



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

Eighty-first Session

FAO/WHO COORDINATING COMMITTEES – REPORT ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HARMONIZED AGENDA AND PROPOSED APPROACHES FOR THE NEXT CYCLE OF THE COORDINATING COMMITTEES

(prepared by the Codex Secretariat)

INTRODUCTION

1. The last round of FAO/WHO Coordinating Committees (RCCs) was convened in 2019. All RCCs were held within a three-month period and using the harmonized agenda agreed by CCEXEC74¹ to facilitate maximum coordination and integration across the committees. This had the benefit of having the RCCs in the spotlight for a specific time period, facilitated the completion of time sensitive work such as the development of the Codex Strategic Plan 2020-2025 regional implementation plans in a cohesive manner and allowed some learnings/experiences to be shared across committees.

2. Post meeting surveys were implemented after all committees as well as debriefing sessions among the FAO, WHO and Codex Secretariat support teams (December 2019) and the regional coordinators (February 2020). The activities and outcomes of the RCCs were highlighted in the Codex annual magazine in 2020². Overall, this round of RCCs was very successful, with high levels of participation in many regions, and discussions on key issues of interest for the regions, but there was also a sense, at least in some regions that there was still more to do to ensure that these truly become key regional fora for discussion on food safety issues.

HARMONIZED AGENDA

3. The harmonized agenda had benefits in terms of preparation for the RCCs and in ensuring similar approaches were taken across regions that allowed comparison of experiences and situation. However, concerns were raised that some aspects of the agenda might be too rigid or duplicative or perhaps that the approach in which some of the agenda items were prepared needed to change. For example, many items depend on survey feedback from members which led to survey fatigue and some members feeling that there was little benefit for the investment of their time. Also, on items such as emerging issues the need to change the focus to follow-up rather than ongoing identification was highlighted as well as how this could be better linked with the keynote address so as to avoid duplication. This item has also highlighted the importance of using the RCCs to continue to create awareness of the range of work ongoing in Codex, that may already be addressing key issues of concern to members and for which they have an opportunity to already engage. The approach to exchange of data on national food control systems³ was not well understood with some questioning the value of this. This together with the observations of FAO and WHO of the need to use these opportunities to have further exchange on capacity development efforts in the regions, highlight that the agenda item supporting the second terms of reference of RCCs on mutual exchange of information needs further development to be effective. This round also saw the end of regional strategies with all regions now focussing on how they can implement the Codex Strategic Plan 2020-2025, rather than develop individual regional strategies, hence regional strategic plans no longer need to be part of the agenda. Finally, the item on use of Codex standards may vary in terms of approach moving forward according to progress made

¹ CX/EXEC 17/74/8; REP18/Exec1 (para 16)

² [What next for Standards?](#)

³ As part of the revitalization process, a database was developed to enable members to continually update information on their national food control systems rather than continuing to issue a Circular Letter in advance of each RCC.

with the implementation of Goal 3 of the Codex Strategic plan to develop a mechanism to monitor use and impact of Codex standards.

4. Regional standards continue to be an important part of the agenda of some RCCs, although in the discussion of new work proposals it has been noted, with the increasingly global food supply chain, that it is becoming somewhat more challenging to define products that meet the criteria in the Procedural Manual for development as a regional rather than global standard. Thus, defining a regional standard is an area that may need careful reflection in the not-too-distant future.

5. Side events were also used to great effect in some regions during the RCCs. Optimal use was made of having so many members together in particular to share experiences and exchange information. This highlighted that it may not be necessary to rely on the formal agenda to achieve all objectives of the RCCs but rather to use the occasion for different events tailored to achieve the best progress or results for that issue.

6. There will be a need to adjust the harmonized agenda to reflect the aforementioned issues, and it is expected that with each round of RCCs adjustments will be needed to optimally reflect the reality at that time. Continuing to explore and remain flexible on how each of the agenda items can be developed and implemented will be important to ensure that members remain active and engaged and committed to the continuous improvement and evolution of the RCCs to best meet the needs of the regions.

COORDINATING COMMITTEES, REGIONAL COORDINATORS AND THE PANDEMIC

7. The Regional Coordinators (RCs) played a key role during the pandemic to promote and maintain engagement of Members in the work of Codex. This was facilitated by informal meetings of RCCs, organized with the support of the Codex Secretariat and the provision of interpretation to the extent possible to ensure that all Members were familiar with the new working environment and were provided with the training and support to facilitate that. Many online training events were also convened at the request of or in conjunction with the RCs and as a new team of RCs came on board after CAC43, they worked to strengthen the communication mechanism and other collaboration aspects in the region, within the challenging environment of the pandemic. More details on this can be found in Appendix 2⁴ of CX/EXEC 21/81/5 which provides an overview of the work of the regions over the past 18 months in the context of the implementation of the Codex Strategic Plan 2020-2025.

8. The last 18 months have demonstrated more than ever the importance of an active RC who provides leadership in the region on an ongoing basis and continually drives engagement. This is much more effective at achieving many of the objectives of the RCCs such as information exchange, engagement in all Codex work relevant to the region, actively participating in decision making, not only on standard setting but also on overarching working mechanisms e.g. endorsement of a virtual CAC. Moving forward it will be important to clearly consider the evolving role of RCCs within Codex and as key regional fora on food safety. With new FAO and WHO food safety strategies on the horizon, in addition to the continuing implementation of the Codex Strategic Plan, the optimization of RCCs needs to be an important consideration in the development of the future blueprint for Codex as recommended in CX/EXEC 21/81/4.

9. With this experience in mind, it is useful to consider whether a meeting of the RCCs should aim to cover all items on its agenda in one sitting or whether some items, particularly those around mutual exchange could be addressed on an ongoing basis using the virtual tools available. The suite of tools available to RCCs is very different compared to 2019, and there is no reason not to fully reap their benefits.

10. The need for flexibility in implementation of the RCCs is important. Even before the pandemic, in 2019, a local crisis resulted in CCLAC having to abandon its physical session, but the work was successfully completed by correspondence, highlighting the readiness of RCCs to adapt.

11. RCCs seem to be an area which can significantly benefit from new and emerging technologies and working methodologies and particular consideration of RCCs, their evolving role and how that could best be carried out could be an important part of the discussion on what Codex will look like in the years to come (Item 4).

⁴ Appendix II: Reports from Regional Coordinators on the major achievements and challenges in implementing the workplan in their regions and the next steps they envisage.

12. Enhancing cooperation among the RCs and RCCs to facilitate sharing of experiences, lessons learned, and success stories will also be important as we emerge from the pandemic to maintain and, where needed, rebuild engagement in Codex and consider how events such as the 60th anniversary of Codex and World Food Safety Day can also be used to further strengthen engagement in Codex and the RCC's.

NEXT ROUND OF COORDINATING COMMITTEES

13. The next round of coordinating committees should normally have taken place in 2021. However, due to the schedule disruptions caused by the pandemic and the postponement of all 2020 subsidiary bodies from 2020 to 2021, the next round of RCCs has also had to be postponed. Efforts are underway to reschedule these in 2022 (with CCEURO expected to kick off the next round in May 2022) and 2023 so that all will have met before the 60th Anniversary session of the CAC in 2023. Challenges in scheduling have been noted in CX/EXEC 21/81/5 and the Codex Secretariat will continue to work closely with RCs to identify feasible dates and determine the manner in which the meeting can be convened, noting ongoing global uncertainties and concerns of some RCs that it will still not be possible to meet physically.

RECOMMENDATIONS

14. CCEXEC81 is invited to note:
- ii. the important role the RCs and RCCs played during the pandemic in maintaining active engagement and promoting inclusivity in Codex work;
 - iii. the need to adjust the harmonized agenda for each new round of RCCs such that it reflects any changes that have taken place and is in line with the needs of the day;
 - iv. that the manner in which agenda items are developed and discussed will need to continue to evolve, while still adhering to the achievement of the Terms of reference of RCCs;
 - v. that the next round of RCCs has been delayed due to the pandemic and that the Codex Secretariat is working closely with the RCs to facilitate their implementation before the 60th anniversary session of the CAC in 2023;
 - vi. the importance of reflecting on and considering the evolving role of RCCs as part of any process considering the future of Codex; and
 - vii. that the Codex Secretariat will facilitate regular meetings among the RCs to strengthen cooperation between the regions and facilitate sharing of experiences and lessons learned.