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Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards

Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

Informal Virtual Consultations
Geneva, 16 - 17 November 2020

Chair's Note on the Informal Virtual Consultations of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

I. Introduction

1. The Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards held its Informal Virtual Consultations on 16 and 17 November 2020.
2. The meeting was chaired by Ms. Agnieszka Sudol, Chairperson of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (WP.7).
3. The Chief of the Market Access Section of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), Mr. Mika Vepsäläinen, welcomed the delegates to the Informal Virtual Consultations. He thanked all panellists and the secretariat for the organization of the Roundtable on Food for Partnerships - Sustainable, Resilient and Climate-proof Food Supply Chains on 16 November 2020 which had highlighted the complexity of food loss along the supply chain from farm to fork. He also stressed that the deliberations had shown that food loss and waste reduction strategies required close collaboration between the public and the private sector. He highlighted how FeedUP@UN could enhance the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and encouraged delegations to inform their national partners about tests and pilot use of the tool.
4. He expressed his gratitude towards all delegations for their support of the work of UNECE in these challenging times and commended the Working Party's Specialized Sections for their achievements in 2020. All their sessions had been held, standards and guides had been revised and adopted, and new areas of work had been discussed.
5. He also informed delegations that the UNECE had joined the United Nations Issue-based Coalition (IBC) on Sustainable Food Systems to support the United Nations country teams and Resident Coordinators during the current crisis and the recovery phase. Discussions were under way on how the UNECE via the IBC could contribute to the United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021. He stressed that while these times called for better crisis response, recovery and resilience building, in the long run, sustainable food

systems with all their dimensions (economic, social and environmental) needed to be integrated into national and international food policy agendas.

II. Attendance

6. Representatives of the following countries attended the meeting: Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Morocco, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Uzbekistan.

7. The following international organizations, specialized agencies and programmes, participated in the consultations: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), Office of Information and Communications Technology (OICT), SDG Lab, The Commonwealth Secretariat, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) India, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Uzbekistan, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), United Nations Resident Coordinator Georgia.

8. The European Commission was also represented.

9. Representatives from the following observer organizations, non-governmental organizations, associations, academia and private sector groups attended the meeting: Agricultural and Food Marketing Association for Asia and the Pacific (AFMA); Agro Commerce Group Co. Ltd, Agromart Company (Uzbekistan), Agronometrics (USA), Europe-Africa-Caribbean-Pacific Liaison Committee (COLEACP), Confederazione Nazionale Coldiretti (COPA), Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production CSP (Georgia); European Landowners' Organisation (ELO), Estonian Food Bank, European Dairy Association, European Food Banks Federation, Federal University of Goiás, School of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science/Food Research Center (Brazil), FoodCloud (Ireland), Fresh Produce Center (Netherlands), Fresh Produce Consortium of Kenya, Freshfel Europe, FruitCon BV (Netherlands), FruitVeggiesEUROPE (EUROFEL), Hilfswerk International, HSE University (Russian Federation), Hubino (India), Interfel, International Meat Secretariat, Invisible Foods (Germany), iWise Group (Singapore), Knärzje GmbH (Germany), Louis Moda Co.,Ltd., NawaChiOne Knowledge Center (Thailand), Olanga (Switzerland), Politecnico di Milano (Italy), Rettergut (Germany), i-REXFO (Italy), SMEUnited, The Ketchup Project (Netherlands), Thünen Institute of Market Analysis (Germany), University of Bologna (Italy), University of Geneva (Switzerland), University of Hohenheim (Germany), V.Besana S.p.A (Italy), Vlaamse Overheid, Belgium, Yesilist (Turkey).

III. Adoption of the agenda

10. The delegations adopted the provisional agenda.

IV. Matters arising since the last session

(a) United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe and subsidiary bodies

11. The Chief of the Market Access Section informed the delegates about the Informal Virtual Consultations of the Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards which took place on 29 June 2020. He explained that pursuant to the special procedures during the COVID-19 period, any recommendations for business-critical decisions emanating from these informal consultations would be submitted to a silence procedure to the Geneva based Permanent Missions in line with the special arrangements. In the case of the WP.7 Informal Virtual Consultations, the only business-critical decision would be the result of the election of the WP.7 Chair and Vice-Chair. He noted that all decisions (standards and programme of work) were being adopted through an intersessional approval procedure as stipulated in Article 19 of the WP.7 Working Procedures.

12. He also highlighted that the 2021 session of the Economic Commission for Europe would focus on circular economy and the sustainable management of natural resources and welcomed delegations' contributions.

(b) Recent developments in other organizations

13. The representative from the Central Asian Working Group updated the delegates about the 2020 online meetings of the national technical working groups with representatives from State agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the business sector from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The group had prepared and reviewed extensive technical and visual materials used in agricultural quality trainings and inspections at primary production and processing levels.

V. Sustainable development, food systems and circular economy

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

14. The delegation from Belgium updated the meeting on the market situation under the first and the ongoing second COVID-19 lockdown, noting the immediate negative impact of the pandemic on prices, border crossing procedures and limited exports and imports, logistics and labour availability. He stressed how the production and trade sector as well as producer organizations actively looked for solutions. The most impacted groups were the farmers and the most affected sector was potato production which suffered particularly from the very limited export possibilities and the closure of the hotel, restaurant and catering (HORECA) sector worldwide. The fruit market had been less influenced as compared to the sales and prices for vegetables, which depended more on the HORECA industry. While the government had released COVID emergency funds for potatoes, a lot of the overstock was distributed to food banks. The second lockdown affected his country even more and prices continued to drop also for the meat industry.

15. The delegate from Finland and Chair of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes explained that the latter had surveyed the impact of the pandemic in several countries. She reported that overall, the certification of seed potatoes had continued in most countries as it was considered an essential service during the lockdowns. However, she also stressed the profound impact of the pandemic and the related closure of the HORECA sector on the potato market and, eventually, the seed potato sector.

Sustainable Development Goal 12 - Recommendations for determination of operators' food loss performance at national levels

16. The delegations and the Chair thanked the secretariat for the organization of a very useful and informative roundtable and the launch of FeedUP@UN on 16 November 2020 as part of the Informal Virtual Consultations.

17. The secretariat together with a consultant had prepared a background presentation on the possible development by WP.7 of recommendations on supply chain operators' food loss performance. The consultant noted that with growing losses along the supply chains and the recent impacts from the pandemic, recommendations developed by UNECE, a highly recognized standard-setting body, in cooperation with the private sector, could pave the way for more food loss accountability along the supply chain. If validated through a certification mechanism, the recommendations could set the stage for a change in behaviour and responsibility. This could lead to more food being upcycled or redistributed in full recognition of the operators' efforts. He also stressed that while UNECE would develop the recommendations, the implementation and stakeholder engagement strategies would take place at national levels. The combination of internationally recognized recommendations with compliance checks and certification acted as accelerators and catalyst for global action towards the halving of food loss and waste by 2030 (i.e. SDG 12.3) and encouraged responsible behaviour at all levels of the supply chain.

18. He said that by building and drawing on WP.7's expertise and already available material such as the Code of Good Practice, the waste measuring methodology, and FeedUP@UN, the recommendations could encompass the entire supply chain. FeedUP@UN and its blockchain technology provided a valuable tool to record and analyse performance over a certain period to trigger action as early as possible and develop roadmaps for implementation. The various certification steps could include food loss reduction milestones as well as carbon and water footprint performance indicators feeding into SDG reporting. FeedUP@UN can facilitate the uptake and integration with existing tools and pave the way towards an electronic certification system based on the prior recorded performance.

19. Overall, such a circular system can lead to increased transparency and accountability in food supply chains through internationally agreed food loss performance recommendations as well as the incentivized use of FeedUP@UN to enable discovery, recovery and redistribution. This holds a strong potential for more food loss and waste compliant supply chains, a boost to more circular production and waste streams; increased awareness and development of upcycled produce as well as progress towards SDG targets.

20. Several delegations expressed their support for the proposal. Discussions focused on the certification aspect which, it was suggested, could become part of already existing certification schemes. Given that the latter were expensive, particularly, for small-scale farmers, alternatives could be either participatory guarantee systems (PGS) or a cycle based entirely on electronic compliance checking and certification. The delegations noted that this increased transparency in food loss and waste reduction performance ensured universal access and use, and improved instant progress measurement. Delegations noted that blockchain based systems like FeedUP@UN were very important in this respect and welcomed the inclusion of footprint calculations for operators' performance and SDG reporting.

21. Delegations concluded that work on this topic should continue in the coming months. It was proposed to include experts from all Specialized Sections to expand the focus areas and scope.

Food loss and its impact on natural resources

22. The secretariat introduced the report drafted by the ECE secretariat's nexus group on natural resources which included a chapter on food loss and its impact on natural resources. The report, together with three other nexus reports, will be presented at the 2021 session of the Economic Commission for Europe. The delegations took note and welcomed the secretariat's report, which was available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=52639>.

Circular economy

23. The Chair and the secretariat briefed the delegates on the 2021 session of the Economic Commission for Europe and its dedicated theme of circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources. They invited delegations to review the potential for circularity approaches to food production, food loss and waste. Further discussions would take place in the months after the Virtual Informal Consultations.

VI. Capacity-building and promotional activities

24. The secretariat provided an update on the capacity-building and other activities under the ongoing United Nations Development Account Tranche 11 project. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, only one physical event could be organized in 2020 at the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) in Berlin. All other scheduled events were postponed to 2021. The secretariat reported that this had led to a reallocation of funds and increased efforts to develop electronic tools. The secretariat also highlighted the positive results of an inter-agency impact assessment of UNECE's 5 years of capacity-building work in Central Asia and briefly outlined the economic, financial, regulatory and social impact created.

25. The delegate of Germany informed delegations that owing to the pandemic, its national training courses were either cancelled or held as webinars. She announced that the International Meeting on Quality Control of Fruit and Vegetables would take place in a virtual format from 16 to 18 March 2021 (three afternoons). She highlighted some of the programme elements which would include also UNECE's work on standards, food loss and waste, as well as the Code of Good Practice.

VII. Electronic quality certificates for fresh fruit and vegetables

26. A secretariat representative from the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) updated the delegates on the UN/eQuality certificate for fresh fruit and vegetables developed by the UN/CEFACT noting that in 2020 two information sessions had been held for the Specialized Section on Fresh Fruit and Vegetables. He explained the modalities of use and implementation of currently available cross-border exchange agri certificates (UN/ePhyto and UN/eCITES) which were being tested. The chosen implementation modalities allowed the use of the e-certificates by smaller countries. Off-the-shelf cloud-based systems for agri certificates were a driver for adoption and he cautioned that significant eQuality uptake could require between 5-10 years. He invited countries to consider recommending the UN/eQuality standard for cross border exchange of electronic certificates and to participate in further meetings in the coming months. The meeting took note and delegations were encouraged to contact the secretariat.

VIII. Other business

27. The delegations agreed to organize a conference at the 2021 session of the Working Party. The topic would be determined in the months after the Virtual Informal Consultations. Delegations were invited to take active roles in the organization.

IX. Election of officers

28. The delegations elected Ms. Agnieszka Sudol (Poland) as Chair and Mr. Bucky Gwartney (United States) as Vice-Chair. The result of this election would be formally approved in a UNECE Silence Procedure after the Virtual Informal Consultations of WP.7.

X. Closing

29. The delegations, the Chair and the secretariat thanked the outgoing Vice-Chair of WP.7, Mr. Guy Lambrechts, for his many years of service as a delegate and his time as Vice-Chair as well as his much-appreciated support for the work, the events and capacity-building organized by the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables and the Working Party.

30. The Chair closed the meeting and stressed the usefulness of the discussions and the roundtable. She thanked all Specialized Sections, their Chairs and Vice-Chairs for their work throughout the year, especially under the difficult circumstances, and commended the secretariat for the excellent organization of all online sessions and the roundtable.
