

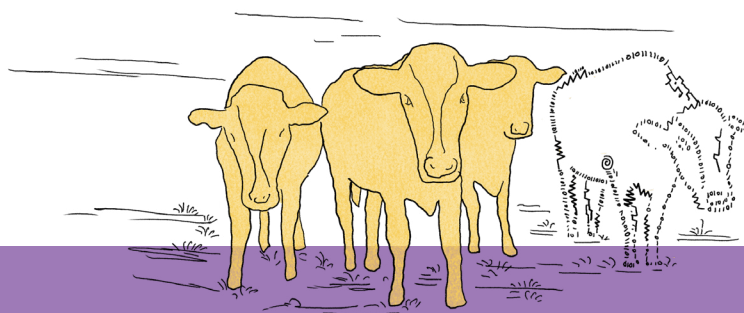
Seeing Everything from Nowhere:

A Human Rights Assessment
of the United Nations Food
and Agriculture Organization's
Data Governance



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Background and Context-Setting

This study critically examines the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) data governance framework and main digital initiatives from the perspective of human rights and public interest.

FAO's initiatives reflect a growing emphasis on data collection, analysis, and digital public goods—transforming how agricultural services are delivered. FAO's data on agri-food systems comprises a large spectrum of information, including genetic information from crop germplasm, crop yields, livestock, and environmental, socio-economic, and geospatial data. FAO's influence is twofold: it sets global standards and shapes policies in the Global South through technical support. Its current approaches may influence future data governance norms in food systems.

Placing the economic, social, and cultural human rights of Indigenous Peoples, women, peasants, and workers at the center of regulatory frameworks and legislation on the development and use of digital technologies is crucial for food systems. These actors face serious challenges, including the digital divide; dispossession of land and seeds; unequal participation in the use of data; negative exclusive property regimes over data; exclusion of certain types of data; unethical tracking and targeting; price discrimination, and manipulation of farmers' behaviors; and market dominance by organizations and bodies that control the data. This is particularly problematic in the larger context of increasing corporate control over food systems: Big Tech and finance corporations are re-shaping agribusiness towards even greater concentration of market power.

The analysis reveals significant gaps in FAO's current data governance model: the absence of specific safeguards for traditional knowledge and non-personal data of small-scale food providers; unequal access to the benefits of digital initiatives; and the systematic exclusion of marginalized groups from decision-making processes that shape technologies affecting their livelihoods.

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Implications for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and Data Justice



Lack of human rights standards in FAO's data governance framework

The failure to embed human rights standards within FAO's data governance framework poses significant risks to marginalized groups and the food sovereignty of developing countries. This omission manifests in three critical failures:

- the lack of protection for the traditional knowledge and non-personal data of Indigenous Peoples, peasants, women, and workers;
- the unequal benefit distribution that favors corporate actors;
- and the systematic exclusion of these same groups from the decision-making processes that shape the digital tools affecting their lives

Not protecting the non-personal data of small-scale food providers exposes them to privacy risks and data grabbing, enabling agribusiness corporations to exploit this information for market manipulation, biopiracy, and the development of proprietary products and digital lock-ins.

Furthermore, the framework fails to safeguard the right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) for Indigenous Peoples, particularly concerning the use of geospatial data linked to their ancestral lands.

It also ignores the gendered impacts of digitalization, operating on an assumption that women will automatically benefit from it, rather than addressing structural inequalities.

The rights of workers and the impacts of digitalization on labor are almost entirely invisible.

All these oversights compromise the fundamental right to science and related data rights for these communities that FAO should observe in its digital initiatives, preventing them from contributing to and benefiting from scientific advancement. This directly harms the agency and ingenuity of small-scale food providers, which is central to resilient, territorial food systems.

FAO's current approach risks perpetuating forms of structural inequalities now compounded by new ways of wealth extraction, where the benefits of digitalization accrue disproportionately to powerful actors while marginalized communities and developing countries bear the costs.

Failure to shape truly public digital goods and infrastructure

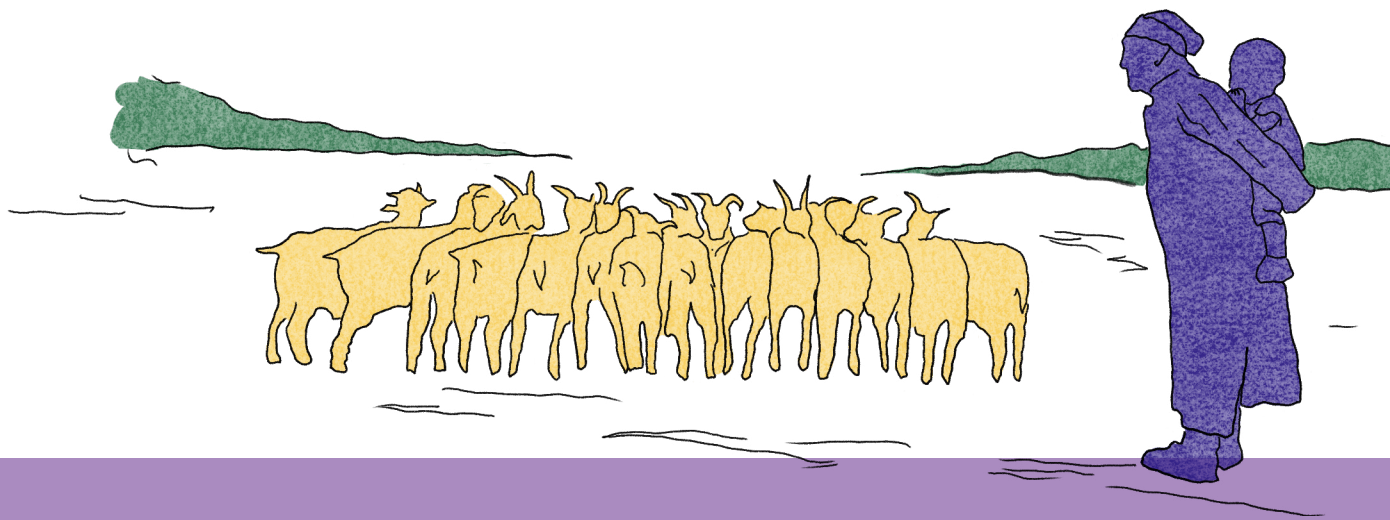
These issues are compounded by the systemic shortcomings in FAO's Digital Public Goods (DPGs) and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI):

- These initiatives often entrench corporate dependency and undermine the public interest.
- FAO's heavy reliance on US-based tech giants like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft for cloud services creates significant exclusion risks for countries under US sanctions and raises concerns about transparency due to a lack of publicly disclosed contracts. This reliance exposes FAO to geopolitical vulnerabilities.
- The governance of these digital platforms is undemocratic. Indigenous Peoples, peasants, women, and workers are not meaningfully included in their design, leading to tools that prioritize scalability over equity and contextual relevance. The organization's risk assessments are narrowly technical, ignoring structural threats like digital colonialism and corporate monopolization of public data.
- Chronic underfunding forces this reliance on Big Tech corporations, effectively ceding public control.

In essence, FAO's current trajectory does not support alternative, equitable digital economies. This risks entrenching a form of digital neo-colonialism that undermines the self-determination of developing countries, obstructs the realization of digital rights, and represents a major structural obstacle to establishing technologies under democratic control for the benefit of people and the planet.



“A central concern is FAO's growing dependence on US-based technology corporations for cloud services and digital infrastructure. This reliance creates exclusion risks for countries under US sanctions and raises questions about corporate influence over public data systems. Contracts with corporate providers remain undisclosed, while risk assessments focus narrowly on technical safety, ignoring broader structural risks such as digital colonialism and corporate monopolization of agricultural data.”



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Sector-specific Pathways for Data and Development Justice

To realign FAO's digital transformation with human rights and public interest principles, we recommend FAO on the following aspects:

Data governance framework

- Adopt gender equality as a core principle of its data governance.
- Adopt legal standards to recognize and protect small-scale food providers' non-personal data rights.
- Apply the right to FPIC of Indigenous Peoples and the right to active, free, effective, meaningful, and informed participation of peasants and other people working in rural areas when geospatial data is used to inform policy making.

- Pay attention to labor issues and the specific challenges that digitalization poses to workers' rights throughout food systems.
- Develop materials to alert small-scale food providers about potential threats to their rights in the context of new technologies and systematically monitor technological risks.
- Incorporate benefit-sharing principles into FAO's data governance framework. Develop safeguards against undue appropriation of FAO's data by corporations and develop assessment tools to evaluate who benefits from, or is harmed by, FAO's digital initiatives.
- Establish multi-scalar mechanisms for the active participation of women, workers, peasants, and Indigenous Peoples in defining priorities for FAO's digital initiatives, in assessing and monitoring their implementation, and in their regular review.
- Ensuring effective participation of peasants, Indigenous Peoples, workers, and women in scientific development. This requires protecting traditional knowledge and adopting a pluralistic approach to science.

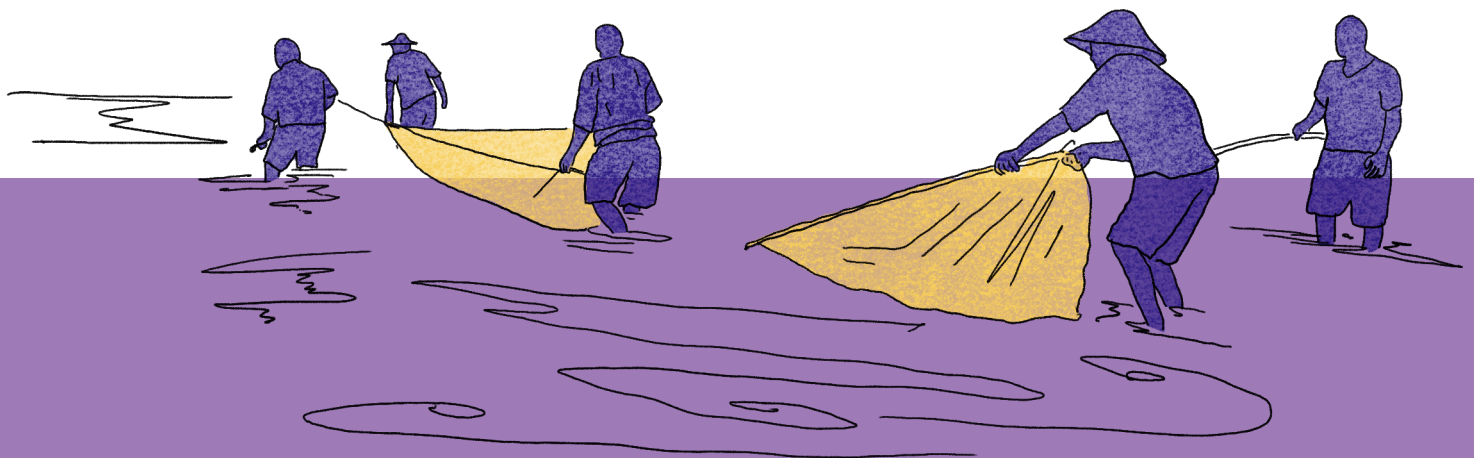
Digital public goods and Digital public infrastructure

- Disclose the terms of use of cloud service providers to FAO and the collaboration agreements with tech corporations, and discuss publicly the risk assessments of these collaborations in FAO's governing bodies.
- Define in a participatory manner the values and objectives of FAO's digital platforms, striking a proper balance between efficiency, productivity, scalability vs. equality, fair distribution of public value, and sustainability.
- Ensure universal accessibility of FAO's DPis by reducing US cloud dependence through diversified providers and collaboration with the UN International Computing Center (UNICC).



- Prioritize developing territorial, national, and regional digital platforms in partnership with small-scale food providers, local businesses, research institutions, municipalities, and regional research institutions.
- Adopt intergovernmental agreements and standards in FAO on the protection of non-personal data related to food systems, and equal and fair conditions for sharing and using of Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) data in the public interest, with the aim of developing a human rights-based governance of truly public FSN data systems and digital platforms.
- Strengthen the UNICC and promote collective agreements of UN agencies, for instance, to negotiate the terms of contracts with Big Tech companies so that UN agencies are in a better position to defend international public interests.
- Guarantee adequate public funding of FAO and its IT infrastructure so that it does not need to rely on corporate providers.

Ultimately, FAO must ensure its digital platforms serve territorial food systems rather than global agribusiness interests. Aligning FAO's data governance with human rights and food sovereignty principles is not merely a technical adjustment, but a fundamental requirement for achieving equitable and sustainable food systems in the digital age.





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Read the full report [here](#)

This report is part of a research collaboration between IT for Change and FIAN under the [Centering Equity and Justice in Global Data Governance](#) project, a collaborative initiative anchored by IT for Change, with support from the Fair Green and Global Alliance (FGG) and the Centre for Global Digital Justice (CGDJ). The project aims to advance sector-specific, contextually grounded data justice principles rooted in Global South perspectives, developed in collaboration with progressive civil society organizations and people's movements. Through this engagement, the project examines the impacts of digitalization and datafication in critical domains—including public health, biodiversity, food sovereignty, and climate change mitigation and adaptation—to articulate justice-oriented approaches to data governance.



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