetings. Acknowledging those difficulties, the Chair noted that certain types of work could be conducted effectively through EWGs but that on other, complex issues, such as National Food Control Systems (NFCSs), PWGs had contributed to resolving concerns in the development of texts. The Chair emphasized the benefit of PWGs as effective in capturing the needs of developing countries and producing outputs valuable to them.
2. The Chair recalled that the Committee had agreed to establish two EWGs, with the possibility of convening physical meetings, to develop guidance on “Use of Systems Equivalence” and “Regulatory Approaches to Third-Party Assurance Schemes”. To ensure broad participation among members, the Chair proposed holding the two PWGs in advance of CCFICS24, scheduled for October 2018, in two different locations – in Chile, in November/December 2017, and in Ireland or the United Kingdom, in April/May 2018. The Chair further proposed combining the PWGs via a webinar or similar modality to facilitate the participation, with real-time responses, of a range of countries that may not be able to participate physically. This experimental approach would be assessed after 12 months.
3. The Chair requested that the Committee discuss and provide views on the proposal.
4. The Committee broadly supported the proposal and expressed the following views:
 - i. Since the complex work of CCFICS required physical meetings, the Committee would draw on its experience in organizing PWGs in different regions and regional workshops.
 - ii. The use of webinars or similar modalities blended with PWG meetings would promote inclusion.
 - iii. PWG meetings, while effective, should be kept to a minimum and used only when necessary.
 - iv. Consideration should be given to holding a workshop or a PWG meeting immediately prior to CCFICS24, so as to facilitate the broadest possible participation among members, to consider the outcomes of the intersessional PWGs.
 - v. The difference between time zones should be taken into account in using web-based meeting modalities.
5. The Committee agreed that two intersessional PWGs would be held on an experimental basis, one in Latin America (Chile) and one in Europe (Ireland or the United Kingdom), to make progress in developing guidance documents on the “Use of Systems Equivalence” and “Regulatory Approaches to Third-Party Assurance Schemes”. It was further agreed that each PWG would last four days, with the time split equally between the two work items and both PWGs would be broadcast via webinar to enable broader participation.

PWG in Chile

6. A PWG to progress development on guidance for the “Use of Systems Equivalence” and “Regulatory Approaches to Third-Party Assurance Schemes” was held in Santiago, Chile from 11-14 December 2017.
7. The system used for the PWG in Chile was the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) WebEx platform. This system allowed participants to follow the meeting in real time and provide input into the discussion. 28 delegates were registered to participate via WebEx while 44 participated in person. The WebEx system had some minor issues getting started on the first day of plenary, however the issues were addressed by the technicians within a few hours and no major connection issues were experienced during the remaining days of the PWG.
8. The platform used, was slightly limited in that only one channel was available. This resulted in Spanish speaking WebEx participants listening to PWG proceedings in English. Participants were of course able to contribute in Spanish and the room/other WebEx participants heard the English translation.
9. Feedback from delegates on the use of WebEx was largely positive. For the majority of users it was a new experience and while there were issues to consider for the second PWG, the participation of remote delegates was considered beneficial. While time zones were challenging, commendably online participants actively engaged in discussions at all hours of work by the PWG. This included some participants connecting from home as the PWG was taking place outside of office hours in their location.

PWG in the United Kingdom

10. A PWG to further progress development on guidance for the “Use of Systems Equivalence” and “Regulatory Approaches to Third-Party Assurance Schemes” was held in Edinburgh, United Kingdom from 28-31 May 2018.
11. The UK benefited from the lessons learned from the first pilot in Santiago and worked closely with Chile in setting up the system.
12. The UK explored two software solutions for the web-streaming of the PWG. The first a proprietary software package that was fully compatible with Microsoft’s Skype. Testing revealed that it was incompatible with most Government computer networks due to security restrictions. Conversely, the WebEx system that was used in Chile had no such issues.
13. In order to overcome one of the challenges identified during the Chile PWG, the UK hosted two WebEx sessions concurrently so that participants could listen in English or Spanish, and contribute in either language. However, this was a rather clunky and inelegant solution. The same could be said of the process for giving the floor to delegates connected via WebEx as it required physical signalling to the chair and the switching of AV audio/translation settings, and then back again.
14. Fewer delegates connected to the Edinburgh meeting via WebEx than had connected to the Santiago meeting. Of the sixty-nine delegates that participated eight of them were connected via WebEx. Importantly for the systems equivalence session this included one of the co-chairs of the work who was able to contribute from afar.

Considerations

15. While the use of webinar technologies allowed remote participation by several Codex Members the provision of the infrastructure to facilitate such participation is an additional administrative and financial burden for host countries (in this case Chile and the United Kingdom) to shoulder. The benefits to the work of the Codex Alimentarius Commission are extensive but the cost implications and reputational risk for host countries rather than Codex Members and observers who can choose not to travel, should not be overlooked.
16. Some challenges were identified during this trial, these include; problems with the use of simultaneous interpretation for the broadcasting, interruptions in the transmission of the PWG due to connection problems in either the host country or that of the remote participant, and difficulties to participate because of the different time zones (which can for example lead to situations where meetings take place outside of normal office hours).
17. A few countries requested multiple connections to the webinar. While this is a good thing from the point of view of inclusiveness and transparency, it also presents the challenge of having more than one potential participant from a country commenting during the meeting. A mechanism should be discussed to ensure that in such situations, it is clear when the comments represent a national opinion or otherwise.

18. Delegates participating via webinar also made some administrative suggestions that would enhance their future participation experience, including that the work program should be strictly adhered to (given the different time zones) and that a list of participating delegates should be distributed at the beginning of the PWG so that online participants know who is physically attending the PWG.

Recommendations

19. It is recommended that the CAC42 advises Codex Members that the trial of webinar for CCFICS PWGs was considered successful and that future use of webinar or similar technologies could be considered by other Codex subsidiary bodies, on a case by case basis, when establishing PWGs.
20. It is also recommend that CAC42 tasks CCEXEC to further consider the use of webinar technology, including the issues raised in this trial. CCEXEC could develop some best practice guidance, and investigate whether Codex should have a preferred software solution, or at least some minimum technological specifications.