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A role for FIRMS in support to SDG14.4.1 “Proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels”
Author: FIRMS Secretariat, FAO (a FIRMS partner)

SUMMARY

This document introduces the SDG agenda and the role of FAO as UN custodian agency for SDG indicators, with particular focus on SDG14.4.1 ‘Proportion of fish stocks within biological sustainable levels’. The document then reviews the possible role for FIRMS in support to the monitoring capacity for SDG14.4.1 including consistency across countries and scales. It indicates how such role could leverage on the FIRMS mandate to develop standards for global dissemination of stocks and fisheries status, the original idea of NatFIRMS, and the on-going development of a Global Record of Stocks and Fisheries (GRSF). It finally request the FSC members to formulate an overall position statement regarding such role for FIRMS including the individual partners.

BACKGROUND ON THE SDG PROCESS

In September 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – including 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. Goal 14 is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. Target 14.4 states: “By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics”. Progress towards this target will be measured and monitored through the SDG indicators of which 14.4.1 “Proportion of fish stocks within biological sustainable levels”. A more detailed description of SDGs and the role of FAO can be found in Appendix 1.

The UN SDG initiative has been driven by countries. The SDGs are now the main reference for development policies and programmes at national level. It was agreed that countries have the ownership and that each country has the right to decide what indicators to report within its sovereign territory or Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The 2030 Agenda has set in place a global reporting structure that includes inputs at local, national and regional levels, and culminates in the UN High-Level Political Forum, an annual intergovernmental meeting that provides guidance and recommendations, identifies progress and challenges, and mobilises action to accelerate implementation of the 17 SDGs. Indicators are the foundation of this mutual accountability structure. These global indicators will help countries

measure the progress they are making towards achieving objectives, learn from experiences and understand which areas to prioritise and allocate resources to.

According to the principle of national ownership, countries are chiefly responsible for gathering data. However, international agencies can lend assistance by strengthening national capacities and ensuring that data are comparable and aggregated at sub-regional, regional and global levels. FAO is recognized as having a fundamental global role in developing methods and standards for food and agriculture statistics, and in providing technical assistance that can help countries meet the new monitoring challenges. FAO has been proposed as custodian¹ of 21 SDG indicators central to food and agriculture, i.e. act as facilitator to assist countries with their reporting and to foster strong and coherent institutional and policy environments.

STATUS REGARDING SDG14.4.1

Currently FAO regularly reports as part of its biennial SOFIA publication the state of fish stocks at global level. The SOFIA methodology for global monitoring is established and the indicator was classified as Tier1 indicator for SDGs. However, the current methodology is applied at a regional level and is not easily applicable to country level assessment, particularly to many developing countries, because (i) stock assessment is highly technical and many countries lack of such skills, and (ii) many countries do not have sufficient data to support stock assessment. Although a great effort has been made over last few years and some quick and dirty methods have been developed, these methods are far from being sufficient to evaluate stock status in reality. Continued effort is still required to adapt the indicator in its present form to make it usable by countries and comparable at global scale.

Regarding individual stocks which can be potentially reported under SDG14.4.1, the scope is as follows:

- National Stocks: countries undertake their own stock assessment; where countries have not such capacity, FAO can help build such capacity or the country, if it wishes, can ask other organizations for help.
- Regional/shared/straddling Stocks are under RFMO/RFBs mandate and should be excluded from countries assessment inside EEZs.
- Regional/shared/straddling Stocks out of RFMO/RFB mandate: FAO could come-up with a framework proposing various options regarding attribution rules. COFI could be used to endorse one of the options.

Countries adopting the indicator will be requested to report to the UN on the indicator as a simple percentage value (e.g. “60% of national stocks are within biological sustainable levels”) possibly with additional information such as the percentage of stocks for which the situation is unknown. However countries would also be requested to provide access to the underlying evidence of the status on a stock by stock basis.

FAO is a custodian of SDG14.4.1. Therefore, FAO has to facilitate the process, provide technical support to, and build capacity in member countries towards the reporting of stock status. As custodian, FAO is also responsible for collecting data from national sources, including to ensure that data are comparable and aggregated at sub-regional, regional and global levels, and providing the storyline for the annual global SDG progress report.

FAO’S ACTION AS CUSTODIAN OF SDG INDICATOR 14.4.1

FI is developing a capacity building plan that will help country to:

¹ See <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i6919e.pdf> for more about the role of FAO as custodian agency

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- Understand what SDG 14.4.1 is measuring
 - Know how SDG 14.4.1 is estimated
 - What data and skills are required to estimate SDG 14.4.1
 - What quick and dirty methods are available, their advantages and disadvantages
 - What data sources, tools and infrastructures are available to support assessment
 - Reporting framework rules and monitoring capacity

FAO's general capacity building plan includes the identification of a selected set of stock assessment methods applicable in Data Limited situations (DLM), the guidelines on the monitoring framework, the development of an e-training curriculum, the convening of a global expert workshop where these methods will be peer reviewed for endorsement by regional experts, and where these experts will be trained as trainers.

While FAO will facilitate and provide support, FAO however should not over-push it without considering the real situations of data and technical capacity in many countries, as emphasized by their pursuance of ownership and self-decision making right in the selection of indicators. FAO needs to invest more to develop simple methods that can be used for data-poor situations with fairly reliable results.

With COFI33 (July 2018) being a key milestone for countries to reach agreement and provide guidance to FAO, the key decisions which will need to be taken in establishing the SDG14.4.1 framework are:

- The overall reporting methodology
- The methods to be used, what species should be included, how data should be collected, who should do the assessment, and the reporting framework for SDG14.4.1
- The role of RFBs in facilitating the capacity building process, and consistency in an inventory based approach should this option be selected.

ROLE FOR FIRMS

The Fisheries and Resources Monitoring System (FIRMS), an information sharing partnership facilitating access to information on the status of stocks, fisheries and their management for which FAO holds the Secretariat, constitutes a key reference instrument to help FAO fulfil its custodianship role.

As laid out above, decisions need to be prepared concerning the reporting framework and the related action plan. Ownership of consistent and comparable reporting lies in countries. Ensuring comparability and consistency globally would require FAO to establish a transparent framework with agreed rules. Options for organizing the reporting framework are:

- Implementing a standards' based inventory mechanism with traceability and transparency from national through regional to global level would strengthen SOFIA's indicator on the state of stocks. Such mechanism may benefit from the standards set up by the FIRMS and be further adapted as required.
- A monitoring framework may be set up with support from the FIRMS data dissemination framework for use by countries to enable/facilitate their dissemination of individual stock status.
- The assessment and reporting framework should be discussed and agreed by all countries at COFI 2018

FIRMS CURRENT INSTITUTIONAL SET-UP

Currently, 14 international organizations representing 19 RFBs are FIRMS members. FAO provides the FIRMS Secretariat and FIRMS has been solidly anchored in the recently established

FAO Strategic Programme 2 “Productive and sustainable food production systems”, with positive resources implications.

FSC9 agreed that in order to increase the monitoring coverage, more RFB partners should be invited to join. In this regard, Letters of invitation are being sent by the Chair and Secretariat to RFBs not yet members of FIRMS.

In terms of coverage, FIRMS’s current primary focus is to disseminate information about shared stocks under RFBs mandates. However some of these RFBs (notably the RFBs with mandates on coastal resources) also disseminate stock status reports of national stocks / assessment units. Under certain RFBs’ umbrella, FIRMS also disseminate national fisheries inventories (e.g. CECAF, RECOFI, WECAFC) and these may be the only source of status information of fishery resources in data limited situations. Here one also may refer to the WIOFISH fisheries inventory database used by SWIOFC, or the Operational Units database used by GFCM.

Article 1.1 of the FIRMS Partnership Arrangement states that the principal objective of this Partnership is to establish a framework between the Partners that will promote development and extension of fisheries status and trends reporting to all fisheries resources. As a matter of facts, the eventual expansion of the FIRMS monitoring coverage at the national level has been envisaged since FIRMS inception and the FIRMS Partnership Arrangement made provisions in this respect:

5.1 Eligibility of partners

5.1.1 National institutions, mandated by a national government, and intergovernmental bodies, that hold responsibilities for the preparation or publication of fisheries information relevant to the framework of the partnership may become a Partner.

5.1.2 Only one institution per country endorsed by its national government may become a FIRMS Partner. That institution may act as focal point to other institutions in a given country, as appropriate.

It was however agreed that FIRMS would initially develop and consolidate with RFBs’ Members only.

NatFIRMS

The expansion of FIRMS to national level has been examined by subsequent FIRMS Steering Committee under the concept of NatFIRMS. At FSC6 in April 2010, key questions related to NatFIRMS were reviewed (see Appendix 2), and FSC6 concluded with few important points:

- Further steps to NatFIRMS development can be initiated; these would include considering modifications to Rules of Procedures; developing guidelines for Partners; COFI is the appropriate forum.
- NatFIRMS is understood to be a separate entity, while obviously many interactions with FIRMS have to be catered for in its implementation.
- While NatFIRMS is established, nations may decide to contribute information to FIRMS via RFBs.
- Agreed that the operational context of NatFIRMS will require close coordination and interoperability with FIRMS, and that the role of each FIRMS Partner will be important in this respect.
- Agreed that maximum benefit of NatFIRMS would likely be realized ... under the following priorities: maintaining high levels of support for FIRMS; and focusing capacity building in developing regions.

GLOBAL RECORD OF STOCKS AND FISHERIES (GRSF)

FSC9 informed FIRMS Partners about the project to develop a Global Record of Stocks and Fisheries (GRSF) under the EU BlueBRIDGE project. GRSF would enable to register a comprehensive list of distinct stocks and fisheries as part of a Global record which will federate knowledge on status/trends of stocks and fisheries across various sources, and as such is

expected to offer key services to stakeholders involved in “regional/global state of stocks indicators”, as well as public and private actors involved in eco-labelling, traceability and sustainable fisheries.

FSC9 supported the project idea and recommended that an active participation of FIRMS or selected Partners would be important to influence the way this Global Record will be shaped. The BlueBRIDGE project started in September 2015 and GRSF has been the matter of a key attention with two meetings dedicated to its development. CCAMLR, FAO, NAFO, and WECAFC have represented FIRMS at the joint FIRMS-TWG5 x BlueBRIDGE-EAB1 meeting (March 2016) as well as at the BlueBRIDGE-EAB2 meeting (March 2017).

Progress on GRSF development is reported at FSC10, providing an opportunity to FIRMS partners to assess its potential to effectively supplement FIRMS with more monitoring capacities for national stocks and fisheries, and provide concrete ground for NatFIRMS in the context of SDG14.4.1 framework.

It is here noted that the Partnership Arrangement states:

3.2 The Partners will contribute to FIRMS according to their mandate. To this effect the Partners will be responsible inter alia, for:

3.2.2 collating fishery information, or establishing databases jointly with FAO or with others;

FIRMS STANDARDS

Importantly, FIRMS has developed global information standards compiled in its Information Management Policy (IMP) to facilitate comparability among single stock status reports. The FIRMS inventory provides a structure and rules for organizing stock status reports across geographic scales (local < national < regional < global) and across time (considering changes affecting assessment units). A standard bi-dimensional stock status dissemination scale has been adopted, used by Partners for mapping to their own reporting standard, which ensures comparability and transparency among disseminated stock status reports. It is also mandatory for stock status reports disseminated through FIRMS to link to sources of information.

In other words, the FIRMS standards would provide a unique reference framework for implementation of SDG14.4.1. As a matter of facts, FIRMS standards prevail in developing the GRSF and its declared objective of a Unique Identifier standard for stocks and fisheries; FIRMS standards can also be further consolidated thanks to feedback gained from GRSF’s strong national perspective.

SUMMARY

A baseline is that ownership of consistent and comparable reporting lies in countries.

The SDG14.4.1 policy framework and the GRSF as a possible instrument for implementing NatFIRMS together create a momentum to realise the vision developed by FSC6 of an interconnected FIRMS and NatFIRMS capacity. This set-up would enable FAO to propose a transparent monitoring framework for SDG14.4.1 with agreed rules aiming at comparability among countries and consistency across scales.

This option would imply organizing the SDG14.4.1 reporting framework by implementing a standards’ based inventory mechanism with traceability and consistent aggregation from national through regional to global level; such mechanism requires consistency among stocks disseminated at national level and stocks disseminated at regional level through FIRMS; such mechanism can build from the standards set up by FIRMS and further consolidated through the GRSF development; such mechanism would strengthen SOFIA’s global indicator on the state of stocks by building more systematically on both regional and national level stocks.

FIRMS and GRSF can be flexibly used to propose a monitoring capacity for use by countries to facilitate their dissemination of individual stock status. In their reporting to the UN on the

SDG14.4.1 indicator, this dissemination facility may enable countries (in particular developing countries) to provide links to the underlying evidence of single stock status.

The assessment and reporting framework should be discussed and agreed by all countries at COFI 2018. In anticipation of this event and in order to prepare a decision, it is important that a solid position be elaborated about the FIRMS and GRSF option. The FSC10 constitute an important milestone and FIRMS partners are requested to make a statement on the feasibility of this option together with the relevant recommendations.

ACTION REQUESTED BY FSC10:

FSC10 is requested:

1. To identify potential issues which might arise when disseminating national inventories of stock status jointly with RFBs regional level inventories, keeping in mind the ultimate goal to strengthen SOFIA's global indicator on the state of stocks. This discussion could be informed by the presentation of the on-going pilot exercise aiming at comparing SOMFI and SOFIA state of stocks for the Mediterranean, and how FIRMS can assist such process.
2. To review GRSF including current status and further development plans and:
 - advise on workflow and procedures for serving a consistent SDG14.4.1 monitoring framework;
 - advise on the proposed data services;
 - advise on data sharing issues;
 - advise on business model and governance options and on the role of FIRMS Secretariat and of FIRMS Partners.
3. To provide guidance regarding the specific role of FIRMS in facilitating the SDG14.4.1 process (including role for the Secretariat as well as for the Partners), with specific attention to i) the outreach aspects, ii) capacity building aspects, and iii) to the consistency in an inventory based approach in particular at the interface between regional and national stocks.
4. To consider current FIRMS status on dissemination workflow, timeliness, coverage, standards, Secretariat capacity, rules of procedures, and to advise on conditions and steps which should be followed for FIRMS and GRSF to effectively provide a monitoring framework for SDG14.4.1
5. To formulate an overall position statement encompassing the above considerations, for FAO management considerations and for use during the development process of the SDG14.4.1 reporting framework.

Appendix 1 - Background on the SDG Framework

1. In September 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – including 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. The Agenda commits the international community to end poverty and hunger and achieve sustainable development in all three dimensions (social, economic and environmental) over the next 15 years (2016-2030). The SDGs are the first Member State-led global development push in history, laying out specific objectives for countries to meet by a given timeframe with achievements monitored periodically to measure progress. Each country is reviewing the 17 goals to determine how they can be translated into feasible but ambitious development plans, and how they can commit national resources to produce real change – based on their own priorities, needs, stage of development, capacities, resources, strategies, partnerships and means of implementation.

2. SDG14 ‘Life below water’ is dedicated to humanity’s interactions with the oceans. Goal 14 is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. It covers a range of issues in the area of conservation and sustainable use, with seven targets and three means of implementation to respond to the urgent need for transformative change toward more sustainable practices. The fourth target “fisheries management and value” (SDG 14.4) states: By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics.

3. Under each target, selected indicators have been set in order to monitor the progress towards implementation of the Goals. According to the principle of national ownership, countries are chiefly responsible for gathering data. However, international agencies can lend assistance by strengthening national capacities and ensuring that data are comparable and aggregated at sub-regional, regional and global levels. FAO is recognized as having a fundamental global role in developing methods and standards for food and agriculture statistics, and in providing technical assistance that can help countries meet the new monitoring challenges. FAO has been proposed as custodian² of 21 SDG indicators central to food and agriculture, i.e. act as facilitator to assist countries with their reporting and to foster strong and coherent institutional and policy environments.

4. As owners of the process, countries:

- are in a position to assess the status of stocks under their full responsibility
- have the decision making right.
- are consulted and are in a position to understand why stocks are presented with given status.
- report themselves on the status of stocks.
- agree on a corporate process and related rules for reporting on status of stocks, this leads to transparency.

Appendix 2 - NatFIRMS (extracted from report of FIRMS SC6
ftp://ftp.fao.org/fi/DOCUMENT/FIGIS_FIRMS/2010/report.pdf)

² See <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i6919e.pdf> for more about the role of FAO as custodian agency

82. Based on all the above considerations, the Chairperson and Secretariat proposed a scenario which was tested by the meeting on a number of examples. Agreement was reached on the concept as a way forward, and the following principles would constitute a basis for the development of NatFIRMS

- NatFIRMS is understood to be a separate entity, while obviously many interactions with FIRMS have to be catered for in its implementation.
- The meeting agreed that developing NatFIRMS will provide an opportunity to strengthen collection and dissemination of fishery information and data at the national level, which is expected to lead to an increase in the geographical and thematic scopes such as social and economic data. This would lead to a strengthening of capacities for enhanced information sharing and fisheries management in developing countries.
- In recognizing the potential value of NatFIRMS, the Steering Committee noted that nations may contribute information to FIRMS via RFBs, and it reiterated the overarching principles under which FIRMS was constituted and exists, including the principles of primary competences and of information ownership enjoyed by Regional Fishery Bodies. “Competences” are here understood to derive from institutional mandates. The many such mandates may be described in terms of geographic areas; assessment and/or management of living resources; and considerations of socio economic concerns.

83. The meeting agreed that the operational context of NatFIRMS will require close coordination and interoperability with FIRMS and will include the following:

- NatFIRMS would be expected to facilitate the collation and furnishing of information relevant to FIRMS activities from nations that are not a part of a RFB;
- Recognising that RFB partners already interact with national members, with regard to information exchange on resources and fisheries, and that NatFIRMS may contribute to information sharing mechanisms while strengthening member country capacities;
- RFB partners that collaborate with partners of NatFIRMS should convey to the FIRMS Steering Committee the guidelines or requirements for publishing information that originates from these collaborations;
- In the case of a new RFB partner to FIRMS, responsibility for the publishing of information formerly posted in NatFIRMS for which competency is now held by the RFB will be handled under the overarching principles recalled above;
- Recognition that the maximum benefit of NatFIRMS would likely be realized by developing high flexibility to respond to the needs of NatFIRMS partners, and under the following priorities: by maintaining high levels of support for FIRMS; and by focusing capacity building in developing regions, which would be expected to strengthen national and regional information-dependent processes, particularly in regard to the ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF).

Decisions

- Members not present at this meeting will be notified of this proposal regarding NatFIRMS.
- The meeting agreed that under the principles and operational context outlined in paragraphs 64-72, and providing that this proposal is adopted by consensus of all the partners, further steps to NatFIRMS development can be initiated. This would include considering modifications to Rules of Procedures as needed, developing a Map of Operational areas, and developing guidelines for Partners.
- COFI is the appropriate forum to present both FIRMS progress and the NatFIRMS concept, in order to gain further insight regarding State interest and to receive their guidance.