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COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES

THIRTY-FOURTH SESSION

1–5 February 2021

Progress Report on the Hand-in-Hand Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief report summarizes implementation progress of the Hand-in-Hand (HIH) Initiative from June through October 2020 and provides additional information in response to requests by Members in Programme Committee (PC 128), FAO Council (CL 164), and FAO Regional Conferences held to date.

The progress report provides a summary overview of the Initiative, then provides additional information as requested by FAO governing bodies, with specific reference to the following subjects:

- Number of countries participating as beneficiaries of the Initiative and adherence to criteria of eligibility;
- Progress toward implementation and further development of the HIH Platform and measures to ensure access by all Members;
- Progress toward making it possible for Members to combine their own data with the FAO platform data;
- Development and implementation of FAO protocols on secure access and use of data;
- Means to support growing number of eligible and participating beneficiary countries as well as other Members requesting access to the Platform;
- Inclusion of the HIH matchmaking approach to partnership building in FAO's partnership framework;
- Other pertinent matters.

The Initiative at a Glance

1. Hand-in-Hand (HIH) is an evidence-based, country-led and country-owned initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (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 progress to achieve SDGs 1 and 2, foundational objectives of the 2030 Agenda, HIH contributes to the attainment of all the other SDGs.
2. The Initiative adopts a robust matchmaking approach that brings together beneficiary countries with donors, private-sector organizations, international financial institutions (IFIs), research institutions and civil society organizations to mobilize means of implementation that support accelerated action. HIH prioritizes countries and, within countries, territories where poverty and hunger are most concentrated or where national capacities are most limited owing to history, conflict or natural disasters. It also introduces a framework with data-driven dashboards to improve transparency and coordination among partners and strengthen host-country capacities for programme leadership, monitoring, coordination and impact analysis.
3. To guide concerted action among partners and in keeping with national sustainable development priorities, the Initiative deploys sophisticated tools, including advanced geospatial modelling and analytics, to identify the largest opportunities to raise the incomes and reduce the inequities and vulnerabilities of the rural poor. It uses these tools to present an evidence-based view of economic opportunities and to improve targeting and tailoring of policy interventions, innovation, finance and investment, and institutional reform.
4. HIH adopts a market-oriented agri-food systems approach to increase the quantity, quality, diversity and accessibility of nutritious foods available in local, territorial, national and regional food markets while also finding additional markets for food and non-food agricultural products that enable the rural poor to improve incomes and access to healthy diets. The Initiative prioritizes countries where national capacities and international support are most limited or where operational challenges, including natural or human-induced crises, are greatest. This is in keeping with the UN's commitment to "leave no one behind".
5. The HIH Initiative was launched in October 2019 when the FAO Director-General wrote to 44 countries identified as potential beneficiaries and to many other countries as potential partners. Since then, numerous contacts have been made with potential country participants, as well as donors and IFIs, private-sector entities, research institutions and civil society organizations who have expressed interest in participating in the Initiative.
6. The remainder of this progress report outlines progress in the development and implementation of HIH during the second and third quarters of 2020. It reiterates why a new approach to FAO country programming was necessary; highlights principles guiding the HIH; gives updates on participating countries; explains how the approach is being supported by the Organization and operationalized to strengthen national ownership in countries currently participating; details progress made toward developing the main technical platforms and discusses the ways that the platform is being made accessible to all FAO Members; and explains how HIH will conduct matchmaking and provide coordination, transparency and mutual accountability to all stakeholders.

A New, Holistic Approach to Support Food and Agriculture Development

7. The HIH Initiative responds to limitations affecting many international development assistance projects. These limitations include fragmentation of effort among development partners; failure to identify and capture synergies or address trade-offs among development actions; insufficient transparency to host governments and competition among development partners and agencies; weak capacities to provide adequate data and evidence-based analysis of local conditions within a sufficiently comprehensive SDG framework; weak analysis and prioritization of development projects and investments in relation to national sustainable development targets; weak and inconsistent data collection and analysis of impacts over time; uncertain attribution of results and a limited culture of

accountability for direct as well as indirect impacts; and difficulty in demonstrating development impact at scale aligned to the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

8. HIH has been developed as an innovative, comprehensive and fully integrated approach to addressing these issues. The Initiative is not designed as a stand-alone programme, but as a country-level approach to providing holistic and effective development assistance that tackles each of the foregoing limitations within a disciplined, accountable, pragmatic and flexible partnership framework. As such, HIH responds to the call of the 2030 Agenda for market-oriented, partnership-based approaches to ending poverty, hunger and all forms of malnutrition while simultaneously promoting sustainable use of natural resources and protection of biodiversity and ecosystem services (SDGs 1 and 2) and while contributing materially to the achievement of all other SDGs, 3-17.

9. HIH also responds to the proposals of the UN Secretary-General, mandated by the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), 2016¹, for repositioning the UN development system (UNDS) to redeploy and strengthen the assets of UNDS entities, especially the specialized agencies, for improved data collection and analysis, policy and technical support, facilitation of robust partnerships to provide non-financial means of implementation, and scaled-up finance and investment. In so doing, it also prioritizes FAO's field-level programming.

10. HIH is led by FAO Representatives (FAORs) working in close partnership with UN Resident Coordinators and UN country teams, and HIH programming is deeply aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (Cooperation Frameworks). The HIH geospatial platform is accessible to all UN entities and is expected to serve as a pillar of the common country analyses (CCAs) that undergird the UN Cooperation Frameworks and track progress toward national targets for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

Guiding Principles for the Analytical Framework

11. The Initiative seeks to eradicate poverty and hunger. The focus is on enhancing agricultural productivity to improve nutrition, raise rural living standards and contribute to global economic growth in accord with the mandates of the FAO Constitution. FAO is committed to working together with priority countries to ensure national ownership and leadership, drawing for support on the goodwill of all FAO Members and their many development partners.

12. The Initiative seeks to empower poor and vulnerable rural populations, and ramp up their net earnings from both farm and off-farm occupations. This is in line with the 2030 Agenda and the recognition that equitable growth and inclusive structural transformation are key to lifting people out of poverty. As such, FAO works on the principle that the positive impact of the Initiative should be available to as many stakeholders as possible through improved agricultural practices; upgrading and diversification of post-production value chains that generate employment, especially for women and youth; and by strengthening models for improved incomes and profitability for diverse agri-food partners.

13. Six principles guide the development and implementation of the HIH analytical framework:

- Principle 1: Target the poorest — The framework identifies and provides tools to enable policy-makers to develop interventions that benefit the poorest of the poor, who also suffer from high rates of hunger.
- Principle 2: Differentiate territories and strategies according to agro-economic potential — The framework recognizes that agricultural and rural transformation may not offer a relatively short-term pathway out of poverty and hunger in all areas, and distinguishes between areas with and without agricultural potential. For areas without agricultural potential, the framework will suggest alternative strategies and partners.

¹ [United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/71/243: “Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system.”](#)

- Principle 3: Bring together all dimensions of agri-food systems to understand the full impact of alternative interventions — For areas with sufficient agricultural potential, FAO data and technical knowledge on biodiversity, water, land, soils, forestry, water and greenhouse gas emissions make this possible.
- Principle 4: Collect information on existing donor interventions — FAO will work with host countries and partners to develop a subnational database of donor activities in food and agriculture. This strengthens country ownership, supports sharing of data and analysis, enables mapping of activities at territorial level, and promotes better integrated, more holistic and sustained development programming.
- Principle 5: Develop a geospatial platform — FAO will provide a web-based dashboard with a suite of geospatial data for use by host countries and their development partners, promoting transparency and collaboration as well as accountability and shared learning.
- Principle 6: Develop a prioritization metric — The proposed metric for FAO intervention and impact is hunger in all its dimensions.

Country Membership

14. The list of HIH priority countries has evolved and will continue to evolve in light of rapidly changing needs. The Initiative prioritizes those countries in situations that put large numbers of people at risk of being left behind. The intention is to provide a special level of support to help the countries overcome limited capacities or the impacts of natural or human-induced crises that impair their ability to sustain and accelerate progress toward SDGs 1 and 2. These countries largely coincide with those that have been classified as off-track, off-target or both for meeting national targets for SDGs 1 and 2. “Off-track” means hunger and extreme poverty are rising, not falling; and “off-target” means countries will not be able to achieve the SDGs poverty, hunger and malnutrition indicators by 2030.

15. Twenty-seven countries have begun initial engagement in the HIH process as of October 9, 2020. These are Angola, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Gabon, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Kiribati, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Mali, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Rwanda, Solomon Islands, Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Tuvalu, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

16. FAO has reached out to countries to identify sources of funding to enable scaled-up support. Several contributor countries have expressed initial interest in working with the Initiative in select locations. A score of other countries, including middle-income countries with large populations or high levels of rural poverty, have expressed interest in participating in HIH as either beneficiaries or both beneficiaries and donors. The outreach to countries is also generating proposals for South–South and interregional partnerships.

17. In response to the strong interest of Members, access to the HIH geospatial platform has been granted for all available resources to all Members with immediate effect, and steps have been taken to enable Members to combine (and protect, if they so desire) their own data with the platform resources. At the current stage of development, however, hands-on access does not serve the immediate needs of most users, who are not familiar with the standards and protocols. An aggressive training programme is being organized to address the diverse needs of FAO Members as well as FAO teams in the country and regional offices. In the short term, volunteers are being trained to help train others with different levels of technical expertise and for different objectives. While the priority remains to support the HIH beneficiary countries, non-HIH countries are also being supported.

18. A full response to this growing demand will require action on several fronts over time: movement to online training and documentation to guide users at different stages of familiarity with the platform and its standards and protocols; creation of tools to automate key analytical processes and reports – much of which will be done by emerging communities of users who co-create, test and refine tools that will be made freely available to others; and increasing use of platform analytics to guide further development of the platform in response to users’ revealed preferences.

Matchmaking Approach to Partnership Building

19. As part of the Initiative's innovative effort to promote and facilitate partnerships through problem-solving matchmaking, a robust partnership-building effort has been launched to engage key private-sector and other non-state partners in offering material (but non-financial) support to address key problems affecting people in the HIH countries. Initial discussions with the research arms of major companies and with globally recognized research institutions have revealed unexpected opportunities to generate new global public goods, massively amplify the data resources available for the HIH geospatial platform, and experiment with new business models designed to offer new services to small producers at costs that are affordable and also to lower the business risks faced by small and medium producers.

20. Early examples of such partnerships include joining forces with Mars, Inc., to test models for predicting aflatoxin outbreaks in order to improve food safety, protect small producer incomes and livelihoods, and boost food security and nutrition. Syngenta has offered a broad menu of technical and in-kind support focused on de-risking innovation to solve practical problems typically encountered by small producers in many HIH countries. In a different vein, and building on an existing partnership, FAO has teamed up with Google Earth to launch a free web-based tool for analysis of key environmental and climate parameters. And discussions with John Deere have focused on developing a partnership with third-party innovators who offer tractors and other light mechanization services to small producers on an hourly basis.

21. Participation of all partners, including the private sector, at country level is arranged based on programmatic requirements identified in the inception or later phases of the HIH engagement and with the specific consent of the national government. In the context of FAO's New Strategy for Private Sector Engagement and the Evaluation of FAO's Civil Society Partnership Strategy, institutional arrangements are being finalized to ensure the relevant Partnerships divisions, the relevant technical divisions and HIH Coordination are fully aligned with corporate due diligence and oversight processes and protocols.

22. The HIH matchmaking approach presents an important innovation in FAO's approach to partnership building with non-state actors, including private philanthropies, private-sector entities, civil society organizations, and universities and research institutions. Although important elements of the FAO Partnership Strategy are currently under review, FAO Members have proposed that systematic consideration be given to practical applications of joint technical and analytical work in the context of Hand-in-Hand and other country-programming initiatives that adopt the HIH approach. We anticipate, on the basis of initial engagements with private-sector and research entities, that the matchmaking approach will provide strong incentives to sustained programmatic work that results in new public goods, expanded knowledge creation and sharing as well as capacity development, and accelerated joint action toward achievement of national targets under the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

Technical Platforms, Training and Data

23. After initial demonstrations to Members and internal stakeholders beginning in April 2020, the HIH geospatial platform was formally launched for public access in late July. More than 8,000 users from 123 countries have accessed the platform in each of the last three months, and this despite the difficulty most untrained users would likely encounter. Apart from the support it offers to HIH countries and partners, the platform is fast becoming recognized as a crucial tool accessible to all stakeholders to help advance all efforts to create more resilient food systems post-COVID-19 and a foundation for the full range of activities to promote agricultural and rural transformations in ways that simultaneously advance the economic, social and environmental goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

24. In order to build the geospatial platform, FAO has engaged with a number of major technology companies and leading public data providers, as well as other UN agencies, NGOs, academic and research institutions, and space agencies. Partners for developing the resources and capacities of the geospatial platform now include Google, IBM, the World Bank, the International

Food Policy Research Institute, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the US Agency for International Development, the European Union, the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences and the Beijing Academy of Agricultural and Forest Sciences, as well as AMIS, IPCnfo, GSOC, Google Earth Engine, ESRI, NASA, CSIRO Data61, Digital Earth Africa, Tsinghua University, Macura, Wilhelmsen, ESWA, ICBA, IGRAC, IATI, ITU, IFPRI, IHE Delft, AfTerFibre, and OpenStreetMap.

25. The FAO platform's model-based analytics and territorial approach are intended to enable policy-makers and stakeholders to better recognize and pinpoint areas of opportunities for maximum impact, unlocking synergies and identifying and addressing trade-offs that might stymie progress. The platform can also generate scenarios that quantify and visualize the impacts of alternative courses of action with more accurate cost-and-benefit estimation. Finally, the platform, as it develops over time, will enable policy-makers and other stakeholders to better analyse, quantify and address trade-offs among different courses of action, thus fulfilling a major unmet need presented by the holistic and cross-cutting vision of interlinkages among actions embedded in the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

26. It is important to note that all data accessible through the platform is not only country-specific, but also specific to the level of micro-territories. This is because the operational approach is decidedly territorial, rather than national or regional in scope. However, the HIH approach can be applied at regional level, too, with the relevant market analysis and territorial differentiation carried out at the regional/interregional level.

27. A "train the trainers" approach is being implemented with high priority to meet the rapidly growing demand from Members and from FAO technical divisions and field offices to enable Members to access the resources of HIH geospatial platform. Volunteers both at headquarters and in the regions are being self-identified to undergo training with the explicit goal of making themselves available to train groups of others. Learning from this experience will be captured in new online e-learning modules designed to guide users at different levels of expertise in the use of the platform.

28. Simultaneously, measures are being taken to automate frequently used processes, such as the stochastic profitability frontier analysis that underlies the creation of typologies for the Initiative. Partnerships and open platforms are expected to lead to the co-creation of new tools for other analytic procedures, which will be made available on the platform over time. The development teams are also exploring opportunities to accelerate labour-intensive processes, such as data cleansing, that constitute important bottlenecks impeding rapid growth in the usability of existing and new platform data resources.

29. In order to validate existing country data, which may be subject to a number of deficiencies, and for filling important known data gaps, FAO has established a data lab within the Statistics Division and in collaboration with the Office of the Chief Statistician. The data lab addresses critical data needs for the prioritized HIH beneficiary countries. Using unofficial, unstructured data and innovative data science methods — web scraping, text analytics, pattern recognition — and access to remote sensing to collect data where few are available, the data lab validates the official data FAO uses. It also develops and re-purposes data science algorithms to enhance the timeliness, coverage and granularity of data. These functions help create a mechanism for data quality control and gain insights for policy-making.

30. FAO's data governance practices and implementation of standards for ensuring data privacy and security are compliant with the major international standards and subject to ongoing internal oversight by the different bodies established within the Organization for ensuring compliance with the relevant and appropriate data, cyber security and legal standards. Rules and mechanisms have been put in place for protecting Member data that FAO has been requested to keep confidential; systems for automated compliance monitoring will be developed as the platform expands and matures and as the number of users increases.

31. Documentation of the protocols governing the handling, use and protection of data is being developed for review by relevant units in the first quarter of 2021. The FAO data platforms are being designed as global public goods intended to be accessed and used by diverse communities of users. While there is a need to take appropriate measures to limit exposure to and contain the impact of risks,

this should be done in a manner consistent with the Organization's policy of ensuring open access to all the data that has been produced by or made available to FAO in order to deliver high-quality data and analytical services to the public.

32. HIH programme dashboards, consisting of data visualizations with the most current data inputs from implementing partners, are being developed and the prototypes will be available before year-end. The dashboards will provide aggregated results that will be essential for monitoring and evaluating impact and for strengthening coordination and advocacy within each country. The dashboards have three elements: inception, operation and impact. Initially, they will be available to FAO and HIH partners, not to the public.

33. The dashboards will help address a core challenge of development programming at scale: ensuring adequate coordination among diverse actions and investments. They will enable proactive consultation among partners to address emerging operational bottlenecks, and they will ensure effective government control as well as mutual accountability among the partners. Progress for the aforementioned inception phase is being monitored using simple online reporting.

34. While the inception phase could seem like a linear (step-wise) process, in many cases, the HIH Initiative is being built around existing commitments or ongoing programmes. Therefore, development in operational or impact phases could also be taking place simultaneously.

HIH Inception Phase

35. The initial start-up phase covering a period of intensive activity — from the initial agreement with the beneficiary country to the development and agreement of the comprehensive Programme Investment Plan — is expected to last no more than six months.

36. In each country, the process begins with a voluntary agreement between the beneficiary FAO Member and the Organization to explore the possibility of initiating an HIH process. The form of this agreement is typically a reply letter from the beneficiary country to the Director-General expressing the country's desire to explore development of a HIH engagement.

37. As soon as an initial expression of interest is received, FAO begins a process of internal consultation to establish and launch a multilevel Task Force. The corporate level Core Team then organizes a meeting with the FAOR, the designated country focal point and the rest of the Task Team. The Chief Economist reviews the HIH engagement model, introduces the Task Team, and outlines an initial set of activities selected to kick-start the collaboration. The process usually begins with a review of existing engagements, as well as sharing of existing studies, data sets and analyses. All Task Team members commit to an in-depth study of existing project and programme reports, studies and analyses. A common repository is established, and a programme of work defined jointly by the members of the Task Team, which is often expanded to include additional officers with complementary knowledge or country experience. Task Team members, guided by the FAOR and country focal points, also review existing programmes and map donor activities related to food and agriculture. Investment Centre representatives, similarly, examine current and proposed IFI programmes. A key objective at this initial stage is to assess available data and to identify possible ways to address key data gaps.

38. After a brief period of information collection and sifting, a mission is planned to prepare the initial assessment outlined above. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, it was expected that such missions would be at least partially field missions conducted by regional and headquarters offices. Today, it is understood that the initial assessments and follow-on consultations can be conducted virtually, so long as appropriate data, and reliable video connections, can be found.

39. In principle, the initial assessment, once completed, is shared with the host government and a series of consultations begun to review the main findings and select the principal areas for intervention. Early experience suggests that the initial analysis may be used in various ways: to adapt, combine or scale up existing programmes; introduce new practices or identify new target markets;

improve tracking and expected benefits to the poor and hungry; improve the environmental sustainability and climate resilience of programmes; enhance climate mitigation properties.

40. The bigger payoff from the assessment comes from the additional information it provides to help improve understanding of needed support. After achieving agreement with the host country on beneficiary territories and populations, a second round of stakeholder consultations is organized in the form of Executive Round Tables to highlight ground-level issues and impediments that may prevent successful realization of the programme and its intended results.

41. The additional knowledge gained from the Round Tables is used by the FAO Investment Centre, in consultation with the host government, FAO technical experts on the country Task Team, and key stakeholders, to develop a comprehensive Programme Investment Plan and identify key partners who can help meet various identified programme support needs. In addition to FAO and the UN country teams, each participating FAO Member can expect to have at least one of five different types of partners selected for their relevance and capacity to mobilize the necessary means of implementation – donor, IFI, and/or research, private-sector and civil society partners – each of whom is selected to provide highly specific forms of support linked to the HIH programme developed by the host country.

42. Once a programme has been agreed and partner commitments have been consolidated, programme implementation can be recorded in the dashboard to capture, analyse and visualize programme data. FAO will use the SDG indicators as the core monitoring tools to assess progress, and for HIH programme impact will measure progress against baseline assessments conducted in 2020. FAO will release the first benchmark impact evaluations prior to the FAO Council in 2023, four years after the start of the HIH Initiative. FAO welcomes external evaluation of its progress by other agencies.

Governance

43. As stated previously, HIH is country-owned and country-led; the HIH approach to field-level work is designed to strengthen national decision-support capacities and to provide transparency and mutual accountability between all participating governments and their development partners. Participation in HIH is voluntary; FAO support methodologies are consistent with these commitments and aligned to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

44. Key decisions within the HIH framework, including the decision to participate, remain with national governments and with each of the partners invited through the matchmaking process. FAO support is built from the ground up, with FAORs having lead responsibility for coordinating communications with the FAO member country. Focal points at national, regional/sub-regional and headquarters levels and a representative of the FAO Investment Centre, who may be located at national, regional or global level form the backbone of cross-Organizational support for the programme.

45. FAO focal points organized into country-specific, virtual Task Teams are responsible for working together to mobilize relevant technical expertise wherever it may be found within the Organization. This flat support structure represents a fundamental overcoming or inversion of the top-down structures that have traditionally characterized the interrelationships between FAO technical and policy support units at headquarters and in the field. Under HIH, demands for support do not originate with headquarters or regional initiatives, but from the integrated analysis provided by FAO and policy dialogue convened by the host government with its diverse development partners.

46. Overall supervision of the implementation of the Initiative is led by the Chief Economist (DDCE), supported by the Director of the FAO Investment Centre (CFI), the Senior Officer responsible for the Global Network against Food Crises (OER), and the Senior Officer responsible for Governance and support to Hand-in-Hand (DDCG). This Core Team is supplemented by designated focal points in each of the five FAO regions. The augmented core group initiates each HIH

engagement with the FAOR and country support team and conducts monthly progress reviews for each country engagement.

47. Governance of HIIH programmes is supported through dashboards designed to offer host governments and their partners transparency and a communications channel for coordination of activities and trouble-shooting in the face of the unanticipated or emerging challenges that often defeat the best-laid development plans. HIIH dashboards serve three functions. First, they help guide host governments, FAO and the partners through the inception phase by providing a roadmap of essential activities: gathering the requisite data and information; conducting the technical analyses required to differentiate territories on the basis of agro-economic potential; supporting stakeholder consultation and partner matchmaking; and, finally, preparing a comprehensive Programme Investment Plan (PIP) that is codeveloped by the host government, FAO and the partners. Second, they provide a line of sight and analytical insight into the operational progress of the PIP implementation. In this sense they serve as IT-based systems for managing a highly complex process involving a diverse array of partners. Third, the dashboards draw on the initial analyses and the baselines for poverty and hunger established in the inception phase, to establish whether countries are on-track and on-target to meet the national targets for SDGs 1 and 2.

48. The prototype dashboards, providing data-based snapshots or visualizations with the most current data inputs from all partners, are being developed and will be available for all HIIH beneficiary countries, with full implementation in up to twenty countries, before year-end.