CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

World Health Organization

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Agenda Item 3   **CX/EXEC 21/80/3**
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JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Eightieth Session

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SUB–COMMITTEE OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

"CODEX AND THE PANDEMIC - STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES"

FINAL REPORT

Executive Summary and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has and continues to have far reaching effects around the world including on the work programme of the Codex Alimentarius Commission where all scheduled physical meetings of Codex subsidiary bodies in 2020 had to be cancelled or postponed and CCEXEC and CAC met virtually. While huge efforts have been made to adapt to this new working environment in a short period of time, it was impossible to completely avoid delays in standards development work and the Commission has recognized that this work cannot be further postponed in 2021.

This report is based on the deliberations of a CCEXEC sub-committee established by CCEXEC79 (2020) that reviewed the impact of the pandemic on Codex work taking into consideration their own experiences and an analysis of the extensive input from Members and Observers and the Codex Secretariat, FAO and WHO. It aims to outline a way forward to ensure that Codex work progresses efficiently during 2021 and that Codex builds on this experience to enhance its resilience for the future. The sub-committee has also considered that changes that have made to practices in response to the pandemic, while introduced by necessity, may provide opportunities for lasting improvements, for example through broadening participation in Codex.

In this context the sub-committee recommends that CCEXEC80:

1- Recognize the progress made by Codex in 2020, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, as an indicator of the resilience of Codex and its Members.

2- Strongly encourage the maintenance of a pragmatic and engaged approach moving forward with Codex work in 2021, particularly as we recognize the challenges posed by alternative tools.

3- Recognize that CAC43 agreed on the possibility of holding virtual meetings in 2021 and endorse the proposals from the sub-committee to operationalize this decision, noting that this does not at present require any change to formal Codex procedures.

4- Recommend that FAO, WHO, the Codex Secretariat and host countries pay particular attention to the following criteria in arriving at decisions on whether to convene virtual Codex sessions:

- Any UN declared global emergency situation;

- The extent of travel restrictions or changes/expected changes in travel restrictions;

- Priority of the matters scheduled for the relevant Codex session;

- Information from Codex members concerning their inability to participate in physical meetings;

- Security concerns (global, regional or local as appropriate to the meeting of interest).

5- Recommend that for 2021 the alternative to physical sessions is virtual sessions together with the use of online written discussions and supporting informal mechanisms. Other options such as hybrid meetings may be considered at a future date, if appropriate.

6- Recommend that the Codex Secretariat and Host Country Secretariats facilitate equity of participation when planning a virtual Codex session taking into account that the technical platform, including its ability to support interpretation, duration, scheduling and agenda serve as the basis for equitable participation.

7- Recommend that when planning the agenda of Codex sessions to be convened virtually in 2021 that:

- pre-meeting planning and preparations are optimized in order to distill key issues for consideration by Codex subsidiary bodies and that this is communicated in a transparent manner; and

- the chairpersons together with the host and Codex secretariats be adequately prepared for the sessions and how to deal with agenda items in recognition of the challenges associated with conducting a virtual session.

The sub-committee further recommends that the Codex Secretariat:

1. Update its guidance on how to participate in a virtual Codex session taking into consideration the ideas collated by the sub-committee over the course of its consultations as well as input from the ongoing post CAC43 survey, and experiences from future Codex meetings and other international organizations.

2. Provide updates about the working mechanisms applied and tools adopted in virtual Sessions of committees in 2021 and the lessons learnt from the experiences during the pandemic.

3. Reach out to all members to inform an assessment of barriers to participation and changes that may mitigate them, paying particular attention to those members who were unable to participate in virtual committee sessions because of those barriers.

4. Deliver webinars in the lead up to committee meetings in order to remind members of virtual participation etiquette and protocol in the Codex context.

1. Background

1.1. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global response to it are presenting unprecedented challenges to the way we work and the mechanisms by which we ensure food safety, protect consumers' health and facilitate fair trade in food, from global standard setting to operational oversight. As a consequence of the pandemic, all Codex technical committee sessions scheduled to meet physically in 2020 were canceled or postponed. The Executive Committee was still able to meet physically in February 2020 (CCEXEC78), whereas CCEXEC79 was held virtually in July 2020, with an abbreviated agenda focusing on the critical review. Following an endorsement process requiring a two-thirds majority of Codex members, the 43rd Session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC43) was also held virtually with a reduced agenda focusing on standard-setting work.

1.2. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the use of international food standards to ensure food safety, protect consumers' health and facilitate fair practices in food trade. It has also shown the importance of developing and implementing Codex standards that maintain food safety and ensure fair trade practices specifically in such situations. In this context, Australia as host of the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS) is considering the potential for new work proposals on relevant matters within its remit, for example remote and virtual audit and verification options and activity.

1.3. Given the above, and in reference to the important role CCEXEC plays in Codex in providing strategic advice and support to the Commission and addressing special problems such as the ones caused by the ongoing pandemic, CCEXEC79 agreed to create a sub-committee to work quickly and collaboratively to frame

the issues, collate reflections from Members, and identify approaches CCEXEC may recommend to the Commission.

1.4. The sub-committee of the CCEXEC was tasked to:

a. Examine the impact of the pandemic on Codex work management;
b. Advise the Commission and its subsidiary bodies on actions/initiatives to advance its work programme of 2020/2021 and build resilience using modern tools and approaches consistent with Codex values; and
c. Ensure that it is well placed to deal with similar events in the future considering the elements presented in the Annex to CRD1 - Codex and the Pandemic-Strategic Challenges and Opportunities[1].

2. Approach

2.1. The sub-committee began its work in August 2020 and, following an exchange of views among the sub-committee members, prepared an intermediate report[2] for CAC43 discussion. The intermediate report made specific recommendations for consideration by the Commission namely:

"to recognize:

- the challenges facing the Codex Alimentarius Commission in fulfilling its duties as the pre-eminent international food standards setting body due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- that while many Codex Committee meetings had to be postponed in 2020 this cannot continue in 2021; and
- to support the use of modern tools and approaches that might be used by Codex subsidiary bodies in line with the Codex core values to ensure Codex work progresses in a timely and effective manner; and

to encourage:

- the Codex Secretariat in cooperation with FAO and WHO to develop easy to apply procedural mechanisms to allow Committees to meet and the work of the Commission to proceed in 2021, should physical meetings continue to be a challenge; and
- Members and Observers to support the work by responding to the survey on the virtual session of CAC43 and highlighting any other issues they think need to be considered by the sub-committee through the Coordinators who are members of the sub-committee."

2.2. This led to extensive discussions at CAC43 and progress on a number of the recommendations presented by the sub-committee as outlined below. Through discussion at the Commission as well as feedback from Members through CRDs[3] and an online survey, the intermediate report provided an opportunity for the broader Codex Membership to give their input to the work of the sub-committee and make recommendations for the further work of the sub-committee[4].

2.3. CAC43 recommended that the sub-committee take into consideration feedback received from Members, and in completing its work also consider how to ensure equity among Codex Members in terms of access to information, ability to submit views, allowing interventions, and consideration of time zones when holding virtual meetings.

2.4. A second call for comments from members of the sub-committee was launched on 8 November 2020 to assist in preparation of the final report. A draft report was prepared and discussed during two virtual sessions of the subcommittee on 9-11 December 2020 and the final recommendations of this report were agreed.

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[1] EXEC/79 CRD/01
[2] CX/CAC 20/43/2
[3] CRD15 (Argentina); CRD17 (Uruguay, Costa Rica and Ecuador); CRD27 (El Salvador); CRD28 (CropLife International); CRD29 (Members from the CCEURO region); CRD30 (Canada); CRD31 (Thailand); CRD32 (Indonesia); CRD33 (the United States of America); CRD34 (Malaysia); CRD35 (Nicaragua); CRD36 (National Health Federation, NHF); CRD37 (Codex Secretariat following consultations with the FAO and WHO legal offices); CRD38 (Kenya); CRD39 (Japan); CRD41 (Dominican Republic); CRD42 (Results of the in-session survey on virtual Codex meetings)
[4] REP20/CAC; paras 7 - 32

3. The impact of the pandemic on Codex work management

3.1. The first task of the sub-committee was to consider the impact of the pandemic on Codex work. In this context, the sub-committee noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had severely impacted the schedule of Codex sessions and no physical Codex meetings had been held since CCEXEC78 in February 2020.

3.2. While physical meetings were cancelled, Codex managed to successfully implement CCEXEC79 and CAC43 virtually and adopted new and revised standards, guidelines and codes of practice, including some key texts such as the revised General Principles of Food Hygiene and the new Code of Practice on Food Allergen Management for Food Business Operators. The Commission also approved several new work items as well as a priority list of pesticides for evaluation by the relevant scientific committee, the latter being an example of an innovative approach to facilitate work continuity.

3.3. Subsidiary bodies being unable to meet has resulted in some delays in Codex work. For example, MRLs for pesticide residues and the draft Principles and Guidelines for the Assessment and Use of Voluntary Third-Party Assurance (vTPA) Programmes, which were anticipated to be finalized in meetings of the relevant subsidiary in the course of 2020 and adopted by CAC43 have not progressed to adoption. Nevertheless, there have been considerable efforts by Chairpersons and the Codex Secretariat to ensure work continued to move forward, with the use of innovative means as appropriate, such as the approval of the priority list of pesticides for evaluation as mentioned in para 3.2 and the recent series of webinars on the ongoing work of CCMAS, which were highly attended and provided a valuable impetus to work continuity within that Committee.

3.4. Thus, while the pandemic has slowed down the progression of Codex work, the approaches to overcome the challenges have brought forth a new sense of purpose, innovation and cohesiveness which the sub-committee is optimistic will be valuable for Codex, not just in addressing the pandemic period, but also in the longer term.

3.5. Cancellation and postponement of physical Codex meetings, travel restrictions, teleworking, lockdowns and quarantine rules also had an impact on budget expenditures and the staff capacity of the Codex and Host Secretariats as well as Members and Observers. For many Members the need to prioritize the pandemic response meant that the capacity to follow Codex work was reduced.

3.6. In terms of the Codex budget, savings from reduced travel have been used to strengthen the Codex community through informal virtual meetings, with interpretation. This ensured that Members and Observers as well as other key structures supporting Codex work such as host secretariats and chairpersons were in regular communication, updated on the impact and had an opportunity to contribute to finding solutions.

3.7. Such communication has ensured that challenges while transitioning from physical to virtual meetings could be addressed e.g. scheduling of formal and informal meetings, identifying an appropriate platform for informal discussion that would typically take place in the margins of physical meetings, and building and maintaining the interpersonal relationships that facilitate constructive discussions and consensus. Decisions on alternatives to physical sessions are thus being informed, not only by the actual work items at hand, but also by an understanding of which working mechanisms are realistically implementable with appropriate support by the Codex and host secretariats.

3.8. While the impact of the pandemic on Codex work to date has been less than we might have initially imagined, concerns and uncertainties remain regarding the year ahead and it is clear at this point that for at least the next six months or so it will not be possible to return to previous work practices.

3.9. In this context, it is critical to recall the discussions at CAC43 in response to the intermediate report of the sub-committee and recall that CAC43:

  i.   recognized the challenges facing the Codex Alimentarius Commission in fulfilling its duties as the preeminent international food standards setting body due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
  ii.   recognized that while many Codex Committee meetings had to be postponed in 2020 this could not continue in 2021; and
  iii. supported the use of modern tools and approaches by Codex subsidiary bodies in line with the Codex core values to ensure Codex work progressed in a timely and effective manner.

3.10. These conclusions support pragmatic planning of Codex work in 2021.

4. Actions/initiatives to advance the Codex work programme 2020-2021.

4.1. Procedural mechanisms to allow Committees to meet and the work of the Commission to proceed in 2021, should physical meetings continue to be a challenge

4.1.1. A key issue brought to the attention of CAC43 by the sub-committee was the need to ease the procedural aspects of convening meetings virtually. The sub-committee recalled that in order to convene a virtual session of the Commission, endorsement of two thirds of the Codex Membership was required and it was considered that such an approach would be overly burdensome if it had to be implemented each time before a Codex Committee could meet virtually.

4.1.2. In response to the sub-committees' intermediate report, the Codex Secretariat together with the FAO and WHO legal offices prepared a proposal[5] on the flexible application of Codex procedures to allow Committees to meet and the work of the Commission to proceed in 2021, should physical meetings continue to be a challenge. This proposal was intended to give Codex the procedural flexibility to continue its work, while maintaining Codex core values and in presenting it the Codex Secretary noted that in his view, there was no need to consider long-term changes of procedures at the moment, but that could be discussed in the future if needed.

4.1.3. This proposal was positively received by CAC43 which:

> i) Agreed, on an exceptional basis in view of the circumstances surrounding the pandemic that, with respect to meetings and sessions of the Codex Subsidiary Bodies to be held in 2021, Rule XI (7) and (8) may be interpreted in a manner that includes a virtual setting;

> ii) Agreed, on this basis, that Codex Subsidiary Bodies may be held virtually in 2021, if determined appropriate by FAO and WHO, in consultation with the host governments concerned and the Codex Secretariat.

> iii) Agreed that the 80th and the 81st sessions of the Executive Committee may be held virtually in 2021 should physical meetings not be possible; and

> iv) Noted that if CAC44 needed to be held virtually, procedural arrangements for elections would be developed by the Codex Secretariat in cooperation with the legal offices of FAO and WHO and presented to the Codex membership for endorsement.

4.1.4. With the adoption of the above by CAC43, a key element of the sub-committee's task, to ensure Codex could advance its work programme in 2021, was addressed. However, the feedback during the CAC43[6] and the subsequent discussions of the sub-committee highlighted a range of other aspects to be considered, which are addressed in the following sections.

4.2. Criteria for determining that a Codex session cannot be held physically

4.2.1 The sub-committee recognized that the decision that a physical meeting cannot be held is taken by FAO, WHO, and the Codex Secretariat in consultation with the Host Country in the best interests of the Codex membership as a whole, as part of the determination of the date and "place" for any appropriate form of meetings. The sub-committee highlighted the importance of taking such decisions at least three months in advance of the date to allow participants to plan appropriately. Respect for the core values of Codex needs to be at the center of such decisions. In the interests of all Codex Members, in making decisions on whether a Codex subsidiary body meeting could be held physically FAO, WHO, the Codex Secretariat and Host Country should pay particular attention to:

> o   Any UN declared global emergency situation;
> o   The extent of travel restrictions or changes/expected changes in travel restrictions;
> o   Priority of the matters scheduled for the relevant Codex session;
> o   Information from Codex members concerning their inability to participate to physical meetings;
> o   Security concerns (global, regional or local as appropriate to the meeting of interest)

4.2.2. In making such decisions, it is important to consider implications for the overall Codex work programme, to prioritize work if needed, and to identify mechanisms to progress items between meetings.

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[5] CRD37
[6] REP20/CAC; paras 7-32

4.3. Prioritization and justification of the best alternative to a physical meeting

4.3.1 *Virtual option*

4.3.1.1. Virtual meetings provide the opportunity to broaden participation in Codex meetings; they enable Members to overcome the significant travel restrictions, offer a low-cost solution to Members (the key requirement being an electronic device with a good internet connection, and a microphone), and provide an important opportunity to speak with each other even though we are not all in the same room.

4.3.1.2. In the current context, this option was considered to be the best to fulfil the Codex core value of inclusiveness. The experience with the virtual sessions of CCEXEC79 and CAC43 has shown that virtual meetings can ensure a high level of transparency. Virtual meetings, just as physical meetings, provide the opportunity for the participation of the FAO/WHO scientific advice programme to support understanding of the scientific advice developed for committees and facilitate discussion and consensus building, a core value of Codex. Measures to build consensus are already provided for in the Procedural Manual and further elaborated on in the Chairperson's Handbook, so all we are doing in this situation is identifying the ways to adapt these to the virtual environment.

4.3.2 *Physical meetings with expanded participation (hybrid meeting)*

4.3.2.1. Unlike physical or virtual meetings where all members are assembled under the same conditions, hybrid meetings might have particular challenges of inequality in participation among members and/or regions, including: whether an equal opportunity to make an intervention can be given to remotely participating compared to physically-participating delegates, how time differences are fairly considered for all regions, and how consensus can be reached on complex issues. For equity reasons, the use of hybrid meetings should not be considered as an alternative to physical sessions in the immediate future, noting that the procedural arrangement described in section 4.1 refers in particular to 2021.

4.3.2.2. However, hybrid meetings may be a future option to enhance participation, for example, in the case of a physical Codex meeting being convened, delegates could have an option to follow Codex work online if they cannot participate in the physical meeting for unforeseen reasons. This may be particularly relevant when emerging from global emergencies, allowing for a transition back to physical meetings, recognizing that regions/countries will emerge from the pandemic at different speeds. Further consideration of hybrid meetings may also need to consider particular unintended consequences, for example (a) government(s) may take such meetings as an opportunity to limit travel funds (sending fewer delegates, or relying on Permanent Representatives to UN agencies or Diplomatic Missions for physical participation with remote participation from capitals); or the size of delegation may enlarge with some only participating remotely. With these aspects in mind the sub-committee noted that hybrid meetings might be considered at a future date.

4.3.3 *Meeting by correspondence*

4.3.3.1. This option is limited to subsidiary bodies with specific agenda/tasks already approved by CAC to work by correspondence. Guidance is currently being developed in the Codex Committee on General Principles (CCGP) on the types of work that can best be addressed by correspondence. There was a concern raised that as we look to new ways to progress our work, we should not be too prescriptive in how the tools at the disposal of Codex can be used and for what purpose.

4.3.4 *Online written discussions*

4.3.4.1. In the course of 2020, experience was also gained with the use of online written discussions, particularly in the context of the Coordinating Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean (CCLAC) which had to end its physical session prematurely in 2019. The Codex Online Commenting System (OCS) was used to facilitate adoption of the report of the physical meeting by enabling all Members to see each other's comments and partake in a written discussion of them. The Codex e-forum was also successfully used to complete the discussions of CCLAC. The sub-committee recognized that Codex has tools available which may be used in conjunction with a physical or virtual meeting to facilitate discussions and progression of certain topics and that such options be considered as part of the suite of tools available to support virtual meetings.

4.3.5 *Informal meeting options*

4.3.5.1. The experience of 2020 has shown that working between sessions is critical to progress work. This is an area where the sub-committee considered there was room for innovation. For example, with electronic working groups (EWGs) we have the possibility now to use a range of online tools which can facilitate the progression of work and could greatly facilitate future committee meetings, virtual or physical. Providing more

information on the tools available and how they can be used by EWGs and host countries for both formal and informal engagement would be useful to inform those leading work, such as chairpersons of EWGs.

4.3.6 Conclusions

4.3.6.1. The sub-committee concluded that for Codex meetings in 2021, a combination of virtual formal sessions and informal virtual meetings and online written discussions respect the core Codex values and give an equal opportunity for participation. The interpretation that "place" includes the virtual space seems reasonable to accept in the case of future circumstances that prevent convening of physical meetings. Beyond that, we should be very cautious about introducing proposals for permanent changes to Codex rules or procedures until more experience has been gained.

4.4 Important elements under the key principles to ensure equity of participation when planning a virtual meeting

4.4.1. The sub-committee considered it important to maintain consistency with physical meetings to the maximum extent possible and allow Chairpersons to fulfill their roles in meeting management using the same spectrum of tools. CAC43 was successful, but it is important to keep in mind that the issues before CAC43 for decision had for the most part been the subject of full consideration in physical meetings of the subsidiary bodies, which will not be the same for the upcoming Codex subsidiary body meetings. However, it was also recognized that direct transposition of a physical meeting to a virtual meeting format required some flexibility for the chairpersons and secretariats and indeed was necessary to adapt to the virtual environment and use of technology.

4.4.2. To alleviate some of the challenges posed by virtual meetings, it seems worthwhile to invest time and resources in additional rounds of comments in EWGs and/or to convene key working groups virtually in advance of a committee session, so that the proposals discussed in virtual committee sessions will be more refined, outstanding issues sorted out as much as possible, and a good basis established upon which consensus can be achieved. Organizing webinars led by EWG Chairpersons to explain the progress made on documents under discussion by the EWG to the delegates of the committee can also contribute to this. The role of EWGs is therefore very important and promoting full and active participation is key to ensuring they achieve the desired outcomes. It should also be recognized that this can put an additional burden on chairpersons of EWGs and they may well require additional support to enable them to execute their role as effectively as possible.

4.5. Logistical aspects of virtual meeting implementation

4.5.1. These aspects are critical to successful meeting implementation, but also cannot be overly rigid as they need to recognize the different needs of each meeting. Some of these aspects are already covered in the Guidance for participants prepared for CAC43[7]. The following sections aim to highlight the overarching issues with regard to meeting logistics which came up in the subcommittee deliberations.

4.5.1 Meeting agendas

4.5.1.1. Meeting agendas need to be developed well in advance taking into consideration the different dynamics and the time constraints of a virtual meeting, recognizing the need to have time during the session for side meetings to address complex matters, and focus on priority issues. Transparency and communication on how agenda items were prioritized, particularly in those committees that do not have clear mechanisms for prioritization would be important in terms of ensuring clarity of and trust in the prioritization process. A structured provisional timetable should be available before the meeting and consideration should be given to how to incorporate flexibility in scheduling to enable additional sessions or breaks where work is contentious as these additional sessions/breaks would assist with consensus building.

4.5.1.2. Items not included on the agenda can continue to be addressed through other mechanisms. For some issues, it may be preferable to allow more time for EWGs to progress work before it is brought to the plenary, in order to present more refined documents to the full Committee for virtual consideration.

4.5.2 Timeframe (overall length) for the meeting.

4.5.2.1 The subcommittee noted that spreading a meeting over a long time period is not optimal and that meetings should normally be convened within a period of a maximum of two weeks, with the number of sessions reflecting the agenda and if feasible with some rest days, with sessions of not more than 3 hours and report adoption quickly following completion of discussions. This does not preclude that some committees, particularly those with extensive agendas or complex agenda items may require a particular approach. Key

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[7] Guidance for participants (CAC 43)

working groups that may have been planned to precede a committee session may convene virtually in advance of the session, within a reasonable time frame to maintain continuity and consistency.

4.5.2.2. In planning meetings across subsidiary bodies, it will also be important to ensure that formal sessions of different committees do not overlap to reduce the burden on participants and the Codex Secretariat.

4.5.3 Scheduling of sessions

4.5.3.1. Given that Codex committees are hosted by different governments around the world, this should mean that not one region or time zone is consistently disadvantaged. Rather, every country will have at least one Codex meeting they need to attend that is not an ideal time in their time zone. However, care should be taken to ensure that to the extent possible, committee meetings are scheduled at times convenient for the widest possible participation.

4.5.3.2. Organizing international virtual meetings in a manner that promotes equitable participation was recognized as being challenging. Hence careful consideration of the technical platform, the length (e.g., not more than 3 hours) and time of day (trying to ensure that it does not disadvantage the same participants all of the time) and agenda serve as the basis for equitable participation.

5. Advice for the Chairperson under the key principles when managing virtual discussions

5.1. It is recognized that virtual meetings present unique challenges for chairpersons and ensuring the chairperson has a good support system around them is key. Preparation, while always critical, becomes an essential part of the strategy to successfully manage virtual meetings. Considering the key role of the chairperson in any meeting, timing of sessions to facilitate the optimal performance of the chairperson is an important consideration.

5.2. It is critical during virtual meetings to allow the chairperson and the Codex Secretariat to manage situations as they develop in the virtual room. It is also important to be considerate of any technical challenges delegates might encounter.

5.3. Over the course of its consultations, the sub-committee has collated ideas[8] that should be considered by chairpersons and the Codex Secretariat when preparing and implementing virtual meetings. It is recommended that the chairpersons together with the Codex Secretariat work together to ensure chairpersons are optimally prepared for chairing of virtual meetings.

6. Approaches needed for the Codex Secretariat to ensure virtual meetings are successful

6.1. The Codex Secretariat has already developed some guidance for participants for virtual meetings and demonstrated the value of preparatory meetings before virtual sessions are convened. It is recommended that the guidance be reviewed taking into consideration the ideas[9] collated by the sub-committee over the course of its consultations in order to maximize the opportunities that the virtual working environment provides in terms of building consensus and collaboration.

7. Looking forward to a more resilient Codex

7.1. Responding to the pandemic and rapidly finding new approaches to overcome the challenges therein has brought forth a new sense of purpose, innovation and cohesiveness, which the sub-committee were optimistic, would be valuable for Codex not just in addressing the pandemic, but also in the longer term. This experience has demonstrated the ability of Codex to be flexible, as well as the flexibility that exists within the Codex procedures, highlighting that we have already some built in resilience on which to build upon. There is no need to rush into trying to develop new procedures and potentially run into challenges, rather we should use what we have to work more effectively and efficiently, notwithstanding that there may come a time in the future when a review of procedures may be required.

7.2. Moving forward, it is critical to use the experience to date and that to be gained in 2021 to consider the development of proposals to improve the organization of Codex work. The engagement of Members with virtual mechanisms of working and new technologies has demonstrated the value of these tools to achieving the core Codex value of inclusiveness. While survey information indicates that Members are missing the direct contact and many express a desire to return to physical meetings, for many others virtual meetings have enabled them to overcome barriers to participation, particularly economic ones and moving forward this is an aspect that cannot be forgotten.

7.3. As we move into 2021, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of preparation for virtual meetings of subsidiary bodies and the use of EWGs, and other innovative preparatory approaches. This is key to progression of Codex work irrespective of whether subsidiary bodies meet physically or virtually and should

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[8] Available on the sub-committee e-forum
[9] Available on the sub-committee e-forum

be part of the future way that Codex operates. Such approaches will also help Codex make up for time lost in progression of some standards due to the pandemic.

7.4. While there is certainly more work to be done to build a more resilient Codex coming out of this pandemic, it is also recognized that 2021 will be both a challenging and exciting year and there is a need to live through that experience before another sub-committee or other mechanisms reflects on that and considers further actions for the future.