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Evaluation of FAO's contribution on knowledge on food and agriculture

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

Masahiro Igarashi
Director, Office of Evaluation
Tel. +39 065705 3903

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I. Introduction

1. The dissemination of knowledge is an essential responsibility of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, the Organization). Article I of the Basic Texts¹ mandates that FAO “shall collect, analyse, interpret and disseminate information relating to nutrition, food and agriculture”. Publications, databases, networks and learning resources are principal means of meeting these requirements. The Organization produces hundreds of such knowledge products and services, and regularly includes them in its Programme of Work and Budget (PWB) as major outputs of its technical work.

2. In October 2011, the 108th Session of the Programme Committee² requested an evaluation on FAO's role in the dissemination of knowledge on food and agriculture to be conducted in 2014. Past evaluations, including the 2007 Independent External Evaluation of FAO³ and the 2013 Programme Evaluation Report⁴, have focused on different aspects of the production and dissemination of FAO's knowledge products and services. In 2013, FAO reviewed its Strategic Objectives (SOs)⁵ and established new functional objectives on technical quality, knowledge and services (O6) and outreach (O8). This was followed by changes to the institutional arrangements for knowledge dissemination, which included the abolishment of the Office for Knowledge Exchange, Research and Extension and the de-facto expiry of the 2011 Corporate Knowledge Strategy⁶. Core activities and responsibility for ensuring the excellence and dissemination⁷ of FAO's knowledge products and services are now established as indicated in the table below.

Table 1: Ensuring excellence and access to FAO knowledge: core activities and lead units (2014-15)

Core activities	Lead Unit(s)
Ensure excellence of technical knowledge through creation of technical networks (O6/60101)	Deputy Director General for Natural Resources (DDN) & Economic and Social Development Department (ESD)
High quality and internationally comparable data are produced and accessed by all countries (O6/60203)	Chief Statistician
Advice and support provided to SO Teams to mainstream Capacity Development, including for knowledge sharing and learning, in FAO's work (08/M0103)	Office for Partnership, Advocacy and Capacity Development (OPC)
Development and promotion of corporate approaches, tools and methodologies in knowledge dissemination and improved management of information (08/M0203)	Office for Corporate Communications (OCC)

Source: PWB 2014-15

3. Building on past evaluation findings and taking into account the progressive implementation of the new institutional arrangements, this evaluation has assessed the contributions of the wide array of FAO publications, databases, networks and learning resources relating to knowledge on food and agriculture, with a special focus on dissemination aspects.

¹ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/022/k8024e.pdf>

² <http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/023/mc358e.pdf>

³ <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/meeting/012/k0827e02.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/028/mg392e.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/027/mg015e.pdf>

⁶ http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/capacity_building/KM_Strategy.pdf

⁷ The Information Technology Division (CIO) also plays a key role in knowledge creation and dissemination by providing solutions & services that enable the development of publications, databases, networks and learning.

II. Background and context

A. Description of FAO's knowledge products and services

4. FAO has responded to its constitutional mandate to provide information on food and agriculture mainly through the production and dissemination of publications, databases, networks and learning resources.
- a) FAO **publications**⁸ cover a broad spectrum of topics related to food and agriculture, and have a wide range of geographical coverage (global, regional, national, sub-national) and purposes (advisory, advocacy, learning, scientific, normative). A recent audit of FAO publishing activity estimated that approximately 300 – 400 first language editions are published every year. Among those, the “State of the World” publications⁹ are some of the most well-known: State of the World Food and Agriculture (SOFA), State of the World Food Insecurity (SOFI), State of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture (SOFIA) and State of the World Forestry (SOFO).
 - b) FAO **databases**¹⁰ cover a broad spectrum of topics related to food and agriculture, and have a wide range of geographical coverage (global, regional, national, sub-national) and contents (statistical, analytic, geospatial, text). An inventory of FAO databases conducted as part of this evaluation identified 76 major depositories of statistics, maps, texts and photographs at FAO. This inventory includes databases from the FAO Statistical Programme of Work (SPW), and was developed with the support of Technical Departments (TD)¹¹ and Regional Offices (RO) in late 2014.
 - c) Learning, both formal and informal, has been a key element in FAO's fight against hunger. In recent years, FAO has expanded the range of learning resources that it offers especially online. The evaluation identified 78 major **learning resources**, including 57 e-learning, 13 learning materials, 6 face-to-face training events, and 2 blended learnings. This non-exhaustive list was collected with OPC, TDs and ROs support in late 2014.
 - d) **Networks** are major knowledge services provided by the organization. FAO's global convening power and knowledge base gives the Organization a comparative advantage as a knowledge broker, and has made it a natural network enabler. FAO has supported around 123 global networks during the evaluation period, including 103 discussion groups, 14 technical and 6 informal networks. This non-exhaustive list was collected with support from DDN, OPC, TDs and ROs in late 2014.
5. The real number and scope of FAO's knowledge products and services is probably much higher and broader than those provided above. An unknown number of publications, learning resources and networks are indeed produced and operated outside corporate systems, mainly by Decentralized Offices¹² (DOs). Nevertheless, the above inventories capture those that the TDs, as owners of the resources, consider the most relevant and known.

⁸ The official catalogue of FAO publications is available online at <http://www.fao.org/publications>.

⁹ Available at <http://www.fao.org/hunger> (SOFI); <http://www.fao.org/publications/sofa/> (SOFA); <http://www.fao.org/forestry/sofo/en/> (SOFO); <http://www.fao.org/fishery/sofia> (SOFIA).

¹⁰ <http://www.fao.org/statistics/en/>

¹¹ TDs include the Agriculture and Consumer Protection, Economic and Social Development, Fisheries and Aquaculture, and Forestry Departments as well the Land and Water; and Climate Change, Tenure and Bioenergy divisions in DDN.

¹² OIG surveyed nine country offices and found that these alone had produced 272 publications for the period from January to July 2013, all of which are outside the corporate systems and corporate oversight. In two countries contacted for the evaluation (Peru and Ecuador) FAO reportedly developed over 90 learning initiatives and supported 50 networks. Two other countries (Zambia and Uganda) provided partial information. Pakistan and Papua New Guinea could not provide any data.

B. Purpose and scope of the evaluation

6. The evaluation provides a formative assessment of the contribution of FAO's knowledge products and services towards the achievement of Member Countries' (MCs) and the Organization's development goals and strategic objectives. It is hoped that the assessment's findings and recommendations will inform the development of the policies and plans underlying the new functional objectives on technical quality, knowledge and services (O6) and outreach (O8).

7. The evaluation covers FAO publications, databases, networks and learning resources mostly issued in the period 2011-14. These are produced and disseminated by TDs and DOs using different funding sources and with a variety of geographical focuses and target audiences. Due to their sheer number and broad thematic range, only a sample was reviewed in detail as part of this evaluation. In selecting the sample, priority was given to major knowledge products and services for which there was no recent evaluative evidence, such as the "State of the World" flagships and FAOSTAT¹³, as well as those where contribution analyses was considered feasible. In cases where information on the products and services under evaluation was incomplete or unavailable, appropriate disclaimers or clarifications were made.

C. Evaluation objective and questions

8. The evaluation assessed the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of FAO's knowledge products and services, with a focus on enabling factors such as quality assurance and dissemination mechanisms. In order to arrive to a common understanding on the main possible contributions of the FAO's knowledge products and services, a theory of change was developed to serve as the result framework for the evaluation (see appendix 1).

9. The key elements of the theory of change are captured in the evaluation questions as shown in box 1.

Box 1: Evaluation questions

1. Are FAO's knowledge products and services consistent with the Organization's goals and based on expressed needs or mandates from the Member Countries?
2. Are FAO's knowledge products and services adequate, in view of the context, needs or problems to which they are intended to respond?
3. How well does FAO ensure the technical excellence and quality of its knowledge products and services?
4. How efficiently has FAO used its human and financial resources in the production and dissemination of knowledge products and services?
5. Are there synergies, duplications or gaps in the knowledge products and services produced and disseminated by FAO?
6. Have FAO's knowledge products and services reached the intended users and uses?
7. What outcomes have FAO's knowledge products and services achieved, or contributed to achieving?

D. Methodology

10. The evaluation was undertaken in a consultative manner¹⁴ using theory-based approaches (such as contribution and SWOT analyses). To facilitate its conduct, the evaluation was divided into

¹³ FAO flagship publications were last reviewed in 2005 (Evaluation of the cross-organizational strategy on communicating FAO's messages); whereas FAOSTAT went through an evaluation in 2008 (Evaluation of FAO's role and work in statistics). The exception is SOFO, which was assessed in 2013 (Evaluation of FAO's role and work on Forestry).

¹⁴ Focal points were designated in each core unit at HQs (DDN, OPC, ESS, OCC, OSP) and in all ROs to facilitate consultations and channel information requests throughout the evaluation process.

four separate components (see box 2). The evaluation's terms of reference (annex 1) provides further details on the methodology.

Box 2: Design of the evaluation components

Component (1): Inventory and survey of knowledge products and services owners. In order to determine the extent of FAO's knowledge work and lay the foundation for an assessment of the results, a detailed inventory was conducted on FAO's knowledge products and services in collaboration with OIG¹⁵, OCC, OPC, DDN, TDs and ROs. Based on the inventory, a sample of FAO staff¹⁶ responsible for the production of publications, databases, learning resources and networks were surveyed in order to gather initial information on the process for identifying, developing and disseminating knowledge products and services, as well as on outcomes attributable to them.

Component (2): Meta-evaluation (desk review). Since 2008 OED has conducted around 25 thematic evaluations, 15 country evaluations and 90 project evaluations. Several evaluation reports were analysed in order to identify past findings, conclusions and recommendations relevant to the present evaluation. Relevant corporate policies, plans and guidance materials were also reviewed¹⁷.

Component (3): Sectoral assessments. The evaluation carried out separate assessments of FAO publications (annex 2), databases (annex 3), networks (annex 4) and learning resources (annex 5), including case studies of a select sample of FAO's knowledge products and services. The sampling strategy included: i) products and services that have a global scope and were not recently evaluated; ii) diversity in terms of types and purpose of products and services; iii) feasibility of tracing use and influence; iv) products developed as part of joint activities; and v) examples with a specific focus on gender and human rights. The selected case studies were: FAOSTAT, Global Agro-ecological Zones (GAEZ) and the Food Price Monitoring and Analysis Tool (databases); SOFI, SOFA, SOFIA and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)/FAO Outlook (publications); and Forestry Technical Network, Climate Change Study Circle, Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (networks). The sectoral assessments made extensive use of the documentation review, the meta-evaluation and the inventory and survey exercises above. Cybermetric analyses (annex 6) of the FAO knowledge products and services included in the sample were also conducted.

Component (4): Survey of FAO member countries and clients. These surveys were carried out in order to gather feedback on FAO's knowledge work from key users at country level, as well as information on unmet knowledge needs. The survey of member countries was administered to all FAO members and responded by 36 countries (annex 7). The client surveys were administered to 172 core users in thirteen countries selected in consultation with all the Regional Offices and the relevant Country/Liaison Office. The countries selected¹⁸ are from all the regions, and exclude those recently subject to, or planned for, a country programme evaluation (annex 8).

E. Roles and responsibilities

11. The evaluation was managed and led by an evaluation officer from the Office of Evaluation (OED). Four subject matter specialists were recruited to carry out the sectoral assessments. The evaluation officer and the sectoral specialists were supported by two evaluation analysts and one evaluation assistant from OED. The cybermetric analysis was outsourced to a specialized company with experience in this type of study. The client surveys were undertaken by national consultants working under the coordination of an evaluator with experience in field research. The OED knowledge management officer played an advisory role.

¹⁵ OIG compiled an inventory of FAO publications in 2012-13 in collaboration with OCC and the relevant TDs.

¹⁶ The list of FAO staff and users consulted throughout the evaluation (over 380 people) is in appendix 1.

¹⁷ The list of documents, including evaluations, reviewed (over 280) is in appendix 2.

¹⁸ Albania and the European Commission (Europe), Zambia and Uganda (Africa), Panama, Chile, the United States and Canada (The Americas), Lebanon (Near East), Japan, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea (Asia).

12. This evaluation faced several challenges in identifying generic findings, mostly due to the broad scope and variety of the subject under evaluation, and the limited availability of data on results (see sectoral assessments for further detail). With these caveats in mind, the present report was prepared on the basis of the analyses and assessments carried out (see components 1-4 above) and seeking to respond to the evaluation questions with the data collected by the evaluation team. The report was subject to internal peer review to ensure that it met FAO/OED quality standards, and benefited from suggestions and comments from Managers and staff of the units responsible for ensuring the excellence and dissemination of FAO's knowledge products and services.

13. This report, together with the Management response, will be presented to the Programme Committee in November 2015 and posted on the FAO website. A brief and other dissemination materials will be prepared for targeted distribution through a range of modalities, including newsletters, conferences and events. A follow-up report on the evaluation will be presented by FAO Management to the Programme Committee in November 2017.

III. Findings

14. The main findings of the evaluation are presented below, grouped by evaluation question.

1. Are FAO's knowledge products and services consistent with the Organization's goals and based on expressed needs or mandates from the Member Countries?

Finding 1. FAO's knowledge products and services are largely consistent with the Organization's mandate. There is however limited involvement of users and potential partners at the design stage, especially from key target groups such as national governments. More consistent involvement of such users and partners would further enhance the relevance of FAO's knowledge products and services.

15. The evaluation found that most databases, publications, networks and learning resources are (or are in the process of) being explicitly linked to corporate organizational outputs, including Objective 6¹⁹. Some, such as the FSN Forum, are already included in the FAO results framework²⁰. Nevertheless, there is still room for strengthening such linkages. For instance, some FAO staff consider the main objective of their networks and databases to be acting as platforms for sharing information and data, and face difficulties linking them to corporate results. In addition, field-level publications and some learning resources appear to be mostly linked to immediate (project) needs, which are not always easy to align with organizational objectives.

16. Most knowledge products and services are reportedly based on an expressed request or need of the Member Countries. In some cases, such as the "Núcleo de Capacitación de Políticas Públicas"²¹, the learning resource responds to the demand of both national governments and FAO staff (box 3). However, a sizeable number (i.e., about one-third) of network, database, learning resources and publication owners surveyed by the evaluation indicated that their products and services are designed without user consultation and instead originated from FAO's own initiative.

¹⁹ FAO data-related activities are aligned to, or being progressively planned under, corporate Strategic Objectives (SO1 to SO5) and/or under Objective 6 (O6). The 2015-16 planning process under O6 is reportedly putting emphasis on strengthening such linkages.

²⁰ Under Output 10103 "Improving capacities in governments and stakeholders for human resource and organizational development in the food security and nutrition domain", the Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) "will facilitate the uptake of knowledge on policies for nutrition and agriculture-nutrition linkages" specifically in West Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Central Asia and Europe.

²¹ <http://www.fao.org/in-action/capacitacion-politicas-publicas/resumen/es/>

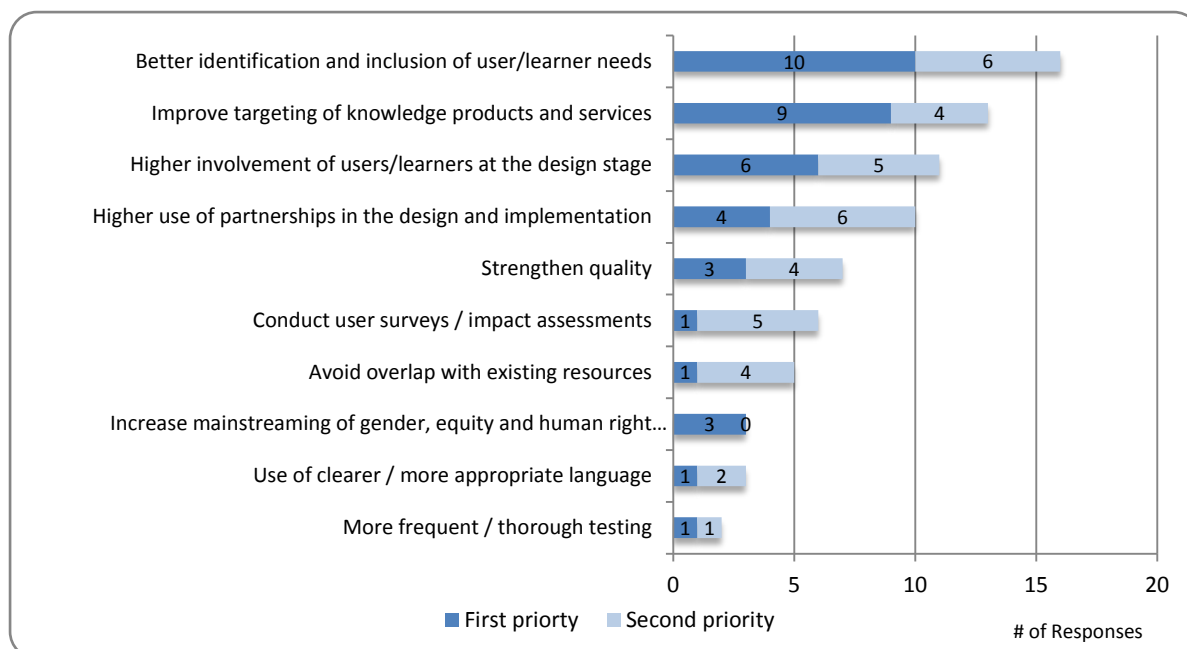
Box 3: Núcleo de Capacitación en Políticas Públicas

The “Núcleo de Capacitación en Políticas Públicas” was established in 2008 as a result of a regional technical cooperation project on capacity building in economics, agricultural policies and rural development in Latin America. This unit specializes in distance learning and its value added derives from its capacity to integrate the vast knowledge and experiences generated by FAO field programmes with innovative learning solutions, tailored to the needs and demands of the countries in the region. Its target audiences are actors involved in the implementation of public policies in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors, including technical experts or professionals from the public sector, academia, research institutions and civil society organizations, as well as FAO staff. Since its establishment, the Núcleo de Capacitación has trained over 10 000 people through 154 courses across all countries in the region.

Source: Assessment of FAO Learning resources, 2015

17. In the view of Member Countries, FAO could make its knowledge products and services more relevant by better identifying and including users' and learners' needs (figure 1).

Figure 1: Priorities to make FAO's knowledge products and services more relevant and useful



Source: FAO Member Countries Survey, 2015

2. Are FAO's knowledge products and services adequate, in view of the context, needs or problems to which they are intended to respond?

Finding 2. Most FAO knowledge products and services are frequently accessed and read, but some there is room to increase visibility and accessibility of some products, especially in terms of language coverage and online access. Furthermore, some knowledge products and services could benefit from greater user-friendliness.

18. The evaluation collected highly positive feedback on the utility of the FAO databases, publications and networks reviewed in detail²², underlining their adequacy and relevance to the work of many target audiences, especially those from academia, research and international organizations. This demand is also shown by the number of visits to some products: FAOSTAT had more than 1 000 000 visits in 2014 alone, and the FAO flagship publications often had over 200 000 visits per year.. However, some knowledge products and services may benefit from greater targeting and simplification.. Previous evaluations noted that some publications and learning resources²³ were not fully adequate for the purposes and target audiences they intended to serve. In some cases, jargon-free and purposively-adapted by-products developed as part of capacity development initiatives are sine-qua-non requirements to enable use (see box 4).

Box 4: The Guidelines for Risk Analysis of Foodborne Antimicrobial Resistance

The Guidelines for Risk Analysis of Foodborne Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR guidelines) were adopted by the 34th Session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission in 2011. The Guidelines provide governments with science-based guidance on processes and methodology for risk analysis and its application to foodborne antimicrobial resistance related to non-human use of antimicrobial agents. Pilot projects have served as a channel to disseminate the Guidelines at national level, including through joint FAO/World Health Organization (WHO) activities in Kenya, Cambodia, Vietnam, India and Nigeria. In Kenya specifically, dissemination activities involved referencing the Guidelines in meetings, regional workshops and a national policy stakeholders meeting. Project outputs such as brochures, leaflets, posters, or videos were also produced with simple messages targeting key stakeholders in the food production chain. Translating the technical guidelines into user-friendly documents and messages to be implemented by farmers, ministries, and other users were reportedly very effective methods of raising awareness about AMR. However, competing priorities resulted in only moderate influence on national-level policies and practices. Uptake and implementation of the Guidelines may benefit from dissemination strategies in addition to the use of established communication tools and incorporate resource mobilization, capacity development initiatives and efforts to mainstream AMR risk analysis into national programmes.

Source: Assessment of FAO Publications, 2015

19. In the case study's²⁴ surveys, the web portal's ease of use, language coverage, and user support and involvement have consistently received less positive rankings than the other usability criteria listed. According to clients and Member Countries, FAO should do more to "improve online access" and, as already noted in figure 1, improve targeting and involvement of end-users and partners at the design stage.

²² See thematic assessment reports.

²³ For example, in the evaluation of FAO's work and role in Forestry, "many stakeholders criticized the majority of training guides for not being written with a clear audience in mind".

²⁴ User support in particular is found to be weak when compared to other international organizations (e.g. World Bank). Language is a barrier to utilisation, for instance in Latin America for databases that are not yet available in Spanish (e.g. GIEWS FPMA Tool, GAEZ Data Portal).

3. How well does FAO ensure the technical excellence and quality of its knowledge products and services?

Finding 3. FAO's knowledge products and services are widely recognized for their technical excellence. The Organization provides guidance and mechanisms to ensure the quality of technical content. Overall, end-users and experts have a positive opinion of (and high expectations for) the quality of FAO databases and publications. This should serve as an incentive to both strengthen and consistently apply quality assurance mechanisms for all knowledge products and services.

20. The Member Countries that responded to the evaluation questionnaire strongly agreed that FAO's knowledge products and services provide technical excellence (figure 2). Past evaluations and the case studies have indeed shown that users have a high regard (and expectations) for the quality of FAO databases and publications. More than 75% of the database users surveyed had a very favorable opinion of every quality criteria proposed (i.e. punctuality, timeliness, reliability and accuracy), whereas expert assessments of a sample of 236 publications gave a satisfactory score (4.3 out of 6) to the technical quality of the publications (table 1).

21. Although FAO has developed several guides and mechanisms to ensure the quality of technical content, some gaps exist, especially at implementation level. For instance, a robust Statistics Quality Assurance Framework²⁵ (SQAF) was developed in 2013, which covers inter alia (i) self-assessment of existing data collection and dissemination activities; (ii) external audit of major statistical activities; and (iii) need assessments for new statistical activities. However, the SQAF has not been implemented yet due to financial constraints. Furthermore, it concentrates on only those activities under FAO's responsibility, without addressing quality at the source (i.e. improving official data).

22. According to FAO Publishing Policy²⁶, "information products must be subject to sound technical review, including external peer review... [and] receive quality assurance by a divisional/departmental review group". Of the respondents to the staff survey, 93% stated that their publications are subject to peer review or other forms of quality assurance. It was also noted that while internal peer review was appropriate given the nature and scope of products, by some partners suggested the use of external review in some instances in order to enhance the credibility of key FAO knowledge products vis-à-vis policy-makers, development partners and specialized media.

23. Finally, FAO has focused largely on ensuring the quality of technical content. Some respondents suggested measures to strengthen the credibility and comprehensiveness of FAO quality assurance measures include the establishment of independent advisory groups or panels (especially for "State of the World" flagships), and further promotion and monitoring of the application of relevant policies and guidelines²⁷ within the Organization through existing interdepartmental groups or the newly established technical networks²⁸.

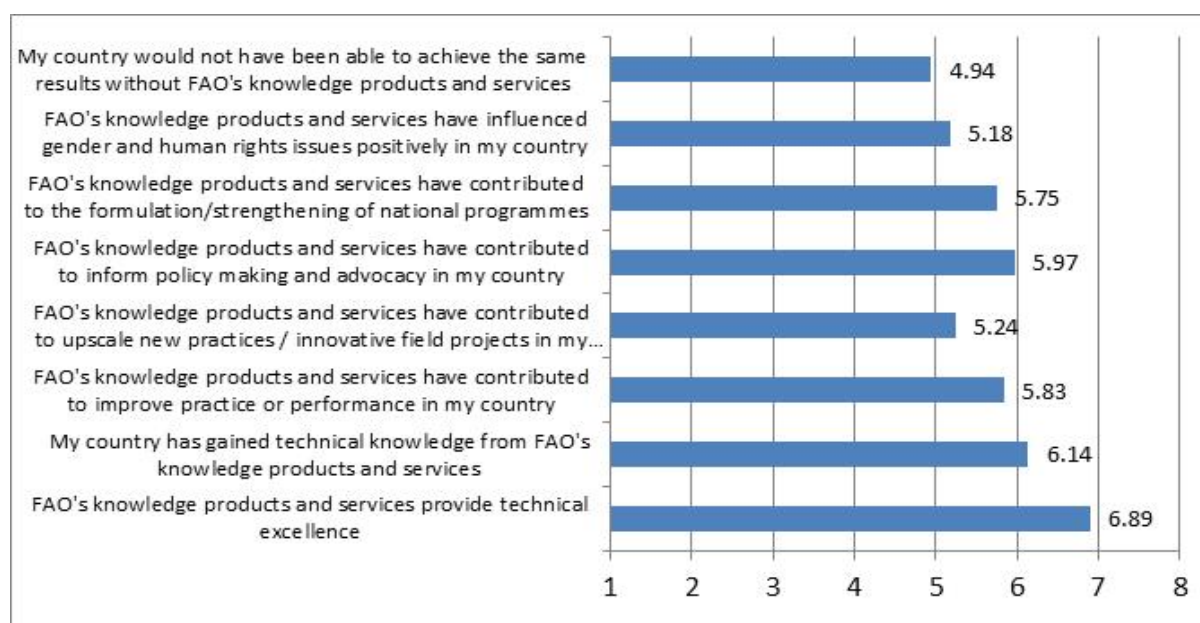
²⁵ FAO. 2014. *The FAO Statistics Quality Assurance Framework*. Rome.

²⁶ FAO. 2013. *Publishing Policy*. Rome.

²⁷ Such as the FAO Environmental and Social Management Standards, available at <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4413e.pdf>; the FAO Gender Policy, available at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/017/i3205e/i3205e.pdf>; the FAO Policy on Indigenous and Tribal People, available at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1857e/i1857e00.pdf>, etc.

²⁸ The Forestry Technical network has already become an space for discussions around work quality.

Figure 2: Member Countries assessment of FAO's knowledge products and services (1: highly disagree-8: highly agree)



Source: FAO Member Countries survey, 2015

Table 2: Non-weighted average score of 236 publications assessed in past evaluations (1: very poor-6: excellent)

Assessments	# publications reviewed	Relevance	Technical quality (1-6)	Actual or potential uptake and use (1-6)	Actual/ potential impact from use (1-6)	Integration of environmental sustainability concepts (1-6)	Gender mainstreaming (1-6)	Integration of social/equity issues (1-6)
Evaluation Reports								
Country Programme in Armenia, 2013	25	5.1	4	3.6	3.3	3.2	2.4	3.5
FAO Regional and Sub-regional Offices in Europe and Central Asia, 2012	28	4.6	4.4	4.3	4	3.3	2.6	3.8
Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (technical guidelines and related code documents), 2012	39	5	4.6	4.4	3.7	4.5	2	2.5
Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (other publications of the Fisheries department), 2012	71	5.1	4.9	4.4	4	4.3	2.5	3.6
FAO Regional and Sub-regional Offices in Asia Pacific, 2013	73	4.8	4.3	4	3.9	3.2	2.7	3.4
Total	236	4.9	4.3	4.1	3.7	3.7	2.4	3.3

Source: Assessment of FAO publications, 2015

4. How efficiently has FAO used its human and financial resources in the production and dissemination of knowledge products and services?

Finding 4. FAO's knowledge products and services are produced in a decentralized manner, and generally operated within budgetary constraints. In particular, more could be devoted to dissemination activities, which limit outreach to potential new users. Although cooperation with external partners has helped boost resources, there could be greater cooperation between authoring and decentralized offices, between technical and communication experts, and among operators. Greater user-orientation as well as internal cooperation and coordination would enhance not only efficiency but also dissemination and outreach.

24. The production and dissemination of knowledge products and services in FAO is largely decentralized²⁹. Staff from TDs play a leading role in the development process, under the coordination or review of relevant committees (e.g. publications) or inter-departmental working groups (e.g. databases, networks and learning resources). Not every database, publication, network or learning resource, however, has a specific budget line to cover for their development or operational costs. With some exceptions³⁰, most FAO products and services are operated within budgetary constraints, with over half of database, publication, network and learning resource owners indicating budgets of less than USD 10 000 per year. As a result, many owners are unsatisfied with the resources at their disposal. Moreover, about one-third of owners do not have an outreach strategy³¹ and most managers dedicate less than 10% of their time to promoting their knowledge products and services.

25. Some FAO managers work with internal and external stakeholders to pool resources for the development and dissemination of knowledge products and services that are of common interest (e.g. FAO works with the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) on GAEZ, and with OECD on the Agricultural Outlook; TDs work with DOs (and vice-versa) to establish Farmer Field Schools (see box 5).

Box 5: Farmer Field Schools

Farmer Field Schools (FFS) were initiated through a FAO programme in Indonesia in the late 1980s to introduce new Integrated Pest Management approaches among groups of farmers cultivating rice. From these origins and for the next 25 years, the FFS approach has been introduced in almost all developing countries and extended to different aspects of agriculture, pastoralism and livestock rearing, climate change, agricultural marketing and life skills. The FFS approach can be easily modified and adapted to many different topics, provided that it blends the technical focus with the development of farmers' capacities to learn through their own observations, exchange with peers and develop soft skills that help them in becoming more empowered. Considering the need for technical as well as methodological expertise in adult education, FFS are developed through internal cooperation among different divisions and offices. This has allowed FAO to be recognized as a source of know-how on rural research and extension. FFS are one of the longest-running and most widely adopted approaches to promoting learning among farmers, primarily due to the participatory, farmer-led adult learning method.

Source: Assessment of FAO learning resources, 2015

26. Although collaboration has increased in some ways, a more granular review shows uneven levels of cooperation overall, especially within FAO and with local partners. For instance, less than half of the databases involve DOs in dissemination and promotion activities. There also appears to be limited collaboration between technical staff and communication/knowledge management specialists,

²⁹ This means that TDs and DOs are largely free to develop knowledge products and services, following the guidance included in corporate policies, such as the 2013 Corporate Publishing Policy, and guidelines, such as the 2012 Good Learning Practices for Effective Capacity Development.

³⁰ Only flagships classified as "Corporate Technical Areas", core databases under S06 and technical networks have earmarked budgets. The remaining are project-funded or included in the relevant S0.

³¹ Also noted in the Evaluation of FAO's role and work related to water.

who could assist technical teams with outreach and dissemination strategies. Additionally, database and network managers could pool resources in order to lower costs and leverage synergies.

27. Past evaluations recommended that FAO “should be more selective and give priority to quality over quantity in the planning and production of [knowledge and] normative [products]”³². At present, FAO is working on “standardization, improved access to and use of the FAO Document Repository, and prioritizing electronic distribution”³³ as a way to streamline production of publications, and is considering measures to safeguard the development of results-oriented databases and networks. It is clear that the current situation needs to be addressed, as some knowledge products and services meet neither quality criteria nor user expectations, and remain largely unknown by target users. The efficiency of knowledge products and services could be improved by increasing the involvement of partners and target users (such as national governments, academia and the private sector), and strengthening existing coordination and planning mechanisms, including the IDWG on statistics.

5. Are there synergies, duplications or gaps in the knowledge products and services produced and disseminated by FAO?

Finding 5. Although there appear to be few duplications, knowledge gaps exist in some thematic areas, especially those addressing specialized topics. FAO data, analyses and learning resources are often disseminated through unrelated platforms and channels.

28. There are several stages at which synergies can be realized in the production and dissemination of knowledge products and services. As discussed in the preceding section, synergies can be achieved when operators collaborate with other FAO units or external partners to leverage their respective comparative advantages, or as a result of the joint delivery or dissemination of products and services, such as in the case of SOFA 2011-12; and the OECD/FAO Agricultural Outlook. This is an area in which FAO can do more to increase the value of its offerings, moving beyond the “silo-approach”³⁴ of presenting data, analyses and learning resources on unrelated platforms, by for example using new technologies to facilitate discoverability of FAO's products and services, and blending knowledge products and services with capacity development initiatives.

29. Although the thematic assessments did not find major overlaps, some discrepancies were highlighted among FAO's own databases (such as price data in FAOSTAT, FPMA and the Food Price Index), and with external sources (e.g. between FAOSTAT and external/national data providers). In terms of gaps, FAO knowledge products and services appear to cover all thematic areas under FAO's responsibility. For instance, most FAO publications and databases address issues related to food security, food production and climate change. More specialized topics, such as social protection, animal health, plant health and soils, have been less frequently covered. Users and clients surveyed provided a long list of topics that need to be addressed, including knowledge gaps and discoverability of FAO's knowledge products and services.

6. Have FAO's knowledge products and services reached the intended users and uses?

Finding 6. The extent varies to which user-groups are effectively reached by, and make effective use of, FAO's knowledge products and services. International organizations, national governments, research and academia benefit the most from FAO data and information. Country-level users, especially from developing regions with poorer internet connectivity and/or language coverage, face more problems accessing FAO data, analyses and resources, and demand context-relevant knowledge products and services.

³² <http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/028/mg392e.pdf>

³³ http://intranet.fao.org/fileadmin/filemanager/docs/CORPORATE_COMMUNICATION_STRATEGY_en.pdf

³⁴ As noted in the 2014-15 FAO Statistical Programme of Work (SPW), “[internal] duplications are results of the fact that FAO datasets are constructed as independent silos each being self-contained”.

30. The extent to which each target user is effectively reached by FAO's knowledge products and services varies, especially in developing countries. Based on the information collected³⁵, government staff, researchers, development partners, consultants, bloggers and media outlets appear to be the heaviest users of FAO data and information. Some learning programmes, such as the the e-learning curriculum on food security, has reached more than 165 000 online learners worldwide (see box 6). However, about one-third of the country-level clients surveyed for this evaluation were often not aware of relevant FAO knowledge products and services, despite being identified as "core users". Also, about one-quarter of the FAO staff surveyed was unable to identify the specific users of their products and services³⁶.

Box 6. E-learning curriculum on Food Security

Since 2006, the European Union (EU) has supported FAO in the development of a comprehensive e-learning curriculum on food security. Through the EU-FAO Improved Global Governance for Hunger Reduction (IGGHR) Programme, over 23 free online courses have been developed in 11 thematic areas and in 3 languages. The e-learning courses, which have been produced in collaboration with several partners, have served as the basis for a wide range of capacity development activities on food security. Within the United Nations and International Financial Institutions, the courses are being used for staff development and external training activities of FAO, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, UNHCR, UNITAR, ILO, World Bank and the UNFCCC. Other institutions, such as the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA) and the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC), are also using the courses for capacity development purposes.

As of August 2015, the e-learning curriculum on food security has reached more than 165 000 online learners worldwide, with 76% of its learners coming from Africa, Latin America and Asia. Collaborations with other development partners for the dissemination of the e-learning curriculum have proven to be a key factor in the outreach of the programme. Apart from being available at FAO's e-learning Centre, the e-learning courses are also disseminated through the EU's Learn4dev network, EuropeAid's Operational Food Security (ROSA) network, and through university consortia, allowing member universities to use the e-learning courses in existing or new curricula. In addition, more than 80 international NGOs working in the field of development, humanitarian relief, health, conservation and social justice have access to the e-learning courses through the Learning in NGOs (LINGOs) platform. The example of this e-learning curriculum shows the potential reach that FAO e-learning courses could have if designed following thorough learning needs assessments and using quality standards and workflows³⁷.

Source: Assessment of FAO learning resources, 2015

31. The extent to which FAO's wide array of knowledge products and services are being effectively used is difficult to assess. FAO data is used extensively for research and analyses. For example, over 44 400 citations of FAOSTAT can be found in Google Scholar; this is about twice the amount of citations to the World Bank or the UN data gateways (see table below).

Table 3: Citations and web references of selected databases

Knowledge Product	Owners	Web references		Number of citations	
		Link Hit Estimate	Site Hit Estimate	Google Scholar	Scopus cites
FAOSTAT	FAO	3 612	1 377	44 400	12 967
data.worldbank.org	The World Bank	353	191	21 400	4 752
data.un.org	United Nations	861	445	2 720	585

Source: Assessment of FAO databases, 2015

³⁵ E.g. case studies, client surveys and cybermetric analysis.

³⁶ This was more pronounced in databases and publications that did not require pre-registration.

³⁷ E-learning methodologies: A guide for designing and developing e-learning courses.

32. FAO global publications are used frequently at country level, sometimes more than regional or country specific publications, with a slight prevalence of advocacy (SOFA, policy briefs) over advisory and scientific papers (guidelines, research articles). However, publications produced by other international organizations are sometimes more used than FAO's³⁸. Users from developing countries provided in general a more favorable assessment of FAO's flagships than users from developed countries. In some cases, such as with SOFIA, there was strong uptake across the developed and developing world. However, the lack of partnerships and financial resources were often a limiting factor for the adoption of key messages.

33. Among the different types of learning resources and networks operated by FAO, those with context-relevant content are the most demanded. As noted in some case studies (Forestry Technical network, FSN forum), past evaluations and the client and Member Country surveys, several face-to-face learning events and online discussions³⁹ have been effective platforms for knowledge sharing.

7. What outcomes have FAO's knowledge products and services achieved, or contributed to achieving?

Finding 7. FAO knowledge products and services have contributed to enhancing technical knowledge and analyses, and strengthening the evidence base for policies and programmes. User feedback is not systematically collected, and the influence and results achieved by FAO knowledge products and services are rarely recorded, especially at organizational and policy levels.

34. As found in past evaluations, FAO data, information and learning resources are used in a range of programmes, analyses and studies on food and agriculture. According to FAO staff and Member Countries surveyed (see figure 2), the primary use of FAO's knowledge products and services is for enhancing technical knowledge. It is often not well understood, however, how the increase in knowledge has translated (in the medium-term) into better analyses and an improved evidence base for policies or programmes, or how the attitudes and practices of targeted users have changed. Very few FAO staff (one-quarter of those who responded to the surveys) regularly gather feedback from users or former trainees, and fewer still document the processes or factors that influence results at organizational/policy level (in the long-term). This is a missed opportunity for the Organization to maximize the value of its institutional knowledge and know-how (see box 6).

³⁸ One of the best performers, SOFA 2011-12 "Women in agriculture", was cited 20 times in Scopus. Comparable publications were cited six to three times more (The World Development Report 2012 on Gender Equality and Development was cited 134, and IFAD's Rural Poverty Report was cited 65 times, respectively).

³⁹ Online and face-to-face discussions have been key drivers behind the growth of some FAO-supported networks. In the case of e-agriculture, membership went from 3 640 in 2008 to 12 100 in 2014. In the case of the climate change network and to a lesser extent REDBIO, membership doubled over the last five years.

Box 6: Experience Capitalization in FAO

According to FAO⁴⁰, “Experience capitalization... is an iterative process through which an experience (with its successes and failures) is identified, valued and documented in various media... Thanks to the work of documenting and capitalizing of good practices, an organization can respond more quickly and effectively to different types of crises and changes that may arise.” Efforts to promote capitalization of experiences at FAO are relatively recent; they formally started in 2011 under OPC⁴¹ leadership. Some decentralized offices, such as the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (RLC), have also undertaken initiatives to document successful experiences from policy and field interventions⁴². Several FAO counterparts met by the team in three Latin American countries (Chile, Peru and Panama) were familiar with RLC’s systematization efforts⁴³ under the FAO-Spain Initiative (especially the Special Programme for Food Security in Central America⁴⁴). Projects associated with this Initiative (such as PESA Centroamerica) reportedly benefited from “know-how” gathered through documentation of field experiences. Although FAO programmes and projects are expected to incorporate “lessons learned from past and related work” in their design⁴⁵, there is no consistent application of experience capitalization methods to capture such knowledge⁴⁶; nor are there easily accessible depositories in which to store and/or consult such information. FAO should take better advantage of its institutional knowledge, especially for advice on governance and policy issues.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

35. The analysis in the preceding sections examined several aspects of FAO support to Member Countries’ development goals through the production and dissemination of knowledge products and services. Drawing from these findings, this chapter presents key conclusions and recommendations that are especially relevant to the work of FAO under O6 (technical quality, knowledge and services) and O8 (outreach).

A. Conclusions

Conclusion 1. FAO produces a broad range of knowledge products and services, which largely respond to the Organization’s mandate and Member Countries’ requests. Several are widely recognized and appreciated, such as the statistical databases. Some however, could be even better tailored to the specific needs of their target audiences. Also, not enough is done to ensure users’ easiness of access to, awareness of and satisfaction with FAO’s knowledge products and services, or to document and capitalize on successful experiences.

36. FAO’s knowledge products and services are progressively being aligned to contribute to FAO’s strategic objectives⁴⁷. However, users and partners are not consistently involved in the development process, and they are not provided with adequate support. This results in some FAO products and services being difficult to find and use, and therefore remaining unknown to key

⁴⁰ FAO, 2013. *Good Practices at FAO: Experience capitalization for continuous learning*. External concept note. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/017/ap784e/ap784e.pdf>

⁴¹ OPC has developed learning modules, and supported the identification, dissemination and application of “good practices” at country and regional level as well as the holding of share fairs at HQ and field locations.

⁴² <http://www.fao.org/in-action/programa-espana-fao/lineas-de-trabajo/conocimiento-comunicacion/en/>

⁴³ E.g. Colombia. *Huertas familiares: Experiencia de Seguridad Alimentaria en el marco de la política pública municipal*; Honduras. *Apoyo a la mejora de los ingresos familiares a través de Huertos Urbanos* (unpublished)

⁴⁴ <http://www.fao.org/in-action/pesa-centroamerica/es/>

⁴⁵ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/ap105e/ap105e.pdf>

⁴⁶ A review of twelve large projects undertaken in developing countries selected for the client surveys (as well as in Peru and Ecuador) showed that only one-quarter incorporated in their design institutional know-how from previous projects, and made provisions to share and document lessons learned.

⁴⁷ FAO work planning for 2016-17, which has started at the country level by identifying country results which express country priorities, opens up the possibility to address concrete country needs during the design of new knowledge products and services.

potential users. There are several knowledge gaps and unmet needs among FAO users, as well as increasing demand for context-specific knowledge products and services, especially to address capacity development and governance/policy issues.

37. At the same time, there has been an explosion of data and information sources in the past few years, which has increased the options available to prospective users and learners. Although FAO still has a privileged place as a provider of relevant knowledge on food and agriculture (especially in developing countries), without a more strategic approach to the creation and dissemination of knowledge it could lose its place as a reference centre. Currently, most knowledge products and services are created with limited budgets and are underfunded with respect to dissemination, user support and experience capitalization mechanisms.

Conclusion 2. FAO data and information are used to improve the relevance of research and analyses, and to support evidence-based decision making in governments and international organizations. However, quality assurance procedures are applied inconsistently.

38. Several FAO products, such as FAOSTAT and many flagship publications, have millions of visitors each year and are widely cited and referred to in academic publications, websites and the media. Clients and partners worldwide turn to FAO for specialized and high-quality advice. However, there is inconsistent application of quality standards

39. To facilitate their application, quality standards must be tailored to the needs and characteristics of the different types and purposes of FAO knowledge products and services. For example, the value of databases resides in their accuracy and methodological standardization. Publications instead rely on robust data, a clear and well-structured presentation, and most importantly, the credible analysis and interpretation of facts. The latter requires intellectual capacity and innovative thinking. Thus the value of external reviews, advisory panels and other forms of human interaction to ensure the excellence of technical work and analyses.

B. Recommendations

Recommendation 1. FAO could pay greater attention to users' and learners' needs, as well as the potential for improving ease of use and expanding the resources' influence to a broader audience.

40. Better assessing user's and learners' needs: FAO produces a wide range of knowledge products and services. Some are produced in response to global commitments and demands, such as the statistical databases and flagships, whereas others (especially at country level) are geared towards emerging or immediate knowledge needs. The diversity in the objectives, capacities, and means of the potential recipients of FAO knowledge products and services is very broad. At present, not enough is being done to assess users' and learners' needs, which is a limiting factor for their use.

41. Improving user experience: Some users look for different sets of data and information, which they expect to find with the minimum amount of effort. Others do not have time to search or are not aware of what FAO can offer; and even when they are aware, they require additional support to translate the knowledge gained into concrete actions. FAO may consider anchoring future online dissemination efforts on FAOSTAT, one of its most successful platforms, and facilitate greater discoverability and use of its knowledge products and services by providing greater user support and by "blending" dissemination activities with capacity development and experience capitalization initiatives.

42. Developing a corporate vision for FAO knowledge products and services: In an era of data and information overload, FAO should consider developing a corporate vision outlining how it intends to position itself to ensure that it continuously meets emerging and changing user needs and expectations, and facilitate accessibility and findability of its different products and services. Such a vision should also describe how the Agency will support users' capacities and skills to enable maximum use of FAO's data and analyses, and that the products and services disseminated by the Organization benefit from institutional knowledge.

Recommendation 2: FAO should continue to strengthen the mechanisms and measures in place to ensure technical excellence of its knowledge products and services.

43. Improving quality standards: Building on the policies and guidelines that already exist for databases and learning resources, FAO should develop tailored guidance for quality assurance of publications. These guidelines should take into account the different types and scopes of FAO knowledge products and consider not only the quality and integrity of technical content, but also other factors that influence the excellence of FAO's knowledge, such as their consideration of environmental and social standards, equity and local/indigenous issues.

44. Strengthening the implementation of quality assurance systems: FAO should strengthen the existing mechanisms to ensure technical excellence. In particular, it should pursue the implementation of the quality assurance framework that already exists for databases and leveraging better the role of the Chief Statistician to enable the effective application of the framework. Similarly, it should strengthen its efforts to promote the application of good learning and publishing practices throughout the Organization. The newly established technical networks could support awareness of and compliance by promoting the adoption of relevant policies and standards. Guidance on how best FAO networks can fulfil this role is needed.

The full report and annexes of this evaluation are available on the Office of Evaluation's Website:
<http://www.fao.org/evaluation>

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