

Strengthening Statistical Governance in FAO:

Why the 2026 Regional Conferences Matter for Regular Budget Resources for Data and Statistics

February 2026

WHY

Data and statistics is not a support function, it is a core element of FAO's constitutional mandate (Article I) and one of four cross-cutting accelerators in the Strategic Framework 2022–31. As a normative organization, FAO's global standards, classifications, and indicators depend on the quality of its statistical foundations. FAO is custodian of 22 SDG indicators across Goals 2, 5, 6, 12, 14, and 15 and the publisher of FAOSTAT, outputs that underpin global food security monitoring, national agricultural policy, and the evidence base for international investment in food systems. This matters more as digital tools proliferate: AI, remote sensing, and model-based approaches can enhance coverage and timeliness, but they depend on validated official statistics to be meaningful. Without credible ground-truthed data, even the most sophisticated platforms risk producing misleading results. The institutional infrastructure that produces this data, the Statistics Division, regional statistical capacity-building, and the methodological work coordinated through the Office of the Chief Statistician, are core functions, not project-based activities. When they are pushed onto voluntary funding, they become fragmented, donor-driven, and vulnerable to the kind of funding shocks FAO experienced in 2025. Protecting statistical functions in the regular budget is about ensuring FAO can fulfil its mandate as a knowledge organization.

WHY NOW

The five 2026 Regional Conferences (March–May) are the first formal input point for FAO's Programme of Work and Budget 2028–29. The priorities they establish will be consolidated by the Programme and Finance Committees, reviewed by the Council, and approved by the 45th FAO Conference (June–July 2027). Data and statistics is a core function of FAO, but it is increasingly dependent on voluntary contributions rather than being protected in the regular budget. The 2026–27 budget required abolishing 177 vacant posts under a flat nominal trajectory, and FAO's Finance Committee (FC 206, October 2025) explicitly flagged data/statistics among the areas where member demand exceeds what the regular budget can deliver. For FAO's statistical functions to be protected in the regular budget for 2028–29, the signal needs to come through Regional Conference conclusions.

Parallel momentum: The 57th UN Statistical Commission (New York, USA, 3–6 March 2026, theme: "Better Data, Better Lives") includes food and agriculture statistics on its agenda. UNSC conclusions can be referenced by delegations when intervening at Regional Conferences.

2026 GOVERNANCE TIMELINE

DATE	EVENT	RECOMMENDED ENGAGEMENT
Now–Feb	Pre-conference preparation	Consider sharing this brief with capital counterparts (MoA, NSO, MFA). Delegations attending each RC can treat the statistics commission readout as a substantive intervention point rather than a formality.
2–6 Mar	39th LARC – Brasília, Brazil	When the LACCAS 32 (March 2025) report is read out, this is an opportunity to call for regular budget protection for statistical functions and to seek specific language in conference conclusions.
3–6 Mar	57th UNSC – New York, USA	Food & agriculture statistics on agenda. Reference UNSC conclusions at subsequent Regional Conferences for information.
25 Mar–1 Apr	38th NERC – TBC	The regional commissions readout offers an opportunity to raise statistical priorities and the case for regular budget resources. Despite AFCAS covering North African countries, AFCAS 29 recommendations are not presented at the NERC, they are presented at the ARC which extends the invitation to Northern African Countries.

13–17 Apr	34th ARC – Nouakchott, Mauritania	Critical conference: AFCAS 29 (Nov 2025) report will be read out. An important opportunity to engage substantively on African statistical capacity needs and regular budget resourcing.
20–24 Apr	38th APRC – Brunei Darussalam	Alert: APCAS 31 dates not yet announced. Delegates may rely on APCAS 30 (May 2024) report. This sequencing gap is worth raising.
11–15 May	35th ERC – Dushanbe, Tajikistan	No dedicated regional statistics commission for Europe, but data and statistical capacity can be raised under the relevant agenda items. Same governance mechanics apply. The provisional agenda includes an information point on statistics which would also allow members to make interventions that then should be reflected in the official report of the ERC.
18–22 May	PC 142 / FC 207 / JM – Rome, Italy	PC, FC, and their Joint Meeting run concurrently the week after the final RC. The PC's standing line item on data and statistics (cf. PC 141/12) is the mechanism for consolidating RC conclusions into the PWB 2028–29 synthesis. An informal discussion on data is also being planned ahead of the formal session.
8–12 Jun	CL 180 (Council) – Rome, Italy	Council receives the consolidated outputs from the PC/FC/JM week. Statistical priorities need to be embedded before this stage.

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVES

- Brief capital counterparts.** This brief can be shared with ministries of agriculture, national statistics offices, and foreign ministry desks. Regional Conferences have two segments: a Senior Officers Meeting (SOM) where technical inputs including statistics commission reports are reviewed, followed by a Ministerial Meeting (MM) where conclusions are adopted. Both levels need to be briefed - technical officials to engage substantively during the SOM readout, and ministers to ensure statistical priorities carry through to the political conclusions that drive budget decisions.
- Develop specific asks on regular budget protection.** The core statistical functions of FAO (including its role as custodian of 22 SDG indicators across Goals 2, 5, 6, 12, 14, and 15) should not depend on voluntary contributions. These can be framed as regular budget priorities for the 2028–29 PWB. The Programme Committee's planned informal discussion on data offers an opportunity to coordinate messaging ahead of the Regional Conferences. The established standing line item on data and statistics (cf. PC 141/12) at the formal PC 142 session (18–22 May) then provides the mechanism to consolidate RC conclusions into budget recommendations.
- Coordinate with like-minded missions.** When multiple delegations engage substantively during the commission readout, the likelihood of specific language in conference conclusions increases significantly, sending concrete signals to the Programme and Finance Committees.
- Maintain engagement through to the Programme Committee.** The PC's standing agenda item on data and statistics (most recently PC 141/12) is the institutional mechanism for ensuring Regional Conference conclusions on statistical priorities are preserved, and translated into regular budget allocations, when PC 142 (18–22 May) and the Joint Meeting with the Finance Committee consolidate RC outputs for the Council.
- Strengthen complementary financing for data systems.** Regular budget protection is the priority, but two complementary mechanisms can reinforce it. First, earmarking a small percentage of each Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) project for data collection, validation, and analysis would embed statistical capacity within FAO's operational work, making every intervention evidence-based. Second, low- and lower-middle-income countries can fill national data gaps by joining the 50x2030 Initiative, a tri-agency partnership of FAO, IFAD, and the World Bank that builds sustained national agricultural survey systems. The financing model requires country commitment: 70 percent is funded through IDA/IBRD allocations for statistics, with 30 percent from donors enabling the technical assistance that FAO leads. The funds for technical assistance need to be replenished – at the moment the Gates Foundation is the only contributor and funding will need to be renewed in 2027.

BACKGROUND: How FAO's Statistical Governance Works

B1. FAO's Multi-Level Governance System

FAO's governance is a hierarchy of deliberative bodies, each with distinct mandates but linked through a unified decision-making cycle. The **FAO Conference** is the supreme governing body, meeting biennially with all 194 Member Nations, two Associate Members, and the European Union as a Member Organization. It determines policy, approves the Programme of Work and Budget (PWB), and endorses the Strategic Framework. The **FAO Council** (49 elected Member Nations, three-year terms) acts as the Conference's executive arm between sessions, supported by the Programme Committee (PC), Finance Committee (FC), and Committee on Constitutional and Legal Matters (CCLM).

Regional Conferences and Technical Committees report directly to the Conference on policy and regulatory matters and to the Council (through the PC and FC) on programme and budgetary matters. The PC and FC hold a **Joint Meeting** to reconcile programme priorities with budget realities before reporting to Council. This dual reporting structure means that both political and technical channels must be engaged, and aligned through the Joint Meeting, for any priority to be fully reflected in FAO's programming.

B2. Regional Statistics Commissions

FAO maintains three Regional Commissions on Agricultural Statistics, each a statutory body established under the FAO Constitution. Europe and the Near East do not have dedicated regional statistics commissions.

- **AFCAS** – African Commission on Agricultural Statistics. **Most recent session: AFCAS 29, Hammamet, Tunisia, 24–28 November 2025.**
- **APCAS** – Asia and Pacific Commission on Agricultural Statistics. **Most recent session: APCAS 30, Kathmandu, Nepal, 19–24 May 2024. APCAS 31 dates not yet announced.**
- **LACCAS** – Latin American and Caribbean Commission for Agricultural Statistics. **Most recent session: LACCAS 32, Asunción, Paraguay, 26–28 March 2025.**

These commissions convene senior statistics officials biennially to assess the state of food and agricultural statistics, advise on data standards and methodologies, and identify capacity-building needs. Their recommendations shape FAO's statistical work programme, including the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics and the World Programme for the Census of Agriculture. Commission findings are presented to the relevant Regional Conferences, creating a bridge between technical statistical governance and political priority-setting.

B3. The 2026 Regional Conference Cycle

Regional Conferences serve as **the highest FAO governing bodies at the regional level**. Five conferences cover Africa (ARC), Asia and the Pacific (APRC), Europe (ERC), Latin America and the Caribbean (LARC), and the Near East (NERC). They synthesize inputs from regional statistics commissions, forestry and fisheries commissions, and other subsidiary bodies into regional priorities that directly shape FAO's biennial planning.

DATE	REGIONAL CONFERENCE	STATISTICS COMMISSION INPUT
2–6 Mar	39th LARC – Brasília, Brazil	LACCAS 32 (Mar 2025) – current report
25 Mar–1 Apr	38th NERC – TBC	No dedicated regional stats commission
13–17 Apr	34th ARC – Nouakchott, Mauritania	AFCAS 29 (Nov 2025) – current report
20–24 Apr	38th APRC – Brunei Darussalam	APCAS 31 dates TBD
11–15 May	35th ERC – Dushanbe, Tajikistan	No dedicated regional stats commission

All five conferences report into the June Council session (CL 180, 8–12 June 2026). The Programme Committee (PC 142), Finance Committee (FC 207), and their Joint Meeting are scheduled for 18–22 May, the week following the final Regional Conference, and serve as the consolidation point before Council. Technical Committees (COAG, COFI, COFO, CCP) follow in July–October 2026. Two Council sessions are scheduled: CL 180 (June) and CL 181 (November–December).

B4. The Broader UN Statistical Architecture

FAO's internal statistical governance connects to the broader UN system through the **UN Statistical Commission (UNSC)**, a functional commission of ECOSOC and the highest body in the international statistical system. The UNSC's 34 member countries, elected by ECOSOC for four-year terms, set global statistical standards, approve methodologies, and oversee the SDG indicator framework.

FAO is the custodian UN agency for **22 SDG indicators** spanning Goals 2, 5, 6, 12, 14, and 15, and a contributing agency for a further five. The Office of the Chief Statistician, within the Statistics Division, coordinates with the UNSC and UN Regional Economic Commissions and supports FAO's regional statistical bodies. This creates a two-way linkage: global standards from the UNSC shape the methodological framework that FAO's commissions implement, while commission assessments of national statistical capacity feed back into FAO's reporting to the UNSC, ECOSOC, and ultimately the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

Ensuring that FAO's regional statistics commissions receive adequate attention at the Regional Conference level strengthens the entire chain from national data collection through to global SDG reporting.

B5. How Inputs Flow: The Governance Cycle

STAGE	BODY	ACTION
1	Regional Commissions on Agriculture Statistics	Assess data systems, recommend statistical priorities, identify capacity gaps in agriculture statistics
2	Regional Conferences	Integrate statistical and sectoral inputs into regional priorities; report to Council and Conference
3	Technical Committees	Review thematic trends, recommend sectoral work priorities; report to Council and Conference
4	Programme & Finance Committees	Synthesize RC and TC inputs into programme/budget recommendations
5	Joint Meeting of PC and FC	Reconcile programme priorities with budget realities; produce unified recommendations for Council
6	FAO Council	Review all subsidiary body reports; advise Conference on Strategic Framework, MTP, and PWB
7	FAO Conference	Approve policy, strategy, and budget

B6. Structural Challenges for Member Countries

Readouts

At each Regional Conference, reports from the regional commissions on agriculture statistics receive a formal readout alongside reports from other regional commissions (forestry, wildlife, fisheries, etc.). **This readout is a standing agenda item and provides a legitimate procedural moment for delegations to engage.** In practice, however, the readout tends to be treated as a formality: commission findings are acknowledged but rarely prompt substantive discussion or specific conclusions on data and statistical capacity.

This matters because Regional Conferences are the governance moment where regional priorities are formally established. The language that appears in Regional Conference conclusions shapes what the Programme and Finance Committees prioritize when they consolidate inputs for the Council. Without substantive engagement during the commission readout, including explicit language on regular budget protection for statistical functions, these priorities are unlikely to survive the consolidation process. The readout is the intervention point, but realising its potential depends on delegations arriving prepared to engage.

Sequencing

The scheduling of statistics commission sessions relative to their corresponding Regional Conferences can create misalignments. Where a commission meets well ahead of the Regional Conference, the report is current. But where the gap is large, or the commission has not yet met, delegates work from outdated findings. The biennial scheduling of both bodies means even modest timing mismatches can result in a full cycle's delay.

In the current cycle, sequencing works well for Africa and Latin America: AFCAS 29 (November 2025) precedes ARC 34 (April 2026), and LACCAS 32 (March 2025) precedes LARC 39 (March 2026). However, **APCAS 31 dates have not**

been announced, and **APRC 38 is scheduled for April 2026**. This means Asia-Pacific delegates may be working from the APCAS 30 report (May 2024), now nearly two years old.

The Technical–Ministerial Gap

Regional Conferences are structured in two segments: a Senior Officers Meeting (SOM), where technical officials review substantive inputs including statistics commission reports, followed by a Ministerial Meeting (MM), where political conclusions are adopted. The statistics commission readout and the detailed technical discussion of data capacity needs happen at the SOM level. But the ministers and heads of delegation who set priorities and agree conclusion language at the MM may not have been present for those technical discussions, and typically receive only a condensed summary. This structural separation means that the people making resource allocation decisions at the political level may lack the full landscape of what the data systems need and what the commissions have recommended. The consequence is that statistical priorities, even when well-articulated at the technical level, can lose specificity and urgency by the time they reach the ministerial conclusions that drive downstream budget decisions.

B7. Looking Ahead: An Evaluation Opportunity

FAO's Strategic Framework 2022–31 identifies four cross-cutting “accelerators” (technology, innovation, data, and complements including governance, human capital, institutions) underpinning all 20 Programme Priority Areas. A potentially transformative step would be to trigger a **formal evaluation of FAO's data and statistics functions** in their role as an SF accelerator. Such an evaluation would provide an evidence base for dedicated governance attention to statistics, generate institutional recommendations on sequencing, reporting, and resource allocation, and create a formal governance moment at which data and statistics are discussed in their own right, rather than through a procedural readout. This could be requested by member states through the Programme Committee or directly at a Council session.

Bottom Line: Data and statistics is a core function of FAO, but one increasingly squeezed by a flat regular budget and pushed toward dependence on voluntary contributions. The 2026 Regional Conferences are a time-limited window for reversing this trend: statistics commission readouts provide a legitimate intervention point, but their potential is only realised if delegations are briefed and prepared to engage substantively. Permanent Representatives in Rome are well positioned to facilitate this, by sharing this brief with capital counterparts and coordinating with like-minded missions ahead of each conference.