



## JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

### FAO/WHO COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

#### Twenty-first Session

Santiago (Chile), 21- 25 October 2019

#### PHYSICAL WORKING GROUPS

(Prepared by the CCLAC Secretariat)

#### Background

1. In 2016, the Twentieth meeting of the FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean (CCLAC) was held in Viña del Mar, Chile. Agenda item 6 of the meeting considered the functioning of the Codex electronic and physical working groups.<sup>1</sup> During this discussion, the delegations from Brazil and the Dominican Republic raised the issue of low participation in physical working groups (PWGs) among developing countries in the region and elaborated on the challenges the latter encountered in joining these forums. It was also noted that greater preference should be given to participating in electronic (EWGs) rather than physical working groups (PWGs).

2. It was further noted that this issue had been previously discussed at the CCLAC region's nineteenth meeting.<sup>2</sup>

3. The objectives set by the recently approved Codex Alimentarius Strategic Plan 2020 - 2025 (Strategic Objective 4) encourage participation by Codex members throughout the standard-setting process.

#### Analysis

4. PWGs have been described as forums that bolster in-depth and detailed work on complex and specific topics. As such, they provide valuable inputs for moving ahead with documents within committee plenary sessions.

5. However, because of higher costs and not always being held in the official languages, PWGs were also recognised as having particular disadvantages for developing countries and their inclusion in ongoing group discussions.

6. Three different types of PWGs may be generally outlined:

- Intra-sessional PWGs. These take place as part of a committee's established work programme.
- PWGs prior to the plenary of an associated subsidiary body. These are usually held immediately before or on the day of the plenary.
- Intersessional PWGs. These are held on dates outside regularly scheduled subsidiary-body meetings.

7. These three types of PWGs present different kinds of challenges in terms of country participation:

- Intrasessional groups usually do not present major difficulties. This is because attendees do not require any additional resources for travel or extra compensation. Also, interpretation services are often available. With this type of group, however, there is less time available for discussing the related committee's agenda items.

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<sup>1</sup> REP17/LAC, paras. 56-60

<sup>2</sup> REP15/LAC, paras. 130-135

- PWGs prior to a plenary usually involve more out-of-office days for delegates. This may lead to higher extra-compensation costs. The availability of interpretation services may be varied and not offered in all participant languages.
- Intersessional meetings are held on dates other than those of officially scheduled meetings. As such, these sessions may take place in countries other than the committee's host country. Although not mandatory, interpretation is usually available in different languages. However, these meetings do require additional travel and compensation resources beyond those linked to the official Codex programme.

8. At the Twenty-fourth meeting of the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS) in October 2018, the possibility of delegates using virtual participation technology was considered.<sup>3</sup>

9. A number of delegations welcomed this initiative to integrate webinar technology into PWGs. They saw it as a potentially useful tool for future meetings and an innovative way to generate greater overall participation.

10. Other delegations remarked that experiences with webinar technology had varied by country. Problems posed by it included: technical issues; social environment factors (remote participants could not participate in informal discussions during breaks); situational awareness (lack of clarity on the participants in the room during the meeting or on when to speak); time zone differences; and excessive meeting length/fatigue due to computer use.

11. It was further noted that the pilot PWG webinar programmes did not actually increase country participation and the reasons for this were unclear. Further analysis of why countries could not connect to or participate in the webinars was recommended.

12. Finally, the Committee concluded that webinar technology offered the possibility for greater inclusion and participation in Codex meetings. However, the difficulties and/or lessons learned during the pilot needed to be considered when thinking about future Codex committee webinar use. Further analysis of what happened during the pilot was in order to gain greater insight into the obstacles preventing participation and how best to overcome them.

13. During its Seventy-seventh meeting, the Executive Committee of the Codex Alimentarius Commission noted that the CCFICS had used webinar technology on a pilot basis with a view to increasing participation in Codex work, but that the effectiveness of it still needed assessment.<sup>4</sup>

## **Recommendations**

14. Based on the aforementioned, countries are invited to reflect on:
- i. The factors hindering remote participation during the PWG meetings held by the CCFICS in 2017 and 2018 which incorporated a virtual participation option.
  - ii. Potential ways of increasing participation in physical working groups (PWGs) and improving their effectiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> REP19/FICS, paras. 69 - 78

<sup>4</sup> REP19/EXEC2, para. 8