

codex alimentarius commission

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
ORGANIZATION
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

WORLD HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

JOINT OFFICE: Viale delle Terme di Caracalla 00100 ROME Tel: +39(06)5701 Telex: 625825-625853 FAO I Email: Codex@fao.org Facsimile: +39(06)5705.4593

Agenda Item 7

CX/EXEC 99/46/3
March 99

JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Forty-sixth Session, FAO Headquarters, Rome, 24-25 June 1999

PROVISION OF DOCUMENTATION, TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION SERVICES FOR CODEX COMMITTEES

PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

1. The purpose of this paper is to bring to the attention of the Executive Committee a number of issues concerning the provision of documentation, translation and interpretation services for Government-hosted Codex Committees, and to request the advice of the Executive Committee on these matters.

THE ISSUES(S)

2. Article 10 of the Statutes of the Codex Alimentarius Commission states that all expenses (including those relating to meetings, documents and translation) involved in the preparatory work on draft standards undertaken by Members of the Commission, shall be defrayed by the government concerned. However, within approved budgetary estimates, the Commission may recommend that a specified part of the costs of preparatory work undertaken by governments on behalf of the Commission shall be recognized as operating expenses of the Commission. The Rules of Procedure of the Commission (Rule XI.3) make similar provisions. Rule XII of the Commission's Rules of Procedure specifies that the languages of the subsidiary bodies of the Commission shall include at least two of the languages of the Commission. Article 10 and Rules XI.3 and XII.4 together form the basis for the sharing of costs of Codex subsidiary bodies between Host Governments and the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme in relation to the provision of documentation, translation and interpretation services.

3. Specific arrangements for the preparation, translation and distribution of individual working papers are agreed between the Secretariat and the Host Governments for each Codex session. Continuing arrangements between the Codex Secretariat and Host Governments are not uniform across all subsidiary bodies. The arrangements for the more recently established Codex Committees are subject to letters of agreement¹ between the Secretariat and the Host Government whereas arrangements for the "older" Codex Committees have been made on an *ad hoc* basis.

4. Most Codex Committees operate in all three languages of the Commission at least insofar as interpretation services are concerned; other active Codex Committees operate in two languages, usually English and French. Interpretation services are provided by the Host Government in all cases. There have been frequent requests for all Codex Committees to operate in the three languages of the Commission as well as requests for other languages to be used if possible. Several Members have expressed concern that *ad hoc*

¹ These should not be confused with the Letters of Agreement covering the protocol arrangements (only) for Codex meetings that were exchanged between FAO and host governments in the period from January 1998 to the present for those cases where such agreements had not previously been established.

working groups established by some Committees operate in one language only. Concern has also been expressed at some Codex sessions about the quality of translation and interpretation services provided by the Host Governments.

5. Working documents for Codex meetings are usually distributed in all of the working languages of the Committee concerned, but this is not always the case due to technical reasons such as late arrival of the draft from the originating country. As noted above, responsibility for the translation and distribution of working papers is shared between the Codex Secretariat and the Host Governments. The Codex Secretariat always prepares, translates and distributes the invitation to the session, the provisional agenda and the paper on "Matters of Interest". It also arranges for the finalization and distribution of the report of the session in most cases. The Codex Secretariat has taken the responsibility for an increasing number for the translation and distribution of working papers for some Committees, and for certain Committees translates and distributes all documents.

6. The benefits of translation and distribution of documents by the Codex Secretariat include a high standard of quality especially in the consistent use of specialized Codex terminology and centralized access through the Codex web-site and the Codex-L distribution list. The drawbacks are increased costs to the budget of the Programme and delays due to the balancing of other priorities within FAO. One major negative effect has been delays in the finalization and publication of final Codex texts because of the amount of the Secretariat's resources (financial and human) devoted to the preparation and issuance of working papers. The situation is unsustainable. Estimates for costs of Codex documentation (working papers and reports) if maintained at the current level in the biennium 2000-2001 exceed the resources available to the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme. The wide variety of distribution lists and the practice of sending reports of Codex sessions to all individual participants adds to the delays in the distribution of documents as well as to costs. The problem is exacerbated by the record number of Codex meetings (30) proposed for the forthcoming biennium.² The Codex Secretariat will be unable to bear the documentation services for these sessions at the current level.

APPROACHES AND OPTIONS

7. A transparent and coherent policy needs to be established with respect to the provision of translation, interpretation and documentation services provided by host governments and the responsibilities of the Codex Secretariat in this matter. The Executive Committee is invited to discuss the above issues and advise the Codex Secretariat on possible options or approaches that would result in a more equitable system that assures the best access by all Members of the Commission to documentation and debates at Codex Committee level.

8. Approaches that may be considered include:

- Requesting host governments to provide a statement in advance of Commission sessions confirming that they are willing to provide the interpretation, translation and documentation services required; this statement to be taken into consideration by the Commission in conjunction with the standing agenda item on the Designation of Host Governments.
- Fostering Codex "documentation centres" which could be used by Host Governments to share the responsibility for high quality translation services.
- Reduction of the number of Codex Sessions meeting in a biennium to a maximum of 25.
- Reduction of the number of working papers (and therefore items) on the provisional agendas of Codex Committees to a number not exceeding 10 for any one meeting.
- Discontinuation of the practice of sending documents, circular letters and reports of meetings to individual participants but only to Codex Contact Points, FAO and WHO contact addresses and observer organizations.³

² It is probable that participation in this record number of meetings is beyond the resources of most Members of the Commission.

³ See Rule V.7 and Rule VIII.2 of the Commission's Rules of Procedure for justification of this measure.