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# COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

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### Highlights of the Hand-in-Hand Initiative and Its Progress

#### Executive Summary

The *Hand-in-Hand Initiative* (HIH) is an evidence-based, country-led and country-owned initiative of FAO to accelerate agricultural and rural transformation to eradicate poverty (SDG 1) and end hunger and all forms of malnutrition (SDG 2). By promoting progress to achieve SDGs 1 and 2, foundational objectives of the 2030 Agenda, HIH contributes to the attainment of all the other Sustainable Development Goals.

The Initiative was born out of the need to provide holistic development assistance at the country level and recognizes the central role that agricultural, rural and food systems transformation can play in accelerating sustainable development. HIH uses advanced data analytics that integrate geospatial, biophysical and socio-economic data to create national typologies, which can be used by governments and their partners to identify areas of opportunity for maximum impact. The Initiative supports the commitment of the UN Secretary-General, in the context of UN development system reform, to offer strengthened data management and analytics, integrated policy and technical services, enhanced partnerships to mobilize means of implementation and scaled up finance and investment to accelerate action to achieve national priorities under the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. HIH is also proving to be a useful approach for coordinating response to COVID-19's impact on food systems functioning.

Between October 2019 and May 2020, 15 countries have begun engagement in the *Hand-in-Hand* process. Each country has a dedicated task force to mobilize Organization-wide support. A data lab and geospatial platform have been launched to strengthen the evidence-base for FAO field work. A robust M&E framework is currently under development. The first benchmark impact evaluation will be released in time for FAO Conference in 2023.

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## I. Introduction

1. *Hand-in-Hand* (HIH) is an evidence-based, country-led and country-owned initiative of FAO to accelerate agricultural transformation and sustainable rural development to eradicate poverty (SDG 1) and end hunger and all forms of malnutrition (SDG 2). By promoting the foundational objectives of the 2030 Agenda, the HIH contributes to the attainment of all the other Sustainable Development Goals.
2. The Initiative was launched in September 2019 in response to the current limitations of international development assistance, including fragmented efforts and failures to address trade-offs among development actions. As such, the initiative is not designed as a stand-alone programme but as a country-level approach to providing holistic development assistance. It responds to the call of the 2030 Agenda for market-oriented, partnership-based approaches to ending poverty, hunger and all forms of malnutrition, while promoting sustainable use of natural resources and protection of biodiversity and ecosystem services.
3. The Initiative is guided by six principles: target the poorest; differentiate territories and strategies according to agro-economic potential; bring together all dimensions of agrifood systems to understand the full impact of alternative interventions; collect information on existing donor interventions; develop a geospatial platform; develop a prioritization metrics. Most important, the Initiative's primary objective is to enhance country ownership and capacities to accelerate progress.

## II. Implementation

### A. Country selection

4. The Initiative prioritizes 44 countries with limited capacities for achieving sustainable development, whether because of the low level of development or because of protracted man-made or natural crises. FAO has committed to supporting them using its own resources. As of 31 May 2020, 15 beneficiary countries — Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Kiribati and Tuvalu, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mali, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tajikistan, Yemen and Zimbabwe — have begun to participate. Some 20 countries, including middle-income countries with areas that have high poverty rates, have also expressed interest in participating as both beneficiaries and donors.

### B. Analytical framework

5. The initiative's analytical framework integrates geospatial, biophysical and socio-economic data to create a mapping that shows the efficiency of the current utilization of national territories against agro-economic potential. Specifically, it utilizes an agrifood systems lens to differentiate territories and generate a set of national typologies. These typologies help governments and international partners determine the types and geospatial locations of agricultural, fishery and forest-related interventions that have the highest potential for sustainably reducing poverty and hunger. In priority areas, the Initiative supplements technical analysis with stakeholder consultations to identify key constraints and formulate a comprehensive programme to resolve them. It then matches partners of different types with identified needs to unlock the full near-term potential of the territory. In critical areas that lack agricultural potential, the HIH will identify alternative mechanisms and partners to provide alternative livelihoods to reduce poverty and address hunger sustainably.

### C. Technical platform

6. Under the leadership of the Chief Economist, with support from ODG and CSI, more than 20 FAO units across multiple domains from animal health to trade and markets have come together to develop an architecture to integrate and share all FAO data through an open platform. FAO has also developed capacities to source data from public data providers, space agencies, research partners and the private sector. To address critical data needs for the beneficiary countries where essential data are

often missing, FAO has established a Big Data Lab. The lab uses artificial intelligence and access to remote sensing to collect data that can be used to validate existing data or fill gaps. The pre-existing Geospatial Platform has been repurposed and expanded to bring together 5 levels of information. These range from all FAO data and those of partner agencies to model-based analytics that can create national typologies and identify investment gaps. To date, the Geospatial Platform has assembled more than 1 million geospatial layers, thousands of statistical series with 4,000 metadata records.

7. The Geospatial Platform's model-based analytics and territorial approach helps stakeholders pinpoint areas of opportunities for maximum impact with more accurate cost-and-benefit estimation, thereby quantifying and addressing trade-offs among different courses of action. The platform also functions as a tool for the Common Country Analysis and for developing more ambitious Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks that recognize the importance of agricultural and rural transformation.

### **III. Governance**

8. In each country, the engagement begins with an agreement between the beneficiary country and FAO to initiate a HIIH process. This is followed by technical analysis, led by FAO, establishing baselines for poverty and hunger and other measures of incomes, inequalities, and resilience. Each country has a dedicated task force comprising representatives from the FAO Country Office, Regional Office, the Investment Centre, HQ, as well as Strategic Programme leads and Sector-Specific leads. Another key feature is the roundtable meetings, which bring all the stakeholders together to define the Initiative's priorities and gaps to develop a programme investment plan. Most important, the roundtable aligns the Initiative's involvement with the national government's development priority and the UN Cooperative Framework.

9. The implementation of the Initiative has coincided with the onset of COVID-19 and the urgent need to cope with the combined impacts on agrifood systems of the pandemic, necessary suppression measures, and a global economic recession. The HIIH approach to analysis and partnership-building has proven to be a useful model for coordinating integrated rapid response to COVID-19 impacts on food systems breakdown and addressing emerging threats to food system functioning.

10. The Initiative is being implemented with an eye toward fulfilling the Secretary-General's vision to bolster the UN system's data management and analytics, integrated policy services, partnerships, and finance and investment. It strives to position the United Nations as a trusted partner to Members by redeploying the system's assets and capabilities to enable effective collective action.

### **IV. Monitoring and Evaluation**

11. Currently, a robust M&E framework is under review. FAO will use the SDG indicators as the core monitoring tools to assess progress. HIIH programme impact will measure progress against baseline assessments conducted in 2020. FAO will release the first benchmark impact evaluations prior to the FAO Conference in 2023.