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منظمة
الغذية والزراعة
للأمم المتحدة

EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON AGRICULTURE

FORTIETH SESSION

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Review of the Assessment of the European Commission on Agriculture

Guidance Sought

In order to further strengthen the ECA work the members are invited to:

- To provide their views regarding the content of the assessment of the ECA as outlined in the report

I. Introduction

1. In 2013 the Evaluation of the FAO Regional and Subregional Offices for Europe and Central Asia recommended inter alia to reinvigorate the technical scope of the ECA by separating the ECA from the ERC. The 29th Session of the Regional Conference for Europe (ERC) requested to review whether the objectives of revitalizing the ECA had been achieved. The 29th Session of the ECA in 2015 and the 30th Session of the ERC confirmed this recommendation and expanded the scope of the assessment to include ECA's contribution to FAO's work. An assessment was carried out between October 2016 and April 2017 by the Secretariat. The ECA Executive Committee has reviewed the assessment report and would propose the "improved ECA" as an option for the future modality for the ECA. The Executive Summary of this ECA assessment is presented in Section II of this paper. The full report is available as Web annex at www.fao.org/europe/commissions/eca/eca-40/en.

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II. Executive summary of the ECA assessment

A. Background, purpose and approach

2. The FAO European Commission on Agriculture (ECA) is one of the six FAO Statutory Bodies (SBs) in the Europe and Central Asia Region. Its membership comprises all the FAO Member Nations in the region; its purpose is to provide advice to and support cooperation among members on agriculture, nutrition and rural development questions.

3. In 2002 the ECA Member Nations and FAO agreed to reinvigorate the technical role of the ECA, also by modifying the timing of the sessions of the Commission and holding it back-to-back with the FAO Regional Conference for Europe (ERC). In 2014, after five back-to-back ERC and ECA sessions, Members decided to hold the ECA and the ERC in separate years, from 2015 onward.

4. In the wake of this decision, in 2016 Members asked REU: to assess whether the objective of revitalizing the ECA had been achieved; and to analyse the ECA's contribution to FAO's work. Thus, the overarching question for the assessment was defined as follows: "To what extent is the ECA providing relevant and useful inputs to the FAO European Regional Conference on agriculture-related issues in Europe and Central Asia, and what is its added value in this task".

5. The analysis focused on the performance of the ECA between 2006 and 2016, against the agreed criteria of relevance, efficiency and effectiveness. The assessment was forward-looking and followed a consultative and transparent approach that included frequent interactions with key stakeholders, including on the Terms of Reference and the draft report. Conclusions and suggestions were developed based on the triangulation of the information, data and evidence canvassed through an extensive desk-review of background documents, interviews with stakeholders, a questionnaire survey to all ECA Members, and observation of selected meetings.

6. For the sake of analysis, the assessment grouped the ECA Members in three main categories, based on their relation to FAO: Programme Countries, which receive support from REU or Headquarters through extra-budgetary funded projects, Technical Cooperation Projects (TCPs), and/or regional and global projects; Resource Partners through FAO for other Member Nations in Europe and Central Asia; Other Members, for those not fitting in the other two groups.

B. Key findings

Membership

7. Membership of FAO in the Europe and Central Asia region has gone through major changes over the last three decades, with a strong expansion in the number of Members during the 1990s. This has also affected the membership of both the ERC and ECA.

8. The needs and expectations of Members vis-à-vis the ECA are a function of changes and trends across many variables including, among others: models and policies for agricultural and rural development; relationship with FAO as a specialized agency of the United Nations, with both a normative and operational mandate; and the geographic focus of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) policies of the Members. These have all significantly shifted over time, which has affected the interest into and the commitment of the Members to the ECA. Furthermore, the diversity of ECA membership across these and other variables is strong, which affects Members' perceived added-value about the ECA.

The agendas and the format of the ECA sessions

9. In 2002, Members decided that the ECA should tackle mostly technical issues. Holding the ECA back-to-back with the ERC, however, gave the former a stronger preparatory role for the latter and led to adding to the ECA's agendas, FAO programmatic and institutional matters that diluted the technical edge of the ECA itself. During the assessment, Members reaffirmed their interest in an ECA that serves as a debate and exchange platform on technical matters within its sectoral mandate. Also, the process for setting the agenda for ECA sessions was found to be transparent and thorough, but not sufficiently inclusive to ensure Members' ownership.

10. The quality of performance was frequently associated to the format of the ECA sessions, which in the view of most Members, should enable a strong participation to the technical debate of all Members, and mostly of Programme Member Nations. Although progress in this respect had been noted in the latest ECA session, there was still a degree of dissatisfaction.

11. The timing of the ECA sessions has varied over the decades, following Members' changing views on the role of the Commission. The separation of the ECA session from the ERC in 2015/16 was mostly appreciated by stakeholders, although it was recognized that it was not sufficient to enhance the attractiveness of the ECA. Moreover, no correlation could be found between the timing of the ECA and ERC sessions and the number of delegations and participants attending. Overall, all evidence gathered suggests that timing, duration and location of the ECA sessions should be a consequence of the purpose and role of the Commission, rather than its drivers.

The profile of Members' delegates to the ECA

12. Attendance of ECA sessions appears to be a function of different factors, including among others, budgetary restrictions, broader relationship with FAO and responsibility for the ECA within national administrations. Attendance of Members' delegations at the ECA was close to the quorum only in 2006, at 56% of the membership; while it was above 60% in all other sessions.

13. The share of representatives from ministries of agriculture and related organizations among participants, increased almost systematically from 2006 onward. This was found to be in line with the desired stronger technical focus of the ECA. However, the assessment also found high rotation among participants, with a very large majority of participants in the ECA and ERC attending only one session of the two bodies, or at best one of each when these were held back-to-back. Moreover, there was a discrepancy between the national institutional ownership of the ECA and the actual participation in the sessions, which undermined the commitment to an effective and relevant Commission. This, despite the fact that the 2008 Rules of Procedures for the ECA specify through Rule 1, paragraph 2, the desirable profile and sustained commitment of delegates.

14. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), organizations have systematically attended both ECA and ERC, with very variable levels of attendance. The overall number of such organizations located in the host country of the session may have played a role in the level of their presence.

The role of the Executive Committee of the ECA

15. The governance of the ECA is entrusted to its Executive Committee, which acts on behalf of the Commission during the inter-sessional period and is the only institution in the regional governance system, that is elected by and represents the entire membership of both ERC and ECA. The ECA secretariat, hosted in the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (REU) supports the Executive Committee in its work.

16. The Executive Committee carries out a significant amount of preparatory work for the ERC, the ECA and for FAO Informal Consultations. This has largely been 'behind the scenes' and not visible to

the large majority of the membership. Until now, the Committee has been ‘fit-for-purpose’ and has effectively carried out its role and fulfilled its mandate.

The composition of the Executive Committee of the ECA

17. The rotation among Members in the Executive Committee is foreseen by the Rules of Procedure. Between 2002 and 2016, 22 Member Nations were represented in the Executive Committee; most of them belonged to the group Other Members, with a small number of Programme Countries.

C. Conclusions and suggestions for the future of the ECA

18. The answer to the overarching question leading the assessment is that the ECA can potentially provide useful and relevant inputs to its Members on agriculture and rural development issues in Europe and Central Asia. It can also have an added value in this task, thanks to its broad and diverse membership, the traditionally strong convening and neutral role of FAO, and its easy access to the wealth of knowledge that FAO represents. Nevertheless, changes are necessary for this to happen.

19. The performance of the ECA in carrying out its tasks emerged to be good or high with respect to some parameters, including its potential relevance as a platform for debating agriculture and rural development issues at regional level and the quality of its background documents. No significant issues emerged on efficiency, in terms of process, which was simplified with the separation of the ECA from the ERC sessions, or costs.

20. The assessment also showed that a majority of Members would likely miss the ECA, should it not exist any longer. At the same time, there was a strong difference between the stated interest by a significant share of its Members, for an ECA that is a platform for exchange and knowledge management on agriculture and rural development in Europe and Central Asia, and the extent to which ECA has been fulfilling their expectations with respect to: focus and depth of the technical debate, the environment it provides for experience and knowledge exchange, and the value of its technical recommendations to FAO and the Members through the ERC. Although the dissatisfaction was stronger among the Other Members group, Programme Member Nations and Resource Partners as well, and staff from ministries of agriculture and related organizations and Permanent Representations alike, requested change and improvement.

21. The assessment has shown how the relevance, effectiveness and added value of the ECA are closely linked to the opportunity for high-quality exchange on themes considered relevant for a majority of its institutional owners, who are the technical ministries of agriculture and related organizations of Member Nations in Europe and Central Asia. Their increasingly stronger participation in ECA sessions since 2006, including in the 2015 session, bodes well for the future although it is a fragile growth that can collapse soon in the absence of significant improvements.

22. The features of the ECA where improvements emerged to be necessary, include the focus of the agendas and formats of the ECA sessions, the profile of ECA delegates, the composition and role of the Executive Committee. Other aspects of the ECA, namely timing, duration and location, could be subsequently adjusted by the Members, if and when useful. Options for each are synthesised here below.

23. With respect to the agendas and the formats of the ECA, possible identified actions were as follows:

- Each ECA session should focus on one technical theme, of interest to the entire membership, to be tackled from different perspectives, e.g. on-going initiatives, innovation, technologies, policies, management capacity development needs and opportunities, etc.;
- Whenever relevant and appropriate, the ECA theme should align with the biennial theme selected by the FAO Conference, addressing it from the perspective of ECA mandate, to avoid

duplication of debates; the fine-tuning of the theme would require a robust consultation process with all institutional owners of the ECA;

- The ECA sessions should bring additional knowledge and information while enabling active participation of delegates and observer. Possible formats would be: plenary discussions supported by key-note presentations on the main theme of the ECA session, working groups, dialogues with expert panels, case-study discussions on national experiences;
- In line with current trends, the participation and contributions from NGOs, Civil Society Organizations, and the private sector, should be encouraged and possibly enhanced, as found appropriate by Members;
- The links between the ECA discussions and recommendations, and the decision-making process in the ERC, should be made more visible, and ERC reports should explicitly refer to inputs from the ECA;
- The ECA sessions should include space for dialogue between participants on relevant ODA and joint research initiatives, on the basis of the experience garnered in this respect during the Informal Consultation for Europe and Central Asia held in Budapest in May 2017.

24. As strongly requested by Members, the SDGs will also have to be included in the ECA debate, as appropriate. Furthermore, in line with the current pattern, the ECA agenda should continue to include as a standing agenda item, a discussion on gender equality in the context of the main theme of the session.

25. With respect to the professional profile of Members' delegates to the ECA sessions, the requirements set-out in the 2008 Rules of Procedures appear to still be highly relevant; and evidence from the assessment suggests that enhanced participation, ownership and commitment to the ECA, could be triggered through the appointment by each Member of a Representative to the ECA, from the respective ministry of agriculture or related organization, or from the Permanent Representation to FAO, who would be responsible for all ECA matters within his/her country for a reasonable time-span. Should this role be assigned within the ministry of agriculture or related organization, the appropriate profile would be of senior officers who have an in-depth understanding through their work of the regional trends and issues in the agriculture and rural development sector, who can contribute to select themes of discussion of interest for the entire membership and who can call upon specialists in their countries to contribute to the actual ECA sessions and work, as appropriate.

26. With respect to the contribution by the ECA to the ERC, the decision by the ERC in 2016 that EFC, EIFAAC and possibly other regional statutory bodies together with the ECA, should systematically report to the ERC itself, raised the need for some coordination among the concerned regional commissions emerged. This would require that all willing and interested FAO Regional Technical Commissions in Europe and Central Asia, engage among themselves with the aim of jointly identifying common areas of focus for their respective contributions to the ERC, of harmonizing their reporting modality and of seeking opportunities for joint debates, presentations and work on themes of common interest.

27. The most appropriate mechanism would appear to be that the ERC assigns the coordination of this process to an informal Working Group of the ERC comprising the chairs and secretaries of all the participating regional commissions, under a rotating chairpersonship among the chairs of the regional commissions themselves.

28. A stronger technical focus of the ECA, that would make it more similar to the other regional technical commissions, might also require that the Executive Committee should exclusively focus on the ECA and no longer be involved in the organization and follow-up of the ERC and of the Informal Consultations. Should this be the decision of the Members, considering that the ERG cannot substitute for the Executive Committee as it does not include the Central Asian Republics, new modalities for discussions on Regional Conference matters should be discussed. Two possible options emerged:

- i) The establishment of an ERG Plus informal regional group, with the specific aim of the inclusive preparation of the Regional Conference and possibly of the Informal Consultations. The ERG Plus could work as a plenary body for this purpose, similarly to the approach of the Latin American and Caribbean Group to the organization of its Regional Conference.
- ii) The ERC would establish a voluntary ad-hoc working group comprising some of its Members, that would dedicate to the preparation and follow-up on the ERC. This Working Group could also include among its tasks, the coordination and harmonization of the contributions from all the regional Statutory Bodies that are asked to systematically report to the ERC, described above.

29. With respect to the composition of the Executive Committee, the breadth of technical topics in the mandate of the ECA will always require an understanding of both FAO and the regional and global trends and issues at stake, which typically falls within the expertise of Members' Permanent Representations. Thus, the ECA Executive Committee should draw at least half of its members from among the Permanent Representatives, as well as its chairperson, to ensure the Committee comprises a variety of views and avoids becoming too narrowly sectorial. Most importantly, more diversity in terms of country profile among the members of the Executive Committee would be highly desirable.

30. Moreover, the Members' request for a stronger focus of the ECA on technical issues, would require more variety in the professional affiliation of the members of the Executive Committee, to bring to the ECA a stronger technical edge. This could be achieved by opening the membership of the Executive Committee to the Representative to the ECA mentioned above, from the Member's ministry of agriculture or related organization, or other senior staff who can similarly contribute to the work of the ECA.

Potential scenarios for the ECA

31. The adoption of all or only a few of the changes discussed above, would lead to different ECAs, which would meet to different degrees the needs and expectations of its membership. Three main scenarios have been identified: a Business as Usual ECA (BAU-ECA), an Improved ECA (I-ECA) and a strong Technical ECA (T-ECA).

Business as Usual ECA

32. The ECA would continue to be managed and organized as in 2015, considering it still provides an opportunity for some exchange of experience and knowledge on themes related to agriculture and rural development among participants. The Executive Committee would maintain its current composition, largely comprising of Permanent Representatives; and its multi-tasking role servicing both the ERC and the ECA, also providing inputs to the organization of the Informal Consultations.

33. The major risk attached to this scenario would be that the institutional owners of the ECA could grow increasingly disaffected because the attractiveness of the ECA would not improve, and at one point, there will be no sufficient quorum that justifies holding the sessions. This is unlikely to happen in the immediate future and most probably, ECA would 'limp along' for a number of sessions to come yet. Box 1 below synthesises the key features of this scenario.

Box 1. Characteristics of Business as Usual ECA

Feature	Description
<i>Agenda of sessions</i>	Technical and programmatic
<i>Format of sessions</i>	Presentations to plenary followed by questions and answers
<i>Profile of Delegates</i>	Mix of Permanent Representations and ministries of agriculture and related organizations, with no significant effort to ensure continuity
<i>Role of Executive Committee</i>	Coordination and support to the ECA, ERC and Informal consultation
<i>Composition of Executive Committee</i>	Mostly Permanent Representations
<i>Timing of session</i>	Alternate year from ERC or back-to-back
<i>Duration</i>	2 days

Improved ECA

34. The Improved ECA scenario would entail adjusting most of the key features and result in a more technical ECA, through an agenda and format that better meet the requests for more focused and specialised debate and exchange and enables more participation, and with a stronger degree of ownership and commitment by delegates.

35. In this scenario, the Executive Committee would not change in composition and would continue to be the interlocutor to FAO Secretariat during the inter-sessional periods, for ECA, ERC and the Informal Consultations.

Box 2. Characteristics of Improved ECA

Feature	Description
<i>Agenda of sessions</i>	Largely technical, programmatic agenda items only exceptional
<i>Format of sessions</i>	Mix of plenary presentations from key-note speakers, panel debates, working groups for sharing experience
<i>Profile of Delegates</i>	Efforts to ensure long-term continuity in attendance from ministries of agriculture and related organizations
<i>Role of Executive Committee</i>	Coordination and support to the ECA, ERC and Informal consultation
<i>Composition of Executive Committee</i>	Largely Permanent Representations, with a stronger and more systematic participation from Programme Countries
<i>Timing of session</i>	Alternate year from ERC
<i>Duration</i>	2-3 days

Technical ECA

36. This scenario foresees that ECA transforms into a fully technical regional Statutory Body – on par with EFC, EIFAAC and others – which provides its technical advice and recommendations to the ERC but has no other link to the ERC. In this scenario, also the Executive Committee should exclusively focus on technical regional issues and preparation of the ECA sessions.

37. An ERG Plus, or a Working Group of the ERC, should be established to ensure dialogue with REU and FAO on the ERC, and possibly on the Informal Consultations, during the intersessional period. Box 3 below synthesises the key features of this scenario

Box 3. Characteristics of Technical ECA

Feature	Description
<i>Agenda of sessions</i>	Largely technical, programmatic agenda items only exceptional; strong consultative process with Members for the selection of the main theme of each session.
<i>Format of sessions</i>	Mix of plenary presentations from key-note speakers, panel debates, working groups for sharing experience; virtual community of practice among delegates for inter-sessional debate
<i>Profile of Delegates</i>	Senior officers from ministries of agriculture and related organizations, committed to long-term engagement in the ECA
<i>Role of Executive Committee</i>	ECA oversight and management.
<i>Composition of Executive Committee</i>	Mixed membership, aiming at 50% of members from Permanent Representations, plus the chairperson, and 50% from ministries of agriculture and related organizations
<i>Timing of session</i>	Alternate year from ERC
<i>Duration</i>	2-3 days