

Audit of ICT governance

Agroscope

Key facts

Agroscope is the federal competence centre for agronomic and food processing research. It is part of the Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG). It employs more than 1,100 people at twelve sites, working in its three Competence Divisions, seven strategic Research Divisions and the Resources Unit. Agroscope's 2022-2025 Work Programme is set out and comprises more than 100 projects and six core themes. In 2022, Agroscope's operating expenses amounted to almost CHF 198.5 million, with receipts of around CHF 24.8 million.

The IT Division provides information and telecommunications technology (ICT) resources. In this area, Agroscope is both a beneficiary and a service provider, particularly for needs related to scientific activities (e.g. visual recognition, sequencing or automatic learning). For 2023, the division has a budget of around CHF 12 million (excluding personnel costs), an increase of around CHF 3 million compared with 2022. It has around 20 employees.

In this audit, the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) examined whether Agroscope's IT governance was appropriate. It found that no systematic ICT governance had been defined or implemented. In this respect, the organisation's level of maturity is low. The situation has been acknowledged and management has defined corrective measures, including at the personnel level, and they are currently being implemented.

Weaknesses in IT governance and lack of a steering body

No end-to-end ICT governance processes have been defined or implemented. In their current form, they are not sufficient to ensure that Agroscope's management can fully perform its tasks of evaluating, steering and monitoring ICT activities. Consequently, there is a risk that shortcomings in the governance system, in the contribution made by ICT to business processes, in risk management, in the adequacy of resources and in the involvement of stakeholders will not be identified in time and corrected.

However, ICT governance activities have been partially implemented. Sporadic reviews are carried out and an annual budget process is in place. In addition, there are plans this year to develop an ICT strategy and a service catalogue. But these efforts remain insufficient. An ICT steering body with the power to evaluate, prioritise and monitor ICT activities must also be set up. Indeed, there is a risk that steering and monitoring will be performed in an uncoordinated manner between different stakeholders, or even that they will be overlooked.

ICT organisation under pressure, important processes not in place

The IT Division, with its dual role as beneficiary and service provider, has to handle a heavy workload. Against this backdrop, several key people have left Agroscope since mid-2021, but most of them have been replaced. Recruitment is also underway for a number of vacant positions. The SFAO noted management's intention to examine the organisation and workforce in parallel with the definition of the ICT strategy and the service catalogue. At this stage, the SFAO decided not to issue a recommendation in this regard.

There are no ICT risk analysis processes or tools. The ICT manager and management are unable to assess these risks and monitor the measures to offset them. Communication from the IT Division about its objectives, capabilities and progress is also inadequate. Stakeholders and their specific information needs are not systematically identified. This creates an unfavourable basis for the relationship between the IT Division and its clients.

Insufficient transparency in portfolio management, improvements underway

There is no description of the responsibilities, stages and results of the project portfolio management process. The project portfolio is not managed in a consistent manner, and not all those involved are clear about their tasks and responsibilities. Progress has been made in identifying ICT projects, but the ICT components of research projects are not identified systematically enough. The inventory of applications is also still being completed. As a result, portfolio prioritisation is based on a potentially incomplete framework, and criteria and responsibilities have not been defined.

Despite this, financial planning for ICT activities has improved in 2023. A new version of the budget has been drawn up which is more transparent and better founded. Monitoring is in place for individual projects, but is lacking at the overall portfolio level. As a result, portfolio management is undermined.

ICT procurement checks are in place, but insufficiently documented

ICT procurement processes are defined. Agroscope has delegated authority to procure services and maintenance. Various checks on ICT procurements are carried out by the head of the IT Division, the procurement coordinator and the management controller. Regular monitoring is in place and improvements are being made, but there is no complete and up-to-date description of these checks. As a result, the SFAO was unable to assess their effectiveness or compliance in the area of ICT procurement.

A supplier management process for ICT services is lacking. Information on relationships with suppliers, the associated risks and the quality of their services is not systematically collected and documented. The SFAO issued recommendations on these points.

In addition, synergies with the FOAG or other Federal Administration units in the field of ICT are not systematically explored, but discussions along these lines have been initiated. These initial efforts must be continued.

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