

## THE UNIQUE MISSION OF THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS (FAO) IN CREATING A WORLD WITHOUT HUNGER AND POVERTY - ITS ACHIEVEMENTS IN SERBIA

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*Abstract:* The aim of this paper is to determine the means and the most significant accomplishments that the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has achieved in the development of agriculture in the world and the Republic of Serbia. The methods used are text analysis, formal-legal method, comparative method, and statistical method. The FAO is one of the most important organizations of the United Nations, both because of the strategically important area it covers and because of the large number of members (245 countries and territories). Founded 77 years ago and headquartered in Rome, it has 130 offices at regional, sub-regional and national levels. The task of this international organization is to prevent world hunger and improve nutrition and food safety. Therefore, the current FAO strategy is based on better food production, better nutrition, and better environmental protection, which in total should lead to a better life for people. Since its founding, this organization has accomplished many significant achievements in its field: first of all, the adoption of the *Codex Alimentarius* collection, which established international standards in food production, rules of good practice in food trade, and rules of food consumer protection, and stands out for its far-reaching influence. Also, of great global importance are the preparation of the International Plant Protection Convention and the international agreement on plant genetic resources, as well as the establishment of the Committee on World Food Security and the Agricultural Market Information System. In addition, the FAO participates in organizing the fight against plant and animal pests. At the regional level,

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the fight against river blindness disease in Africa and Rinderpest can be highlighted. In Serbia, the FAO participated in the remediation of the consequences of the 2014 flood with direct assistance to farmers who suffered damage, as well as with subsequent training on disaster risk management. In addition, this organization supports Serbia on different rural development issues (including gender equality, irrigation, etc.), as well as on sustainable management of natural resources and climate resilience.

*Keywords:* FAO, agriculture, food, *Codex Alimentarius*, UN

## INTRODUCTION

The FAO is a specialized agency of the United Nations in charge of leading international activities to prevent world hunger. It was founded on October 16, 1945, in Quebec (Canada) and is based in Rome. Its main purpose is to provide all people with regular access to a sufficient amount of safe and quality food in order to lead an active and healthy life. With its 195 members (194 countries and the European Union), the FAO operates in over 130 countries by helping governments and authorities improve and develop their agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. In doing so, the FAO provides research, technical assistance, and support projects and processes national agricultural data. This organization is governed by a conference of representatives of all members, which is held every other year at its headquarters, when the executive board of 49 members is elected, as well as the general director. In addition, numerous working bodies (committees) have been organized for certain issues, such as finance, programs, agriculture, fisheries, etc. In its work, the FAO has set the following priorities: helping to eliminate hunger and unsafe and poor quality food, with the availability of information on hunger in high-risk areas being of paramount importance; achieving greater productivity and sustainability in agriculture, forestry and fisheries, all the while ensuring that natural resources are not compromised; reducing rural poverty by providing the rural population with increased access to resources and services in order to establish a sustainable system for combating hunger; enabling advanced and sustainable agricultural systems suitable for efficient agriculture; improving the resilience of this sector to crises by creating conditions for overcoming regular and extraordinary risks.

## THE FAO'S GLOBAL MISSION AND ITS OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENTS

From the previous activities of the FAO, it can be seen that this specialized agency of the United Nations worked to alleviate poverty and hunger by promoting the development of agriculture, improving nutrition, and striving for food security. Well-known FAO programs in this area have achieved enviable results. Achievements were manifested in the areas of food, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, disease eradication, and information dissemination.

### **Achievements related to food**

In the group of programs, i.e., achievements related to food, one can point out, first of all, participation in the creation of a database of standards, guidelines, guides, and rules of good practice, which relate mainly to food production, labeling, and safety – the so-called *Codex Alimentarius*. In addition, notable achievements in this area include the establishment of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the adoption of the Right to Food Guidelines (2004). Namely, the FAO established the *Codex Alimentarius* Commission in November 1961, which was joined a year later by the World Health Organization (WHO), with the task of establishing consumer protection standards, as well as facilitating and ensuring international food trade. In 2021, the commission had 189 members and about 50 observers. According to its own documents, the *Codex Alimentarius* (CA) consists primarily of international standards for permitted levels of food additives, as well as maximum permitted levels of toxins and contaminants in food, maximum permitted levels of pesticide residues in food and veterinary medicines in food of animal origin; and the rules about hygiene and good technological practices. In doing so, these standards are adopted in the form of recommendations, i.e., they are not binding international rules, but other legally binding international legal instruments, such as the World Trade Organization agreements, refer to these rules as reference values (Dabović, 2007). The CA collection currently consists of 238 standards, 81 guides, 55 collections of practices, and prescribed levels of residues in food for pesticides and veterinary drugs, as well as collections of professional texts, etc. (Nishida & Martinez, 2007). The FAO established the CFS in 1974 as an intergovernmental body to serve as a forum for the review and follow-up of food security policies. In 2009, the CFS went through a reform process to ensure that the voices of other stakeholders were heard in the global debate

on food security and nutrition. The vision of the reformed Committee is to be the most inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together in a coordinated way to ensure food security and nutrition for all. The CFS was reformed to address short-term crises but also long-term structural issues. The Committee reports annually to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The Right to Food Guidelines on a voluntary basis supports the progressive realization of the right to food in the context of national food security, and is a practical tool to help implement the right to adequate food, which are founded on human rights principles. They were endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) at its 30th Session and adopted by the FAO Council in November 2004, after two years of intergovernmental negotiations that included the relevant participation of civil society. While they are not legally binding, they provide policy recommendations to states and other stakeholders on relevant issues, including access to natural resources, education, legislation and markets. The political legitimacy of a right to food strategy is strengthened when all relevant stakeholders are involved in the design, implementation and monitoring phases. Thus, the Guidelines are a valuable document for any individual or institution that works on food security and nutrition.

### **Achievements in agriculture**

The adoption of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), as well as the adoption of the Agreement on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, are likely to be the greatest achievements of the FAO in the field of agriculture. Also, in this field, a distinctive achievement is the adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, which were adopted in May 2012. Access to the International Plant Protection Convention was offered in 1952 (the basic text was updated in 1997) and has so far been signed and ratified by 184 states. The purpose of the IPPC is to secure regular and effective action to prevent the spread and introduction of pests on plants and plant products and to promote appropriate measures for their control. Aside from the main text, the IPPC has several mechanisms for fostering cooperation among its contracting parties. These include: developing International Standards for Phytosanitary Measures (ISPMs); fostering the exchange of plant health information – for example, through national reporting obligations; developing capacity; and providing legal and policy guidelines (FAO, 1997; Pimentel, 2001). The

International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture was adopted by the Thirty-First Session of the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in November 2001. The Treaty's objectives are as follows: recognizing the enormous contribution of farmers to the diversity of crops that feed the world; establishing a global system to provide farmers, plant breeders and scientists with access to plant genetic materials; ensuring that recipients share benefits they derive from the use of these genetic materials with the countries where they have been originated. The Treaty puts 64 of the world's most important crops, which account together for 80 percent of the food the world's population derives from plants, into an easily accessible global pool of genetic resources that is available to potential users in the Treaty's ratifying nations for some uses. Namely, those users who access the materials must be from the Treaty's ratifying nations, and they must agree to use the materials solely for research, breeding, and training for food and agriculture (FAO, 2001). Concerning the adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, it had been important that the FAO had started to support member countries in addressing structural problems with land fragmentation and small farm sizes through the development of land consolidation instruments shortly after its foundation in 1945. In the late 1990s, land fragmentation and land consolidation re-appeared on the agenda, this time in the context of Central and Eastern Europe where land reforms from the beginning of a transition in 1990 had led to excessive land fragmentation and small farm sizes in most of the countries. The FAO began to document and address problems in this area around 2000. Since 2012, the Guidelines have served as a reference to improve governance of tenure, including through land consolidation based on international best practices (Hartvigsen, September 2018; Barry, Molero & Muhsen, May 2013).

### **The FAO Forestry Program**

Through its Forestry Program, the FAO seeks to have transformational impacts that benefit forests and forest-dependent people and help achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. The FAO's approach balances economic, social, and environmental objectives to enable the present generation to benefit from the Earth's forest resources while conserving those resources to meet the needs of future generations. The Forestry Program oversees more than 230 projects in 82 countries. The FAO is guided in its technical forestry work by

the Committee on Forestry (COFO) and six regional forestry commissions. The FAO's work in forestry is centered on the following priorities: halting deforestation and forest degradation; forest restoration, reforestation, and forestation; conservation and sustainable use of forests to enhance forest-based livelihoods; improving forest-related data and information and capacities (FAO, 2020). One of these projects is the Great Green Wall. Namely, the Great Green Wall is Africa's flagship initiative to combat climate change and desertification and address food insecurity and poverty. Creating a great mosaic of green and productive landscapes across North Africa, the Sahel and the Horn could be a game changer for Africa, transforming the lives of millions of people. Endorsed by the African Union in 2007 as the "Great Green Wall for the Sahara and the Sahel Initiative" (GGWSSI), it brings together more than 20 African countries with international organizations, research institutes, and civil society and grassroots organizations. The Great Green Wall must not be seen as a wall of trees to hold back the desert. This idea that originally inspired the initiative has given way to the vision of a mosaic of sustainable land use practices. At the same time, the wall is a metaphor to express the solidarity between African countries and their supporters from around the world (FAO, 2007; Pausata, March 20, 2020).

### **The FAO's unique achievements in the area of fisheries**

When it comes to the unique achievements in the area of fisheries, we can mention the 1995 Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and the Port State Measures Agreement (FAO, 1995). Namely, the purpose of the Code was to set international standards of behavior for responsible practices with a view to ensuring the effective conservation, management, and development of living aquatic resources with due respect for the ecosystem and biodiversity. These standards may be implemented, as appropriate, at the national, sub-regional, and regional levels and in the promotion of more responsible behavior in the fisheries sector. It is anticipated that these standards and norms will lead to the achievement of long-term sustainable outcomes (FAO, 1995; Caddy, 2000). The 2016 Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA) was the first binding international agreement to specifically target illegal fishing (including unreported and unregulated fishing) (FAO, 2016). Its objective was to prevent, deter, and eliminate illegal fishing by preventing vessels engaged in illegal fishing from using ports and landing their catches. In this way, the agreement reduces the incentive for such vessels to continue operating while it also blocks fishery products

derived from illegal fishing from reaching national and international markets. The effective implementation of the agreement ultimately contributes to the long-term conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources and marine ecosystems (Ibidem).

### **The FAO eradication of diseases**

According to the FAO press release from 1989, “River Blindness” disease has virtually been eliminated as a public health problem, and people in the West African region were able to return to the land in great numbers. The “River Blindness” disease control program was launched in 1974. As a result of the intensive effort, about 25 million hectares of fertile land have been freed from the disease, which was both a major public health problem and an impediment to socio-economic development. Namely, the rehabilitation of West African land freed from the disease provided food and improved living conditions for around 17 million habitants (FAO, 12 May 1989, Kevin et. al., 2011). The FAO’s Global Rinderpest Eradication Program, a key element within the Emergency Prevention System for Transboundary Animal and Plant Pests and Diseases (EMPRES), was formed in 1994 as an international coordination mechanism to promote the global eradication of rinderpest and verification of freedom from the disease, while providing technical guidance to achieve these goals. The GREP has worked in close association with other organizations and communities worldwide. Since the late 1960s, the European Union has funded national and regional projects focused directly on, or incorporating, rinderpest control. A declaration of global freedom from rinderpest was issued in 2011, making rinderpest the first animal disease to be eradicated globally thanks to human efforts and only the second disease ever, after smallpox (FAO, 2011; 2020a). The Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS) is an inter-agency platform meant to enhance food market transparency and policy response for food security. It was launched in 2011 by the G20 Ministers of Agriculture following the global economic crises in 2007/08 and 2010. Bringing together the principal trading countries of agricultural commodities, the system assesses global food supplies (focusing on wheat, maize, rice, and soybeans) and provides a platform to coordinate policy action in times of market uncertainty. The AMIS is composed of G20 members plus Spain and seven additional countries with major exports and imports of agricultural commodities. Together, participants of the system represent a large share of global production, consumption and trade volumes of the targeted crops, typically in the range of 80-90 percent. By enhancing transparency and

policy coordination in international food markets, the AMIS has helped to prevent unexpected price hikes and strengthen global food security (AMIS, 2022; Umar et al., 2020).

### **SOME SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE FAO IN SERBIA**

In September 2019, the FAO and the Government of Serbia agreed on the continuation of their joint work, which has been ongoing since 2001, through the FAO Country Office in Serbia, on advancing the Serbian agricultural sector. The Country Programming Framework that was signed in Belgrade was set to lead to accomplishing three goals: rural development, the sustainable management of natural resources, and climate resilience. These goals, which were the joint priorities of the two partners, were aligned with national strategies and policy documents, the accession process to the European Union, the United Nations development framework, and the globally accepted Sustainable Development Goals. It was mentioned that in Serbia, 40 percent of the population of 7.1 million lived in rural areas. The agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sectors employed about two out of every ten people. Therefore, the development of the rural economy could have a catalyzing effect for the whole country (FAO, 2019). Therefore, at first, the FAO was committed to supporting Serbia in its efforts to increase agricultural productivity, help farmers' integration into value chains, boost economic growth, and create additional income sources for rural families (Dabović, 2017). Also, the FAO aimed to make concerted efforts to pursue leveraged investments in the framework of its partnerships with the Global Environment Facility, the Green Climate Fund, and other financial institutions.

#### **Providing support to rural development**

Shortly after severe floods hit Serbia in May 2014, the Government of the Republic of Serbia declared a state of emergency. Around 32,000 people were evacuated from their homes, schools, health facilities, and agricultural lands were damaged. Agriculture was the backbone of the rural economy in Serbia, as well as an important source of income for the majority of the rural population. The damage and losses to the agriculture sector were estimated at 228 million Euros. In response to the devastating floods, the FAO partnered with the European Union, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, and other implementing partners to launch the European Union Assistance for Flood Relief Program. The program, which was funded by the European

Union, aimed to provide extensive assistance for flood relief in Serbia. The FAO has supported a total of around 34,500 flood-affected farming families from 993 communities in 41 municipalities in Serbia with assistance packages. As a result, the families were able to restart their agricultural activities and rebuild their livelihoods (FAO, 2022b; Popadić, 2021).

After the floods in Serbia in 2014, the FAO organized a training workshop in Serbia in May 2015 that was focused on disaster risk reduction and management, in order to learn from the past and prepare for the future. In the workshop, a new National Disaster Risk Management Program was introduced. About 30 participants, including professionals from Serbia's government, worked to define priority activities for disaster risk reduction and management activities in the agricultural sector. This workshop marked a need to shift to resilience-building measures related to agriculture. Namely, agriculture in Serbia made up just over 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product and accounted for almost 20 percent of exports, with two-thirds of the rural population relying on agriculture for their livelihood. Therefore, the FAO workshop had two main outcomes. It provided in-depth sessions for awareness raising and training on disaster risk reduction. It also provided Ministry staff with hands-on experience in drafting an action plan for the new National Disaster Risk Management Program (FAO, 2015). In 2021, the FAO published research titled "National gender profile of agriculture and rural livelihoods" on the country's gender assessment in Serbia. This research was aligned with the FAO's strategic commitment to close the gender gap in agriculture, thereby generating significant gains for the agricultural sector and helping to reduce hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. The key objective was to produce a comprehensive analysis of gender equality in the agricultural sector and rural development processes, identifying gender inequalities and their underlying causes and consequences, and offering recommendations for gender-responsive policies to enable the transformation of gender relations and structures in the agricultural sector and rural development in Serbia (FAO, 2021). The research findings indicated significant gender gaps in rural areas across diverse dimensions, including access to assets, economic participation, roles in and gains from agricultural production, the exercise of a range of welfare rights, political participation, access to social services, lifestyles, and resilience to climate change and emergencies. It was underlined that the latest emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, has had a profound impact on the rural population, agriculture, and the position of women in rural areas. At the same time, it created opportunities for innovative approaches and

new practices that can improve the economic activity of rural women in the future, and consequently their overall wellbeing (*Ibidem*).

Since 2018, the FAO and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) have supported Serbia to boost its agricultural production by increasing its irrigation capacity. Namely, despite being a leading agricultural producer and grain exporter in its region, Serbia was highly vulnerable to climate change and drought with less than 2 percent of its arable land being irrigated. Therefore, this project marked the beginning of drafting Serbia's irrigation development strategy, and in the following years, it identified specific policy and investment options that increased agricultural productivity, environmental sustainability, and climate change resilience via enhanced and newly developed irrigation networks. Rehabilitating and modernizing Serbia's irrigation system strengthened the resilience of the sector while diversifying the agricultural production, as irrigation enabled growing higher-value crops and increased the productivity of the existing ones. The FAO drew on its global agricultural water management expertise and vast field experience in irrigation investment schemes to provide technical assistance to support the design and implementation of the strategy and the action plan in this project (FAO, 2022c).

### **Providing support in natural resource management and climate resilience**

In 2018 and 2020, the FAO supported Serbia in preparing a document titled "Readiness Proposal" in the framework of a program titled "Strengthening Serbia's Capacities for Strategic Engagement of the Private Sector into Climate Financing". The document states that Serbia is highly exposed and vulnerable to natural hazards as a result of climate change. Also, as stated in the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), the most vulnerable sectors in the Republic of Serbia are agriculture, hydrology, forestry, as well as human health and biodiversity. Accordingly, Serbia committed itself to a GHG emission reduction of 9.8% until 2030 compared to base-year emissions, which requires significant investments, especially in the energy sector that is still state-owned. Thus, in order to reduce risks, losses, and damage caused by extreme climate and weather events and reduce GHG emissions, targeted investments, especially from the private sector, will be needed. Strategic engagement of all actors, including the private sector, is a precondition in order to ensure

sustainability. In this context, the Republic of Serbia has identified in its Country Work Program (until 2025) energy, agriculture, water resources and hydrology, and forestry as the priority sectors for cooperation with the Green Climate Fund. The conclusion is that in order to implement priority investments and achieve the goals of raising awareness in the general public, engaging with the private sector and facilitating direct access to the Green Climate Fund (GCF) under a second Readiness proposal is necessary (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia & FAO, 2018, 2020).

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