FAO Norms and Standards: A Suitable Basis for Securing the Shifting Foundations of Agricultural Policy?

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Abstract: This paper presents how FAO norms and data standards stand as core sentinels defining the indicative direction and subsumed objectives of agricultural policy. They set the basic protocols for initiating and monitoring procedures in a uniform way. FAO has recently launched what portends to be the largest and most influential global statistical dataset on food and agriculture, the core features of which are conceptual consistency, integrated data methods and intended policy relevance. FAO's traditional pivotal role in compiling and analyzing agricultural statistics has placed it in a position of considerable importance in informing current debate on global and national questions related to yields, crop output, food security, nutritional vulnerability and other conventional concerns of policy. These new demands relate to tackling various environmental concerns, rural-urban imbalances, trade and commodity market developments, droughts, global climate change, deforestation, over-fishing and biodiversity to mention just some of the more important issues to be dealt with.

To meet this challenge, FAO aims to increase global knowledge in two ways; the first by improving the flow and use of the global statistics it produces using internationally recognized standards to ensure comparability and the essential additivity of data, and the second by improving national capacity to report such data in a consistent way. The implicit synergy lies in the symbiosis of these two approaches; the outputs of agricultural data at the national level feed directly as inputs into the global database and the latter can then be used to define the overall direction of policy and underpin the content of national programs of agricultural development. By managing and compiling global statistics according to centrally defined standards, FAO is in a position to offer advice and guidance on appropriate methodologies and can help develop useful complementary data tools.