



# The Committee on Agriculture driving FAO's agricultural agenda

Since it was founded in 1971, the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) has played an important and influential role in helping to guide the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) through a period of extraordinary development and change in global food production. As FAO's main technical advisory committee on agriculture, COAG has provided strategic advice on many of the challenges FAO has faced including the safe use of pesticides, gender, food safety, nutrition and sustainability, the management of natural resources and many other issues.

In January 2012, FAO launched a major new initiative to modernize and transform itself into an organization better equipped to respond to the new challenges it increasingly faces. The aim was to improve the delivery and impact of FAO's programmes at the country level and ensure its global knowledge products achieved tangible changes in policy and practice that benefit poor farmers.

As part of this process, COAG is helping FAO better fulfil its mandate by providing technical advice on issues ranging from sustainable crop and livestock production intensification to how to manage land and water resources in a changing climate. The Committee also highlights the role of agriculture not only as a source of food, but in providing livelihoods for millions of smallholder farmers and their families around the world.

Throughout this process of strategic transformation, FAO has been listening carefully to its Member Nations with COAG providing one of the most important forums for informed and strategic discussion. This influential but low-key role has been typical of COAG over the past 40 years.

This overview seeks to show clearly what the hard working Member Nations of COAG have achieved in that time and how their success has helped quide FAO's agricultural agenda.

Looking ahead, I see COAG leading the way through the Strategic Objectives' implementation, and continuing to provide strategic advice on priority challenges, such as achieving food security for all, climate change, environmental degradation, and unsustainable agricultural practices.

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Under FAO's constitution, its Council is assisted and advised by eight committees including the Committee on Agriculture (COAG). Their efforts can lead in turn to formal Council – and in some cases Conference – action with important impact on the work of the Organization and its global activities.

A good example of this quiet power and influence came at COAG's very first meeting when in its inaugural report to Council in November 1972 it recommended that FAO should "concentrate on development of the seed industry in order to speed up effective development of variety trials, seed production, seed quality control and seed distribution".

The Council endorsed COAG's recommendation ensuring that priority was given to seed activities

to strengthen work on seed industry development, including improved training on seed technology. Such support was almost certainly helpful to the success of Green Revolution in Asia, which – at the same time in the early 1970s – was trying to disseminate the seeds of its first rice varieties. The rest as they say is history, and the Member Nations of COAG moved on to new challenges and issues facing global agriculture.

This overview highlights some of the work of COAG over the last four decades including the identification and adoption of best practices and standards; dealing with important issues facing global agriculture; providing strategic advice on natural resource management; and predicting future trends.

#### COAG's mandate

As FAO's main technical advisory committee on agriculture, COAG is responsible for:

- Reviewing major agricultural and nutritional problems and proposing concerted action by FAO's Member Nations;
- Advising the FAO Council and the Director-General on activities relating to agriculture, livestock, food safety, nutrition and natural resource management, with particular emphasis on all the social, technical, economic, institutional and structural aspects relating to agricultural and rural development in general;
- Reviewing specific matters relating to agriculture, food and nutrition referred to the Committee.

COAG also provides advice and recommendations to the FAO Conference on global agricultural policy and regulatory matters, and to the FAO Council on matters relating to the Organization's priorities, programmes and budgets.



#### Codex: safe, good food for everyone

As the body responsible for managing the development of global food standards, the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) has been at the centre of global debates on many important issues including biotechnology, pesticides, food additives and contaminants. It strives at all times to ensure consensus on the standards it develops despite the challenges of reaching an agreement among so many nations.

COAG's Member Nations have repeatedly expressed their support for Codex via statements by the Committee. Specifically in 1999, they agreed that Codex was the correct forum to set standards for organic agriculture and genetically modified organisms. More recently in a paper presented in 2012 the Committee was told it was essential that FAO and the World Health Organization continue to provide timely and high quality scientific advice to the Codex programme. In response, COAG advised Council that Codex's standard-setting activities should be included in the new FAO Strategic Objectives.

### Helping farmers get what they need: good seed of the most improved variety

Food security is heavily dependent on the seed security of farming communities. For this reason, COAG has always placed special emphasis on the seed production and dissemination of improved varieties. It gave important support to seed system development at the beginning of the Green Revolution in Asia in the early 1970s. More recently, in response to the food price crisis of 2008 – when global prices for wheat, rice and other food staples spiked sharply – the Committee supported FAO's work in developing more sustainable and efficient seed systems in developing countries. In Africa, the support led to the development of the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme of the African Union, which provided a strategic framework for the development of the continent's seed sector.

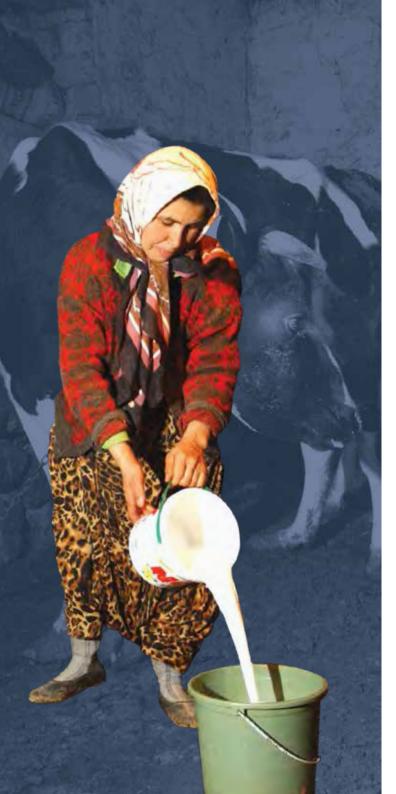
#### Impact on the ground

Central America is home to some two million small family farms where beans and maize are grown as the main staple crops. Many of the farmers are trapped in grinding poverty because they lack access to good quality – or what is known as certified – seed so their harvests are consistently poor.

In response to this problem, FAO initiated the Seeds for Development project in 2010, which supported the establishment of seed growers' associations and provided training to improve quality and to operate commercially sustainable enterprises.

The project has had a considerable impact on the region's food security. By December 2012, the enterprises supported by the project had produced more than 6 100 metric tonnes of high-quality bean seed and 754 tonnes of quality maize seed – enough to plant more than 120 000 hectares of beans and 67 000 hectares of maize.

Many farmers using the new seed have doubled their yields, producing enough beans to feed more than 458 000 families and enough maize for more than 188 000 families.



#### Promoting cleaner, greener agriculture

One of the biggest environmental challenges facing agriculture today is to reduce its impact on the environment, with pesticide reduction at the top of the list. COAG has been working in this area for many years, helping to drive the sustainability agenda at FAO, and promoting the development of an ecosystem approach to farming including the adoption of integrated pest management.

The Committee has also helped guide the development of global standards on pesticides by advising on revisions to the International Code of Conduct on Pesticide Management, and maintaining close links to the Secretariat for the Rotterdam Convention, which covers pesticide trade. At a meeting in 2012, COAG reviewed the latest changes to the Code, managing an improved consultative process that resulted in the successful adoption of the revised Code by FAO's Governing Bodies in 2013.

#### Protecting plants from pests and diseases

COAG and its Member Nations have for many years supported the important activities of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). Fundamental to the success of the IPPC is the continued development and adoption of International Standards for Phytosanitary Measures. Equally as important is the implementation of these measures to safeguard plant resources through capacity development, information exchange and dispute settlement. In its 2012 meeting, COAG again highlighted the work of the IPPC and recommended it be included in FAO's new Strategic Objectives.

COAG's unique ability to provide a technical forum that can help nations respond to regional problems has also been well demonstrated via efforts to control the desert locust. While many countries still use pesticides to control this dreaded pest, in 2005

the Committee supported the development of a new preventive strategy using FAO's Emergency Prevention System for Transboundary Animal and Plant Pests and Diseases (EMPRES).

EMPRES promotes the containment and control of pests and diseases through international cooperation involving early warning, early reaction, coordination and capacity development. In September 2013, FAO launched a preventive locust control campaign in Madagascar, where a locust plague was threatening the food security and livelihoods of 13 million people or nearly 60 percent of the island's population.

In a related matter, and following endorsement from the FAO Council, the Organization's fifth Strategic Objective focuses on increasing "the resilience of livelihoods to disasters" including "emergencies in the food chain (e.g. transboundary plant, forest, animal, aguatic and zoonotic pests and diseases)".

### Recognizing the growth of the livestock sector

In 2005, COAG was among the first global bodies to look at the growing importance of the livestock sector in terms of its demand for land, need for feed, the increasing consumption of animal products, and sustainability. After receiving a report entitled The Globalizing Livestock Sector: Impact of Changing Markets, the Committee endorsed the need for an enhanced capacity building programme by FAO to assist developing countries to take advantage of the opportunities and mitigate the negative effects of globalization of the livestock sector.

In June 2010, COAG asked FAO to investigate the possibility of action in support of the more sustainable development of the livestock sector. The result was a multistakeholder partnership called the Global Agenda for Sustainable Livestock that was then endorsed by COAG in May 2012. The agenda now plays a key role in

FAO's efforts to ensure the sustainable development of the livestock sector.

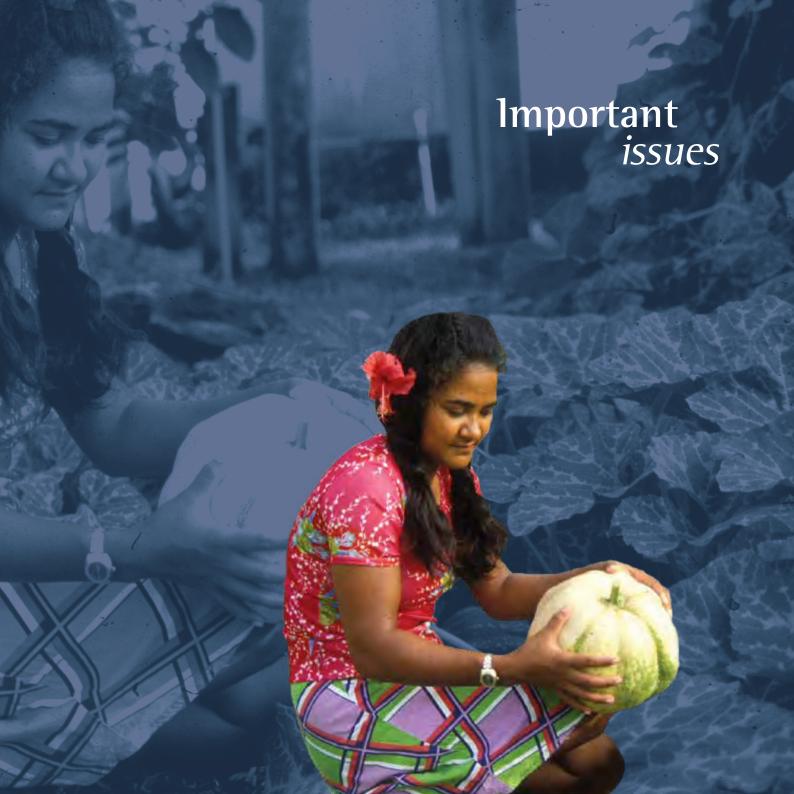
#### Reducing post-harvest losses

In 2010, COAG's Member Nations decided that more attention should be given to the reduction of post-harvest losses. This followed a decade during which the food sector went from one dominated by family-based farms and small-scale, relatively independent companies to one of larger, global companies more tightly integrated and aligned up and down the food supply chain.

Increasing emphasis by the sector on higher value farm products to meet the changing diets of urban consumers had focused renewed attention on postharvest systems.

The Committee received a report entitled The Status of FAO's Work on Post-Harvest Losses. The report warned, "a substantial proportion of the food produced in the world is never consumed and is lost or wasted. In view of these changes FAO and its partners have realigned their strategies aiming to reduce food losses and waste". The new approach focuses on systemic improvements to the efficiency and sustainability of food chains.

Importantly, the report led to COAG advising FAO to include "efforts to combat post-harvest losses and waste in the food chain" in its new Strategic Objectives.



### Biotechnology and biofuels: important new sources of energy and food, or not?

Biotechnology and biofuels are among the most important and contentious issues in agriculture. In 1999, COAG's Member Nations focused their discussions on biotechnology and recommended "that FAO develop a strategic approach to biotechnology and give high priority to a coordinated cross-sectoral programme". The Committee also requested that FAO "assist Members in building the technical capacity to deal with biotechnology".

In response to the COAG recommendation, FAO established the Inter-Departmental Working Group on Biotechnology, which went on to develop the Organization's first position statement on biotechnology and to organize a survey of actual and planned biotechnology activities in FAO. These activities served as an important foundation for future work in biotechnology.

COAG's Member Nations first turned their attention to biofuels in 2009, asking Conference to monitor the "potential and benefits of biofuels". Since that important step, FAO has significantly expanded its work in the area of energy. For example, it has developed the Bioenergy and Food Security Rapid Appraisal programme, which is currently being tested in Malawi and the Philippines. In 2012, FAO launched the multi-partner Energy-Smart Food for People and Climate Programme.

### Sustainability: the key to successful agricultural and rural development

Since the initial development of the Agenda 21 plan of action for sustainable development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, FAO has been leading its implementation in agriculture, with COAG contributing in a number of areas.

In 2005, COAG strongly backed the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) initiative. In 2010, the Committee fully endorsed FAO's plan to support and contribute to the Rio+20 process and to advise member countries on the preparatory process. Further developed and expanded at the Johannesburg Conference in 2012, the SARD Initiative engaged with civil society to develop innovative practices in such areas as women in agriculture.

SARD was also able to inspire and lay the foundations for a number of other innovative approaches in agriculture including:

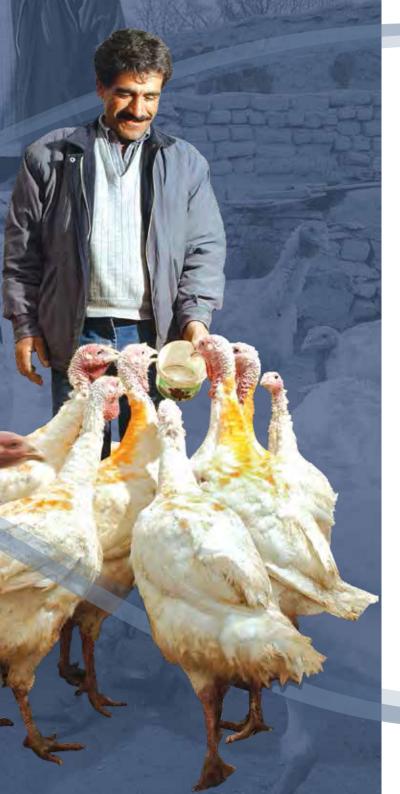
- The Save and Grow initiative:
- The Climate Smart Agriculture Alliance;
- Greening the Economy with Agriculture;
- The Sustainable Assessment of Food and Agricultural Systems.

While backing the Save and Grow initiative in 2012, COAG recommended it to FAO Member Nations and advised them to incorporate relevant aspects of it in their national agricultural development strategies.

### Smallholder agriculture: foundation of food security

A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, published in 2013, described smallholder agriculture as the foundation of food security in many countries and an important part of the socio/economic/ecological landscape in all countries.

The report followed a decision by COAG in 2010 to recommend policies to support smallholder agriculture and to recognize that sustainable smallholder agriculture (including livestock) can provide environmentally friendly, socially equitable and economically viable solutions.



## Save and Grow a new paradigm for agriculture

In 2010, COAG "supported the FAO Strategy for Sustainable Crop Production Intensification through an ecosystem approach ... and requested the Secretariat to refine the programme timetable, provide a financing plan and establish programme indicators". This led to the development of a new global initiative called Save and Grow, which published a well-received policymaker's guide.



The publication was praised by *The New York Times* for putting "greener techniques all together in one document" and *The Wall Street Journal* for "a new approach that will cut agriculture's contribution to climate change".

FAO has gone on to promote Save and Grow in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

### Gender equality in agriculture: fundamental to food security

The gender gap imposes significant costs on society, in terms of lost agricultural output, food security and economic growth. Promoting gender equality is not only good for women but also for sustainable agricultural development. The FAO *State of Food and Agriculture* (2010–2011) estimates that, by giving women the same access to productive resources and rural employment as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30 percent. Production gains of this magnitude could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 percent, which means 100–150 million people.

The FAO Gender Equality Policy – which firmly recognizes this – has received COAG's support, including requests for gender relevant, sex-disaggregated agricultural statistics and the mainstreaming of gender issues.

### Agribusiness and agro-industries: investing in food security

One of the most important developments in global agriculture since the food price crisis of 2007 and 2008 has been the increasing levels of investment in food production and the rapid growth of the agribusiness sector, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In 2007, COAG recommended that "FAO give priority to responding to the challenges of agribusiness and agro-industries development by reinforcing expertise and capacity, providing high quality information and analysis, supporting agro-industry and value chain programmes and enhanced public-private cooperation".

Then in 2010, COAG's Member Nations focused on FAO's existing Strategic Objectives and "emphasized the importance of the work on agribusiness and rural agroindustries, in particular small and medium enterprises, also with a view of expanding rural employment opportunities". The impact of the Committee's work

became clear with the release of FAO's five new Strategic Objectives in 2012.

### Urban and peri-urban agriculture: fresh food and jobs for the cities

Agriculture – including horticulture, livestock, fisheries, forestry, and fodder and milk production – is increasingly spreading to towns and cities. In 1999, COAG first reviewed and discussed the role of urban and peri–urban agriculture (UPA) and recommended that FAO develop an integrated approach to assist member countries to deal with UPA at the policy and technical level.

Since that initial step by COAG, FAO has launched various initiatives in this area including:

- The Growing Greener Cities project to promote urban and peri-urban-horticulture;
- School garden projects in a number of countries;
- Programmes to improve water quality used for urban horticulture;
- The Food for the Cities programme, which since 2001 has supported and coordinated activities focused on urban food security.



### A Global Soil Partnership: support for a vital, silent ally

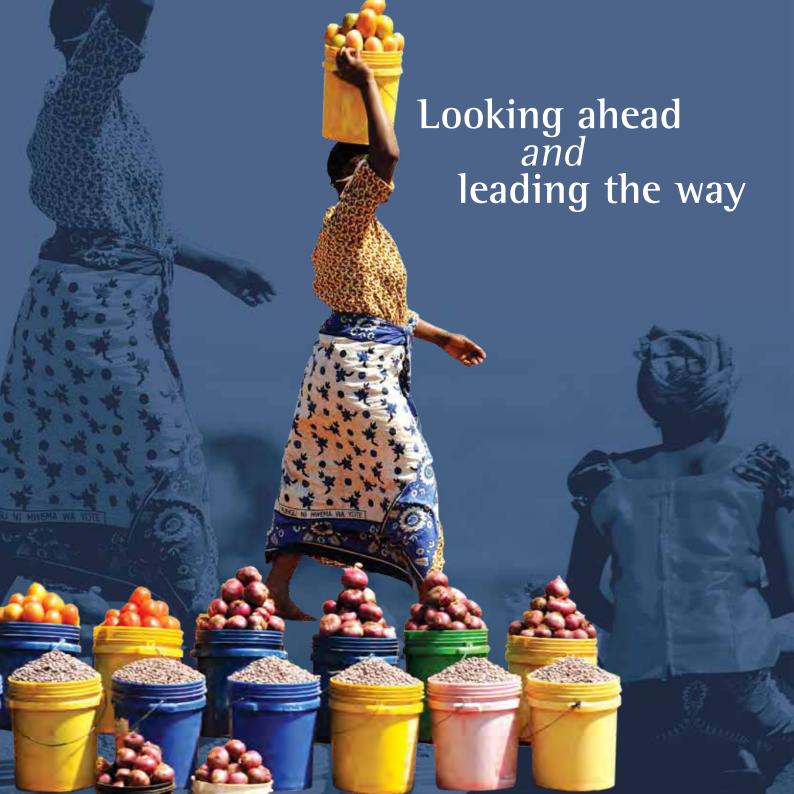
Soils constitute the foundation for healthy food production and thus contribute to food security locally and globally. Population growth and increasing production are placing serious pressure on already degraded soils, a situation which – if left unchecked – will hinder efforts to sustainably increase food production to meet growing societal demands. There is also a misconception that healthy, fertile soils are abundant.

Recognizing these concerns, COAG endorsed the establishment of the Global Soil Partnership in May 2012. Its terms of reference were then endorsed by the FAO Council in December 2012 with the aim of improving the governance of soils and promoting sustainable soil management. The partnership acts as a major vehicle to catalyze effective and concerted actions to halt the pervasive degradation of soils through the promotion and encouragement of investment in sustainable soil management as a priority for food security and sustainable development.

Recognizing the importance of soils and in the framework of the Global Soil Partnership, in December 2013, the 68th General Assembly of the United Nations declared the 5<sup>th</sup> of December World Soil Day and 2015 as the International Year of Soils.

### Water: a vital resource and a major challenge

COAG first looked at the problems facing water use in agriculture in 1999 and warned FAO Council of the "very large gaps in data and information at the country level". In response, FAO became a global leader in collecting, analysing and disseminating data and information on water resources (especially transboundary water resources); and on water use and irrigation through its AQUASTAT Programme, the Organization's global water information system. Committee members encouraged countries to provide the basic data needed for FAO to be able to monitor and analyse the global, regional, national and sub-national availability and use of water resources. FAO also develops methodologies and guidelines and provides technical assistance to countries to improve their assessment and monitoring capacities.



In the FAO Medium Term Plan for 2014-17, Director-General Graziano da Silva set out his vision of the most pressing issues in food and agriculture:

"Major global trends that will frame agricultural development over the medium-term include: rising food demand, lingering food insecurity, malnutrition – including rising obesity levels – rural poverty, increasingly complex agricultural and food systems, more dynamic agricultural trade flows and regulations, climate change, and need for better governance to address increasing agricultural development complexity.

"Taking into account these global trends, as well as FAO's broad mandate, seven main developmental challenges will have special significance for member countries and other development actors to increase agricultural production while ensuring sustainable ecosystem and climate change management; eradicate food insecurity, nutrient deficiencies and unsafe food; improve the quality and balance of food consumption and nutrition; improve the livelihoods of populations in rural areas; ensure more inclusive food and agriculture systems; increase resilience of livelihoods to threats and shocks; and strengthen governance mechanisms".

These issues in one form or another have always been on the agenda of COAG.

The committee has led the way in providing strategic technical advice to FAO, which has helped the Organization make important progress in these areas.

Within the larger UN system, FAO and COAG are firmly committed to the goals of the UN Secretary-General's Zero Hunger Challenge and his call to eliminate hunger in our lifetime by ensuring (1) 100 per cent access to adequate food all year round; (2) no stunted children under two years old, and no more malnutrition in pregnancy and early childhood; (3) all food systems are sustainable; (4) 100 per cent growth in smallholder productivity and income, particularly for women; (5) no loss or waste of food, including responsible consumption.

Looking ahead and under the reviewed strategic framework, COAG will continue to guide FAO throughout the period of Strategic Objectives' implementation, and will continue to provide strategic advice on priority challenges to achieving food security for all.

#### Committee on Agriculture (COAG) Secretariat

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### **OUR PRIORITIES**

### The FAO Strategic Objectives

Achieving FAO's goals to end hunger and poverty is a challenging and complex task. Today, thanks to major changes in how we do business, FAO is a fitter, flatter and more flexible organization, whose activities are driven by five strategic objectives. The new and improved FAO has a real chance to win the battle against hunger, malnutrition and rural poverty.

#### HELP ELIMINATE HUNGER, FOOD INSECURITY AND MALNUTRITION

We contribute to the eradication of hunger by facilitating policies and political commitments to support food security and by making sure that up-to-date information about hunger and nutrition challenges and solutions is available and accessible.

#### MAKE AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY AND FISHERIES MORE PRODUCTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE

We promote evidence-based policies and practices to support highly productive agricultural sectors (crops, livestock, forestry and fisheries), while ensuring that the natural resource base does not suffer in the process.

#### REDUCE RURAL POVERTY

We help the rural poor gain access to the resources and services they need – including rural employment and social protection – to forge a path out of poverty.

#### ENABLE INCLUSIVE AND EFFICIENT AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD SYSTEMS

We help to build safe and efficient food systems that support smallholder agriculture and reduce poverty and hunger in rural areas.

#### INCREASE THE RESILIENCE OF LIVELIHOODS FROM DISASTERS

We help countries to prepare for natural and human-caused disasters by reducing their risk and enhancing the resilience of their food and agricultural systems.