*Comments on proposal for an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture*

* Overall, this concept could provide a valuable resource and source of advice for governments and other stakeholders.
* We suggest that the mandate and work of the proposed Digital Council should show clearly how it will add value and not duplicate existing efforts across multilateral fora.
* We understand that there is a ministerial mandate (agreed by agriculture ministers at the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture 2019 and the G20 Agriculture Ministers’ Meeting 2019) to envision a concept of the Digital Council for further consideration, not a mandate for establishing the Council itself. Therefore documentation should be clear that this is a scoping exercise at this stage, which should be reflected through the use of qualifying language across the whole concept note—for example ‘the proposed Council’.
* Conceptually, we suggest that any Digital Council would act as an independent advisory group on digital agricultural issues, rather than a political/ representative body. The issues/suggestions raised by panel experts could be sent to relevant working groups (e.g. CoAg, CCP) or commissions (e.g. genetic resources) to progress. The concept note should explicitly define the role of the Council as distinct from other relevant international bodies in agriculture or more broadly—such as the International Telecommunications Union—and highlight how the proposed Council would add further value.
* Importantly, the members of the proposed Council should be digital experts (e.g. data management, technology development, sales/distribution, legal, infrastructure/telecoms, software/apps) and not be political representatives or traditional agricultural science experts who will have opportunities to consider issues in relevant FAO committees (or other IO committees). The involvement of government experts would be important to ensure that the work of the proposed Council is relevant to policymakers.
* The concept note needs to be clear that the proposed Council will provide non-binding and evidence-driven recommendations. These recommendations would be implemented not by the Council but by the relevant FAO or IO committee or national governments depending on the issue at hand.
* The proposed Digital Council should be streamlined and does not need to be supported by a large and complex organisational structure (such as an Executive Council, Advisory Committee, Secretariat and Working groups). This would likely create increased administrative burden and costs and potentially add to duplication of efforts across IOs working in this space.
* We suggest that the Terms of Reference for the proposed Digital Council should include a sun-setting clause, so that the work of the body can be evaluated and reviewed as appropriate.
* We would like to pose several questions relating to the proposal:
  + How would the Digital Council be funded sustainably? Would there be any financial implications for participants?
  + What would be the expected commitment from countries?
  + What are the timeframes for the development of the concept note? Will we have another opportunity to consider the concept note?
* Finally, our specific responses to the four consultation papers are as follows:
  + We note that it is unclear how some of the proposed information for inclusion in the draft concept note relates to the questions posed. For example, the key characteristics identified under Question 2 do not demonstrate how the Council will address barriers to technology adoption.
  + With regards to Question 1, while we agree that the challenges listed are relevant to the digitalisation of agriculture, it is unclear how this list of potential entry points for governments relates to the potential role of the Digital Council.
  + We also suggest the following amendments under Question 1:
    - It is important to acknowledge governments’ potential role in data standardisation and the creation of inter-operable systems. The ability to link different systems and interchange equipment and analysis is important for mainstream uptake of new technologies.
    - We suggest that ‘the increase of socio-economic divides between developed and developing countries’ should be worded as ‘the increase of socio-economic divides within and between countries’ to reflect the fact that many of the issues in question affect both developed and developing countries alike (although to varying degrees).