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Item VI of the  
Provisional Agenda

### COMMITTEE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY

Seventeenth Session - Rome, 23 - 27 March 1992

#### FREQUENCY OF CFS SESSIONS

##### Table of Contents

	<u>Paragraphs</u>
I. BACKGROUND	1 - 4
II. THE MANDATE AND WORK OF THE CFS	5 - 15
(a) The Mandate of the CFS	
(b) The Monitoring Role of the CFS	
(c) The Policy Role of the CFS	
III. THE OPTIONS	16 - 28
(a) Status quo option	
(b) One-and-a-half option	
(c) One-plus option	
(d) One-two option	
IV. CONCLUSIONS	29 - 32

**COMMITTEE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY  
Seventeenth Session - Rome, 23-27 March 1992**

**FREQUENCY OF CFS SESSIONS**

**I. BACKGROUND**

1. The question of the frequency of CFS sessions was first raised during the Thirteenth Session of the Committee in April 1988. The CFS Report of that session states:

"In discussing its own role, the Committee agreed that, since its inception in 1975, it had evolved new ideas and concepts that were universally supported and had promoted national and international policies aimed at improving world food security ...." (para 19), and

"Most delegates felt that, in view of the great importance of the subjects discussed at the Committee and the volatility of the world food security situation, the Committee should continue to hold annual meetings. Some other delegates, while agreeing with the important role of the Committee in food security matters, felt that there was merit in considering the holding of only one session of the Committee in each biennium. In this case, they felt that the document on the assessment of the world food security situation should continue to be prepared annually and that, in those years when the Committee would not meet, this document could be considered by the Committee on Agriculture or it could be circulated to the members of the CFS. Some of these delegates also suggested that, if a radical deterioration in the world food security situation were to occur, additional sessions of the Committee should be convened. It was also suggested that the question of the frequency of the Committee's sessions could be considered by the Programme and Finance Committee". (para 20, CL 94/10).

2. During the same session, the Committee expressed the preference for a five-day meeting from Monday to Friday, instead of eight working days, spanning a weekend, the practice up to then. Following this recommendation, the Fourteenth Session of the Committee in April 1989 was a five day meeting, from Monday to Friday, a practice which continues since then.

3. During the Fourteenth Session of the Committee the issue of the frequency of the CFS sessions was again raised. The CFS Report of that session summarizes the discussion as follows:

"Some delegates, while stressing the importance of the work of the Committee, re-iterated the view that there was merit in considering the holding of only one session of the Committee in a biennium, leaving it to the discretion of the Director-General to call an additional meeting at an earlier date if the need arose. Most delegates felt that the Committee should continue to hold annual meetings. It was agreed that, in view of the present precarious situation and uncertain prospects of the world food security situation, the issue of the frequency of the Committee's session should be deferred to a later date. .... The Committee considered that the question of the frequency of future sessions could be reviewed again, in light of developments in the world food security situation" (para 53, CL 95/10).

4. The issue of CFS frequency was not raised during the Fifteenth session of the CFS in 1990 owing perhaps to the precarious world food security situation prevailing at the time. The issue re-surfaced during the Committee's Sixteenth session in 1991, when some delegates, while stressing the importance of the work of the Committee, re-iterated the view that there was merit in considering the holding of only one session of the Committee in a biennium. In accordance with its established rules of procedure the Committee agreed to hold its Seventeenth session in 1992. At the same time the Committee agreed to review the question

of the frequency of future sessions during this Seventeenth session on the basis of a paper presenting the "pros and cons" of the different options. Thus this paper has been prepared by the Secretariat to assist the Committee in its deliberation of this subject.

## II. THE MANDATE AND WORK OF THE CFS

### (a) The Mandate of the CFS

5. The origin of the CFS dates back to Resolution XXII of the World Food Conference of 1974. The Conference recommended that the FAO establish a Committee on World Food Security as a standing committee of the FAO Council whose functions included the following (Rule XXXIII, para 5 of the Basic Texts of the Organization):

- (a) keep the current and prospective demand, supply and stock position for basic foodstuffs under continuous review, in the context of world food security, and disseminate timely information on developments;
- (b) make periodic evaluations of the adequacy of current and prospective stock levels, in aggregate, in exporting and importing countries, in order to assure a regular flow of basic foodstuffs to meet requirements in domestic and world markets, including food aid requirements, in time of short crops and serious crop failure;
- (c) review the steps taken by governments to implement the International Undertaking on World Food Security; and
- (d) recommend such short-term and longer-term policy actions as may be considered necessary to remedy any difficulty foreseen in assuring adequate cereal supplies for minimum world food security.

6. The CFS held its first session in April 1976 and it has met on an annual basis since then. The annual frequency of its sessions is stipulated in Rule XXXIII of the Basic Texts of the Organization which state:

"The Committee shall normally hold two sessions during each biennium. Sessions shall be convened by the Director-General, in consultation with the Chairman of the Committee, taking into account any proposals made by the Committee" (para 3); and

"If required, the Committee may hold additional sessions on the call of the Director-General in consultation with its Chairman, or on request submitted in writing to the Director-General by the majority of Members of the Committee" (para 4).

### (b) The Monitoring Role of CFS

7. As clearly stated in the mandate of the CFS its prime responsibility is to keep under continuous review the current and prospective demand, supply and stock position for basic foodstuffs. It was felt by the architects of the CFS that this monitoring role of the world food security situation had to be continuous; thus, it was stipulated that the CFS should meet annually. The monitoring function of the CFS was to be also prospective, i.e. be concerned not only with the current season but the forthcoming season. That determined more precisely the timing of CFS's annual meeting. Thus, it is not accidental that the CFS sessions are held in March-April of each year. That is the earliest time in the season when reasonable assessments can be made of food security developments in the previous calendar year and current marketing year (July-June) for the main basic foods, as well as early indications of harvest prospects in the current calendar year. Thus, as regards its monitoring function, not only the annual regularity of the review of the food security situation is important, but also the timing of that review.

8. It is also not accidental that Rule XXXIII (para 4) quoted above stipulates that the Committee may hold additional sessions, i.e. more frequently than once annually. Although such additional sessions have not been held to date, it may be noted that the annual meetings were supplemented by Quarterly Briefings on world food security for Permanent Representatives in Rome up to 1989.

9. It should also be pointed out that the annual activity of assessing the current and prospective world food security situation and policy outlook, carried out by the body established for this important function, namely the CFS, represents an objective, intergovernmentally-determined basis for the Organization's pronouncements on the current world food security situation and outlook. This assessment feeds into the deliberations of numerous other bodies where summarization of the world food security situation and outlook is required. Within FAO, these include, for example, the Committee on Commodity Problems, the Committee on Agriculture, the Council and the Conference. Outside FAO, use is made of the annual assessment of world food security, *inter alia*, by the World Food Council and the ECOSOC. Therefore, even if the need for an annual assessment did not exist within the ambit of this Committee, a regular assessment of the world food security situation is such a basic and important activity for the Organization that it would have to be done anyway. Such an exercise requires a thorough analysis and interpretation of changes in production, consumption, trade and stock and related policies of major producing, trading and consuming countries. The preparation of the annual assessment document for the CFS provides an opportunity to governments to consolidate such analyses into an objective and coherent global food security assessment.

(c) The Policy Role of CFS

10. The second main activity of the CFS is to review policy developments of relevance to food security and recommend short-term and longer-term actions which can improve the policy environment for food security. Originally, a major activity of the CFS in the policy area was the review of the implementation of the International Undertaking on World Food Security, agreed in 1974. Although the International Undertaking is explicit in its terms of reference, the Committee's activities in the policy area have been continuously adjusted to reflect new realities. Thus, in 1979 the FAO Plan of Action on World Food Security was formulated which, *inter alia*, helped to promote the development of the "food financing facility" by the International Monetary Fund. In 1981, with the aim to improve international consultative mechanisms in the event of food emergencies, agreement was reached in the Committee on an Agenda for Consultation and Possible Action to Deal with Acute and Large-Scale Food Shortages. In 1983, the broadened concept of food security was adopted by the Committee which explicitly recognized the importance of physical and economic access to food by poor households, in addition to availability and stability of supplies at the aggregate level. This concept was subsequently endorsed by the World Food Council, the ECOSOC and has been recognized as a working definition of food security by all those working in this area, including the World Bank and research organizations. In order to mobilize public opinion and political support to the objective of improving food security the Food Security Compact was adopted by the Committee in 1985 and subsequently by the FAO Council and Conference.

11. Besides these accomplishments in the broad food security sphere, the Committee has been also at the forefront in analytical policy work. This has been done in a flexible manner, i.e. attention has been given to emerging issues of considerable importance to food security and for which low-income food-deficit countries, lacking capacity or resources to undertake separate analysis themselves, were in need of guidance. Thus, during the recent past the Committee examined, *inter alia*, the following issues:

- . The role of forestry in food security (CFS: 85/4)
- . The contribution of food aid to food security (CFS: 85/3, Add.2)
- . Role of roots, tubers and plantains in food security (CFS: 86/4, CFS: 87/4(a) and CFS: 87/4(b))

- . The contribution of food aid to food security (CFS: 85/3, Add.2)
- . Role of roots, tubers and plantains in food security (CFS: 86/4, CFS: 87/4(a) and CFS: 87/4(b))
- . Prepositioning of food stocks to expedite delivery of emergency food aid (CFS: 86/5) and Administrative procedures and timing of response of donors to food emergencies (CFS: 87/5)
- . National preparedness planning to cope with food emergencies (CFS: 86/7)
- . Impact on world food security of agricultural policies in industrialized countries (CFS: 87/3)
- . Measures to improve access to food by the poor (CFS: 88/4)
- . Effects of stabilization and structural adjustment programmes on food security (CFS: 89/3)
- . Gender issues in rural food security in developing countries (CFS: 90/4); and
- . Prospects for food aid and its role in the 1990s (CFS: 91/3).

12. Review of such policy issues by the Committee, in addition to the guidance provided to interested countries, has often resulted in concrete recommendations to bilateral and multilateral agencies concerned with food security. Also, discussions in the Committee have emphasized certain aspects of the issues involved which have had implications for better focussing the work of the Organization.

13. In recent years, another theme with policy significance considered by the Committee, has been its reviews of selected national experiences with food security policies and programmes. So far, five such case studies (Niger, Tanzania, India, Ghana, Ecuador) have been considered by the Committee with the view of drawing lessons which may be of relevance to other countries. The deliberations on these reviews have demonstrated that they offer good opportunities for learning from successes and failures of food security policies and programmes. The Committee and the FAO Council have requested and reiterated that the Secretariat continue such reviews in the future.

Table 1. Membership and Attendance at CFS Sessions

Session No.	Developed-country members		Developing-country members		Total membership		Others attending 1/	
	No.	of which: attendance from capitals 2/ (%)	No.	of which: attendance from capitals 2/ (%)	No.	of which: attendance from capitals 2/ (%)	No.	of which: attendance from capitals 2/ (%)
1	25	68.0	53	39.6	78	48.7	19	52.6
2	27	59.3	67	25.4	94	35.1	21	42.9
3	26	57.7	53	35.8	79	43.0	20	55.0
4	26	57.7	58	29.3	84	38.1	27	29.6
5	27	55.6	58	32.8	85	40.0	17	35.3
6	27	59.3	65	38.5	92	44.6	23	39.1
7	26	53.8	63	44.4	89	47.2	25	36.0
8	26	57.7	71	32.4	97	39.2	24	29.2
9	26	65.4	73	26.0	99	36.4	30	36.7
10	26	61.5	80	25.0	106	34.0	23	34.8
11	25	64.0	73	21.9	98	32.7	26	38.5
12	25	72.0	78	17.9	103	31.1	17	35.3
13	24	58.3	61	19.7	85	30.6	26	19.2
14	25	52.0	70	17.1	95	26.3	19	21.1
15	25	56.0	73	15.1	98	25.5	18	11.1
16	26	46.2	73	17.8	99	25.3	13	38.5
Average	26	59.0	67	26.8	93	35.7	22	34.5

1/ Countries which are not members of the CFS; other international organizations and agencies.

2/ Refers to cases in which at least one delegate of each representation came from the capital of the member country or the headquarters in case of international organizations and agencies.

14. Finally, the Committee has regularly reviewed the activities of the Global Information and Early Warning System as well as those of the Food Security Assistance Scheme. Aside from providing useful guidance to the Secretariat at the technical level, these reviews, through the Report of the Committee, bring to the attention of the Council and the Conference the importance of these activities and have thus ensured that the orientation of the Organization's programme of work in these areas has been based on the considered views of the concerned specialized Committee of the Organization.

15. Membership in the CFS has always been strong (see Table 1) and has not shown signs of decrease. Thus in recent years membership to the Committee was close to or exceeded 100 members. Membership is strong from both developed and developing countries. The Committee's sessions are also well attended by delegates from the capitals of the member countries in view of the technical nature of the issues considered which require reviews by specialists in the respective fields. On average, some 60 percent of delegations from developed countries are represented by at least one delegate from the capital. This percentage is, however, much smaller for developing country delegations (27 percent) reflecting, mainly, the inability of many of these countries to finance such participation.

### III. THE OPTIONS

16. The above has highlighted the main activities of the Committee and has demonstrated that it plays an essential role in monitoring world food security and in taking a leading role in policy initiatives. It was also considered that at least the monitoring function of the Committee is an activity which has to be carried out yearly and more precisely early enough in the marketing year so that it is of value to interested countries and allows for corrective actions in cases of undesirable forecasted outcomes. It may be argued that such a regularity may not be absolutely necessary as regards policy issues, although past experience has shown that the Committee has always had a full agenda of issues of very important contemporary relevance. The timing and frequency of both the monitoring and the policy role of the Committee could in fact become more crucial in the future in view of developments on several fronts. Such developments relate, inter alia, to the adjustments that would likely take place following conclusion of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations; the implications of the outcome of policy reforms in eastern Europe and especially in the U.S.S.R.; and the extent to which the increased reliance on market forces in the developing countries themselves would contribute to improving their food security.

17. These uncertainties suggest that whatever options may be considered as regards the frequency of CFS sessions, the regularity of monitoring world food security should not be compromised. With this pre-requisite in mind, the following four options are put forward for the Committee's consideration:

(a) Status quo option: retaining the present frequency of annual sessions;

(b) One-and-a-half option: holding one full-agenda session and one short session during each biennium. The agenda during the short session years would be limited only to the assessment of the world food security situation and outlook;

(c) One-plus option: holding one full-agenda session in each biennium during non-Conference years and assigning the responsibility for a full review of the world food security situation and outlook to another FAO body during Conference years;

(d) One-two option: holding one full-agenda session during each biennium, reinstating the practice of regular Briefing Sessions on the world food security situation and leaving it to the discretion of the Director-General to hold additional short or full-agenda sessions should circumstances warrant.

18. Some of the implications of each of the above options and the arrangements that will be necessary to make them effective are dealt with in turn.

(a) Status quo option

19. Under this option a full agenda meeting every year, will allow the Committee to continue its practice of in-depth consideration of a special theme of importance to food security in every session, in addition to carrying out its assessment of the world food security situation and outlook, as well as the periodic reviews of the activities of the GIEWS and FSAS. It is envisaged that for the near future there will not be a shortage of special themes, given the suggestions that already have been made to the Secretariat during earlier sessions for topics to be studied for the Committee's consideration <sup>1/</sup> and the increased emphasis in the Committee's work on methodological issues relating to access to food and household food security.

(b) One-and-a-half option

20. Under this option a full agenda session of the CFS would alternate with a short session which would be limited to an assessment of the current and prospective world food security only. Past experience shows that the Committee's discussion on the assessment document often finishes well into the afternoon of the second day of the meeting; given the time required for the preparation of the Report, its clearance by the Drafting Committee and its adoption in plenary, the realistic length of the short CFS session would be three working days.

21. Clearly under this option the Committee itself would retain full control over its monitoring role of the world food security situation. As regards its policy role, the number of issues that will be possible to be considered would be reduced and, depending on the issues, the timeliness of the Committee's assessment and views on the issues may be affected. If this option were to be taken, it may be necessary for the CFS to recommend that other FAO committees include in their agenda selected themes within their competence of relevance to food security. Additionally, the CFS may need to request the Secretariat to carry out studies on selected issues in addition to those that the Committee itself would be able to review in detail.

22. Overall, given enough flexibility on the agenda of other FAO bodies, this option is not likely to have a serious adverse effect on the main activities of the CFS, although it may prove that the pressure to consider emerging policy issues could overburden the agenda during the full session years. The savings to the Organization from reducing the CFS session from 5 to 3 days every other year will not be substantial, and few if any net savings would be achieved if the agendas of other committees are concurrently expanded.

(c) One-plus option

23. Under this option a full agenda session of the CFS would take place during non-Conference years whereas the review of the assessment of the world food security situation during Conference years would be carried out by another body. This was the essence of the

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<sup>1/</sup> Such suggestions include, inter alia: effects of ecological problems on food security; re-examination of the 17-18 percent as the minimum safe level for cereal stocks to consumption ratio; study of the factors accounting for changes in prices of the main products in developing and developed countries; effects of triangular transactions and local purchases on market and price developments in countries with exportable surpluses.

proposal made by some delegates during the Thirteenth Session of the Committee, who suggested that in those years when the CFS would not meet, the assessment document could be considered by COAG. The timing of COAG sessions (also March-April during Conference years) would facilitate assessment of the world food security situation and outlook. However, this item does not closely correspond to COAG's usual agenda so that such assessment would basically have to be an additional item if it were to be dealt with by COAG.

24. Alternatively, such an assessment could be considered by the Council session taking place during the first half of each Conference year. Indeed the Council during those sessions has on its agenda the review of the world food situation and also considers the Report of the CFS. These two items could be replaced by a comprehensive review of the assessment of the world food security situation on the basis of the full assessment document prepared by the Secretariat under its normal annual schedule.

25. Placing the review of the assessment document for the consideration of the Council could compensate somewhat for not having a CFS session during Conference years, as the Council's decisions clearly carry greater weight than its technical committees. However, the benefits which derive from consideration at the technical level, in the ambit of CFS sessions which are open to all Member Nations, would be dispensed with.

26. This option would yield some savings for the Organization, estimated at about US\$ 119 000 or about 17 percent of the full cost of two CFS sessions per biennium. These savings materialize basically from reductions of documents and meeting costs as well as miscellaneous costs related to the meeting.

(d) One-two option

27. Under this option normally one CFS session would be held during each biennium supplemented by Briefing Sessions of the Representations to FAO in Rome on the world food security situation and outlook. Should the monitoring of the world food security situation deteriorate, the Director-General could call a second meeting during a biennium, in accordance with the Basic Texts.

28. As regards the monitoring of the world food security situation, this option would provide a mechanism for both regular coverage and for calling a second session of the CFS each biennium should the need arise. However, because a second meeting would probably have to be organized as a matter of urgency, it would not provide for a complete policy-oriented agenda. Thus, in terms of accommodating the policy role of the CFS, this option is largely similar to (b) and (c) above, i.e. it implies halving the time presently available to the CFS for consideration of food security policy issues. Its cost implications to the Organization may not be substantially different from that of the present frequency arrangement for the CFS. The actual cost of this option would also depend on the number of briefing sessions during each biennium.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

29. The options presented in the previous section represent the possible realistic alternatives available to the Committee as regards the frequency of its sessions. All options would ensure that at the minimum the regularity of the monitoring of the current world food security situation and outlook carried out by the Organization and the Member Nations would not be affected. This function of the CFS continues to be considered basic for this Organization and as such should not be compromised. This is especially the case in view of adjustments in the international trading environment and on-going policy reforms in eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. and the developing countries themselves in the context of structural adjustment programmes.



30. The alternatives to the status quo situation do, however, have implications for the policy role of the CFS. Effectively all these alternatives would reduce by one half the Committee's time available for the consideration of policy issues. This, aside from reducing the number of policy issues that would be discussed by the Committee, may in some cases also affect the timeliness of such discussions, for those issues that relate to on-going policy developments. Overall, under a reduced frequency scenario, the policy agenda of the Committee would have to be curtailed and very selective; it may have to exclude reviews of national experiences with food security policies and programmes and additionally the reviews of the activities of the GIEWS and the FSAS would be less frequent.

31. As regards the cost implications of the different alternatives, the only one that would yield some savings for the Organization is option (c); under this option the costs to the Organization for hosting one session during each biennium would be reduced by about 17 percent compared to the status quo case.

32. The above considerations represent the Secretariat's objective assessment of the implications of possible frequency options. It is clear that it is not possible to assess these options on the basis of a precise cost/benefit analysis. Yet, it is evident that in absolute dollar terms the additional cost of two full CFS sessions per biennium is not significant in light of the benefits of such regularity. Thus, the Secretariat's recommendation is for maintaining the present annual frequency of CFS sessions.

