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JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

FAO/WHO COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR AFRICA

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REVITALISATION OF FAO/WHO COORDINATING COMMITTEES
PROPOSALS ON STRENGTHENING THE ROLE AND PLATFORM OF RCCs

(Prepared by Codex Secretariat, FAO and WHO)

1.   BACKGROUND

1.   The FAO/WHO Coordinating Committees (RCCs) support exchange of information and dialogue (see Terms of Reference in Annex I). Every two years the RCCs provide the opportunity for professionals with a common interest to come together to address food safety and food trade issues. Within the Codex structure, the RCCs provide the link between the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) and technical committees and the regions to ensure that Codex leads global policy on food safety and quality and is also responsive to country and regional needs.

2.   RCCs, besides presenting unique opportunities for the region, are also a useful forum for FAO and WHO to engage with countries, and discuss priority needs and challenges which subsequently inform the planning and monitoring of their food quality and safety activities in the regions. In the past FAO and WHO conducted a series of regional food safety and quality conferences, since their discontinuation RCCs can provide a regular forum for FAO and WHO and countries to address food safety issues.

3.   While presenting many opportunities for exchanges and regional work, it has also been recognized that there is room for further improvement. RCCs have not remained static, changes and improvements have occurred, however sometimes at different paces resulting in RCCs taking different directions and different approaches.

4.   The purpose of this paper, prepared jointly by the Codex Secretariat, FAO and WHO, is to examine how the RCCs can contribute more efficiently to Codex, FAO and WHO activities, needs of food safety professionals and to ensure that the considerable resources and time invested is optimised. A number of proposals are made in this paper to provoke discussions and agree on concrete next steps.

2.   WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES?

2.1   Opportunities

5.   RCCs are functioning as a forum in which countries discuss issues of importance to the region related not only to food standards, but to food safety systems, food trade, consumer information, food and nutrition including NonCommunicable Diseases (NCDs).

6.   A strategic objective for *RCCs could thus be that they become the preeminent regional fora to raise awareness and attention to food safety and other food related topics*.

7.   Revitalizing the RCCs in this way would allow them to give input and direction into the global Codex work, to the activities of FAO and WHO and to improving food safety and quality. A coherent approach across RCCs is preferable while it should not constrain regional specificities.

8.   The Codex Strategic Plan (2014-19) can guide the thinking on how to reach this objective as the Strategy includes a number of activities on which progress is reported by Codex committees including RCCs, e.g.:

-    Develop a systematic approach to promote identification of emerging issues related to food safety, nutrition and fair practices in trade *[Activity 1.2.1]*

-    Where practical, the use of Codex meetings as a forum to effectively conduct educational and technical capacity building activities *[Activity 3.2.3]*

2.2   Challenges

2.2.1 Regional strategic plans

9.   The development of multiple regional strategic plans is of concern. Considerable time and resources have been invested on this exercise and there are instances where regional strategic plans duplicate the global Codex Strategic Plan.

10.   This should be avoided as: (i) the global Codex Strategic Plan includes a number of items for which all Committees, including RCCs, are responsible; and (ii) RCCs are consulted each time a global Codex Strategic Plan is developed and may propose activities for inclusion.

2.2.2 Information sharing

11.   Countries remain interested to share information on their institutional arrangements for the control of food safety and aspects of quality and consumer affairs. However, the current system of using a Circular Letter is not effective due to low and scattered responses, which do not allow processing and analysis.

12.   A system to continuously collect data online, independently of RCCs sessions would be more useful in identifying the status and needs of food control systems for the region.

13.   Beyond the exchange of information on institutional systems, sharing knowledge and experiences on food safety and quality issues at the RCCs is minimal and takes place in an informal, ad hoc way. While this is useful, the revitalization process may give rise to additional opportunities for an improved dialogue on food safety and quality issues.

2.2.3 Regional positions

14.   Discussions on global Codex issues of importance to the region are useful to inform the coordinators in their role as members of CCEXEC. If the region is of unanimous agreement on an issue this can be important information for the CCEXEC, CAC and global technical committees. However, the development of uniform "regional positions" might lead to fixed positions leaving little margin for negotiation in the meetings where the issues are discussed. The discussion on global issues should rather serve to prepare countries to contribute to the discussion in global Codex meetings.

15.   Overall more emphasis should be given to the identification of issues and matters of relevance to the region and bringing these on the agenda of global Committees.

16.   Discussions at RCCs should aim at improved support to regional coordinators so that they are optimally prepared to represent their region at the CCEXEC.

3.   PROPOSALS

3.1   RCCs as improved food safety and quality fora: aligning RCCs

17.   We propose that the agendas of all RCCs remain aligned, with the exception of items related to development or revision of specific regional standards and include the following standing items.

3.1.1 Food safety and quality situations in the countries of the region

18.   This item will replace the past agenda item related to regular Circular Letters. The discussion under this item will guide on specific food safety and quality issues in the region (challenges, priorities, etc.) and inform work of FAO and WHO to prioritise and strategize on capacity building and related activities in the region. It should contribute to determining the key-note address and topic (3.1.2).

19.   An online system (see 3.2) to collect data on countries food safety and quality situations (e.g. food safety and quality country profile) would be developed to collect information and data for the preparation of this document.

3.1.2 Key note address and discussion on regional issue of priority and common challenge

20.   The purpose of this proposed new agenda item is to high-light special issues, raise awareness and create political interest and 'buy-in' to food safety and quality matters.

21.   The topic for this item would be informed by discussions at the RCC, and chosen in close consultation with the Coordinator and will include: a key note speech by an eminent high-level speaker, a technical paper and a facilitated discussion.

3.1.3 Monitoring the Codex Strategic Plan

22.   A standing agenda item will focus on monitoring the implementation of the global Codex Strategic Plan as it relates to the work of the RCC.

23.   As agreed by CAC37 and CCEXEC69[1] a monitoring framework will be developed for the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

3.1.4 Food standards in the region

24.   This item will replace the current item "Codex work relevant to the region" under which possible needs for new regional standards or the relevance of existing regional standards will be discussed. This item is also a key element to feed into the global Codex work.

3.2 Platform for information sharing on food control systems and roles and responsibilities in food safety

25.   National food control systems are not static – they continue to develop and evolve through the introduction of new legal and regulatory requirements and framework. The world of food production and consumption is ever-changing - global food trading patterns, occurrence of trans-national food-borne illness outbreaks, cross-boundary food recalls, etc. – often require food safety officials in one country or region to be in contact with colleagues in a different country/region.

26.   The data and information needed to respond to this challenge in a strategic and timely way require a simple but effective system for data collection and analysis.

3.2.1 Online platform to collect and distribute country relevant data

27.   We propose replacing the RCC Circular Letter with an on-line data and information collection system integrated into the Codex website, which provides the possibility to countries to continuously provide data and information (see CX/AFRICA 15/21/4-Add.1)

28.   This system may also be used to measure any other specific points that countries want to exchange on and could also be used to submit data measuring performance of food control systems.

An essential consideration in designing the system will be agreeing on which data is most important and feasible to share.

29.   Approximately six months before the RCC session, a reminder will be sent to CCPs of the region concerned requesting to review the country data and update as necessary eventually with requests for additional data.

30.   The data will be extracted to prepare a regional overview of country situations and other issues to be circulated among countries and guide RCC discussions on how to move forward the food safety and quality agenda in the region.

3.3 Identification of needs and priorities in regions (persistent and emerging food safety/quality issues)

31.   A mechanism to better identify and understand the needs and priorities at regional and country level should be developed to feed into the global Codex process to, among others:

- Allow targeted planning by national food safety authorities;

- Identify priorities for new work in Codex;

- Report on emerging issues;

- Inform the FAO/WHO scientific advice programme;

- Inform FAO and WHO capacity development programmes (including targeted project development).

3.4 Regional Strategic Planning

32.   We propose that:

- RCCs main focus should be on the implementation of the global Codex Strategic Plan (see 3.1.3);

- Regional strategic plans, where developed have the same timeframe as the global Codex Strategic Plan and are consistent with and complementary to.

4. CONCLUSION

33.   The different elements outlined above, singularly or combined, will result in:

- Improved planning and monitoring – at national, regional and global level;

- Improved exchange of information and experiences;

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[1] REP14/CAC para. 119 and REP14/EXEC paras 42-43.

- Improved needs identification for capacity development;
- Improved food safety and quality capacities and knowledge.

5.   RECOMMENDATIONS

34.   RCCs are invited to consider the recommendations in Section 3.

Terms of Reference of RCC (Codex Procedural Manual)

(a)   Defines the problems and needs of the region concerning food standards and food control;

(b)   Promotes within the Committee contacts for the mutual exchange of information on proposed regulatory initiatives and problems arising from food control and stimulates the strengthening of food control infrastructures;

(c)   Recommends to the Commission the development of worldwide standards for products of interest to the region, including products considered by the Committee to have an international market potential in the future;

(d)   Develops regional standards for food products moving exclusively or almost exclusively in intra regional trade;

(e)   Draws the attention of the Commission to any aspects of the Commission's work of particular significance to the region;

(f)   Promotes coordination of all regional food standards work undertaken by international governmental and non-governmental organizations within the region;

(g)   Exercises a general coordinating role for the region and such other functions as may be entrusted to it by the Commission;

(h)   Promotes the use of Codex standards and related texts by members.