

164th Session of the Council

Item 9: International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture

I. Introduction

Food systems are in dire need of innovative solutions to address interlinked challenges, such as ensuring food security and nutrition for all, contributing to inclusive growth and managing natural resources sustainably. Digitalization can play an increasingly important role in achieving the global goal of improving food security and rural livelihoods. Digital technologies boost connectivity, reduce inefficiencies, provide access to information and stimulate cooperation across the value chain. Digital technologies can have a tremendous impact, making agriculture more productive, sustainable and efficient. Although the opportunities offered by digital technologies are vast and profoundly transformative, there are also underlying risks.

Although digital technologies affect all sectors of the economy and society as a whole, their impacts on agriculture can be specific and can give rise to challenges that should be addressed by policymakers.

The proposed Platform would not duplicate other UN entities' (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), etc.) work, but would complement it by creating linkages between international organizations and *fora* that focus on food and agriculture, and those that work on the digital economy. Creating such linkages is important for the development of an environment that is conducive to the application of digital technologies and agricultural development.

II. Process

In January 2019, the Agriculture Ministers of 74 Nations, during the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA),¹ requested FAO in consultation with international organizations and stakeholders to develop a concept note for the establishment of an 'International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture'.

FAO started working closely with other international organizations and engaged other stakeholders in the consultations. The process included a series of workshops and a broad online consultation using FAO's Food Security Network. FAO organized a side event during the Committee on World Food Security last October, where Members had the opportunity to be informed of this multi-stakeholder initiative and discussed its objectives.

The concept note was finalized in January 2020 and considered by the GFFA Berlin Agriculture Ministers' Conference on 18 January. As a result, 72 ministers for agriculture called upon FAO and its governing bodies to support the establishment of the Digital Council.²

Although the ministers requested FAO to work on establishing an 'International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture,' FAO proposes that the governing bodies change the name of this initiative to 'International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture'. The term 'platform' better reflects the nature and functions of this initiative. It is a multi-stakeholder forum where information is shared, and issues are

¹ See the 2019 GFFA Communiqué: <https://www.gffa-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/GFFA-2019-Communiqué.pdf>

² See the 2020 GFFA Communiqué: <https://www.gffa-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GFFA-Communiqué-2020-EN.pdf>

discussed to develop a shared understanding of the benefits and risks of digitalization and achieve a consensus on the way forward.

FAO houses similar initiatives, such as the Global Soil Partnership, Global Framework on Water Scarcity in Agriculture (WASAG) and the Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS).

In the context of digital technologies, the proposal for establishing the Platform is in accordance with the UN Secretary-General's Strategy on New Technologies that supports multi-stakeholder dialogue on normative frameworks that support these technologies to build trust and confidence. It is also in line with the recommendation of the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation for developing multi-stakeholder or bilateral initiatives on specific issues.

III. Objective and roles of the proposed International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture

The broad objective of the proposed International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture would be to provide a forum for examining and discussing the potential benefits and risks of digitalization of agriculture and providing advice and guidance to governments. These would be **voluntary and not legally binding** and aimed at supporting decision-making at higher levels.

The Platform will be a voluntary initiative, and the functions will entail: i) drive the exchange of ideas and experiences and act as a **coordination mechanism**; (ii) act as a **policy adviser** to governments to harness the opportunities presented by the digitalization.

Coordination Mechanism

This role entails the facilitation of the dialogue between governments and a diverse spectrum of stakeholders, such as farmers' organizations, civil society, technologists, academics and the private sector.

More importantly, this coordination role will aim to bridge the gap between the organizations and *fora* where the digital economy is discussed (such as in ITU) and, more specifically, those that focus on food and agriculture. Currently, there is no link between these two processes and issues related to digital technology applications on agriculture are not covered in the digital economy *fora*. The proposed Platform would bridge this gap by strengthening cooperation between International Organizations and *fora* mandated on food and agriculture and those that focus on the digital economy. It would raise awareness on agriculture, so that related impacts are considered and discussed within the digital economy *fora*.

Policy Adviser

Policies and regulations will be vital in maximizing the benefits of digital technology and minimizing their risks. Through open dialogue and consultations, the proposed Platform would support governments and policymakers to formulate policies by developing voluntary guidelines, norms and principles that can address the technical, social and ethical challenges the sector is facing in the context of digital technology. Policy advice deliverables will be reviewed by the FAO Members that would participate in the proposed Platform before they are issued.

IV. Operating Mechanism of the proposed International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture

To fulfil the foreseeable roles as coordinator and policy advisor, the envisaged Platform will assume an agile and inclusive structure as follows:

The **Inter-governmental Representative's Group** would serve as the decision-making body of the Platform. This Group will be composed of experts from the Members or experts nominated by Members, ensuring that all regions are represented. There will be 12 members/delegates: two from Africa, two from Asia, two from Europe, two from Latin America and the Caribbean, two from the Near East and two from North America and the Southwest Pacific region. This Group would identify issues, set the Digital Platform's priority list, deliberate on best practices and recommendations submitted by international organizations and experts (the Advisory Committee, see below), and assess the initiative's overall effectiveness and performance. These Members will elect a Chair and Vice-Chair.

The **Advisory Committee** would be composed of international organizations and technical experts. It would also include experts from farmers' organizations, the private sector, NGOs, and it would undertake most of the technical work. The Advisory Committee would work on issues requested by the Inter-governmental Representatives Group, ensuring that these would be discussed by all stakeholders (in the Multistakeholder Forum, see below) and by forming ad hoc Working Groups, if the need arises. The Advisory Committee would make proposals (on best practices or recommendations) to the Inter-governmental Group for discussion and endorsement.

The **Multistakeholder Forum** – an online forum open to stakeholders would ensure inclusion and a bottom-up approach at a low cost. If there is a need to address specific issues (such as, for example, Artificial Intelligence for which the Advisory Committee may have no expertise) the international organizations and other experts could form ad hoc Working Groups. The Multistakeholder Forum would involve farmers through their umbrella associations, such as the World Farmers' Organization and regional associations. It would include NGOs, academia and the private sector.

The **Coordination Unit** would provide day-to-day operational and administrative support to the Digital Platform's activities and technical support. It will be funded by voluntary and extrabudgetary contributions and will be comprised of a Director (D1), a professional Officer (P4) and an administrative assistant (G3).

The rules and procedures that would guide these groups would be discussed later by the Members who would participate in the initiative.