

27th Session of the Committee on Agriculture – Written Correspondence Procedure

Item 2.12: Terms of Reference of the International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture

Secretariat response to written questions from the Committee

1. At its 164th session, the Council endorsed the proposal for hosting by FAO of the International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture (the Platform) and requested review of the terms of reference for this Platform by the COAG, COFI, COFO, the Programme Committee and the FAO Council. In this context, document COAG/2020/22 *Terms of Reference of the International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture* was submitted to the Committee for comments. The Secretariat expresses its thanks and appreciation for the feedback received. The comments and inputs are duly noted, and these will be subsumed into future iterations of the document.
2. Regarding questions related to the mission and objectives of the Platform in formulating policy recommendations, best practices and voluntary guidelines, it may be recalled that the Platform will not be an autonomous legal entity or FAO body. The Platform will facilitate the exchange of knowledge on best practices and policy frameworks that promote the digitalization of food and agriculture within the mandate of FAO, and its recommendations will be voluntary and non-binding.
3. In response to comments regarding the risk of duplication of activities under the mandate of other International Organizations, it is important to note that the Platform, through its Advisory Committee, will create close synergies with International Organizations, including those mandated in policy areas related to digital technologies and the digital economy (such as the International Telecommunication Union - ITU). The objective will be to strengthen collaboration and, more importantly, awareness in the Organizations mandated with the digital economy on issues related to digital technologies in food and agriculture and include these issues in their discussions, without duplicating or prejudging their activities.
4. Regarding questions related to the role of the Platform in addressing the digital divide, it may be noted that the Platform's mission and objectives are aimed at contributing significantly towards bridging the digital divide across regions and countries, rural and urban areas and gender. This will be achieved through inclusive dialogue and the formulation of recommendations, best practices and voluntary guidelines that recognize different contexts and capacities.
5. In response to questions on the structure of the Platform and the role and functions of FAO, the Secretariat wishes to note that the Organization provides a neutral forum where Members can discuss, exchange views and build a common understanding. The convening power and expertise of FAO will greatly facilitate the function of the Platform. FAO hosts and contributes to a number of similar initiatives, as for example, the Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS). Although FAO will host the Platform, contribute to the Platform's Advisory Committee with other International Organizations and stakeholders, and provide day-to-day operational support and management through the Coordination Unit, it is the role of Members in the Inter-governmental Representatives' Group to identify issues and priorities, review and discuss the analysis, and endorse recommendations, best practices and voluntary guidelines.

6. Regarding questions on the level of commitment and engagement required for the Inter-governmental Representatives' Group, the Secretariat would be grateful if participating Members engaged in the Platform with senior officers who are responsible for issues on digital food and agriculture. This would contribute to the efficient and effective functioning of the initiative. FAO and the participating International Organizations will make every effort to present to the Inter-Governmental Group the necessary analysis, evidence base and recommendations for consideration and decision and to maintain Members' commitment within acceptable levels.

7. The Secretariat notes that the envisaged composition and size of the Inter-governmental Representatives' Group (senior officers/experts from 12 Members) would address the need for a light and agile mechanism and ensure that all regions are represented. The establishment of reporting mechanisms with FAO's Governing Bodies (please see point 14. below) will also ensure that proposed recommendations, best practices and voluntary guidelines will be discussed by all Members.

8. The Secretariat notes that the proposed composition of the Advisory Committee, as presented in document COAG/2020/22, includes the International Organizations that had contributed to the discussions on the establishment of the Platform. Additional International Organizations and Regional Organizations can be invited to participate in the Advisory Committee by the Inter-governmental Representatives' Group. The Secretariat notes that in order to address the trade-off between a broad basis and an agile and light structure, it would be appropriate to include in the Advisory Committee 'umbrella' farmers' organizations, private sector associations and specialized non-governmental organizations that have the necessary digital technology expertise to contribute to the work of the Platform. The Secretariat also acknowledges the need for the Advisory Committee to formulate a long-term strategic approach in its engagement, in addition to provisional biennial plans of action, in order to ensure the Platform's effectiveness and sustainability.

9. In response to questions regarding participation in the Online Multi-stakeholders Forum, the Secretariat would like to note that this could be based on the FAO Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum, an online platform for multi-stakeholder dialogue on food security in the FAO ES Stream) to create synergies and cost-savings. This will allow the inclusion in the dialogue of national and local actors, smallholder farmers and small-scale food and agriculture businesses across the world. FSN Forum dialogues are open to everyone and all actors can register, ensuring safe interaction and participation in the context of data privacy. As the Online Multi-stakeholder Forum would specifically focus on digital food and agriculture issues, a number of specialized organizations, associations or NGOs could be invited to participate subject to approval by the Inter-governmental Representatives' Group. Concerning proposals to also organize physical meetings of the Online Multi-stakeholders Forum, the Secretariat proposes to leverage the convening power of FAO and other participating International Organizations to organize periodic face-to-face meetings of all multi-stakeholders, when the restrictions taken to constrain the spread of COVID-19 and should the Platform's budget permit.

10. Regarding questions on the provision of scientific evidence on the benefits and potential risks of digital technologies on food and agriculture, it should be noted that the International Organizations and stakeholders that comprise the Advisory Committee would undertake studies and analyses on the various dimensions of digital technologies' impacts in line with their respective mandates. Depending on the issue analyzed, International Organizations and

stakeholder experts will review and synthesize the data, state-of-art analyses and evidence, and will engage the Online Multi-stakeholder Forum to gain additional evidence. The Advisory Committee will submit documents for consideration and discussion by the Inter-governmental Representatives' Group. In the event that the Advisory Committee has no expertise to address a particular issue, a temporary and *ad hoc* working group can be formed to undertake the analysis. All documents produced by the Advisory Committee will be public to promote transparency and knowledge-sharing.

11. In response to questions regarding the term 'ethical challenges' in document COAG/2020/22, the Secretariat would like to note that various digital technologies and their capacity may have unforeseen consequences or outcomes and therefore, may result to give rise to ethical challenges. The Platform's mission to address this concern is also in line with efforts by the UN Secretary-General's Road Map for Digital Cooperation to promote digital technologies that are trustworthy, human rights-based, safe and sustainable, as well as the work by ITU and UNESCO on the ethics of Artificial Intelligence.

12. Regarding comments on the term 'best practices' in document COAG/2020/22, the Secretariat would like to note that the term denotes the methods that would be generally accepted as having the best possible positive impact as compared with that achieved by other means. As such, methods that will form 'best practices' will be agreed through consensus by the Inter-governmental Representatives' Group, taking into consideration the different contexts and capacities.

13. In response to questions regarding definitions of 'digitalization', 'digital economy' and 'digitalization of food and agriculture', the Secretariat would like to note that such definitions are not internationally agreed. Some useful discussion on definitions can be found at the 2016 World Bank Group's World Development Report: Digital Dividends; and, UNCTAD's 2019 Digital Economy Report 2019, Value creation and capture: Implications for developing countries.

14. Regarding questions on the linkages of the Platform with FAO's Governing Bodies and the development of a reporting mechanism for FAO Members, the Secretariat would like to propose that the Platform reports periodically to the FAO Council so that all Members can monitor its work and assess its value added. In addition, should the Inter-Governmental Group decide that the Platform's recommendations, best practices and voluntary guidelines have implications for policy-makers, the Inter-governmental Group, either as Members or through the Secretariat, would bring those to the attention of FAO's Council and/or relevant technical committees as appropriate.

15. In response to questions on the budget of the Platform, it should be noted that the initiative shall be funded through voluntary contributions from Members and other partners (extra-budgetary contributions). The Secretariat is working to develop a sustainable funding plan for the initiative. Its placement within the office of the FAO Chief Economist will provide an appropriate institutional basis for strong synergies with the FAO Chief Scientist and the FAO Office for Innovation, as well as with the standard-setting bodies housed in FAO on digital technology issues. The Platform will also benefit through synergies with the FSN Forum which is located in the ES Stream, and the Governance and Policy Unit that is also under the FAO Chief Economist. The Platform will be managed by FAO under its mandate and institutional framework.