

**JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME****CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION****35th Session, FAO Headquarters****Rome, Italy, 2-7 July****PILOT PROJECT TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION IN THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF
CODEX TEXTS AND PROMOTE EXCHANGE AMONG MORE EXPERIENCED AND LESS
EXPERIENCED COUNTRIES**

This paper depicts a novel approach regarding the elaboration of Codex documents in technical areas that are challenging for countries with less experience, by engaging them in the work in a collaborative and participatory manner.

The pilot project was funded by the Codex Trust Fund (CTF) under Objective 2: Strengthening participation in Codex.

Background

The 43rd Session of the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene (CCFH) agreed to establish a physical Working Group (pWG) to continue the revision of the *Principles for the Establishment and Application of Microbiological Criteria for Foods* (CAC/GL 21-1997) and to elaborate practical examples on the establishment and application of microbiological criteria for different purposes to aid the revision of the Principles. This work had been identified within the CCFH as a relatively complex issue and one where new approaches needed to be considered to facilitate the development of the Codex texts in a manner that enabled broad participation and facilitated greater understanding of the issues under discussion.

In order to facilitate the active participation of less experienced countries in the elaboration of these practical examples, it was further agreed to pilot an initiative using a "mentoring" approach through the coupling of more experienced lead countries and/or observer organizations (*mentors*) with less experienced countries (*mentees*). Practical examples were developed by seven identified drafting teams comprising member countries and/or observers as either lead/mentor or contributor/mentee to allow for knowledge transfer and ownership of the process and the examples. The practical examples developed were discussed at the pWG held in Parma, Italy from 29 May to 1 June 2012. The Codex Trust Fund (CTF) provided support for mentees from CTF eligible countries to attend the pWG in Parma.

Selected FAO and WHO staff, including the Codex Secretariat and the CTF Secretariat, have supported this pilot mentoring initiative since the beginning to effectively plan, implement, and finally evaluate the usefulness of this initiative. This work included an assessment of delegates to be supported by the CTF to attend the physical meeting in Parma, and continuous assessment of the progress and results of this pilot initiative in order to gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of approaches such as this and distill out the lessons to be learnt for consideration in designing future initiatives.

The drafting groups communicated mainly electronically. Two of the seven groups set up periodic group teleconferences to advance and explain certain key points as they progressed on their examples. Most of the

groups had a work plan with clear deadlines to meet. An FAO staff member participated in an observer capacity and also provided support to the groups on communication, procedural and technical issues as required.

At the end of the period for the elaboration of examples, the mentors and mentees were sent an online questionnaire for evaluation of the pilot initiative. This was followed up by focus group discussions at the pWG in Parma, Italy. An overview of these initial evaluation activities are provided below.

Preliminary results

Feedback from less-experienced countries (*mentees*).

Overall, the mentees were very satisfied with the pilot initiative and in particular the quality of the mentors' work and their participation in the discussion. They noted that this activity had also enabled them to engage with colleagues/experts in their country at a much earlier stage in the development of a Codex document and facilitate a broader discussion of the issues at country level. The mentoring process was also reported as a valuable learning experience that had heightened their understanding of and ability to work with a complex subject area.

The mentees highlighted the sharing of knowledge, data and learning experiences with other countries on specific topics, and the identification of key national experts in the field for improved country discussion as the main advantages of the approach.

With regards to disadvantages, the participants requested additional support through the creation of a virtual library, enabling access to current references unavailable in their countries. They also stated that they would have liked more time for discussion on the subject matter.

The mentees called attention to how the mentor/mentee initiative and participation in the physical working group allowed for a very different kind of participation in Codex. In the traditional approach countries read the documents, discuss within their countries, define national positions and go to the Codex committee session with this national position. Participating in the mentoring initiative and the physical working group had allowed mentees to work on the documents from a bottom-up approach, improving the preparation for CCFH and leading the national process around the document in their own country.

The mentees stated that this approach might be most usefully applied in Codex for general subjects that affect almost all kinds of foods in all countries and for specific tasks of high complexity.

Feedback from the lead countries / observer organizations (*mentors*)

The mentors highlighted their overall satisfaction with the pilot. In addition to achieving the objectives, mentors had gained a greater understanding of the needs of specific countries and experience in using a mentoring approach to respond to these.

Feedback from the mentors also highlighted the commitment of mentees to contribute, but noted the range of experience and knowledge influenced the manner in which the work was undertaken and the rate of progress. However, overall it was considered that less experienced countries and more experienced countries, working together as a team, brought broader perspectives to the discussion and increased the knowledge of all involved.

Among the disadvantages expressed by the mentors were the formalities (e.g. NCC procedures) in some countries that can slow the momentum of the work, and the different languages and time zones which complicate "live" discussions.

Both mentors and mentees stated that they would take part in a mentoring process again and would recommend other countries to take part in this type of initiative.

Of particular importance is that both mentors and mentees noted that the initiative started out with the labels of "mentors" and "mentees" but that the collaboration had resulted in the disappearance of the hierarchical relationship possibly associated with these terms and created a feeling that all had been a "winner" in the process.

Conclusions

The assessment of this pilot initiative at the time of writing has been very positive. Both mentors and mentees found that it had: achieved the desired outcome (drafting of seven examples of use of microbiological criteria); been an enriching experience; provided insights into how the Codex standard setting process works; had a number of positive side effects; could be considered as an approach to be used and/or adapted for future application in specific areas to advance Codex work.

The key learning points that FAO/WHO have drawn from the process are summarized below.

The mentoring approach as piloted:

- was successful in increasing knowledge and understanding of a complex, technical but important issue area in Codex (use of microbiological criteria) for standard development;
- was successful in achieving a specific outcome (drafting of seven examples of use of microbiological criteria);
- could be considered for use in other specific areas of Codex (particularly for enhancing knowledge and understanding of complex or technical issues) or adapted for use within already existing mechanisms for working on Codex documents (e.g. designating "mentor" countries within electronic working groups to play a role in enhancing knowledge, understanding and effective participation of countries in such groups);
- allowed for the development of relationships between mentors and mentees that continue beyond the exercise and can be used for exchange on any number of queries or issues related to participation in Codex.

Codex might wish to consider the replicability of this approach in CCFH and other Committees to promote understanding, applicability and ownership of Codex texts.

A full assessment of the project will be undertaken in two steps: (i) a short term evaluation focusing on the results and impact on the CCFH work on microbiological criteria; and (ii) a medium-long term evaluation on the replicability of the approach and its impact on effective participation.