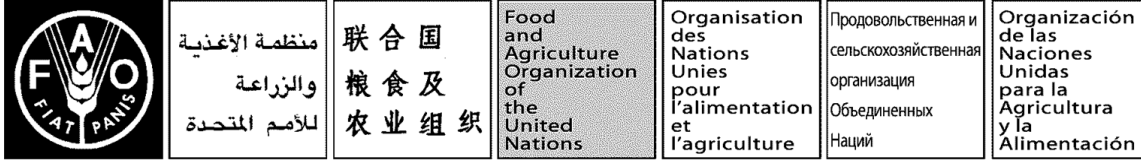


September 2023

E**WESTERN CENTRAL ATLANTIC FISHERY COMMISSION (WECAFC)****NINETEENTH SESSION****Bridgetown, Barbados, 6-8 September 2023****Background and Updates on the Strategic Reorientation of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC)**

This document was prepared by WECAFC Secretariat to support the work of the Drafting Group under the Ad Hoc Intersessional Working Group (IWG) for progressing towards the development of a model for a regional fisheries management entity or arrangement in the WECAFC area. This group tasked with developing specific text options related to the mandate and objectives of the future entity/arrangement, was established to strengthen the IWG co-chairs as recommended by members at the Virtual Meeting of the IWG to prepare for the Second Preparatory Meeting for the Strategic Reorientation of WECAFC held on Friday, 23 October 2020.

1. Historical background

A more effective WECAFC is essential and beneficial for the sustainable management of our shared living marine resources and for healthy oceans of the whole region. It is also critical to guide other regional fisheries bodies and bolster coordinated regional actions and international cooperation. This is the framework within which the discussions on the strategic reorientation started in 2012, at the 14th Session of the Commission.

Since then, various (strategic reorientation) workshops were held until the 16th WECAFC session of the Commission, held in 2016, when this matter was specifically tabled. An agreement was reached that practical steps are required as the business-as-usual status cannot remain any longer. The subsequent intersessional action was the First WECAFC Preparatory meeting for the transformation into a Regional Fisheries Management Organization (RFMO) held in Bridgetown, Barbados, on 25-26 March 2019. This meeting is in line with the decision of the 16th Session of the WECAFC (held in Guadeloupe, France, (20–24 June 2016/WECAFC 16) to “launch a process to establish a Regional Fisheries Management Organization (RFMO), and to clarify issues in relation to competency area, stocks coverage, budgetary implications for Members, institutional structure, membership, decision-making processes, national sovereignty aspects, its objectives and any other relevant matters that the Members may wish to consider”. It was concluded with members demonstrating a sign of ownership and trust building among all, and agreeing on short, medium and long term approaches with a possible structure of a new entity/arrangement (a) which would have an advisory role in science, capacity building, technology transfer and MCS, and (b) where binding CMM decisions could be made at the level of the Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABJN), with the possibility of retaining the option to include the EEZ in order to maintain flexibility for certain stocks/species as it is done under the NAFO Convention. Other aspects to be included would be to fight against IUU fishing, and trade issues such as traceability and catch documentation schemes. The details of the arrangement would have to be worked out. The entity/arrangement (RFME/RFMA) should be consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and other relevant international fisheries instruments.

The Bridgetown preparatory meeting, made possible through the financial support of the European Union, was acknowledged as a new paradigm shift in the reorientation process and a positive mindset of all stakeholders, with WECAFC members in the driver seat of the strategic reorientation process. The draft report was presented at the Seventeenth Session of the Commission (WECAFC17) held, 15-18 July 2019, Miami, Florida, United States of America (<https://www.fao.org/3/ca8748t/CA8748T.pdf>), and endorsed as documented in <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8259t/CA8259T.pdf>.

2. Roadmap established at the 17th session of the Commission and implementation process

The 17th Commission Meeting of WECAFC provided a clear roadmap to the WECAFC Secretariat, and agreed to establish an Ad Hoc Intersessional Working Group (IWG) for progressing towards the development of a model for a regional fisheries management entity or arrangement in the WECAFC area. This Roadmap calls for a second preparatory meeting and if needed, a third preparatory meeting (possibly virtual) to be organized [before the WECAFC 18th session in 2021]. The WECAFC IWG consisting of all WECAFC members is spearheaded by the Chair of WECAFC and two Vice Chairs representing the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) and the Central American Fisheries and Aquaculture Organization (OSPESCA). It also defines the expectations from WECAFC members to facilitate the work of the IWG, and the support of the WECAFC Secretariat to the IWG and 2nd Preparatory Meeting.

The two main tasks of the IWG were to review the experiences of similar entities/arrangements and guide the dialogue on what system is most suited to the region, keeping at the core of the review the key

components of an entity/arrangement as per the critical issues identified by WECAFC members at the First Preparatory meeting. These are notably the scientific functions, data collection and information systems, technology transfer, capacity building, trade related issues such as traceability and catch certification of fisheries products, Conservation and Management Measures (CMM), co-management, MCS, combatting IUU fishing in the region, while having flexibility to respond to new and emerging needs.

Under the oversight of the IWG, the Secretariat through the ring-fenced (FAO Regular Programme) funds of WECAFC, facilitated the administration of a questionnaire to members and observers (Fisherfolks, academia, research, Fisheries management and advisory bodies), from 6 February to 6 March 2020, to gather information, best practices, and options for the development of the RFME/A. To be flexible and accommodate diversity in approach, the IWG encouraged members to share their views by any means or other form they prefer. The report of the findings was presented at the Virtual Meeting of the IWG to prepare for the Second Preparatory Meeting for the Strategic Reorientation of WECAFC held on Friday, 23 October 2020. The deliberations concluded to the strengthening of the IWG co-chairs with the establishment of a drafting group (DG) tasked with developing specific text options related to the mandate and objectives. Seven was the agreed membership, besides the oversight by the three co-Chairs of the IWG. The subsequent call for volunteers, however, led to five members' nominations-Brazil, Grenada, European Union (member organization), Mexico and the Netherlands.

Using the revised report and additional analysis of the first report, a new questionnaire was developed, with more targeted questions, including concrete options for selection to inform the work of the Drafting Group. This questionnaire was administered to members from 14 May to 4 June 2021. The Secretariat consolidated summary findings consistent with an agreed template which was shared with the co-chairs and the DG on 14 June, to convene to develop specific text options for the Mandate and Objectives. This group met thrice, on 28 May, 9 and 16 June 2021. It defined its objective and working methods and timeline, which included a virtual seminar for the Drafting Group to present the text options in late July 2021 and convening of the Second Preparatory Meeting in Fall of 2021. Through an EU Grant, a document on "*Review of the Biological Data, the Stocks Spatial Distribution and the Ecological Connectivity between the Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction and the Exclusive Economic Zones in the WECAFC region*" (WECAFC/XIX/2023/Inf.6) currently in the publication workflow system of FAO was prepared to support the delivery of the DG. Unfortunately, the set timetable and commitment within the IWG/DG did not materialize until the 18th Session of the Commission, held 26-29 July 2022, Managua, Nicaragua.

The Commission was provided at its 18th Session, an overview of the state of implementation of the roadmap. While noting with disappointment the limited progress made, Members recognized the negative impact on the process caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which prevented convening the in-person meeting required for such a strategic undertaking, agreed to proceed swiftly, and recalled the reiterated references made by the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) Members on the strategic reorientation of WECAFC. The Commission agreed that the DG should reconvene as soon as possible, and the Second Preparatory Meeting should be held in person, or at least in a hybrid format, during the inter-sessional period.

With the institutional changes within the partners RFBs and some members, with a subsequent turnover, it was critical to reactivate the membership of the DG established following the 23 October 2020 seminar. The Secretariat launched in October 2022 a call to strengthen the DG which was unsuccessful. As this document is produced, in support of the Chair of the IWG and two Vice Chairs representing the CRFM and OSPESCA, the DG has three members (Brazil, EU, and Mexico), after the withdrawal of Grenada during the previous intersession, and recently (May 2023) the unavailability of the Netherlands. Following its first meeting post-WECAFC18 held on 29 December 2022, three additional meetings were held, with the Chair

taking the lead during the intersession in drafting the proposed draft text options. The version to be presented to the Commission members, is expected to be available as WECAFC/XIX/2023/17 in the three languages of the Commission before the end of July 2023.