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Food and Agriculture
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Продовольственная и
сельскохозяйственная организация
Объединенных Наций

Organización de las
Naciones Unidas para la
Alimentación y la Agricultura

منظمة
الأغذية والزراعة
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COUNCIL

Hundred and Sixty-fifth Session

30 November – 4 December 2020

Working Methods of the Conference

Executive Summary

1. The 162nd Session of the Council, in July 2019, considered matters arising out of the 41st Session of the Conference. It noted *inter alia* potential areas for improving efficiency of Conference proceedings with regard to time management, attendance at parallel meetings, bolstering quorum, and attendance during the General Debate.

2. Accordingly, the Independent Chairperson of the Council held informal consultations with the Chairpersons and Vice-Chairpersons of the Regional Groups between September 2019 and September 2020. A number of opportunities for enhancing the working methods of the Conference were discussed during the course of these consultations. As a result, four potential improvements have been identified by Members to the working methods of the Conference:

- A. introducing the option for Members to deliver their keynote Statements in digital form during the General Debate of the Conference;
- B. scheduling the meetings of Commission I and Commission II so as to minimise overlap, to the extent possible;
- C. introducing Round Table events during the Conference to foster senior or high level official action-oriented dialogue; and
- D. convening informal meetings of the General Committee prior to the opening of the Conference

3. These four options are submitted to the Council for its consideration, following their review by the Joint Meeting of the Programme and Finance Committees, and separate consideration of the legal aspects of option D by the Committee on Constitutional and Legal Matters (CCLM).

Suggested Action by the Joint Meeting of the Programme and Finance Committees, and by the Council

1. The Joint Meeting of the 129th Session of the Programme and the 183rd Session of the Finance Committee is requested to review this document, in conjunction with the relevant guidance from the 111th Session of the Committee on Constitutional and Legal Matters (CCLM), and make such comments and recommendations thereon as it considers appropriate.
2. The 165th Session of the Council is requested to consider the proposals contained in this document, alongside related observations and advice from the CCLM and the Joint Meeting, and submit any such recommendations as it considers appropriate for approval by the Conference at its 42nd Session.

Queries on the substantive content of this document may be addressed to:

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Introduction

1. The 162nd Session of the Council in July 2019 considered matters arising out of the 41st Session of the Conference and requested that consultations be held on the working methods of the Conference under the leadership of the Independent Chairperson of the Council (ICC).¹
2. Accordingly, the topic was discussed at the ICC informal meetings with the Chairpersons and Vice-Chairpersons of the Regional Groups between September 2019 and September 2020. In this context, Members identified issues specifically regarding time management; attendance at meetings held in parallel, in particular by smaller delegations; quorum of meetings; and participation levels during the General Debate under the standing agenda item “Review of the State of Food and Agriculture.”
3. Four options have been developed accordingly by Members for improving potentially the working methods of the Conference:
 - A. introducing the option for Members to deliver their keynote Statements in digital form during the General Debate of the Conference;
 - B. scheduling the meetings of Commission I and Commission II so as to minimise overlap, to the extent possible;
 - C. introducing Round Table events during the Conference to foster senior or high level official action-oriented dialogue; and
 - D. convening informal meetings of the General Committee prior to the opening of the Conference.
4. The full set of options contained in this document are submitted to the Joint Meeting of the 129th Session of the Programme Committee and the 183rd Session of the Finance Committee. A separate document² on the legal aspects of option D regarding the General Committee was considered by the 111th Session of the Committee on Constitutional and Legal Matters (CCLM). This document is submitted to the 165th Session of the Council, to be considered alongside the observations and recommendations of the CCLM and the Joint Meeting.

Option A – Digital methods for delivery of General Debate Statements

5. The General Rules of the Organization state that each Conference Agenda shall include a “review of the state of food and agriculture and of the programmes of Member Nations and Associate Members”.³ The current practice of the General Debate by the use of statements in the Plenary session provides the opportunity for each Member of the Organization to transmit its views and outlook with regard to the state of food and agriculture, through statements of up to five minutes in length. The current format has a ceremonial value, as well as appeal to senior-level officials for this platform of address.
6. Introducing digital methods for the delivery of Member Statements during the General Debate could help create potential efficiency gains. It would make available to delegations greater flexibility of time to attend other meetings of the Conference. However, eliminating oral statements in the General Debate may undermine the participation in the Conference of high-level officials from Members.
7. Therefore, it is recommended that the digital method for delivering Statements in the General Debate be introduced i) on a voluntary basis and ii) as an alternative option to oral statements in plenary.

¹ CL 162/REP, paragraph 7

² CCLM 111/6

³ Rule II, 2 (c) of the General Rules of the Organization

8. The proposed procedure for implementing digital methods to deliver statements under the Conference item 'Review of the State of Food and Agriculture' would be as follows:
- a) Text-only statements may be submitted and published on the Conference website in lieu of delivery in plenary with a word limit of 1250 words for single-country statements and 2000 words for multi-country statements; or
 - b) Video statements may be submitted and published on the Conference website in lieu of delivery in plenary. Video statements are then broadcasted on screens during the Conference week and in the Conference venue. Delegates may either submit pre-recorded video statements ahead of the Conference opening, or may book a time slot during the Conference week to record their video statement in FAO headquarters and with FAO technical support. It is proposed that single-country video statements do not exceed three minutes and multi-country statements do not exceed six minutes.
9. While there is a need for time to be managed efficiently, the political sensitivity of the General Debate limits the possibilities for implementing strict time management tools. Measures such as multi-Member statements and a time allocation system prepared in advance may be only partially effective in streamlining the procedures during the General Debate. However, allowing delegations to opt for either oral or digital statements could immediately relieve the time pressure on those delegations which opt for the digital option, and are then able to attend other meetings of the Conference.
10. It is therefore proposed that the established practice whereby oral statements are delivered in plenary during the General Debate is continued, while the option to deliver video or text-only statements is included on a voluntary basis. In this way, delegations who opt for the digital option would be able to enhance their participation in the remaining meetings of the Conference proceedings. This may also thereby bolster attendance and quorum in the meetings of Commission I and II.

Option B - Scheduling of Commission I and Commission II meetings

11. In the context of informal consultations, Members suggested scheduling the meetings of the Conference Commissions so as to reduce overlap between them to the extent feasible, in order to increase the participation of smaller delegations in all Conference meetings; as well as to bolster quorum in all Conference meetings.
12. The duration of Conference Sessions has been steadily reduced over the years. Conference Sessions lasted eleven days between 1995 and 2003, and have reduced to six/seven days from 2005. Scheduling the meetings of the Commissions of the Conference consecutively would risk extending the overall length of the Conference Session, which has been shortened to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the proceedings. There is therefore a need to maintain the overall maximum seven-day length of the Conference Session, while adjusting the schedule of meetings of the Commissions of the Conference to avoid overlap to the extent possible.
13. It is proposed to adjust the schedule of meetings of Commission I and II by convening meetings of Commission I in the morning and Commission II in the afternoon, or vice versa. In this case, it would be necessary to adjust the time schedule so that meetings begin earlier in the day and adjourn later in the afternoon. This would be necessary to ensure sufficient time for the Commissions to consider all items on their agenda. It is proposed that Commission I convene its proceedings from 8:30 to 13:00 instead of 9.30 to 12.30, and that Commission II convenes between 14:30 and 19:00, or later if necessary, instead of from 14.30 to 17.30. This adjustment of schedule would entail each Commission meeting for four and a half hours each day, rather than the six hours that is usually scheduled.
14. It is important to note that the exact amount of time needed to address agenda items of the Conference cannot be predicted ahead of the Session. As such, it is not possible to guarantee a complete absence of overlap between the meetings of the Commissions of the Conference. Should agenda items addressed by Commission I take longer to be concluded than is envisaged in the timetable, deliberations on these items would then continue in a meeting of Commission I convened in parallel with a meeting of Commission II, and vice versa. However, efforts could be made to schedule

the meetings of the Commissions in such a way that would reduce as much as possible the overlap between them, while avoiding extending the overall length of the Conference Session.

Option C - High-level Round Table events

15. The introduction of Round Table events to the Conference schedule aims to promote greater interaction and informal dialogue among senior-level Officials in attendance at the Conference. Members have noted that Round Tables may stimulate more productive, high-level dialogue among senior officials in participation at the Conference on issues of global concern related to food and agriculture. Round Tables may also therefore enhance the attractiveness of the Conference to Ministers and other senior officials and enhance the impact of their participation.

16. The 2009 Immediate Plan of Action (IPA) for FAO Renewal encouraged Conference sessions to be more “action-oriented, focused and attractive” for participation by Ministers and senior officials.⁴ While the IPA promoted the addition of Side Events at the Conference to promote informal dialogue, Members consider high-level Round Tables as a suitable platform for Heads of Delegations to discuss a topic of strategic importance and global concern in an interactive manner. This format may better facilitate an exchange of views on policy matters in addition those manifested during the General Debate of the Conference.

17. During informal consultations, Members voiced support for convening a maximum of two Round Tables during the Conference Session with participation limited to senior-level officials or Ministers. A topic or theme for each Round Table would be decided upon through consultations with the Regional Groups. Members also encouraged that Round Table events be led by a single Chairperson or a professional moderator recruited from outside of the Organization.

18. Members considered it necessary that Round Table events not overlap with any other meetings of the Conference. It is also proposed that the Report of the Conference record only the title of the Round Tables, a list of topics discussed and the name of the Chairperson or moderator, without detailing the substantive content of the debates held. In addition, an informal record summarising the Round Table discussion may be prepared. This would ensure that discussions held during the Round Table events remain informal and foster interactive debate among participants.

Option D – Meetings of the General Committee prior to the opening of the Conference

19. In the context of informal consultations, some Members considered that the convening of General Committee meetings prior to the opening of the Conference could relieve some of the Committee’s workload from the Conference week itself; as well as enable greater time flexibility for scheduling other meetings during the Conference.

20. On average, the General Committee convenes three or four meetings during each Conference Session. The matters discussed at the first meeting of the General Committee often relate to procedural issues,⁵ which could conceivably be discussed before the formal opening of the Conference.

21. Other items, however, would require consideration during the week of the Conference itself. These include, in particular, recommendations related to the election of Council Members and the restoration of voting rights to Members in arrears.

22. Nevertheless, it is postulated that some preliminary discussion may be carried out by the General Committee on the key issue of restoration of voting rights of Members prior to the formal opening of the Conference. In any case, the General Committee would need to meet after the opening

⁴ CL 145/12, paragraph 2

⁵ Such matters include arranging the time and place of all plenary meetings and of all meetings of Commissions and Committees established at plenary meetings; determining the order of business at each of the plenary meetings of the Session; allocating agenda items to the different Commissions and Committees of the Conference; the establishment of the Commissions of the Conference; and the appointment of the Chairpersons and Vice-Chairpersons of the Commissions of the Conference.

of Conference to take any decisions on this matter, in particular where a Member in arrears makes payment so as to remedy the status of its assessments during the Conference week.

23. An example somewhat similar to the option of advance convening of meetings of the General Committee is found in the Credentials Committee of the Conference, which has convened its meetings ahead of the Conference opening since 2001. This has been possible as a result of amendments to the Basic Texts of the Organization by the 30th Session of the Conference,⁶ which provided that the Council, at its Session prior to the Conference, nominate the Chairperson and Members of the Credentials Committee and the General Committee of the Conference prior to their formal election by the Conference. This allowed the Credentials Committee to meet on a provisional basis ahead of the formal opening of the Conference. In this context, the CCLM at its 68th Session, “*did not see any legal difficulties ... that the preparatory work on the validation of credentials be carried out as far as possible before the opening of the Conference.*” The CCLM concluded that the “*Credentials Committee would, of course, need to be formally elected by the Conference. Any preparatory work done prior to the Conference would, thus, need to be formally confirmed by the Committee once it is formally elected.*”⁷

24. The legal aspects of convening meetings of the General Committee prior to the opening of the Conference, in advance of the formal election of its Chairperson and membership, were considered separately by the CCLM at its 111th Session in October 2020.⁸ The CCLM “*observed that the General Committee is constituted only upon election of its Members by the Conference, following a nomination by the Council. Accordingly, it considered that, pursuant to the Basic Texts, the General Committee could not meet prior to the Conference. Acknowledging the need for efficiency gains, the Committee suggested that nominees for the General Committee could meet informally prior to the Conference without the authority to take decisions or make recommendations.*”⁹

25. In line with the modus operandi of the Credentials Committee, and the suggestion of the CCLM at its 111th Session with regard to the General Committee, it is proposed that the General Committee convene informal meetings ahead of the Conference to undertake preliminary discussions. However, no decisions or recommendations by the General Committee would be made before the constitution of its Membership by the Conference. Once the Chairperson and Members of the General Committee are elected by the Conference at its first meeting, the General Committee may take decisions on the basis of prior informal discussions.

26. Thus, there may be efficiency gains to be had in convening informal meetings of the General Committee prior to the formal opening of the Conference. The workload of the General Committee during the Conference week would be reduced, though not necessarily in significant fashion with respect to its key function *vis-à-vis* restoration of voting rights.

⁶ Conference Resolution 4/99

⁷ CL 115/5, paragraph 10

⁸ CCLM 111/6

⁹ CL 165/12, paragraph 32