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APR
2025



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION BRIEF

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FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION BRIEF

FAO WEBSITE ACCESSED AS WELL FOR INFORMATION

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FACT TABLE

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| 1945 | FAO's founding by the United Nations |
| 42 | FAO founding members in 1945 |
| 194 + 1 | Total number of FAO country members plus the EU as of 2025 |
| 49 | Number of the FAO Council participating country representatives at a given time with staggering exit points |
| 2017 | FAO Basic Text and Articles (Constitution) developed |
| 1973 | South Africa discontinued membership |
| 1993 | South Africa re-instated as a member |
| 1947 | Coordinating Committee established at the third session of the FAO Council |
| 1957 | Coordinating Committee amended to Programme Committee for the FAO Council |
| 12 | Members of the Programme Committee from member states |
| 1983 | Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture established |
| 1997 | The Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture established two subsidiary bodies: the Intergovernmental Technical Working Group on Plant Genetic Resources and the Intergovernmental Technical Working Group on Animal Genetic Resources |
| 154 | Memberships for the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture as at January 2025 |
| 2025 | South Africa joins the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA). |
| 2025 | FAO celebrates 80 years with FAO@80 |

1. PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT AND OF THE FAO

The purpose of this document is to briefly share information on the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for the purpose of information sharing. The FAO is a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN) that leads international efforts to defeat hunger.

Its goal is to achieve food security for all and ensure that people have regular access to enough high-quality food to lead active, healthy lives. In terms of Article I of the Basic Text, the functions of the FAO are to collect, analyse, interpret and disseminate information relating to nutrition, food and agriculture. In this Constitution, the term "agriculture" and its derivatives include fisheries, marine products, forestry and primary forestry products.

The FAO shall further promote and, where appropriate, recommend national and international action regarding:

- a. scientific, technological, social and economic research relating to nutrition, food and agriculture;
- b. the improvement of education and administration relating to nutrition, food and agriculture and the spread of public knowledge on nutritional and agricultural science and practice;
- c. the conservation of natural resources and the adoption of improved methods of agricultural production;
- d. the improvement of the processing, marketing and distribution of food and agricultural products;
- e. the adoption of policies for the provision of adequate agricultural credit, at national and international level; and
- f. the adoption of international policies with respect to agricultural commodity arrangements.

It shall also be the function of the organisation to:

- a. furnish such technical assistance as governments may request;
- b. organise, in cooperation with the governments concerned, such missions as may be needed to assist them to fulfil the obligation arising from their acceptance of recommendations of the UN Conference on Food and Agriculture and of this Constitution; and
- c. generally, to take all necessary and appropriate action to implement the purposes of the organisation as set forth in the preamble.

2. BACKGROUND ON SOUTH AFRICA'S RELATIONS WITH THE FAO

The FAO was founded in October 1945 by a total of 42 Member States committed to ensuring global food security. South Africa was one of the 42 nations that founded the FAO as the Union of South Africa at the time, aiming to promote agricultural development, improve nutrition and ensure food security. The then US President Roosevelt called upon member nations to constitute a body that would be fully involved in food and agriculture matters with its head office in Rome. The Permanent Mission in Rome ensures that South Africa's positions and interests are represented in FAO discussions and decision-making.

3. MEMBERSHIP AND BENEFITS

3.1 Membership

Membership is open to all nations that are interested and meet the FAO constitutional mandate. South Africa's membership was discontinued in 1974 due to apartheid legislation and was reinstated in 1994. Currently, the FAO has 194 members plus the European Union as a member, bringing the total to 195.

3.2 Institutional mechanisms

The FAO is one of the United Nations' bodies and works with other Rome-based agencies (RBAs) such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) founded later to tackle hunger and provide financial support, respectively, for rural development. The FAO has a director-general (DG) who reports to the council, supported by the deputy directors-general (DDGs), assistant directors-general (ADGs) and other staff members. The organisation employs a variety of specialists and experts with technical knowledge in areas of agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

3.3 Council and biennial conference

The council is the governing body of the FAO and acts as the executive arm of the conference between its biennial sessions. The council meets for five regular sessions and is supported by the Programme Committee, Finance Committee and the Constitutional and Legal Committee. The 49 member nations that constitute the council are elected by the conference for a term of three years with staggered expiry dates.

The conference, as the ultimate governing body of the FAO, sits, meets biennially and elects an independent council chairperson who chairs the council for two years.

3.4 FAO Africa Regional Conference

The Africa Regional Conference is held once every two years, in the years in which the FAO Conference does not meet in regular session. Attendance is usually at Minister of Agriculture level. Observers from countries outside the region, as well as international, regional and Arabian organisations are also invited to the conference.

3.5 Membership fees

The FAO receives 100% of its funding from Member States. South Africa pays its membership fees annually via the Department of Agriculture. These fees support both country and regional office programmes.

3.6 Membership benefits

Membership fees are used to support Member States through Technical Programming Frameworks (TCPs), amongst others. Examples for South Africa include the TCP on Climate Change and the TCP on Food Security.

4. COMMITTEES

Various committees have been established by the FAO to address a variety of food and agriculture-related aspects.

4.1 Council committees are outlined below:

4.1.1 Programme Committee:

This committee was established as the "Coordinating Committee" at the third session of the FAO Conference in 1947 and renamed the "Programme Committee" in 1957. Its size and structure were last modified by the conference at its thirty-sixth session. Composed of 12 members from Member States, the committee supports the council in developing and implementing FAO activities. Functions are defined in Rule XXVI.7 of the General Rules of the Organization. It meets concurrently with the Finance Committee, twice per year, to discuss matters which require review by both committees. South Africa is represented by an ambassador, Ms Nosipho Nausca-Jean Jezile, as a member.

4.1.2 Finance Committee:

This committee assists the council in overseeing the organisation's financial administration. It meets concurrently with the Programme Committee. Members of the Finance Committee are elected during the one-day council session immediately following the conference.

4.1.3 Committee on Constitutional and Legal Matters (CCLM):

This committee considers constitutional and legal items referred to it by the council or by the director-general based on Rule XXXIV.3 of the General Rules of the Organization.

4.1.4 Committee on Commodity Problems (CCP):

The CCP monitors global commodity challenges affecting production, trade, distribution, consumption and related economic issues. Membership is biennial and requires formal application by interested FAO Member States.

4.1.5 Committee on Agriculture (COAG):

The COAG conducts periodic reviews and appraisals of agricultural and nutritional challenges in order to propose concerted action by Member States and the FAO. It also reviews the organisation's agriculture and food and nutrition work programmes and their implementation, with emphasis on the integration of all social, technical, economic, institutional and structural aspects in promoting agricultural and rural development. Membership must be renewed formally each biennium.

4.1.5 Committee on Fisheries (COFI):

The COFI is the only global intergovernmental forum addressing major international fisheries and aquaculture issues. It makes recommendations to governments, regional fishery bodies and other stakeholders.

4.1.6 Committee on Forestry (COFO):

The COFO reviews global forestry issues proposing action to be undertaken by Member States and the organisation. This committee also reviews the organisation's work programmes in the field of forestry and their implementation.

4.2 Committee on World Food Security (CFS)

The CFS serves as a forum in the United Nations System for reviewing and following up on world food security policies, including food production and physical and economic access to food. It is chaired by a nominated Member State representative for a two-year term until the next representative is nominated during the CFS Plenary Sessions. The CFS is currently chaired by South Africa for 2024 and 2025, represented by Her Excellency, Ambassador Jezile. It is the most inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for stakeholders to collaborate on food security and nutrition.

4.3 Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

This commission addresses policies for the sustainable use and conservation of genetic resources for food and agriculture, as well as the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from their use. Established by the FAO in 1983 with 170 members, it is the only permanent intergovernmental body focusing on biological diversity for food and agriculture.

In 1997, the commission established two subsidiary bodies, the Intergovernmental Technical Working Group on Plant Genetic Resources and the Intergovernmental Technical Working Group on Animal Genetic Resources, to deal with specific issues in these areas. This led to the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) established on 29 July 2004. South Africa joined on 16 January 2025, becoming the 154th Contracting Party. All parties are committed to the treaty's objectives of conserving and sustainably using plant genetic resources and equitable sharing of benefits.

4.4 Committee on Phytosanitary Measures

This is a forum where the World Trade Organization (WTO) members discuss matters related to the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures' implementation and addresses potential challenges arising from SPS measures.

4.5 FAO/WHO CODEX Alimentarius Commission

The commission is responsible for advising the FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO) on implementing the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme; the purpose of which is:

- a. to protect the health of the consumers and ensure fair practices in the food trade;
- b. to promote coordination of all food standards work undertaken by international governmental and non-governmental organisations; and
- c. to determine priorities, to initiate and guide the preparation of draft standards through, and with the aid of, appropriate organisations.

5. OTHER FAO CORE TECHNICAL AREAS

The FAO's technical expertise involves key sectors inclusive of:

- Agriculture and crops: Supporting countries to improve productivity, sustainability and resilience through climate-smart agriculture, integrated pest management and sustainable soil and water management.
- Livestock: Promoting responsible livestock production, animal health and disease prevention, with attention to "One Health" approaches.
- Forestry: Advancing sustainable forest management, forest conservation and the role of forests in livelihoods, biodiversity and climate mitigation.
- Fisheries and aquaculture: Supporting the responsible management of marine and inland fisheries and aquaculture for food security, biodiversity protection and livelihoods.
- Land and water: Helping countries manage land, soil and water resources efficiently and equitably.
- Food safety and standards: Providing scientific advice and support to international food standards, including through the Codex Alimentarius, a joint FAO/WHO body.
- Farmer field schools: This is an extension approach that provides an opportunity for hands-on group learning on farms by the farmers.

6. CONCLUSION

The FAO's establishment and continued operation represent a legacy that no Member State would want to relinquish. Its supportive and collaborative approach deserves recognition and ongoing enhancement by all members and its associates.

The founding aim of the FAO is to promote agricultural development, improve nutrition and to ensure food security. While the UN and its agencies such as the FAO consider nutrition crucial, this is still not reflected in its nomenclature:

- UN "Food Security and Nutrition" as opposed to what South Africa still promotes;
- "Food and Nutrition Security". This is cause for concern on the prioritisation level of support that is provided to the aspect of nutrition.

The FAO supports work on nutrition through research and established institutional capacities. Consideration of ensuring nutrition security should be captured in the main purpose of the FAO, consequently, in food and nutrition security, unless if there is a vehemently threatening reason not to. Part of the FAO's strategic initiatives requires considering the need for including member countries' priorities.





