**Towards the establishment of an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture**

**About this online discussion**

During the 2019 Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA), governments and international organizations committed to harnessing the potential of digitalization to increase agricultural productivity, while improving rural livelihoods and environmental sustainability. In this context, FAO was asked to develop a concept note for the establishment of an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture in consultation with the World Bank, African Development Bank,  International Fund for Agricultural Development, World Food Programme, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, World Trade Organization, International Telecommunication Union, World Organisation for Animal Health and the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation.

Against this background, the online discussion *Towards the establishment of an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture* was held on the FAO Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) to solicit feedback on key sections of a draft version of the concept note. The online discussion, facilitated by Samuel Varas and Meng Zeng from FAO, took place from 17 October to 8 November 2019.

Over the three weeks of discussion, participants from 43 countries shared 108 contributions, which are summarized in this document. The introduction to the discussion topic and the contributions received are available on the discussion page:

<http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/digital_council>

**General views on the establishment of an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture**

Multiple participants noted the advantages of establishing an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture (hereafter Council): it could help promote sustainable food production (Joseph Bagjaray) in the context of population growth (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and climate change (Bonaventure Temba, Olanike Deji) and also improve farmers’ livelihoods (Mahesh Chander, Joseph Bagjaray). Furthermore, the Council could help bridge digital divides (Hamad Lyimo, Poda Damas), build innovation systems (Madjid Bouzidi), facilitate sharing of information and lessons learned (Policarpo Tamele, Ateca Kama, Guillermo Martinez, Virendra Kamalvanshi) and advocate for digitalization in the agricultural sector (Robert Kibaya).

Other participants were more critical, stressing that it should first be determined whether digitalization would effectively address the existing challenges in the food and agriculture sector (Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, hereafter ETC Group). Importantly, digitalization should not automatically be deemed positive or desirable (European Commission, AFSA, FIAN International, INKOTA), and should be regarded as a tool rather than an objective (European Commission, INKOTA, Theodor Friedrich).

Furthermore, participants argued that establishing the Council could undermine people’s livelihoods due to power imbalances in favour of the private sector (Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, hereafter IATP). Others stressed that the lack of regulation in the field of digital agriculture cannot be addressed through a generic forum with private sector actors – such as information and communications technology (ICT) companies – who are engaging for the first time with the food sector, have a conflict of interest (Andrea Ferrante), and are generally driven by the accumulation of private profit at the expense of public goods (AFSA). Moreover, digitization efforts often target a specific problem, but lose sight of the overall objective of ensuring food security in a sustainable manner while recognizing the agency of food system actors (IATP). In this context, it is crucial that the Council’s activities are guided by a human rights-based approach (FIAN International, AFSA, Society for International Development, INKOTA, IATP, ETC Group). This also implies that small-scale producers should be part of discussions on the establishment of the Council and should not be subject to incorporation into industrial systems (AFSA).

Last, some participants highlighted that during the 2019 GFFA, no clear mandate was created for establishing the Council (Australia, New Zealand) and that, in fact, there would be no need for it: digitalization would be best addressed in a sectoral and neutral manner, and creating another platform for this topic would constitute a duplication of efforts (New Zealand). Related to this, others stressed the need to clearly show how the Council would add value (European Commission, Australia, United States of America).

The online discussion also prompted participants’ feedback through a series of questions pertaining to various sections or aspects of the concept note, as detailed below.

**Question 1: What are the potential entry points for governments to address challenges and foster the development of digital agriculture?** *(*[*Click here for the relevant section of the concept note*](http://assets.fsnforum.fao.org.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/public/files/162_Digital_Council/Discussion_guide_Q1.pdf)*)*

The concept note proposes a list of challenges the global food and agriculture sectors face, written in the form of entry points to address them. Some participants found the list to be exhaustive. At the same time, however, some stressed that the Council should not overstretch itself (Segun Ogunwale). In addition, as the entry points are very generic and hence also relevant to other development sectors, they should be addressed from a broader development perspective (Caroline Figuères).

Other participants found the list to be inconclusive (European Commission), pointing out that stakeholder needs will change over time (Dele Raheem). In addition, some highlighted that the items mentioned cannot be called entry points as they are formulated in a negative way (France), and that challenges and entry points should be addressed separately. Moreover, entry points should be described in more detail and involve actors other than governments (European Commission).

In addition, participants shared specific comments and questions regarding the challenges as described in the concept note:

**Inadequate access to information**

* It should be clarified how farmers are currently informed of available digital tools and their benefits.
* Data should be available for free and in appropriate formats.

(European Commission)

* The focus should be on making information available in a format that is easy to understand and use (France).

**Inadequate digital literacy and skills development**

* Farmers and food processors also need management skills.
* The digital gap between older farmers and the rest of population needs to closed.

(European Commission)

* The need to provide access to training on digital technologies should be added (Argentina), specifically for farmers interested in using digital tools (European Commission).
* Technological development must not only replace labour but also build capacity of the workforce to perform less arduous or more value-creating tasks (France).
* This would not only affect the agricultural labour force but also other actors across the system (Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Agricultores y Ganaderos, hereafter COAG).
* The need to improve cooperation with mobile companies, vocational schools and farmer organizations should be addressed (Gian Linard Nicolay).

**Inadequate access to financial resources**

* Investments in digital technology must suit farmers’ needs and financial capacity, and result in concrete added value in a relatively short time (France). Reluctance to invest often stems from the fact that the cost-benefit ratio is not favourable enough (COAG).
* Tools that promote incentives for emerging entrepreneurs and that boost youth employment should be considered (Argentina).
* Small and medium enterprises engaged in digital agriculture services need financial support especially in their early stages of development (China).

**Inadequate infrastructure**

* The digital divide should be addressed by including the provision of broadband connectivity in rural and agricultural policies (European Commission).
* Reference should be made to: a) the need to expand the fibre optic network in each country, and b) digital divides between countries and the need to find mechanisms to reduce them (Argentina).

**Inadequate support from the innovation system**

Implementing new innovations also involves setting up information and training systems that allow stakeholders to benefit from them (France).

**The increase of socio-economic divides between developing and developed countries**

* This should be reworded as “the increase of socio-economic divides within and between countries” (Australia).
* These divides will widen if no action is taken to intervene in the digitalization process currently being driven by private companies. Countries should focus on the provision of digital infrastructure as a basic public service, with net neutrality being a key aim (INKOTA, IATP).
* The following divides should be included: a) socio-economic divides within countries and societies (Lars Kahner); b) sociocultural divides (Mebit Kebede); c) digital divides between large and small farms or within the food chain (European Commission); d) generational divides (European Commission, COAG); e) legal divides (Pascal Bonnet); and f) the digital divide between rural and urban areas (COAG, Gian Linard Nicolay, Marco Meneses, Oladele I. Osanyinlusi).

**Lack of investments in non-developed countries**

* This problem is also relevant to developed countries (European Commission).
* It is key to design technological responses that are market-based: i.e. if a market exists, and if it corresponds to needs, the private sector will invest in solutions for which a return on investment is expected (France).

**Low affordability of new solutions**

* This needs to be further elaborated regarding good regulations, new business models and voucher support schemes.
* There is a need to: a) design tools that are useful to farmers; b) increase farmers’ involvement in the design and management of digital services; and c) analyse context-specific technologies (European Commission).
* Low affordability is not necessarily restricted to new solutions; business models are required that can bring solutions to scale, whether new or old (Lars Kahner).

**Trust of information**

* The fact that farmers do not sufficiently benefit from the data value chain should be highlighted (European Commission).
* Users must not depend on a single supplier of data and information. Monitoring systems to ensure the veracity of information and its dissemination must be set up and supervised by independent bodies (France).
* Governments must put in place frameworks to ensure that industry treats data securely, while respecting farmers’ privacy (Leanne Wiseman).
* Science-based information can enhance trust – therefore, there is a need to cooperate with research institutes (Gian Linard Nicolay).

**Data ownership**

* A cause for concern is the issue of “datafication” (European Commission).
* It is not clear how data is used and shared, and how data security is being ensured (China).
* Farmers should have freedom of choice to provide or not provide data about themselves. Their access to this data must be guaranteed, and they must be protected against any reuse of it that would be detrimental to their own interests (France).
* Uniform regulations on data ownership should be developed (Hungary).
* Data should belong to whoever generates it (COAG, AFSA). States should develop legal mechanisms to ensure this ownership, with the overall aim to prevent exacerbation of existing inequalities (IATP).
* Approaches based on collective rights to access and use of data need to be developed to identify solutions that prioritize the public interest and ensure inclusive decision-making (FIAN International).
* Data protection (Lars Kahner) and data sovereignty should be added to this section (INKOTA).
* Policy and legal analysis of data ownership in terms of access and use should be included. Open data vs negotiated access is an emerging dichotomy, and the division between “data-rich” and “data-poor” is sharp. This area of work could be linked to the “digital divide" by adopting a capability approach (Daniele Manzella).
* Companies are already collecting and storing immense quantities of data on farmers, but ownership of their data is not regulated – this process must be stopped immediately (Andrea Ferrante).

**Additional challenges**

Participants highlighted additional challenges, sometimes suggesting accompanying entry points. A shared concern was that of corporate power in the global food, agriculture and ICT sectors (European Commission, FIAN International, INKOTA, ETC Group), which calls for, *inter alia*, stricter anti-trust law and more effective taxation measures (INKOTA). They stressed that this concentration of power exacerbates inequalities (ETC Group, INKOTA) and that digitalization itself can increase inequality and lead to new forms of dispossession (FIAN International).

Participants also highlighted the power of the private sector whereby it can introduce digital innovations in the absence of comprehensive impact assessments or governmental regulatory frameworks, which undermines democracy (Andrea Ferrante). Furthermore, engagement of stakeholders such as farmers and indigenous people is inadequate (COAG, Foluke O. Areola, Andy Nyamekye). A citizen-centred approach should be adopted (COAG, Andy Nyamekye), with support for civil society-led processes on digital agriculture (Andrea Ferrante), taking into account the gender aspects of digital agriculture (Society for International Development, Olanike Deji). Moreover, violation of human rights in digitalization processes should incur strict penalties (AFSA).

Furthermore, the consequences of digitalization for the environment (European Commission, FIAN International, AFSA, ETC Group, IATP) and health (FIAN International, AFSA) should be considered. These relate to the manufacture and use of hardware, such as impacts from mining, energy consumption, waste generation and disposal, and different types of emissions. Studies highlighting health risks related to technologies such as 5G should also be recognized (FIAN International).

Last, participants mentioned a wide range of other challenges related to issues such as policy harmonization (Foluke O. Areola), security concerns (James Wire), data anonymization techniques (Nenad Dragoljic) and inefficient public services (Muhammad Subhan Qureshi). A major challenge would be gathering context-specific data; the Council could support the mobilization of resources to realize this goal (Ana Islas Ramos).

**Other entry points and actions**

Some participants shared separate entry points to which the concept note does not explicitly or sufficiently refer, including the following:

* *Establish cooperation between organizations from different sectors and levels.* Collaboration should involve local organizations (Olanike Deji) and the public and private sector (Nenad Dragoljic, Sophie Treinen). Furthermore, the Council should partner with organizations that have already collected data related to local requirements and dynamics (Virendra Kamalvanshi).
* *Create an enabling environment for private investment.* A regulatory environment that encourages information sharing (David Dion, Nenad Dragoljic) and the development of digital infrastructure (David Dion) should be established.
* *Implement a broad ecosystem of innovation*. Interdisciplinary research centres working in the field of digital agriculture are crucial to developing such a system (Pascal Bonnet).
* *Enhance investment in youth.* Youth should be central to efforts promoting digitalization (Jean Claude Ndayambaje). Young people can help promote the use of digital technologies in agriculture (Mary Mwema): as they are often familiar with ICT and at the same time face unemployment challenges, their engagement in digital agriculture should be encouraged (Placidius Rwechungura, Junko Nakai). To facilitate this, digital agriculture should be included in school curricula (Ibukunoluwa Adedeji).
* *Ensure information is provided in local languages* (Nenad Dragoljic, Taimur Hyat, Foluke O. Areola, Sophie Treinen, John Ede). For instance, digital platforms should be built in local languages (Poda Damas) and technical as well as non-technical information on agriculture should be translated (Taimur Hyat).
* *Provide farmers with general support and specific assistance related to digitalization*. This entails: a) making agricultural inputs and services available (Gullapalli Koteswara Rao, Harish Jana); b) facilitating access to digital markets (Gullapalli Koteswara Rao, Nenad Dragoljic); c) providing support schemes for assuring connectivity for farmers; d) linking financial technology companies with farmers; e) implementing an advisory system on digitalization (European Commission); f) enhancing e-extension services (Elijah Masika Ndinyo); and g) developing toll-free lines or free text messaging systems to exchange information with farmers (John Ede).
* *Strengthen digital infrastructure in rural areas.* Multiple participants stressed that this should be among the Council’s priorities; this would be particularly crucial in addressing rural-urban inequalities (AFSA).

*The process of defining appropriate entry points*

Some participants discussed aspects to consider before and during the process of defining entry points. It would first be necessary to determine whether a country is interested in digitalization (Irina Kravetc) and to define its specific requirements (Omoyemen Lucia Odigie-Emmanuel). Overall, a comprehensive assessment of the current use of digital technologies should be carried out (European Commission, Nenad Dragoljic), and initiatives in the field of digital agriculture should undergo adequate risk analysis (European Commission, ECT Group).

In fact, understanding costs and benefits of technologies (Erand Llanaj, Dele Raheem) as well as factors determining their uptake (European Commission, Ecuador, Erand Llanaj) is crucial for identifying adequate government interventions (Erand Llanaj). Opening this process up to citizens would allow for inclusion of different viewpoints and context-specific information (Guillermo Martinez, Dele Raheem).

Last, as digitalization may also affect the work of governments, an understanding of the role technology can play in different stages of the policy cycle is needed. Digitalization may create new responsibilities but also help reduce information asymmetries and transactions costs, which may lessen the need for government intervention (Erand Llanaj).

**Question 2: How can the establishment of the Council address the numerous barriers to adopt these technologies?**[*(Click here for the relevant section of the concept note)*](http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/sites/default/files/files/162_Digital_Council/Discussion_guide_Q2.pdf)

The concept note proposes that the Council adhere to several principles, by which it should be inclusive, neutral, accessible, autonomous, accretive, efficient, ethical and scalable. Participants provided comments on the following principles as described in the concept note:

**Be inclusive**

* The Council should recognize that not all countries are at the same level of development in terms of digital agriculture (European Commission).
* The Council should be designed in an inclusive way (Pascal Bonnet) and adhere to the CFS principles of participation and representation. There should be a balance of constituencies, gender and regions (INKOTA), and farmers must be adequately represented (COAG).
* Actors such as financial institutions, IT companies and experts, and donors should be mentioned in this section, as they will be crucial in rolling out digital solutions (David Dion).

**Be neutral**

* When selecting technologies, potential socio-economic and environmental impacts should be considered (European Commission).
* The main criterion should be the value offered to rural people in terms of increasing their sovereignty and income and managing their farms sustainably. Furthermore, the aim should be to bridge socio-economic gaps (INKOTA, IATP), recognizing regional and demographic disparities (IATP).
* The Council should not be neutral, but rather focus on advancing the progressive realization of human rights (AFSA).
* The Council should not accelerate the digital agriculture transition, but rather ensure that the agricultural sector makes best use of digital technologies (Gian Linard Nicolay).

**Be accessible**

* Accessibility should also be ensured for the elderly and there should be mitigation measures for any social group that is left behind as a consequence of technological transformation (France).
* Priority should be given to ensuring the Council’s visibility: farmers all over the world should know about the Council and how to benefit from its activities (Fidelis Eyoh Ukume).
* Solutions should be made available and affordable through collaboration with the private sector and farming communities (Gian Linard Nicolay).

**Be ethical**

The Council should ensure that ethical principles guide technology design, development, testing, manufacturing, distribution, usage, ownership, control and benefits (AFSA).

**Be scalable**

* The end user(s) need to be further defined (European Commission).
* Scalability is key as it may favour software-based solutions that are easily transferred to new contexts (United States of America).

Participants suggested adding the following principles:

* *Be accountable* (Gian Linard Nicolay, Erand Llanaj, Segun Ogunwale)**.**
* *Be adaptive* (Justine Mwanje).
* *Be apolitical* (Segun Ogunwale).
* *Be connected*. The Council should connect to existing tools, research and best practices (United States of America).
* *Be fair*(Mebit Kebede) / *honest*. Digitalization can result in unexpected and controversial impacts, which must be fairly addressed (European Commission). In addition, the Council should ensure that all acts are legal, standardized and transparent (China).
* *Be forward-looking* (Andy Nyamekye).
* *Be informed*. For effective and ethical decision-making, Council members require training on the implications of digitalization (Leanne Wiseman).
* *Be loyal*. The Council should provide consistent support to rural people (Mebit Kebede).
* *Be reflexive* (Andy Nyamekye).
* *Be reliable* (Erand Llanaj).
* *Be responsive to scientific evidence* (Daniele Manzella).
* *Be transparent* (Mebit Kebede, Erand Llanaj).

**Question 3: Do you think that the roles identified for the Digital Council are suitable for facing the food systems challenges outlined above?** *(*[*Click here for the relevant section of the concept note*](http://assets.fsnforum.fao.org.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/public/files/162_Digital_Council/Discussion_guide_Q3.pdf)*)*

**General feedback on the proposed roles for the Council**

Different opinions were shared on the Council’s roles as proposed in the concept note. Some countries (Argentina, Hungary) and multiple participants believed them to be suitable, although some highlighted the need to adequately engage stakeholders, including national focal points (Erand Llanaj), farmers (Society for International Development, Leanne Wiseman, Vijay Vallabh Barthwal), the private sector (Leanne Wiseman, Fostina Mani), women and youth (Fostina Mani, Society for International Development), and indigenous people. In general, the establishment of the Council’s roles should be people-centred (Society for International Development).

Participants also shared feedback of a more critical nature:

* The roles do not match the challenges outlined and lack recommendations on regulating digital agriculture (INKOTA).
* The roles are suitable to a certain extent – one should look critically at the diverse challenges smallholders face and public budget allocations to agriculture (Robert Kibaya).
* The Council’s roles are not evenly distributed; there seems to be an emphasis on addressing the knowledge gap (Madjid Bouzidi).
* It is not clear whether the Council will work in convergence with structures that are already in place; the Council should not negatively impact these existing structures (Mahesh Chander).
* The country-by-country approach hampers the timely adoption of a global approach; this, in turn, hinders achievement of the SDGs (Jacques Drolet).

Regarding the way in which the roles are presented, participants stressed that: a) the figure in the concept note is not consistent; b) some elements are repetitive; c) a distinction should be made between one-time activities and short-, medium- and long-term actions; and d) a description of a strategic approach to the Council’s work should be included (European Commission). Participants also shared feedback on the specific roles proposed, as follows.

**Role 1: Building a central knowledge hub**

Participants stressed that rather than a knowledge hub, a knowledge and innovation system could instead be developed, encompassing communication between stakeholders and processes of co-creation and knowledge transfer (European Commission). As social sciences study exactly these processes, they should be part of the approach (Pascal Bonnet).

Other contributions included feedback on specific aspects as outlined under Role 1:

* “Aggregation of existing research and resources”:
  + It is essential to use the results of research, and only conduct new research when necessary (Kossi Amessinou).
  + This aspect should be reviewed with a focus on implementation in developing countries (Gullapalli Koteswara Rao).
* “Highlights of new technologies”:
  + This should be changed to “highlights of new technologies and models” (China).
  + Technologies such as remote sensing should be considered for examination and adoption (Gullapalli Koteswara Rao).
* “A synthesis of the ways that target farmers can progress in implementing various digital technologies”:
  + This should also include “various digital models and policies” (China).
  + Technologies based on domestic conditions should be developed (Gullapalli Koteswara Rao).

Participants suggested the inclusion of two additional items: a) the provision of information services to market players, including family farms (China); and b) the creation of a national inventory of digital initiatives (Nenad Dragoljic).

**Role 2: Policy and regulatory framework for digitalization**

One the one hand, participants stressed that this role may go beyond the Council’s scope as agreed at the GFFA (European Commission). The Council may guide countries and develop recommendations (European Commission, IATP) but should not create regulations (European Commission). Moreover, any advice or guidance provided by the Council should be voluntary, non-prescriptive and non-binding (United States of America). On the other hand, other participants argued that regulatory power is needed for the Council to address the adverse impacts of digitalization (Andrea Ferrante) and, conversely, to allow people to enjoy the benefits associated with digitalization (Oliver Onyeodili).

Other comments included feedback on specific aspects as outlined under Role 2:

* “Tools for nations and local governments": Progress could be reported through an annual “global e-agriculture index”. This benchmarking instrument would allow implementing governments to reflect on their performance, and others to identify market potential (Chris Ndungu).
* “Nations would gain practical suggestions to foster digitalization in agriculture”: The meaning of this needs to be clarified (European Commission).
* “Methods for closing gaps in these areas”:
  + Collaboration among different actors can be promoted but should include those most affected, and adequately address their needs (Society for International Development).
  + The elements “methods for closing gaps in these areas” and “collaboration could be an effective way to enable digitalization in an inclusive way” should be linked (European Commission).

**Three ecosystem gaps**

The concept note describes three “ecosystem gaps” the Council should address: the “innovator”, “integrator” and “informer” gaps. Some participants noted that the definition of these gaps is adequate, but that a distinction should be made between the local, national, regional and global levels (Gian Linard Nicolay). Other participants argued that the description of the gaps is not conclusive. Regarding the *innovator gap*, participants commented that this issue goes beyond a lack of R&D tailored to local contexts (European Commission), and that a reference to the digital divide should be included (Daniele Manzella). Another participant argued that the problem would not necessarily be a lack of innovation, but limited scaling up and adoption retained by sustainable business models. In fact, instead there is an “investor” gap, as resources are needed to attract investment in digital agriculture (Segun Ogunwale). Comments on the *integrator gap* suggested that this aspect should be described differently if it is to reflect the need for increased multistakeholder collaboration (European Commission).

**Additional roles for the Council**

Participants also suggested other roles the Council could take on, such as:

* conducting capacity building efforts (European Commission, John Ede, Leanne Wiseman) to build a cadre of digitally skilled advocates for digital transformation (David Dion) and to strengthen computer literacy of extension staff (Aftab Khan).
* providing immediate and real-time information in emergencies and humanitarian situations (Aftab Khan);
* carrying out advocacy efforts (Foluke O. Areola) to: a) encourage governments to embrace digital technology (James Wire); b) promote investment in digital agriculture (Andy Nyamekye, Segun Ogunwale); and c) help establish lower prices for agricultural technologies to help poorer countries (Fidelis Eyoh Ukume);
* making shared platforms available, including: a) a national directory of digital solutions and their providers; b) a national data portal on digitalization; and c) an orchestration platform for feedback management and partnerships (Segun Ogunwale).
* providing guidance for the design and implementation of technologies and regulatory frameworks that advance human rights, which entails: a) assessing the potential impact of ICT on food systems and food security (France, FIAN International, Mahamadou Koutou); b) hearing different viewpoints, especially those of small-scale food producers and marginalized groups, which feed into these processes; c) putting forward norms and principles that should guide R&D and the application of digital technology; and d) exploring approaches based on collective rights to data access and use (FIAN International).

**Question 4. What governance structure should be in place in order for the Council to serve its purpose?** [*(Click here for the relevant section of the concept note)*](http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/sites/default/files/files/162_Digital_Council/Discussion_guide_Q4.pdf)

**Adequacy of the proposed governance structure**

The concept note includes an illustration depicting the Council’s proposed governance structure) and an explanation of its different units. Multiple countries (Ecuador, Guatemala, Hungary) and participants agreed with this structure (Guillermo Martinez), pointing out that it is politically feasible (Emmanuel Nwite, Mahamoudou Koutou) and allows the Council to serve its purpose (Ecuador).

However, other participants stressed that the structure would reflect a top-down approach (Sangya Kaphle, Caroline Figuères) and that it would not allow for early local buy-in (David Dion). An Executive Council, far removed from practice and with a predetermined number of seats, would run the risk of being motivated by political reasons rather than by needs and results (Sangya Kaphle, David Dion). Instead, the Council should embrace bottom-up participation (Caroline Figuères) and be built on the principle of self-determination. Hence, power imbalances should be addressed (IATP, FIAN International) and private sector participation should be strictly limited (AFSA). Other participants stressed, however, that the digital sector should be adequately represented (European Commission, Fostina Mani). In any case, the Council should work closely with other parts of the UN system so that mutually beneficial and coordinated strategies and policies can be developed in the public interest (IATP).

In addition, participants stressed the general need to clarify the roles of the stakeholders, including those of signatory governments, international organizations, and stakeholders in non-signatory countries (European Commission). Some raised the question of who would set priorities for the Council’s work (AFSA), pointing out that member countries should be able to propose specific topics to focus on (European Commission). Other participants wondered how accountability would be ensured (AFSA), stressing the need to apply a human rights-based accountability framework (FIAN International).

**Main operational units of the Council**

Participants shared the following feedback on the Council’s proposed operational units:

*Executive Council*

* It should be clarified whether stakeholders that are not represented in the Executive Council will have an observer role.
* The Executive Council is described as an expert group, while working groups are set up in parallel – these can form expert groups as well (European Commission).
* The meaning of “a balanced representation of critical mid- to senior-level voices” needs to be clarified (France).
* There is no criteria for choosing the delegates (Foluke O. Areola). These should not (all) be nominated by governments, which may nominate people for political reasons (Emmanuel Nwite, Foluke O. Areola).
* Decision-making should be carried out at the state level (Society for International Development).
* Marginalized groups (INKOTA), particularly women and farmers, should be represented.
* Women’s leadership would help address gender inequality (Aftab Khan).

*Advisory Committee*

* The Committee’s roles could include advocacy (Segun Ogunwale).
* The Committee should ensure inclusiveness and transparency (Foluke O. Areola).
* There is a need for country or regional representation in the Committee (John Ede).

*Secretariat*

Details on the number of members and the Secretariat’s composition are lacking (France).

*Working Groups*

* There is no explanation of the relation between Working Groups and the Executive Council.
* The Working Groups’ activities could be outsourced (European Commission).
* The role and composition of the Working Groups should be clarified (Fostina Mani).
* There should be specific Working Groups for different world regions (Eugene Ryazanov).
* Working Groups should be established on: a) development of agricultural competences; b) digital technology and its legislation; c) precision and site-specific crop production and gardening; d) precision farming and plant protection; e) remote sensing and use of unmanned aerial vehicles in agriculture; f) precision engines and machinery, robotization; g) digital solutions in the food industry; and h) digital solutions and services in rural development (Hungary).
* The Working Groups should address the following challenges: a) access to digital infrastructure or technologies; b) regulation of corporate control; c) questions of data sovereignty, ownership and storage; and d) digitalization and planetary boundaries (INKOTA).

Furthermore, participants highlighted that the proposed monitoring and evaluation mechanism needs to be described in more detail (Argentina, Foluke O. Areola, Segun Ogunwale).

Last, participants suggested the establishment of the following additional operational units:

* a technical team that focuses on specific country situations and searches for funds to establish local research and development projects (Ecuador);
* an accountability governance unit to ensure implementation of the Executive Council’s agenda (Erand Llanaj);
* units that engage at different levels, such as: a) regional units to promote regional cooperation (Aftab Khan); b) a mechanism for periodic engagement with governments at national, regional and international levels (Foluke O. Areola); c) branches of the Council in locations close to the stakeholders (Dele Raheem); and d) national-level councils (David Dion, Abdesslam Omerani).

**Other governance scenarios**

Some participants discussed other governance scenarios for consideration:

* Members of the Council should be digital experts only rather than government representatives (Australia, New Zealand, David Ojo), and recommendations of the Council should be non-binding (Australia, New Zealand). The issues and suggestions raised by panel experts could be sent to relevant existing working groups or commissions on progress (Australia).
* The Council should be established within the UN system (ETC Group, FIAN International, IATP) and should be anchored in the international human rights framework (IATP, FIAN International). Representation should be balanced, and the Council should be inclusive of those with critical views. Transparency, inclusiveness and public participation should be guiding principles (ETC Group).
* Several participants stressed that the CFS should be a guiding example for the Council’s functioning, mandate and principles (Society for International Development), and that the Council should work under its guidance (Andrea Ferrante).
* One participant recommended a network scenario where the Secretariat would exchange information with regional and national nodes and the Executive Council would be responsible for strategic decisions. All operational decisions should be taken at the regional, national and local levels (Gian Linard Nicolay).
* An open governance model would be essential to realize digital transformation at the grassroots level. This model could consist of a Secretariat, community interest groups, technology interest groups, peer support groups, and working groups with independent reporting structures. Decisions should be based on evidence, with results shared and discussed transparently, engaging the vulnerable and those most affected by digitalization (Sangya Kaphle, David Dion).
* Council members should be independent and come from all world regions; FAO country or regional offices can facilitate administrative and virtual meetings (John Ede).

**Question 5: Please add any other comment or relevant content you think should be included in the concept note.**

Participants also shared other feedback. Some stressed that the concept note should be better aligned with the SDGs, and that the Council’s overarching mandate and objectives should be clarified. Participants pointed out that the Council’s main objectives and priorities should be to: a) address issues of data protection and offer a platform for partnership between public and private actors in the digital and agricultural sectors (European Commission); b) establish an information platform for and by agricultural producers (Irina Kravetc); and c) contribute to the transition towards steady-state and de-growth economies based on clean energy (AFSA).

Regarding the organization of the Council’s work, participants suggested that this should be tailored to different geographical areas, distinguishing between urban and rural areas. The Council’s scope should cover the entire food chain, while specific attention should be paid to small and medium enterprises (European Commission). In addition, its working mechanism should reflect the important role of small-scale food producers (FIAN International). Furthermore, instead of imposing the introduction of digital agriculture, the Council should rather foster the uptake of digital technologies by promoting their benefits in agricultural communities. While some participants stressed that solutions should be tailor-made (European Commission, United States of America), another participant argued that the focus should be on using uniform technologies (Emmanuel Nwite).

Last, participants stressed the need to define the Council’s funding mechanisms (European Commission, Australia, Foluke O. Areola) and financial support principles. This is especially important in relation to the provision of financial support to developing countries (Yrysbek Abdurasulov) in the field of capacity building and infrastructure development (Argentina).

**Resources shared by participants**

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