

## Rome Data Champions meeting summary - November 2024

*A meeting of Rome Data Champions, hosted by the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data included guest speakers: Vasco Molini - Program Manager of the the 50x2030 initiative, Jose Rosero - Chief Statistician and Director of FAO Statistics Division (ESS); and Valerie Bizier, Senior Statistician at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).*

### Synopsis

The main subject of the Rome Data Champions convening focused on the recent merger of the Office of the Chief Statistician (OCS) with the FAO Statistics Division (ESS) as a result of changes outlined in the Program of Work and Budget (PWB). We invited Jose Rosero, who recently took over the role of Chief Statistician, and Valerie Bizier, formerly of OCS, now working at ESS, to explain how these changes impact their work and how data and statistics are now situated within the organization. We also heard from Mr. Rosero and Ms. Bizier on important updates regarding (1) the implementation of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) policy recommendations on food security and nutrition (FSN) data, in particular on the establishment of a Food Security and Nutrition statistical domain under the UN Statistical Commission and (2) the content of FAO's report to the United Nations Statistical Commission. The group also discussed the views of the Rome Data Champions on how member countries could have a better overview of the data and statistical work FAO on a more regular basis.

In recent meetings, we have provided initiatives working in the Agricultural Data and Statistics space for 30 minutes at the beginning of our meetings to present their work to member country representatives. This meeting showcased the work on survey-level agricultural data by the [50x2030 Initiative](#). The Initiative's program management team is based in Rome and is led by program manager Vasco Molini, who joined our discussion (summarized below).

### Project Spotlight: 50x2030

The 50x2030 Initiative is a collaborative effort led by the World Bank, FAO, and IFAD that aims to transform agricultural data systems in 50 countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America by 2030. With a budget of around US\$500 million, this Initiative aims to fill the critical agricultural data gap that undermines policy-making in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, affecting food security, climate resilience, and economic growth. The Initiative addresses the fact that low- and lower-middle-income countries invest nearly US\$500 billion annually in agriculture, often without sufficient evidence to inform those investments, leading to suboptimal outcomes. To combat these challenges, 50x2030 was developed to help countries produce effective data and make it accessible and available to all

stakeholders. This enables the building of capacity to enable data-driven policies and decision-making. The Initiative supports countries in addressing food security, sustainability, and climate change by building stronger national agricultural data systems. Financing for the Initiative follows a 70/30 strategy, where it is 70% financed by partner countries through the World Bank's IDA/IBRD resources for data production. The remaining 30% is funded by donors and philanthropic organizations to provide much-needed technical assistance for data production and use and to promote evidence-informed agriculture.

Capacity building is a key component of the Initiative, with FAO focusing on data production, IFAD on data use, and the World Bank on methodological approaches. During the presentation, FAO expressed its enthusiasm for the program as it provides the necessary approach to implement projects thanks to how the project allocates resources. Many projects stall after the training /capacity development phase due to resource constraints and the high costs of implementing survey-level data collection. 50x2030 addresses these issues and more. Please contact Vasco Molini ([vmolini@worldbank.org](mailto:vmolini@worldbank.org)) for more information.

### **Integration of FAO Statistics Division (ESS) and the Office of the Chief Statistician (OCS)**

Our meeting started with Mr. Rosero and Ms. Bizier giving context to the merger between ESS and OCS by explaining that FAO is a decentralized statistical system, where many units produce statistics, including ESS (producing roughly 60 percent of all statistics at FAO), Fisheries, Forestry, Land and Water (Aquastat), Markets and Trade (EST), and the Agrifood Economics and Policy (ESA). This decentralized system needs coordination to give consistency between the different statistical units and alignment with FAO's overall mandate and work program, which is guided by country members.

The role of an independent Office of the Chief Statistician (OCS), separate from ESS, was implemented in 2016 to provide independent oversight, quality assurance, and coordination of data and statistics within the organization. Ms. Bizier explained that a separate OCS office was particularly critical in 2018 as FAO was mandated to coordinate FAO's work on the 21 SDG indicators under its custodianship, in particular the development of their associated methodology, the establishment of data collection and production processes, and their reporting to the UN Statistics Division (UNSD) and the Global SDG report. However, a performance evaluation of OCS was conducted in 2019 and presented to the Programme Committee, FAO Council, and FAO Conference, recommending a merger of the Statistics Division (ESS) and OCS to streamline processes. The report rationalized the merger due to a lack of coordination to influence the implementation of statistics directly, not delivering overall efficiencies, and redundant positions in communications staff. After the retirement of the outgoing Chief Statistician Pietro Genari, senior management decided to comply with the recommendations of this evaluation and increase efficiencies by merging the two offices.

The merger between the two offices started on Jan 1, 2024, and is ongoing. Mr. Rosero is now the Chief Statistician and Director of the Statistical Division (ESS). ESS now has two deputy

directors who report to Mr. Rosero. One Deputy Director leads the teams associated with the old mandate of ESS, such as data generation and capacity development. The other Deputy Director leads teams tasked with work similar to the mandate of the former OCS, including internal governance of statistics, coordination, and quality assurance. It is a new position for which staffing has started.

Mr. Rosero highlighted an important detail related to how quality control is implemented that has resulted from the merger. Initially, the independent office of the Chief Statistician was created to avoid conflicts of interest in the Director of Statistics having final oversight of their audits and the data and statistics they generate. To prevent this in the merger, the new Deputy director was charged with a mandate formerly under OCS, including coordination, quality assurance, and internal governance. To avoid conflicts of interest, it is foreseen that the incoming Deputy director and ESS Data Quality Unit will report on data quality matters directly to the FAO Data Coordination Group, chaired by the Chief Economist, to ensure quality assurance through additional checks, balances, and coordination. The Data Coordination Group is part of FAO's internal governance on data and statistics. The Chief Economist chairs the group and consists of all directors of the decentralized statistics-producing divisions (ESS, Fisheries, Forestry, Land, and Water (Aquastat), Markets and Trade (EST), and the Agrifood Economics and Policy (ESA)), acting as a board of statistics within the organization.

Mr. Rosero noted that FAO was unique within international organizations for having an independent positions for their respective Chief statistician and Director of statistics. The merger makes FAO more similar to other international organizations, including UNESCO, ILO, and World Bank, which have the chief statistician role sitting with the director of the largest statistics division. Mr. Rosero also noted that countries often have a similar structure. In Ecuador, he served as Chief Statistician, coordinating the national statistical system, which also mandated serving as the director of the national statistical office. Ms. Bizier highlighted that the merger comes with inherent risks – one being the case of the previously mentioned independence and the conflict of interest of ESS statistics being reported to the Chief Statistician. Another risk is that the Chief Statistician now has a very large portfolio as both Director of ESS and Chief Statistician. Mr. Rosero and Ms. Bizier assured members that these concerns are adequately addressed by adding a second deputy director, and the inclusion of the Data Coordination Group into the reporting structure of the division reduces this risk.

The Rome Data Champions group has previously provided members with knowledge products outlining changes to the PWB discussed in FAO Council in late 2023. Our policy brief outlined the merger in addition to budget cuts to statistics. We see this merger as beneficial and are optimistic that efficiency can be achieved as a result of the restructuring. However, we continue to question the total budget cuts to statistics within the FAO during the merger to the tune of 250,000 USD - particularly in a year that prioritized Data on its agenda through the CFS Data workstream and discussions in FAO Program Committee, setting a concerning precedent. Data as a principle discussion topic is likely to feature less prominently in the near future at FAO or CFS work plans. Ensuring quality data and statistics produced with integrity and disseminated

by FAO is a core function outlined in the FAO Basic Texts and is a critical component of the [2022-2031 Strategic Framework](#), where data is called upon to be used as a cross-cutting accelerator to support the four betters. We recommend increasing resources for Data and Statistics within FAO to help support these priorities.

Members were given an opportunity to ask Mr. Rosero and Ms. Bizier questions, the first of which focused on how the Office of Youth and Women fit within this new Statistics landscape post-merger, who has oversight over this office, and whether they produce statistical information on these issues. Mr. Rosero told members that the Office of Youth and Women is new and still needs to be fully staffed. Therefore, some details still need to be clarified. However, he did anticipate that while the new office will oversee new processes, it has not been designed to be an implementing unit, making it unlikely that it will be generating data. However, if it does, it would be integrated with the FAO statistical systems that the chief statistician oversees.

### **Overview of Statistics at the Regional, Sub-Regional, and Country Offices of FAO**

Group members asked Ms. Bizier and Mr. Rosero about how regional, sub-regional, and country offices fit within the new organization of statistics within FAO and asked questions about where data is generated, how decentralization looks at the country office level, how ESS and the Chief Statistician interact with regional offices, and country offices concerning data generation/capacity building.

Mr. Rosero explained to members that the current system operationalizes statistical work in 5 [decentralized offices](#) led by regional statisticians, which are hosted by regional offices of FAO and funded via the PWB budget. The five offices are in Accra, Ghana; Bangkok, Thailand; Santiago, Chile; Cairo, Egypt; and Budapest, Hungary. There are also sub-regional FAO offices with statisticians: One in Samoa covering the Pacific Islands, one in Barbados covering the Caribbean, and previously an office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Additional sub-regional statistician roles have been out-posted to regional and sub-regional offices, funded by projects/trust fund / extrabudgetary resources.

Mr. Rosero went into further detail and explained that, for example, in Accra, Ghana, there is a regional statistician (funded by FAO budget/PWB) and two additional statisticians funded by trust fund/ extrabudgetary projects. Administratively speaking, the regional statisticians respond to the regional or sub-regional office and do not report to ESS. This system has led to complex reporting lines and could lead to conflicts in extreme cases. However, in the near future, there are discussions about streamlining these processes and closing this potential gap with sub-regional/regional statisticians. Mr. Rosero highlighted that through the extra support received by these project-based statistical resources, FAO is able to give support to countries beyond what could otherwise be covered by PWB funds.

## How does a country ask for support from FAO and how is it financed?

Mr. Rosero and Ms. Bizier presented the process a country undertakes when they request statistical support or capacity development from FAO. The first entry point is the country office, which generally doesn't have dedicated staff for statistical capacities. They are then directed to the regional statistician offices, led by the regional statistician, which then supports countries. There have been cases, particularly in Africa, which covers many countries, where the regional statistician is overcapacity in addressing requests. When this happens, FAO statistical units (non-regional) are called to support the specific request of the country. The core budget ESS receives from PWB is for core activities: data generation of global data (FAOSTAT) and anything to do with methodological work. The funds to support country-requested capacity development come from the [Technical Cooperation Programme](#) budget (TCP) at the national or regional level and the different types of programs that trust funds fund. Therefore, countries can request support from FAO via TCPs funded by PWB but complemented by trust funds / project-based resource mobilization. This makes capacity development highly dependent on extra-budgetary funds.

## Updates on FAOSTAT

Mr. Rosero responded to a member's question regarding an update to FAOSTAT, which was launched on Feb 1, 2024. This update took steps to join two separate data/statistical domains: Nutrition, and Food and Agriculture. This new, holistic approach combines both domains under the umbrella of agrifood systems. With this, dimensions of agrifood systems are presented in data and statistics in a more precise format, highlighting what is needed to transform agrifood systems and presenting a better understanding of data gaps in the agrifood system. Dietary data is an example of a significant gap in these data. Diets are the most direct pathway of linking food security and nutrition and how many nutrients we are acquiring when we are eating. FAO previously had dietary data, but it needed to be centralized, standardized and harmonized. For example, the FAO Nutrition Division had a way of classifying food items, which was different from how the Statistics Division processes food consumption surveys, making comparing survey data very challenging despite it being a similar topic. To improve this, the Food and Diet domain was established within FAOSTAT so you can link dietary data coming from different sources.

Mr. Rosero elaborated further by explaining that information originating from [supply utilization accounts and food balance sheets](#) measures micro and macronutrient availability by assessing what is produced in a country (production data), not whether food is being consumed in these countries. Household surveys, on the other hand, measure apparent intake of food – where an enumerator asks questions about the availability of food at the household level by assessing how much was spent on purchasing specific types of food but does not account for actual consumption of food (food waste, etc.). Another data source is individual dietary surveys, which are highly complex, account for daily food consumption, and give granular data on how food is prepared through food diaries – the "holy grail" of nutrition data. These three data sources

have traditionally not been standardized. With the new food and diet domain, FAO has taken steps to standardize the data, through its ESS, ESN and NFI divisions. However, to date – there has not been collaboration with WHO. Usually, WHO and UNICEF, in terms of data and statistics, look at nutritional outcomes. They monitor indicators like obesity but not necessarily diets. This is why the FAO nutrition division is uniquely placed to track these indicators.

Mr. Rosero spoke to members on how FAO collaborates with UNICEF and WHO through CFS – which is why the Data Workstream has been critical to helping coordinate how data and statistics are organized within the UN System.

### **FAO updates on CFS Data Workstream – the role of the UN Statistical Commission in implementing the voluntary Policy Guidelines**

Members remember the lengthy [CFS Data workstream](#), which resulted in voluntary policy recommendations on data collection and analysis tools for food security and nutrition, the utility of which needed to be clarified throughout the process. Mr. Rosero re-assured members of the utility of the process by providing a concrete example of how the voluntary policy recommendations have helped make the case for establishing a statistical Domain for Food Security and Nutrition Data at the UN Statistical Commission.

As a reminder, the United Nations Statistical Commission is the highest intergovernmental body of the international statistical world. It is composed of country members - all countries send their statistical authorities (National Statistical Offices) to this meeting, and international organizations join as observers. As a governing body, it reports to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which then reports to the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Incidentally, the CFS also has a similar reporting structure. All CFS outcomes are reported to ECOSOC and reported to UNGA.

Every two years, FAO reports to the UN Statistical Commission on the status of agricultural statistics worldwide. In this year's meeting, which took place in late February – FAO presented this update and included the voluntary policy recommendations, and a description of the discussions during the workstream. Mr. Rosero emphasized the unique opportunity the voluntary policy recommendations afforded him to raise awareness in the UN Statistical Commission of the CFS process – because what happened with the data workstream is very unique within the UN System – an intergovernmental body (CFS) devoted time to discussing specifics around data and agreed on recommendations. Mr. Rosero stressed that even if the recommendations are voluntary guidelines, the fact that data was given this level of attention in a multi-stakeholder, intergovernmental body with specific policy recommendations is unprecedented. Mr. Rosero used his intervention at the UN Statistical Commission to start to implement the voluntary policy recommendations.

One of the recommendations called for creating a standalone statistical domain for Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) under the umbrella of the Commission. Until now – in the



international statistical community, no statistical domain was combining the two topics effectively. When FSN is discussed, depending on where you are looking, data is collected and organized in a way that does not effectively capture the information needed to assess FSN. Mr. Rosero gave an example - in the case of FAO, you have to rely on agricultural statistics, which is not the same as FSN as it focuses on availability and production. Or, if you want data related to FSN on Nutrition, UNICEF and WHO provide health statistics, which generally focus on other aspects of health. It is vital to establish a standalone statistical domain to advance the statistical discussion on food security and nutrition. FAO proposed the creation of a Food Security and Nutrition domain at the United Nations Statistical Commission, which will require the support of countries. This is a tangible outcome of the CFS voluntary policy recommendation; FAO is empowered by the multilaterally agreed voluntary policy recommendations of CFS to propose the creation of an FSN statistical domain at the UN Statistical Commission. Once this is established, progress can start work in improving this data. Once adopted, FAO, together with WHO and UNICEF, acquires the mandate to report to the UN Statistical Commission and country members about the progress on this type of statistics. This means that in 2025, the three organizations will be required to report to countries and the Statistical Commission about the state of FSN. This creates a space for countries and intergovernmental agencies to collaborate and make progress on methodological issues through a group of experts at the Statistical Commission.

Discussions at the CFS data workstream also addressed the need for more harmonization on food security and nutrition statistics, whereby different organizations speak about different food security numbers despite having the same labels. There have been times when one organization claims the total number of food insecure people, which differs from other organizations' numbers due to differing methodologies. For example, WFP measures food security based on its [Food Consumption Score \(FCS\)](#), which does not match the FAO's numbers, as they are based on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) methodologies.

Mr. Rosero stated that the CFS voluntary recommendations put us closer to coordination in the FSN space because countries and international organizations will be mandated to coordinate under the UN Statistical Commission umbrella. Progress will be reported to CFS and the UN Statistical Commission, ensuring progress.

### **Establishing a standing line item on Data and Statistics at Programme Committee**

Members have highlighted in several Rome Data Champions meetings that there is interest among member country representatives in hearing updates on Data and Statistics from FAO regularly either through an existing body like the Programme Committee or in a semi-structured and informal context like the Rome Data Champions group. Members highlighted that this is particularly important as issues surrounding quality assurance in data and statistics can become contentious – particularly if they are only discussed when there are perceived problems with the data or reports being produced by FAO. Regular, intentional, and

proactive communication between FAO and member country representatives on issues related to data and statistics can establish more trust between stakeholders and foster increased transparency within the system. Members asked FAO what the most appropriate place these types of conversations can be had and whether the restructuring of FAO statistics with the merger of ESS and OCS provides an opportunity to establish a forum for discussion. Mr. Rosero mentioned that the increased interest from member countries and the many agenda items in Programme Committee directly related to FAO data and statistics has been very important to the visibility of statistics work being done in the organization. It has allowed ESS to report on their work in a way that reaches members that hasn't previously existed.

Mr. Rosero closed by telling members that FAO has regional statistical commissions where member country representatives actively participate and advise on the workplan of FAO Statistics. [Africa](#) (AFCAS), [Asia Pacific](#) (APCAS), Latin America and Caribbean, all have commissions, though the Near East, and Europe and Central Asia regional offices do not. At the level of HQ, there is no committee on statistics. In the last two years, the Programme Committee has been filling this gap as there has consistently been an agenda item on data and statistics in every programme committee meeting. FAO encouraged members to continue to use the Programme Committee mechanism to advise on the workplan of FAO Statistics.

As a final comment, members requested a visualization from FAO that shows how FAO situates agricultural data and statistics within the UN system, including ongoing projects and initiatives, to better understand how the pieces fit together.