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Strengthening science-policy interfaces for agrifood systems

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The FAO Science and Innovation Strategy is a key tool to support the implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31, and by consequence, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It includes three interdependent pillars, nine associated outcomes and two enablers, and is grounded in seven guiding principles.
- Strengthening science-policy interfaces (SPIs) for agrifood systems is one of the outcomes under the first pillar of the Strategy on “Strengthening science and evidence-based decision-making”.
- The current science-policy interface landscape for agrifood systems is broad and includes a plurality of initiatives and actors at different scales that generate, synthesize, assess and use knowledge for decision-making at various levels of granularity, and for different purposes. While several global processes focus on various aspects of agrifood systems, implementation of many insights and resolutions of such processes must happen at the national level, aligned with the specific gaps, needs, constraints, priorities and context of each country.
- Accordingly, and in line with the Action Plan of the FAO Science and Innovation Strategy, FAO is developing draft guidance on strengthening science-policy interfaces at the national level.

GUIDANCE SOUGHT FROM THE PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

- The Programme Committee is invited to take note of the document.

I. Introduction

1. Agrifood systems provide food, nutrition, employment and economic security to millions of people around the globe. They are, however, facing unprecedented challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, all of which are exacerbating poverty, climate change vulnerability and hunger around the world. There is a need for urgent action informed by the best available science and evidence. Agrifood systems transformation, in particular, require solutions that transcend conventional policy boundaries and take into account different experiences, expertise and values. The multiple dimensions and complexities of agrifood systems highlight the need for a holistic approach and the inclusion of knowledge from both the academic (for e.g. scientific research) and non-academic (for e.g. knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and small-scale producers) spheres, as well as mechanisms, processes and governance structures to equitably integrate and translate knowledge and evidence for policymaking.¹

2. The FAO Science and Innovation Strategy, a key tool to support the implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31 and by consequence the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, includes three interdependent pillars, nine associated outcomes and two enablers, and is grounded in seven guiding principles.² Strengthening science-policy interfaces (SPIs)³ for agrifood systems is one of the outcomes (outcome 1.2) under the first pillar on “Strengthening science and evidence-based decision-making”. FAO is well positioned at the nexus of knowledge and policy to translate science and innovation into guidance and practical tools. As a facilitator of intergovernmental processes, FAO further aims to provide a neutral platform and scientific analysis for exchange among countries.

3. The Strategy indicates that FAO will strengthen its contribution to SPIs at national, regional and global levels to support organized dialogue between scientists, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders in support of inclusive science- and evidence-based policymaking for greater policy coherence, shared ownership and collective action. FAO aims to consider in its analyses the varied and sometimes competing needs, goals and interests of different agrifood system actors. The added value of FAO’s contribution is to focus at national and regional levels in addition to the global level, to address issues that are relevant to agrifood systems taking into account as appropriate information and analyses produced by existing SPIs, such as the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and to enable ongoing and effective dialogue through the institutional architecture provided by the FAO Governing Bodies. Aligned with the Strategy, FAO is developing draft guidance for SPIs at the national level, helping to ensure that effective policy decisions are made based upon sufficient, relevant, and credible science and evidence.

II. Science-policy interfaces for agrifood systems

4. Integration of science and evidence into effective agrifood systems decision-making processes remains a significant challenge. For example, policymakers may not inform scientists and other knowledge holders about their needs while scientists and other knowledge holders may not actively engage in the policymaking process. Additionally, many obstacles may compromise this participation. Scientific findings may be limited by complexity, insufficient data, uncertainties, contrasting results, and can be contested. Co-creating and integrating knowledge from different knowledge systems and across various sectors, scales and social actors can be fraught and politicized.

5. Decision-making is often influenced by a variety of both structural and behavioral drivers and barriers as well as numerous stakeholders with diverse values, vested interests and with significant

¹ Turnhout, E., Metzger, T., Wyborn, C., Klenk, N., & Louder, E. (2020). The politics of co-production: participation, power, and transformation. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 42, 15–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2019.11.009>

² FAO. (2022). FAO Science and Innovation Strategy. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/cc2273en/cc2273en.pdf>

³ The Strategy defines the term ‘Science-Policy Interface’ as “mechanisms for organized dialogue between scientists, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders in support of inclusive science-based policy making” and states that “effective science-policy interfaces are characterized by relevance, legitimacy, transparency, inclusivity, and ongoing and effective dialogue through an appropriate institutional architecture”.

power asymmetries. Policy implementation can sometimes be rapid, yet even when unequivocal knowledge has been garnered over a long period, policy development and application can be very slow despite the acknowledged urgency of a problem.

6. Efforts have been made to increase the use of science and evidence in policymaking over many decades, with a range of strategies employed across various sectors, in many ways led by, but not limited to, environmental considerations, particularly with respect to the consequences of climate change. Many Conventions now rely on global environmental assessments, although these have been shown to need improvement.⁴

7. Current challenges affecting agrifood systems require agility and transparency to co-create and integrate knowledge and feed it into policy and practice. Consequently, it is necessary to establish legitimate institutional structures, improved networks among knowledge holders and policymakers, to build capacity in how to inform policy optimally with evidence, and to institutionalize systematic, participatory and transparent processes.

8. The science-policy interface landscape for agrifood systems is broad and includes a plurality of initiatives and actors that generate, synthesize, assess and use knowledge for decision-making at various levels of granularity, and for different purposes. No single stakeholder group or organization covers the whole landscape, nor does any constituent provide all the pieces of the necessary support infrastructure either internationally or nationally. While there has been a proliferation of global SPIs, there is a lack of integration and coordination, as well as important gaps in evidence related to issues such as trade-offs and co-benefits, and the political economy, among others.⁵ For example, a recent process has been launched by the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and the Montpellier scientific communities to offer a safe working space for global experts panels to work together and for SPIs to structure a learning community of practice, looking at agrifood systems transformation as a lever to address the intertwined challenges towards sustainable development.⁶

III. Strengthening science-policy interfaces at the national level

9. While several global processes focus on various aspects of agrifood systems, implementation of many insights and resolutions of such processes must happen at the national level, aligned with the specific gaps, needs, constraints, priorities and context of each country. The specificity of agrifood systems in all their breadth, complexity and power differentials calls for greater collaboration across ministries, disciplines and stakeholders.⁷ An SPI is a possible response for enhancing such collaboration and is particularly adapted to tackling complexity to produce solutions to address nationally prioritized challenges and country pathways.

10. A key area of work to support the implementation of the Strategy is to “*Facilitate the development of guidance for strengthening science-policy interfaces*”. FAO has initiated work on this, starting with the organization of an FAO online consultation⁸ to further identify and understand the

⁴ Maas, T. Y., Montana, J., van der Hel, S., Kowarsch, M., Tuinstra, W., Schoolenberg, M., Mahony, M., Lucas, P.L., Kok, M., Bakkes, J. & Turnhout, E. (2021) Effectively empowering: A different look at bolstering the effectiveness of global environmental assessments. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 123: 210-219.

⁵ European Commission, “Recommendations to the United Nations’ Food Systems Summit Scientific Group from the European Commission’s High-Level Expert Group to assess needs and options to strengthen the international Science Policy Interface for Food Systems Governance” (2021). https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/research_by_area/documents/hleg_recommendation_to_the_unfss_scientific_group_web.pdf

⁶ University of Montpellier, CFS, & CGIAR. (2022). The Montpellier statement: Feed, Care, Protect: Intelligence to accelerate food systems’ transformation at local and global levels. <https://www.umontpellier.fr/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/MontpellierStatement.pdf>

⁷ UN. (2023). Making food systems work for people and planet UN Food Systems Summit +2. Report of the Secretary-General

⁸ <https://www.fao.org/fsnforum/consultation/what-are-barriers-and-opportunities-scientists-and-other-knowledge-holders-contribute>

barriers and opportunities for scientists and other knowledge holders (drawing their knowledge from other knowledge systems, including Indigenous Peoples, small-scale producers, etc.) to contribute to informing policy for more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems. The online consultation took place from 5 December 2022 to 24 January 2023, and received 91 valuable contributions from 39 countries.

11. Building on findings from the online consultation, background studies to understand the experiences at global, regional and national levels, key informant interviews, desktop studies, literature reviews and an expert workshop, FAO is developing draft guidance on strengthening SPIs at the national level. The draft guidance is envisaged to include: core elements for functional SPIs to be considered; principles such as credibility, relevance, legitimacy, etc.; different SPI models and the trade-offs and complementarities between models; cross-scale interactions, i.e. between SPIs at the national, regional and global levels; mechanisms and methods for knowledge co-creation, integration and synthesis; skills and capacities of SPI actors; monitoring, evaluation and learning options; among others.

12. Since circumstances differ according to specific contexts, there can be no one-size-fits-all approach and tailoring to national needs is essential. Accordingly, the guidance document is intended to be a tool to launch a learning process around SPIs. It could be considered at the country level in a process to strengthen existing, or establish new, agrifood systems SPIs. The guidance is envisioned to be improved (through a second iteration of the guidance) by learning from such experiences.