



**JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION**

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REVIEW OF THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE MODEL FOR FUTURE CODEX WORK

Prepared by the Codex Secretariat

BACKGROUND

1. CCEXEC85 (2023)¹ agreed that the document describing the key elements of a model for future Codex work (CX/EXEC 23/85/3, Appendix II) remained a living document that should be periodically reviewed in light of experiences and learnings, and that this would be further considered at CCEXEC86.
2. The final report of the CCEXEC Subcommittee on a blueprint for the future of Codex (CX/EXEC 23/85/3, Appendix II) presented a model for future Codex work which focused on:
 - Meeting models (physical, virtual, and mixed formats).
 - Schedule of Codex meetings; and
 - Inter-session working mechanisms e.g., Electronic Working Groups (EWGs) and other virtual informal working mechanisms.
3. These areas have continued to evolve since the CCEXEC sub-committee undertook its work. The following provides some additional information on these three areas from the Codex Secretariat, taking into consideration the holding of Codex meetings and related activities since CCEXEC85, with a particular focus on 2024.

UPDATE ON CODEX WORKING MECHANISMS

Meeting models

Codex Alimentarius Commission

4. The format of the Commission's regular session is governed by Rule VI of the Rules of Procedure of the Codex Alimentarius Commission Procedural Manual. In particular, Rule VI, paragraph 2, provides that "*Sessions of the Commission shall be convened, and the place of the meeting shall be determined by the Directors-General of FAO and WHO after consultation, where appropriate, with the authorities of the host country*". This Rule may be suspended by the Commission by a two-thirds majority of the votes cast, pursuant to Rule XV, paragraph 2.
5. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rule VI, paragraph 2, was suspended to allow the continuation of Codex work through virtual sessions of CAC43 in 2020 and CAC44 in 2021. Thereafter, in view of the evolution of the pandemic, CAC45 and CAC46 were held physically, with the possibility of remote participation (via Zoom) for listening and verbal interventions. However, all Members were advised to have at least one delegate attend the session in-person, as in-person participation was the only means by which Members could take part in all forms of decision-making available to the Commission.

¹ REP23/EXEC2; paragraph 38, point 3.

6. In 2023, CCGP33 considered the possibility of amending the Codex Rules of Procedure to allow virtual sessions of the Commission. In this context, CCGP33 “*agreed to defer review of a possible amendment to the Codex Rules of Procedure allowing virtual sessions of the Commission, noting that this should not be for an indefinite time period*”. It also “*requested FAO and WHO to inform CCGP34 on their possible plans to amend their rules of procedure to include virtual meetings of their Governing Bodies, including decision-making modalities such as voting*” and “*emphasized the importance of flexibility in working modalities for Codex meetings*”.²

7. In FAO Governing Bodies, the modalities of Members’ participation are normally set out in a document describing the methods of work for the session, which is endorsed at the outset of the meeting³. Recently, the practice in FAO has been to restrict virtual participation for listening purposes only, through a webinar mode.

8. The development of a similar document on the methods of work for each session of the Commission would be advisable. This would have the benefit of allowing the Commission to confirm its ways of working at the beginning of each session, with clear information on participation modalities for the meeting, voting mechanisms - should they be required - including the need for physical presence in case of a secret ballot.

Codex subsidiary bodies

9. In 2024, the format of Codex meetings continues to vary as the decision of CAC44⁴ to allow for a virtual setting with respect to sessions of Codex Subsidiary Bodies, including CCEXEC, provides flexibility on the meeting format.

10. The majority are being convened as in-person meetings with webcasting of the formal sessions and, where feasible, associated physical or in-session working groups. Two Codex subsidiary body meetings were or will be held in-person with the possibility to intervene virtually: CCMAS43 and CCFICS26. One meeting, CCLAC23, will be virtual, although the top table will be located together in person. Meetings of CCEXEC will be in-person only.

11. While there is a desire to ensure that meetings are accessible, decisions on the meeting format in 2024 have been primarily driven by resource availability (Codex Secretariat and/or Host Secretariat as appropriate) and safety and security considerations. These are expected to continue to be key drivers for meeting format.

12. Webcasting of meetings is provided through the collaboration of the host secretariat and the Codex Secretariat. Different technological solutions, including the use of Zoom and YouTube, have been used to support webcasting of Subsidiary Bodies’ sessions, depending on compatibility with host governments policies. To date, there is no single solution and the types of technology and platforms that can be used vary from one host country to another.

13. At the request of the Chairperson of CAC, the Codex Secretariat looked into the feasibility of providing a means to support host countries in delivering meetings with the potential for virtual interventions. However, analysis of further requirements highlighted that much of the costs associated with virtual interventions are related to the set-up in the meeting room and therefore require services and equipment that can only be provided locally, and which will vary according to the pre-existing set-up of the meeting facility. Such variations make it challenging to procure a competitive provider globally.

14. In 2024, the two host secretariats that are convening physical Codex meetings with the option of remote participation have purchased their own platform license. The Codex Secretariat continues to provide the Zoom platform for meetings that are convened in association with technical sessions e.g. virtual working group meetings, as well as technical support to host country secretariats on the use of Zoom if required.

15. The two Codex subsidiary body meetings that took place or will take place in 2024 as physical meetings with the option of virtual interventions will likely provide valuable insights and lessons that can guide further use of this meeting format, as resources permit. From the experience of CAC to date, access to a meeting room which is equipped for such a meeting format decreases the associated costs and logistical arrangements.

² REP23/GP paras 70 – 80 and CX/GP 23/33/6 (Review and possible amendments to the rules of procedure on sessions of the commission (CX/GP 23/33/6)).

³ Such an approach would be supported by a document outlining the ways of working to be published in advance of each session. Examples of such documents for FAO governing body meetings include the Methods of Work for the 174th Session of the Council ([CL 174/INF/5](#))

⁴ REP21/CAC, paragraph 12 (iii)

Report adoption

16. In recent Codex meetings, report adoption has been undertaken using the same format as the meeting itself. Meeting transcripts, generated by artificial intelligence from meeting recordings, continue to serve as a backup to the Codex Secretariat in preparing the reports. In relation to this, and also the increased use of recording and webcasting of Codex meetings, a Data Protection and Privacy notice⁵ has been published on the Codex webpage and is also included in the Codex Meeting Online Registration Form.

Schedule of Codex meetings

17. With up to 17 Codex meetings some years, the annual calendar of Codex sessions continues to be very full and challenging to prepare. The Codex Secretariat works closely with host country secretariats and the FAO/WHO Secretariats for the provision of scientific advice (when applicable) in this regard. In 2024, the following Codex meetings, were or will be convened back-to-back: CCCF/CCFA (April 2024), CCEURO/CCPR (May/June 2024); and CCRVDF/CCFL (October 2024). Although some concerns were expressed this year with back-to-back meetings, and some overlaps of delegations might be unavoidable, this is dependent on the focus of the concerned committees. Back-to-back meetings have in fact been used as a practicable option for decades in the establishment of the annual calendar of Codex meetings. Although not the first option when considering scheduling Codex meetings, it has also been difficult to avoid, given the number of Codex meetings per year and the challenges of finding dates that also take into consideration the needs and restrictions of Host Countries, FAO, WHO and the Codex Secretariat, and also recognize periods when it is difficult for Members to participate such as during peak holiday periods in different parts of the world.

18. Back-to-back meetings of committees continue to be organized on a case-by-case and needs basis, taking into consideration certain factors such as:

- the Terms of Reference and work of the relevant committees,
- whether they are worldwide or regional committees,
- availability of FAO and WHO scientific advice teams when relevant (avoiding overlap with scientific advice committees where relevant),
- format of the meetings (e.g. if one is virtual or there is the possibility to intervene remotely) and
- the support required from the Codex Secretariat.

19. It is also important to ensure an adequate period between the meetings of Codex Subsidiary bodies and the annual Codex Alimentarius Commission, so that Members have sufficient time to consider the recommendations of subsidiary bodies in advance of CAC.

20. In 2026, CAC will return to its former calendar location of July as it was challenging to secure a permanent calendar space for CAC at the end of the year. Also, the proximity of CAC to the end of the financial year presented some difficulties in terms of meeting financial closure deadlines, meaning that certain expenditures were being charged to the next financial year. The return of CAC to July in 2026 will mean some disruption and additional challenges to the schedule in 2026, with CAC49 (July 2026) taking place only eight months after CAC48 (November 2025). The Codex Secretariat is working with host secretariats in this regard. After 2026, a more stable schedule should be re-established.

Inter-session working mechanisms

21. Electronic working groups (EWGs) play a key role in the elaboration of Codex texts facilitating discussion and decision-making by committees to enable texts to advance in the Step procedure. With 46 EWGs active at the time of writing, EWGs continues to constitute a significant working mechanism. EWGs have been supplemented with virtual working group meetings (VWGs) (see paragraph 23 to 25), which have met in advance of some recent Codex meetings to facilitate the work of the committee, noting that physical working groups (PWGs), open to all Members/Observers, are now only convened in association with a physical meeting of a committee.

22. Given the high number of EWGs, participation can be challenging for Members, and requiring careful prioritization. This might lead to low levels of participation in some EWGs, which impact the output of the work. Another challenge facing EWG work is that their leadership currently is supported by only approximately 10 % of Members with a further 5- 10% serving as co-chairs. Overall, roughly three quarters of Codex EWGs are chaired by around 5% of Codex Members, with these Members chairing multiple EWGs. Thus, engaging more Members in key roles in Codex work is very important for the sustainability of this working mechanism and the inclusiveness and representativeness in the work.

⁵ https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/data_protection/en/

23. VWGs, which were first convened during the COVID-19 pandemic, have provided Codex with an additional, flexible, informal working mechanism, to facilitate discussion and provide inputs to the elaboration and advancement of Codex texts in formally established processes such as EWGs, PWGs and/or the subsidiary body session. The goal is to create the optimal conditions for decision-making and progressing the given matter in the Step Procedure within the formal session of the relevant subsidiary body. Experience to date have highlighted the value of VWGs as:

- virtual meetings of EWGs;
- replacements of PWGs when the schedule of the subsidiary body session does not permit a PWG to be convened;
- a forum for preparation for, and support to further work in, a PWG; and
- preparatory meetings to provide initial feedback on issues identified by a subsidiary body for further consideration by the plenary.

24. VWGs have operated similarly to EWGs, in that a clear task has been defined, however, they have generally been open to all Codex members and observers. This provides for inclusiveness, allowing delegates who will not be able participate in person in plenary, and did not register to the EWG, to have an opportunity to convey their views and contribute to the discussions in the relevant subsidiary body.

25. VWGs are not normally established by the relevant subsidiary body, although the subsidiary body may note the potential use of this tool to facilitate discussions in preparation for its subsequent session⁶. This flexibility is part of the value of having such a tool at the disposal of Codex. While VWGs may be established in advance by a subsidiary body, when this is not the case, their establishment is based on a consultation process between the Chair of the Committee, the EWG Chair(s) concerned and, the Codex and Host Country Secretariats, who agree on the task or aim of the VWG.

26. Among the benefits of VWGs to date have been their ability to provide real-time exchange of information and discussion on key/outstanding issues and to facilitate the work of the formal session e.g. to pre-digest certain items and prepare recommendations for consideration by the session. Of importance to note is that the outcomes of VWGs all feed into formally established Codex working mechanisms where the decisions on how to proceed are taken.

27. VWGs nevertheless need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, as they do incur additional preparation and resources, particularly in cases where interpretation is provided, but also in terms of preparing reports from the VWG for the subsidiary body session. It is important to ensure there is a focus on those items which can be most helpful to the progression of the work of the committee.

28. While EWGs, PWGs and VWGs are all valuable tools to progress the work of Codex, it is also important that these tools are not over-used or inappropriately used, as this adds to the burden of work for the host secretariat, the Codex secretariat as well as Members and Observers. In this regard it is important that Codex committees carefully manage their workloads, prioritizing items such that agendas remain manageable and allow sufficient time for discussion of items in the plenary session.

29. While webinars have also been organized in conjunction with or in advance of Codex meetings, these are primarily for information purposes only. Webinars may aim to facilitate the participation of Members and Observers in Codex meetings; however, unlike the above-mentioned mechanisms (EWGs, PWGs, and VWGs), they are not intended to provide input to the meeting discussions. Webinars may also be open to the general public when they aim to provide information on issues of potential relevance to Codex work.

NEXT STEPS

30. As noted above, the format of Codex meetings continues to evolve. In this context, it is proposed that CCEXEC request the Codex Secretariat (together with host secretariats and committee chairpersons) to provide periodic updates on the evolution of working mechanisms and identification of any challenges encountered that may require further consideration by CCEXEC, CAC or CCGP. Appendix II of CX/EXEC 23/85/3 would remain as a reference document.

⁶ REP24/FH, paragraph 194; REP24/CF paragraph 140

31. CCEXEC86 may also wish to:
- note that the format of meetings continues to evolve, and flexibility remains important;
 - provide feedback on the proposal to prepare a document on working methods to be confirmed at the beginning of each CAC session;
 - note that from 2026, CAC will be convened in July and the meeting schedule for 2026 and onwards will need to be adjusted accordingly;
 - remind Codex Committees of the importance of good work management practices and prioritization to avoid the establishment of too many EWGs and the related burden on all concerned and ensure that agenda items can be adequately discussed within the available plenary session time; and
 - note the importance of EWGs, PWGs and VWGs in progressing the work of Codex between sessions and encourage more Members to take leadership roles in such working groups to ensure their sustainability and inclusiveness.
32. CCEXEC86 could further consider whether there are any high-level principles that should be kept in mind when making decisions regarding meeting formats, the Codex schedule or inter-session working mechanisms, recalling that CCEXEC80 already established criteria⁷ for consideration when taking decisions on virtual meetings.

⁷ CCEXEC80 recommended 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; and security concerns (global, regional, or local as appropriate to the meeting of interest).