



JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Forty-fourth Session

CODEX TRUST FUND: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

(Prepared by the Codex Trust Fund Secretariat)

A. Executive summary

1. This document outlines challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic to the Codex Trust Fund (CTF) and CTF beneficiary countries. It describes how the increased use of virtual tools has enabled countries to continue engaging in Codex work to the extent possible and points out limitations in the scope of CTF support to help countries overcome specific challenges.
2. The Executive Committee of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CCEXEC) and the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) are invited to:
 - i. note the information provided in this document; and
 - ii. signal support to the CTF in demonstrating the flexibility necessary to respond to the exceptional challenges posed to countries eligible for CTF support by the COVID-19 pandemic, and thereby help ensure the effective and equitable participation of Member countries in a virtual Codex environment.

B. Background

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the operations of and activities supported by the CTF. Extensive restrictions on international and domestic travel, as well as on the assembly of groups of people have been imposed around the globe.
2. CTF beneficiary countries have been facing major challenges in implementing their projects, particularly concerning activities requiring travel, as well as in-person meetings and trainings. Some of these activities could be implemented under the observation of strict safety regulations. In addition, the introduction and expansion of virtual meeting tools in the work environment allowed for continuation of some activities online. Still, there has been a significant delay of project implementation overall that is continuing in 2021.
3. The CTF Secretariat has been working with FAO and WHO regional advisers to mitigate challenges where possible and support countries in the adjustment of their implementation plans. Countries resorted to the use of virtual tools where possible while revising or postponing activities that were not feasible to be implemented under the current conditions.

1. The new virtual work environment

1.1 The introduction of virtual tools in the working environment has had positive effects as the application of videoconferencing and other virtual tools has enabled countries to continue their engagement in Codex work, including the participation in Codex meetings and the implementation of CTF activities to the extent possible. While there remain limitations to engaging through virtual tools, this new working environment offers additional means of information exchange, training and other forms of collaboration that can realize cost savings through limitations of travel and lead to a more equitable access of countries to Codex committee meetings.

2. Remaining challenges and the role of the CTF

2.1 Due to their specific economic and political circumstances, CTF beneficiary countries faced different challenges in working around the limitations imposed by the pandemic, with some of these challenges significant enough to inhibit or substantially limit the utilization of virtual tools. The CTF, in collaboration with WHO and FAO, succeeded in addressing the most pressing challenges, but in the process encountered limitations through the scope of support outlined in the CTF project document.

2.2 The CTF2 was set up to build and strengthen capacity of countries to engage effectively in Codex work by building on existing government structures that allow for the sustainable continuation of that work. The CTF project document therefore specifically excludes the support of “[n]ational personnel, infrastructure, office equipment, internet connections, [...] and other local costs [...]”¹. This provision is well justified to avoid setting up structures that will not continue to function once project support has expired.

2.3 However, under exceptional circumstances as those brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, there are cases in which support going beyond the originally defined scope of the CTF2 may be necessary to ensure the continuation of work. Furthermore, the current working environment with its strong emphasis on virtual engagements is likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future. As countries are adapting to this new reality, it is appropriate for the CTF to consider to which extent its current scope of support can be adapted to be most effective, including in a virtual or hybrid world of Codex work.

2.4 More flexible support provided under the current circumstances would help countries with limited means to connect virtually (e.g. due to lack of suitable infrastructure) to attend virtual Codex meetings and to use tools allowing for the continuation of some of the Codex work otherwise not possible. This would mitigate the risk of increasing disparities between countries engaging in Codex work and improve equitable access to the global Codex infrastructure.

2.5 In conclusion, the CTF sees a need for being able to exercise the flexibility necessary to respond to challenges posed by exceptional circumstances that limit countries’ ability to engage effectively in Codex work, and to adjust to the emerging virtual working environment brought about by the pandemic. CCEXEC and CAC are invited to signal support to the CTF in demonstrating such flexibility.

¹ Codex Trust Fund-2 Project Document (December 2015), p. 15: https://www.who.int/foodsafety/areas_work/food-standard/CTF2ProjectDocument.pdf