

## Why GAO Did This Study

The United States and other member states have long-standing concerns about the management and operations of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a United Nations (UN) specialized agency charged with leading international efforts to defeat hunger. After an external evaluation found that FAO needed to reform, FAO adopted its reform plan, called the Immediate Plan of Action for FAO Renewal (IPA), which includes 272 action items. This report examines (1) the methodology that FAO uses to report on the status of its reform plan, (2) factors that affect FAO's ability to implement its reform plan, and (3) actions the United States has undertaken to support FAO reform efforts. GAO analyzed FAO documents, including FAO's most recent 2010 IPA progress report; interviewed U.S. and UN officials, and representatives of FAO member states; and analyzed 30 IPA action items from FAO's reform plan.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State and the U.S. Representative to the UN Agencies for Food and Agriculture work with member states to (1) encourage FAO to develop clear guidance for assessing and categorizing the implementation status of IPA action items and (2) determine before 2013 if consensus can be achieved for IPA action items currently subject to disagreement among member states. The Department of State concurred with GAO's recommendations. FAO management noted that it would consider the issues discussed in GAO's report.

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## UNITED NATIONS

# Improved Reporting and Member States' Consensus Needed for Food and Agriculture Organization's Reform Plan

## What GAO Found

In response to member states' request, FAO's 2010 IPA progress report provided more quantitative measures of its reform implementation status than in its previous progress report, but the reported information may not accurately reflect the implementation status of some action items due to weaknesses in FAO's methodology. The progress report used implementation status categories to characterize reform status. IPA project leaders assessed the status of action items using these categories, but the varying nature of the action items and ambiguity of the implementation status categories caused difficulties in quantitatively measuring the progress of reforms. FAO's Program Management Unit (PMU), the entity responsible for managing the implementation of the reform plan, did not provide clear guidance for project leaders to easily differentiate among the categories. Moreover, the PMU did not comprehensively validate the reported implementation status for all action items in the 2010 IPA progress report. However, it has begun to collect and validate supporting information for all action items that project leaders are reporting as being "completed" and has also begun to monitor the progress of a selected number of action items that have yet to be completed. GAO found that the reported information in FAO's 2010 IPA progress report may not precisely reflect the implementation status of some action items. For example, some action items that were ongoing in nature were categorized as "on track," while others were reported as "continuous." Since the action items that remain to be completed are the largest and most complex to implement, the accuracy of future progress reports will become more important to FAO member states that are responsible for providing appropriate oversight.

FAO management has made efforts to address some factors that could hinder its ability to implement the reform plan, but some impediments may challenge full implementation. To further its oversight of the reform plan, FAO management undertook a risk assessment that identified risks at the program level, such as weaknesses in its internal governance, and significant risks that could affect implementation at the project level. FAO management has addressed some of the weaknesses and risks identified in the risk assessment. However, impediments such as disagreements among member states, interdependencies among reform projects, and insufficient support from some managers and staff could cause some of the action items to be incomplete or delayed. For example, member states continue to disagree on the criteria for FAO country office coverage. FAO management does not expect to complete this action item until after the scheduled end of the reform plan in 2013.

As the principle representative of U.S. interests at FAO headquarters, the U.S. Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome (USUN Rome) has made efforts to support FAO reform. USUN Rome's actions include the prioritization of oversight and accountability reforms, consistent with a U.S. government initiative across the UN system and are reflected in USUN Rome's performance indicators. USUN Rome has also worked formally and informally with member states to promote oversight and accountability reforms at FAO. For example, USUN Rome officials participated in an oversight focus group that actively supported the drafting of a disclosure policy for FAO's internal audit reports and the establishment of an Ethics Office.