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# PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

**Hundred and Thirty-seventh Session**

**Rome, 6-10 November 2023**

**Evaluation of FAO's support to life below water (SDG 14)**

**Management Response**

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## I. Introduction

1. Management would like to express appreciation for the comprehensive evaluation of FAO's work in support of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG14), and the interactive nature of this Evaluation with stakeholders as well as with fisheries and aquaculture officers in the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division (NFI) and in Decentralized Offices. Management appreciates the recognition of the important role of FAO in relation to SDG14, which includes the custodianship of four out of ten SDG 14 indicators. Furthermore, these four indicators (14.4, 14.6, 14.7 and 14.b) are classified as Tier 1, indicating that they have well-established, agreed and internationally applicable methodologies and standards, and data are regularly produced by countries. Only one other SDG 14 indicator (14.5) is classified as Tier 1. Perhaps this success could have been reflected in the Evaluation.

2. We appreciate the conclusions that the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 has aligned the Organization's work with SDG 14 targets and that FAO's work on SDG 14 responds to the needs and requests of Members as expressed in the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI). We also appreciate the positive comments expressed on the quality and value of the flagship report *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture* (SOFIA), our successes in developing normative products and international standards, and the value of the partnerships FAO has developed over time to deliver SDG 14.

3. Before responding to the specific recommendations of the Evaluation, Management would like to comment on two specific findings:

- a) Finding (para 7). "*The FAO Strategic Framework omits SDG14.1 [Marine Pollution] and the Blue Transformation Roadmap includes minimal references to this SDG*". Management would like to note that FAO works on promoting social, economic, and environmentally sustainable food production systems, including aquatic food systems. In the context of marine pollution this includes: assessing the impacts of plastic pollution on aquatic foods, and on human health after consuming aquatic foods exposed to microplastics, assessing the impacts of greenhouse gasses on ecosystem dynamics, assessing and reducing marine litter associated with fishing and aquaculture and implementing the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Aquaculture (EAA) in our work. All these aspects are part of FAO's programme of work in fisheries and aquaculture. Management specifically refers to the GloLitter project, implemented by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in collaboration with FAO, to assist developing countries to prevent and reduce marine plastic litter from the maritime transport and fisheries sectors and identify opportunities for the reduction of plastic uses in both fisheries and maritime transport sectors. This project is the first to address this problem at a global level. As mentioned below, the recently endorsed FAO Guidelines for Sustainable Aquaculture make several references to risk management in the development of aquaculture, including reduction of effluents and other environmental impacts. FAO's work on pollution is primarily determined by its mandate and respects the mandate of other agencies who are partners in the above initiatives.
- b) Finding (para 16). "*Communication on the status of fish stocks is sometimes confusing and potentially misleading*". FAO appreciates the complexity of this issue and its technical elements, which may lead to misunderstandings. Every two years FAO provides regional and global estimates of two indicators of stock status: a) percentage of marine fish stocks sustainably fished, irrespective of their abundance and catch (currently 64.6 percent and deteriorating) and b) percentage of the volume of landings that come from sustainably fished stocks (currently 82.5 percent and improving). These estimates are based on stocks that account for about 75-80 percent of the global landings for which FAO has information, and thus are a good proxy for the status of global fisheries. When combined, these two indicators suggest that while the status of global fisheries continues to be of concern, on average larger fish stocks (in volume of catch) are better managed, demonstrating that fisheries management works and that management improvements are essential to help rebuild stocks. The analyses reflect the complexity of the topic, combining assessments of all national and regional authorities with FAO analyses for data-limited stocks that are not subject to formal assessments.

## II. Response by recommendation

4. In relation to the specific recommendations, Management would like to offer the following comments:

**Recommendation 1: Submit a request to the next 2025 Comprehensive Review of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators.** *This request should entail a comprehensive review of the utility, validity and alignment of SDG 14 targets and indicators under FAO's custodianship. The proposal should specifically include the review of indicator 14.6.1 or the framing of one additional indicator related to fisheries subsidies under target 14.6.*

**Response:** The Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG – SDG) is responsible for developing and updating the indicator framework of 232+ indicators to monitor the 17 SDGs and the 169 associated targets. It is accepted that the alignment between SDG targets and indicators could be improved, especially as new information becomes available. For example, the implementation of the recent World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement on fisheries subsidies may facilitate the development of an additional indicator in support of SDG 14.6. Within its mandate, FAO agrees with this recommendation and intends to conduct an internal review of all the indicators under its responsibility, and if appropriate make proposals for additional indicators to better match SDG indicators and their targets.

**Recommendation 2. Improve the quality of SDG 14 data published.** *This requires reconciling discrepancies in fish stock status reporting by different sources (national data by governments versus regional and global data by SOFIA), addressing data gaps in small-scale fisheries, improving communications on the status of fish stocks and, to the extent possible, sustaining partnerships established as part of the Illuminating Hidden Harvests global initiative to extend the coverage of data on small-scale fisheries and support to countries providing data.*

**Response:** Management agrees with the Evaluation on the importance of reconciling national reports on fish stock status with regional and global estimations provided in the FAO SOFIA report. However, it has to be recognized that rather than discrepancies, what the Evaluation has identified are two different processes that over time should provide consistent information. Process 1 - The SOFIA assessment, which is conducted on the basis of about 500 aggregated stocks that since 1974 are monitored and assessed following agreed and published methodology, and when available uses data from national and regional authorities. This assessment is aggregated by FAO fishing regions as well as globally and reported every two years in the SOFIA reports. Process 2 - In recent years the above has been combined with biennial questionnaires from countries to report on their stock status in relation to indicator 14.4.1. In the first of such questionnaires 98 countries responded, with the indicator validated for 30 countries, while a further 29 had their results flagged as “unreliable”. It is too early for the data from Process 2 to reach the level of consistency and quality of the data we have in Process 1, but we expect this Process to improve and over time align with SOFIA sustainability averages. To do so FAO is conducting a series of regional workshops with national authorities to update the list of stocks considered in the above analyses in search of additional consistency. These processes have highlighted the challenges faced by some countries in determining stock status, including deficiencies in fisheries data collection, insufficient scientific expertise and insufficient communication amongst stakeholders. To address this issue, FAO released an e-learning course in November 2019 and ran eight capacity building workshops for data collection on catch, effort and biological data between the end of 2019 and 2022. These workshops have been attended by more than 70 countries and over 500 participants. Finally, FAO is working on a proposal for a medium-term global project to address the capacity of countries to report on the multiple indicators associated with SDG 14.

**Recommendation 3. Create a sustainable programme to build national capacity for fisheries data collection and robust stock assessments.** *This requires leveraging FAO’s experience and expertise in fisheries data collection and stock assessment, developing a sustainable funding strategy, and building effective partnerships to accelerate progress.*

**Response:** Management agrees with this recommendation. In one of the key messages of the 2022 edition of SOFIA FAO stated that “...*Improving global fisheries management remains crucial to restore ecosystems to a healthy and productive state...*”. Consistent with this message and with this recommendation, FAO is already preparing a proposal for a programme under the Blue Transformation umbrella, for supporting the development of the capacity of member countries on the production of fisheries management advice, that includes collection, management and analysis of data, and the assessment of fish stocks and fisheries, particularly for data limited stocks. This programme specifically responds to objective 2 of the Blue Transformation Roadmap (“*Effective management of all fisheries delivers healthy stocks and secures equitable livelihoods*”). Subject to resource mobilization efforts the programme should be in place in the next biennium.

**Recommendation 4. Continue to lead a shift to “better” food production by developing an intersectoral approach that addresses tradeoffs posed by aquaculture intensification and reduces risks of food production systems to oceans.** *This approach may include strengthening existing strategies, guidelines and policy; leading the development of rigorous global standards and indicators for aquaculture sustainability; and promoting an aggressive consumer awareness strategy to empower consumer choices that promote sustainability of marine ecosystems.*

**Response:** Management would like to first note that aquaculture is not explicitly included in any SDG 14 target, although some of the indicators implicitly include aquaculture in their calculations. With this caveat, FAO has been working with its Members in the development of FAO Guidelines for Sustainable Aquaculture (GSA), following the call in the 2021 COFI Declaration for Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture (<https://shorturl.at/dhpDG>) for “...*new and ongoing inclusive sustainable aquaculture development programmes*”. These Guidelines, endorsed in May 2023 by the FAO COFI Sub-Committee on Aquaculture, and to be tabled at the FAO Committee on Fisheries in July 2024, make several references to the importance of reducing environmental risks in the development of aquaculture and considering tradeoffs, for example clause 4.2.8 (“...*in order to optimize production and productivity, minimize environmental impacts, and stress and disease...*”) or clause 5.1.2 (“...*conserve, protect, enhance and restore aquatic ecosystems, their services, and their biodiversity, water, and soil resources, while preventing pollution of land, water and sea*”). As the first global agreement on sustainable aquaculture, a properly funded programme for implementation of these Guidelines will specifically respond to this recommendation. Furthermore, the Blue Transformation Roadmap identifies a number of Programme Priority Areas under the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 for which aquaculture intensification and expansion are relevant. These include BP5 (Digital agriculture), BE1 (Climate change mitigating and adapted agrifood systems), BE2 (Bioeconomy for sustainable food and agriculture), BE3 (Biodiversity and ecosystem services for food and agriculture), BL2 (Inclusive rural transformation), BE4 (Achieving sustainable urban food systems), BL3 (Agriculture and food emergencies) and BL6 (Scaling up investment), where the tradeoffs would be considered at intersectoral level, consistent with the recommendation.

**Recommendation 5. Embed free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in FAO’s project cycle ensuring that it is designed, implemented, monitored and reported in all relevant projects.** *This may be included as one of the elements of the action plan recommended below but is a priority that requires immediate action.*

**Response:** FPIC allows Indigenous Peoples to provide or withhold/ withdraw consent, at any point, regarding projects impacting their territories. FPIC also allows Indigenous Peoples to engage in negotiations to shape the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of projects. FAO will ensure compliance with its commitment to FPIC in relation to relevant projects, but also flags that this requires the allocation of dedicated resources and timing in funding mechanisms provided by FAO’s development partners.

**Recommendation 6. Engage to empower key stakeholders – including women, youth, people with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples – to maximize their active participation in, and contributions to, SDG 14-related work.** *To this end, develop an action plan that values and leverages the knowledge, capacities and needs of different groups—such as people with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples. Elements of this action plan may include, for example, embedding FPIC in the project cycle; mapping and developing strategies to address gaps in SDG 14 normative frameworks; strengthening data collection and reporting for monitoring; and possibly expanding FAO’s efforts in social protection and decent work in fisheries and aquaculture.*

**Response:** FAO is already working extensively in relation to empowering women in fisheries, in particular in relation to SDG 14.b. Referring specifically to the work of the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division (NFI, FAO performed a gender stocktaking exercise in 2022 in NFI to provide a basis for better gender mainstreaming. The stocktaking exercise assessed how well gender equality has been reflected/incorporated in the work of the Division and highlighted gaps, good practices and opportunities for action, to better mainstream gender in the work of the Division. The next steps include the implementation of the NFI Gender Action Plan 2022-2025, the development of the NFI Gender Help-Desk and internal trainings and capacity building of NFI personnel by thematic areas (i. FAO Policy on Gender Equality 2020-2030; ii. Gender concepts, tools and approaches; iii. Gender mainstreaming in projects and programmes), as well as increase fundraising, visibility and collaborations. Similarly, FAO is already upscaling efforts to empower Indigenous Peoples and youth. This resulted for example in a session dedicated to fisheries in the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) in July 2023, as well as the commissioning of studies on Indigenous Peoples’ fisheries in Mesoamerica. The participation of Indigenous Youth from fishing communities in the upcoming World Food Forum is also actively supported. FAO is also developing an action plan to engage and empower youth in the fisheries and aquaculture sector and several meetings have taken place with other units for this purpose. The call to expand efforts in social protection and decent work in fisheries and aquaculture, which is particularly relevant for people with disabilities, is welcomed.

*Evaluation of FAO's support to life below water (SDG 14) - Management response matrix*

Evaluation Recommendation	Management response <b>Accepted</b> <b>Partially Accepted</b> <b>or</b> <b>Rejected</b>	Management Actions to be taken, and/or comments about partial acceptance or rejection	Responsible unit	Time frame	Further funding required (Y or N)
<p><b>Recommendation 1: Submit a request to the next 2025 Comprehensive Review of the Inter- Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators.</b> <i>This request should entail a comprehensive review of the utility, validity and alignment of SDG 14 targets and indicators under FAO's custodianship. The proposal should specifically include the review of indicator 14.6.1 or the framing of one additional indicator related to fisheries subsidies under target 14.6.</i></p>	<b>Accepted</b>	FAO intends to start this process by conducting an internal review of all the indicators under its responsibility, and the identification of possible alternative actions to take for this improvement. The request for the Comprehensive review will be informed by this deeper analysis.	NFI in consultation with Office of Chief Statistician (OCS)	2024-2025	Y for new indicators linked to the WTO Agreement on fisheries subsidies
<p><b>Recommendation 2: Improve the quality of SDG 14 data published.</b> <i>This requires reconciling discrepancies in fish stock status reporting by different sources (national data by governments versus regional and global data by SOFIA), addressing data gaps in small-scale fisheries, improving communications on the status of fish stocks and, to the extent possible, sustaining partnerships established as part of the Illuminating Hidden Harvests global initiative to extend the coverage of data on small-scale fisheries and support to countries providing data.</i></p>	<b>Accepted</b>	FAO agrees with the Evaluation report on the importance of reconciling national reports on fish stock status with regional and global estimations provided in the FAO SOFIA report. However, it has to be recognized that rather than discrepancies what the Evaluation has identified are two different processes (one that started in 1974 and the second only in 2020) that over time should provide consistent information. The Fisheries and Aquaculture Division has already identified the issue and is working in this direction. A proposal for a medium-term project to build capacity of countries to report on the multiple indicators associated with SDG 14 will be prepared, with a wide participation, and submitted to potential donors for funding.	NFI	2024-2025	Y (extrabudgetary)

Evaluation Recommendation	Management response <b>Accepted</b> <b>Partially Accepted</b> or <b>Rejected</b>	Management Actions to be taken, and/or comments about partial acceptance or rejection	Responsible unit	Time frame	Further funding required (Y or N)
<p><b>Recommendation 3: Create a sustainable programme to build national capacity for fisheries data collection and robust stock assessments.</b></p> <p><i>This requires leveraging FAO's experience and expertise in fisheries data collection and stock assessment, developing a sustainable funding strategy, and building effective partnerships to accelerate progress.</i></p>	<b>Accepted</b>	<p>The Fisheries and Aquaculture Division is preparing a proposal for a programme for supporting the development of the capacity of member countries on the production of fisheries management advice, that includes collection, management and analysis of data, and the assessment of fish stocks and fisheries.</p> <p>This process will be accelerated and is expected to be working in the next biennium.</p>	NFI	2023-2025	Y (extrabudgetary)
<p><b>Recommendation 4. Continue to lead a shift to “better” food production by developing an intersectoral approach that addresses tradeoffs posed by aquaculture intensification and reduces risks of food production systems to oceans. This approach may include strengthening existing strategies, guidelines and policy; leading the development of rigorous global standards and indicators for aquaculture sustainability; and promoting an aggressive consumer awareness strategy to empower consumer choices that promote sustainability of marine ecosystems.</b></p>	<b>Accepted</b>	<p>FAO has been working with its Members in the development of FAO Guidelines for Sustainable Aquaculture (GSA), following the COFI Declaration for Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture call for “...new and ongoing inclusive sustainable aquaculture development programmes”. These Guidelines, endorsed in May 2023 by the FAO COFI Sub-Committee on Aquaculture, make several references to the importance of reducing environmental risks in the development of aquaculture and considering tradeoffs. As the first global agreement on sustainable aquaculture, a properly funded programme for implementation of these Guidelines will specifically respond to this recommendation. Furthermore, aquaculture intensification and expansion are relevant to several Programme Priority Areas (PPAs) in the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31, where the tradeoffs would be considered at intersectoral</p>	NFI and other Divisions and Offices to PPAs: BP5, BE1, BE2, BE3, BL2, BE4, BL3 and BL6	2023-2031	N

Evaluation Recommendation	Management response <b>Accepted</b> <b>Partially Accepted</b> <b>or</b> <b>Rejected</b>	Management Actions to be taken, and/or comments about partial acceptance or rejection	Responsible unit	Time frame	Further funding required (Y or N)
		level, consistent with the recommendation.			
<p><b>Recommendation 5. Embed FPIC in FAO’s project cycle ensuring that it is designed, implemented, monitored and reported in all relevant projects.</b> <i>This may be included as one of the elements of the action plan recommended below but is a priority that requires immediate action.</i></p>	<b>Accepted</b>	<p>FPIC allows Indigenous Peoples to provide or withhold/withdraw consent, at any point, regarding projects impacting their territories. FPIC also allows Indigenous Peoples to engage in negotiations to shape the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of projects. FAO will ensure compliance with its commitment to FPIC in relation to relevant projects, but also flags that this requires the allocation of dedicated resources and timing in funding mechanisms provided by FAO’s development partners.</p>	<p>NFI and FAO Units responsible for FPIC compliance</p>	<p>ongoing</p>	<p>N</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 6. Engage to empower key stakeholders – including women, youth, people with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples – to maximize their active participation in, and contributions to, SDG 14-related work.</b> <i>To this end, develop an action plan the values and leverages the knowledge, capacities and needs of different groups—such as people with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples. Elements of this action plan may include, for example, embedding FPIC in the project cycle; mapping and developing strategies to address gaps in SDG 14 normative frameworks; strengthening data collection and reporting for monitoring; and possibly expanding FAO efforts in social protection</i></p>	<b>Accepted</b>	<p>FAO is already working extensively in relation to empowering women in fisheries, in particular in relation to SDG14.b. Following a 2022 gender stock taking exercise NFI will be implementing the NFI Gender Action Plan, develop the NFI Gender Help-Desk and continue internal trainings and capacity building of staff, as well as increasing fund-raising, visibility and collaborations. Similarly, FAO is already upscaling efforts to empower Indigenous Peoples and youth. FAO is also developing an Action Plan to engage and empower youth in the fisheries and aquaculture sector. The call to expand efforts in social protection and decent work in fisheries and aquaculture, which is particularly relevant for people with disabilities, is welcomed.</p>	<p>NFI and the Inclusive Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division (ESP)</p>	<p>2023-2025</p>	<p>Y (extrabudgetary)</p>



<b>Evaluation Recommendation</b>	<b>Management response</b> <b>Accepted</b> <b>Partially Accepted</b> <b>or</b> <b>Rejected</b>	<b>Management Actions to be taken, and/or comments about partial acceptance or rejection</b>	<b>Responsible unit</b>	<b>Time frame</b>	<b>Further funding required (Y or N)</b>
<i>and decent work in fisheries and aquaculture.</i>					