CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

World Health Organization

JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION
Eighty-fourth Session
CICG, Geneva, Switzerland
10 – 14 July 2023

PROPOSED BLUEPRINT ON THE FUTURE OF CODEX – FINAL REPORT FROM CCEXEC SUBCOMMITTEE

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Below we make our observations to the FINAL REPORT FROM CCEXEC SUBCOMMITTEE. We indicate the section and paragraph where we suggest modifications or we have observations. Suggested modifications appear in bold italics.

2.1 Emerging issues in food and feed safety
Second paragraph.

The Commission mandated work to CCEXEC, which was addressed by a subcommittee of CCEXEC and considered by CAC45[xii]. ***CAC45 concluded that there is no evidence that the current organizational structure and procedures have deficiencies that make them unsuitable when evaluating standards for New Food Production Systems (NFPS).*** Codex Members were encouraged to submit new work proposals related to NFPS using existing mechanisms, and to identify possible issues that the current structure and procedures could not address and options to address them, which may require us to think afresh about the way in which Codex work is structured and operationalized. CCEXEC83 also recognized the need for guidance to be prepared on how to apply existing procedures to ensure that Members do not perceive procedural obstacles to submitting new proposals for work in this and other areas of Codex. The Codex Secretariat has been requested to draft practical guidance on how to apply existing procedures when developing new work proposals.[xiii]

2.2.1 High level global initiatives
First paragraph

The UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) articulated the need to urgently deliver progress on all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each of which relied on healthier, more sustainable and more equitable food systems, and further recognized the need to work together to transform the way the world produces, consumes and thinks about food. Codex standards related to food safety and fair practices in the food trade can facilitate the advancement of SDGs that are directly relevant to the work of Codex, in particular SDGs 2,3,12 and 17[xiv]. ***It should be noted that while developing and or reviewing standards, there are issues other than food safety, quality, or nutrition that may be relevant and taken into account. It should be noted that, when developing or revising standards, the current procedures enable consideration of other legitimate factors proposed by Members on a case-by-case basis where these are relevant to the protection of consumer health and the promotion of fair practices for the food trade. There are procedures which allow these to be proposed by Members on a case-by-case basis to help decide if such issues can be considered as Other Legitimate Factors (OLFs) to be taken into account in Codex risk- management decisionmaking, using the criteria provided for in the procedural manual, such as whether these issues are within the mandate of Codex and acceptable on a worldwide basis.***

3.2 Meeting models

3.2.1 Assessment of different meeting formats
Section 3.2.1 First paragraph

Over the past four years Codex went from physical only meetings to virtual only meetings to a mixture of physical and virtual formats. The first big leap from physical to virtual was eye-opening, leading to unprecedented registrations for Codex meetings. When reviewed against the Codex core values it was CX/EXEC 23/84/3 7 observed that virtual working modalities provided an opportunity for more Members and observers and larger delegations to join meetings hence contributing greatly to achievement of the Codex core values of inclusivity and by gaining participants transparency also increased

The requirements of virtual meetings for reaching consensus on complex issues are different from those of face-to-face meetings. In the case of face-to-face meetings "hall meetings" play an important role. In virtual meetings it is possible to recreate equivalent mechanisms, but in this case a much more careful planning work is necessary on the part of the person who will lead the meeting. Additionally, virtual meetings allow for greater inclusion.

~~*However virtual meetings have challenged the achievement of other core values such as the established consensus building process in Codex Committee meetings, which previously took advantage of opportunities available when meeting physically. Virtual meetings, may lack some flexibilities afforded by physical meetings such as quickly forming ad hoc working groups, inter-session working groups to address specific issues, and connectivity issues can present challenges during the conduct of meetings.*~~

3.2.2 Selection of meeting format
Table 2 - observations

We present severe methodological observations on the ratings made in this table, which we will detail:

a)   A methodological error that we can commit in the evaluation of the different modalities of meetings is not understanding that each one of them has its own requirements. If we evaluate each modality in terms of its ability to recreate the procedures and ways of working that face-to-face meetings follow, it is clear that all of them will be at a disadvantage. Let's see some examples of this problem taking virtual meetings as a reference. There are several factors that we have to consider:

   i.   Meeting extension. The face-to-face meetings are very extensive and have a very busy agenda because the immense investment of money that countries are required to make in the transfer of their technicians must be made profitable. Virtual meetings do not pose this investment and in this case the work must be organized not in one large meeting but in meetings spread out over time that address a much more limited agenda.

   ii. Schedules. In face-to-face meetings, the problem of time differences is solved by transferring the technicians and making their schedules match those of the host country. In virtual meetings, uncomfortable hours for some of those who participate are inevitable. To mitigate them, two measures must be used. In the first place, the shortening of the length of the meetings, as stated in the previous point. Second, setting times in the different meetings that have different start times, in order to distribute the inconvenient hours equally among all the participants.

   iii. Meeting planning. Face-to-face meetings allow for improvisation. In virtual meetings, planning is essential, in order to seek the appropriate approach to sensitive issues in prior virtual meetings for informal consultation with representative members of the different points of view regarding the topic.

b)   We do not agree with the evaluation contained in the document in relation to the resources required by the different meeting modalities. Face-to-face meetings are the ones that require the greatest amount of resources by far. For each participant who does not reside in the country where the meeting is held, the country he represents has to make significant outlays for travel and lodging. On the other hand, it is necessary to separately evaluate the resources that each country and the CODEX secretariat require.

c)   We do not share the evaluation of virtual meetings when it is argued that they have a negative impact on collaboration and consensus building. They seem to us to be subjective appreciations devoid of any empirical support. Take for example the issue of consensus building. Virtual meetings have allowed for a dramatic increase in participation from all regions. Even if it were true that it is more difficult to reach consensus in virtual meetings, it would be necessary to discern how much the number of participants weighs in this increase in difficulty. It is obvious that the fewer those involved, the easier it will be to reach consensus.

d)   There is solid evidence on the aptitude of virtual meetings to address complex issues where reaching consensus is difficult. By way of example, during the month of October 2021, the Eighth Meeting of the Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Antimicrobial Resistance (TFAMR8 4-9, October 13 and 16, 2021) was held in virtual mode. This meeting successfully completed the work undertaken in 2017 on two documents that from the beginning generated a significant degree of controversy among the countries (Revision of the code of practice to minimize and contain resistance to antimicrobials transmitted by food (CXC 61-2005) and Guidelines for Integrated Monitoring and Surveillance of Foodborne Antimicrobial Resistance). In order to prepare this meeting, 4 webinars distributed throughout the year were previously organized, which addressed the most controversial issues of both documents. Subsequently, 6 virtual preparatory meetings (3 for each document) were held to ensure the progress of the work.The meeting was attended by participants from 81 member countries, one member organization, 16 observer organizations, FAO and WHO. This example not only illustrates the ability of virtual meetings to solve complex problems without prejudice to inclusiveness, but also shows that this modality requires an organization of work according to its particularities.