**E-consultation on the Establishment of an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture**

Comments Submitted by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) USA

Introduction:

This effort to establish a global governance mechanism is timely, as digitalization of agriculture and food systems is already happening around the world: it goes beyond precision agriculture to cover an array of operations, from digitalization of agricultural extension services to the use of block-chain technology in food value chains and retail sales.

At times, however, these initiatives can end up undermining the livelihood security of those engaged in the agriculture and food systems as food producers and/or as workers, making them vulnerable to food insecurity.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This, first and foremost, is due to the power imbalance between the private sectors promoting these technologies and the states where these MNCs are located as opposed to other actors, including other countries, where digitalization is being enacted.

Also, digitalization efforts often target a specific problem, be it traceability or precise fertilizer application, but in the process often lose sight of the over-all objectives of the food and agricultural sector. As the recent HLPE report on *Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable food systems* emphasized, these overall objectives are about ensuring food and nutrition security of all, through progressive realization of the Right to Food, by recognizing the agency of those producing, processing and consuming food, while at the same time reducing the ecological footprint of food systems.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals are such that pursuit of one goal must be informed by attention to other related ones, lest the efforts negatively impact any other goal. Innovative technologies like information communication technology (ICT) in food and agriculture can very much be part of this pursuit of UNSDGs around the right to food and ecological sustainability. However, for that to happen, these initiatives need to be guided by UN decisions and treaties, in particular UN CFS policy instruments developed through an inclusive multi-stakeholder process, as well as the UN declaration of the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas (UNDROP) and the UN declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples.

It is our firm hope that all the undertakings of the proposed International Digital Council (IDC) for Food and Agriculture will be guided by a human-rights based approach, and commitment to progressive realization of the right to adequate and nutritious food for all, especially the most marginalized groups of food producers and workers.

See our response to specific questions below.

1. *What are the potential entry points for government to address challenges and foster the development of digital agriculture?*
   1. The concept note rightly identifies the existing digital divide, in terms of the gap between demographics and regions with access to modern ICTs and those that do not have access or skills – in terms of gender, age, along rural-urban axis, and between and within regions and countries, indicating the pre-existing development gap.

Thus there is a huge risk that this gap will further widen if adequate actions are not taken at regional, national and international levels to develop mechanisms to ensure that the the gains from ICT benefit everyone more evenly, in advance of fostering the development of digital agriculture.

The provision of digital infrastructure as basic public services, can help address this gap to some extent. However, as is clear from the case of Kerala, where the Govt of the State of Kerala, in India has committed to provide internet to every household (free for those under poverty line), it is further important to make sure that net-neutrality concerns/other data related concerns are taken on board while providing internet connection as a basic public service.[[3]](#footnote-3)

* 1. The other issue that the concept note recognizes as important to consider is data ownership. So far most of the ICT technologies in agriculture that are getting scaled up are developed by transnational corporations engaged in agribusiness and food-value-chain operations, or in the business of data (Microsoft, Amazon). We also know that “demand for digital transformation is partially being driven by government ICT strategies."[[4]](#footnote-4)

While the extent of digitalisation varies substantially between developing countries and others, it remains the responsibility of the state, at whichever stage of digitalization they are, to develop legal measures to ensure that ICT technologies, especially those in agriculture and food systems, do not exacerbate pre-existing inequalities. One important way in which states can enable this is by developing legal mechanisms ensuring that ownership of the data gathered in this manner stays within the communities and countries where data is gathered.

As we are in the midst of an ecological crisis, governments should ensure that digitalization does not undermine the sustainability concerns. See more on it in response to question 5.

1. *How can the establishment of the Digital Council address the numerous barriers to adoption of these technologies?*
   1. The concept note sggests that *“*The Digital Council should be impartial to geography and technological solution areas when setting its agenda, instead prioritizing those efforts that can offer the greatest potential value to accelerating digital agriculture.“ Following from the earlier point on development gap, we would urge the Digital Council to recognize the pre-existing regional and demographic disparities between regions, and to prioritizing efforts that can offer the greatest potential value to **reducing the development gap** from these efforts at accelerating digital agriculture. Please refer to the opening comments to help guide this process.
   2. Similarly, it has been recognised that *“*the skillsets required in agrifood sector will change and transform how and where people work. This may affect female and male workers differently and transform the dynamics of the agrifood industry gender gap.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The Digital Council must foster development of appropriate, site specific measures that can be put in place (including skills development of those who can potentially be displaced through digitalization) in advance of digitalization initiatives.
   3. Having said that, the Digital Council must recognise that digitalization has been identified as a driver of market concentration in the specific case of agriculture and food sector, along the entire agricultural chain, as elaborated in *Blocking the Chain,* and this shall be addressed in the following sections on governance*.[[6]](#footnote-6)*
2. *Do you think that the roles identified for the Digital Council are suitable for facing the agrifood systems challenges outlined above?*

In the concept note, under role 2 (on policy and regulatory framework for digitalization) there is no clear role for Digital Council related to regulation, and what has been outlined falls far short of the requirement. It would be necessary for the Digital Council to develop recommendations that governments can use to regulate digitalization in agri-food secotor – on themes that have been raised through this brief comment, including net neutrality, digitalization enabled corporate concentration, and data ownership and security.

1. *What governance structure should be in place in order for the Council to serve its purpose?*

As stated earlier, digitalization is taking place around the world, and it is happening in an interconnected world. Thus we need a multilateral governance mechanism to address many of the existing and future challenges, especially if digitalization is to contribute to food and nutrition security of the most vulnerable, even as it contributes to building sustainable food systems. To acheive this, it is essential that this be established within the UN system, with its mandate based on the UN Charter and principles based on the international human rights framework, and contribute as per the mandates of the reformed UN Committee on Food Security.

The Digital Council should work closely withother parts of UN system, which are also developing their own vision on digitalization (for example, ILO in the context of impact on workers, UNCTAD in the context of international trade in agricultural commodities and food), so that mutually beneficial and co-ordinated strategies and policies can be developed in the public interest.

The different roles and responsibilities of different actors, (all of who must participate only as third parties), need to be clarified, and the Digital Council should take into account power imbalances between different actors. In doing this, Digital Council must be built on the principle of self determination, recognizing the **agency** of the people engaged in the agriculture and food systems as food producers and workers, recognising their right to determine what technologies they want if any, and under what conditions. CFS principles of inclusivity (or marginalized food producers, workers etc. through Civil Society Mechanism) could be a model for addressing this concern.

1. *Please add any other comment or relevant content you think should be included in the Concept Note.*

Thank you for this opportunity to add some of the most pertinent concerns. The concept note does not address the elephant in the room: the ecological crisis-in biodiversity, water, climate. Digitalization requires use of hardware with high ecological footprint, and technology that uses high amount of energy (as in the case of block-chains). We are still unaware of the potential public health risks of this increased use of internet in our lives. While these concerns are valid for digitalization in any sector, these concerns become especially pertinent in the case of food and agriculture sector, because its vast reach to lands and peoples.

Thank you.

Shiney Varghese

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

Email: [svarghese@iatp.org](mailto:svarghese@iatp.org); [www.iatp.org](http://www.iatp.org)

1. [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016718307769#](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016718307769)! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-hlpe/news-archive/detail/en/c/1198609/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.livemint.com/politics/policy/after-100-literacy-kerala-aims-for-internet-in-every-household-11573118379273.html> Also see: <https://www.medianama.com/2017/08/223-kerala-free-wifi-net-neutrality/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca4985en/ca4985en.pdf> p.37 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca4985en/ca4985en.pdf> p.77 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/blockingchain2.png> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)