



联合国
粮食及
农业组织

Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Organisation des Nations
Unies pour l'alimentation
et l'agriculture

Продовольственная и
сельскохозяйственная организация
Объединенных Наций

Organización de las
Naciones Unidas para la
Alimentación y la Agricultura

منظمة
الأغذية والزراعة
للأمم المتحدة

E

FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-seventh Session

Amman, Jordan, 5-8 February 2024 and 4-5 March 2024

The Arab Forum for Rural Advisory Services (AFRAS)

Executive Summary

Rural Advisory Services (RAS) play a key role in empowering small-scale farmers with the skills and practices they need to address their productivity and profitability challenges and improve their livelihoods, hence contributing to rural transformation. Small-scale farmers in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region represent the bulk of the agricultural producers, yet their accessibility to the varied RAS needed to improve agriculture-based livelihoods remains inadequate.

Several institutional, organizational and financial factors impede the performance of RAS in the region, limiting their availability at the scale and quality required. In 2021 and 2022, FAO conducted the regional study “Advancing rural advisory service in Arab countries to promote market-orientation and inclusive transformation.” The study assessed RAS from the perspective of market-orientation, pluralism, and responsiveness to the needs of various categories of farmers, focusing on smallholders and vulnerable producers.

Recommendations of the study included strengthening of regional networking and cooperation on RAS – a long-overdue need – through the establishment of a dedicated forum on RAS, operating under the umbrella of the Global Forum on Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS). The opportunity of establishing such a forum was discussed and endorsed during three consecutive regional consultations organized respectively in June 2022, February 2023, and July 2023. These symposia brought together key RAS stakeholders across the region including policymakers and representatives of regional and international organizations, RAS experts, and champions, who reached a consensus on the vision, mission, values and principles, functions, and roadmap towards the establishment of the forum.

Denominated Arab Forum for Rural Advisory Services (AFRAS), the forum is primarily dedicated to networking among RAS stakeholders; information sharing and exchange of experience; and knowledge management. Upon request by AFRAS’ stakeholders, FAO in collaboration with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and GFRAS, has been supporting AFRAS’ incubation process by facilitating the interaction among stakeholders at regional and country levels, as well as supporting the diverse technical, institutional and organizational arrangements required for its operationalization, making it ready to be officially launched.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

Queries on the content of this document may be addressed to:

RNE NERC Secretariat
FAO-RNE-NERC@fao.org

I. Background

1. Small-scale farmers represent the backbone of agriculture in the NENA region, contributing about 80 percent of some annual and perennial crops and livestock production, the majority of them working as family farmers.¹ Despite its prevalence, the productivity and profitability of small-scale farming are challenged by a variety of interlinked economic, environmental, and institutional factors playing out at the global, regional, and local levels. These include the growing impact of climate change, the scarcity and fragility of natural resources (especially water), price volatility in international and domestic markets, and protracted crises, conflicts and political instability in certain countries, discriminatory policies, and institutions, and social/gender norms.² Agricultural and rural development policies often overlook the specific needs of small-scale farmers, leaving them to cope with the consequences of land fragmentation, weak organization, diminishing and poorly accessible rural infrastructure and services, often with limited ability to harness technological advancements and market dynamics. The combination of these adverse factors deepens inequalities between smallholders and large-scale producers,³ between rural and urban areas, and between men and women farmers, leading to food insecurity, poverty, and migration to urban areas and abroad, with vulnerable and marginal farmers at a particular disadvantage. Notably, small-scale family farmers ultimately constitute about 70 percent of the poor living in the region.⁴

2. Extension and RAS play a key role in enabling farmers to cope with both production and marketing challenges. RAS refers to “the different activities that provide the information and services needed and demanded by farmers and other actors in rural settings to assist them in developing their own technical, organisational, and management skills and practices so as to improve their livelihoods and well-being”.⁵ The scope of RAS goes beyond production technology and information sharing to include those services facilitating farmers’ access to inputs’ and outputs’ markets, acting collectively and making informed decisions to increase their income and enhance rural livelihoods. These services – broadly defined as market-oriented services – include information on market prices, farm business management, finance, and improved technologies, and mechanization, including the appropriation of digital solutions. Evidence shows that these diversified services are often provided by multiple service providers from the public and private sectors, producer organizations and civil society groups in what is defined as a pluralistic service system.⁶

3. Consequently, RAS emerges as critical to rural transformation. Broadly defined as the process of pursuing improved livelihood and inclusive growth by means of a rise in agricultural productivity and marketable surpluses, expanded off-farm employment opportunities, better access to services and infrastructure, and capacity to influence policy,⁷ rural transformation is strictly connected to the transformation of agrifood systems to be more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable.

4. The 36th Session of the FAO Near East Regional Conference (NERC 36) called on FAO to support the advancement of extension and advisory services as pluralistic and market-oriented systems with an emphasis on inclusivity, gender-responsiveness, and innovation. Accordingly, FAO conducted a regional study on “Advancing rural advisory services in the Arab countries to promote market orientation and rural transformation”. The study entailed the assessments of RAS in Egypt, Jordan,

¹ Marzin, J., Bonnet, P., Bessaoud, O. & Ton-Nu, C. 2017. *Study on small-scale family farming in the Near East and North Africa region. Synthesis*. Cairo: FAO, CIRAD & CIHEAM. <https://www.fao.org/3/i6436e/i6436e.pdf>

² FAO. 2021d. *Near East and North Africa – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021: Statistics and trends*. Cairo, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7495en>

³ FAO. 2020. *Priorities for Food and Agriculture in the Near East and North Africa Region. A background paper prepared in view of the 35th FAO Regional Conference for the Near East*. Cairo, FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa <https://www.fao.org/3/cb9865en/cb9865en.pdf>

⁴ FAO. 2017. *Proceedings from Technical Meeting on Social Protection as a Tool for Poverty Reduction in the Near East and North Africa. 29th and 30th March. Beirut. Lebanon*. <https://www.fao.org/3/i7651e/i7651e.pdf>

⁵ Christoplos, I. 2010. *Mobilizing the potential of rural and agricultural extension*. Rome, FAO & GFRAS. <https://www.fao.org/3/i1444e/i1444e.pdf>

⁶ FAO. 2017. *Pluralistic Service Systems Market-oriented services for reducing rural poverty: Conceptual framework*. Rome. <http://www.fao.org/3/ai7249e.pdf>

⁷ IFAD. 2016. *Rural Development Report 2016 Rural Fostering inclusive rural transformation*. Rome.

and Lebanon applying a pluralistic and market-oriented perspective⁸; it drew on similar studies previously carried out in Oman and Tunisia and on a wider literature review on RAS. The study emphasized RAS responsiveness to the needs of small-scale farmers and their accessibility by various categories of farmers. The findings highlighted gaps and entry points to inform policy recommendations and strategic planning at the country and regional levels towards enhanced rural livelihoods and inclusive and sustainable rural transformation.

II. Status of extension and RAS in the Arab Region

5. As evidenced by the FAO study “Advancing rural advisory services in Arab countries to promote market orientation and inclusive transformation”, extension and RAS in the region are mostly run by the public sector, largely focused on the technical challenges related to agricultural production, plant protection, and to some extent natural resources management. Weak research-extension linkages affect the quality of RAS and limit its responsiveness and adaptability to the changing nature of agriculture. In most countries of the region, RAS are still weak in addressing topics of access to markets, agribusiness, value addition and facilitation of collective action to support farmers in overcoming challenges. Aside from the narrow approaches to the topics covered, huge gaps exist due to reduction in the public extension workforce and diminishing outreach and support from the public sector. Consequently, RAS are not effectively reaching smallholder and disadvantaged farmers, and are especially lacking in addressing gender and age-specific needs and challenges. Additionally, RAS services need to upgrade knowledge and skills regarding climate change adaptation and mitigation, and build resilience, as well as improve outreach using digital means.⁹

6. From a policy perspective, dedicated policies on RAS are lacking; when they exist their implementation and integration in national agricultural and rural development strategies are weak. RAS is largely underfunded, with limited availability and coverage of RAS where public extension staff are either few or lack the necessary resources to deliver required tasks.

7. The potential of collective action to deliver RAS is also untapped. Limitations in this regard include the weak organization of small-scale producers; low capacity of Producer Organizations (POs),¹⁰ including local agricultural, marketing, and service cooperatives, to meet the needs of small-scale farmers; and the under-representation of women in POs and cooperatives.

8. Efforts of pluralistic RAS emerge as fragmented or duplicated, lacking integration, and coordination among service providers from different sectors (public, private, local/ international non-governmental organizations [INGOs], research institutes, POs). Lack of a common vision, leadership, and follow-up of prioritized activities and specializations was also observed.

9. The lack of opportunities for knowledge exchange and experience sharing among RAS actors makes the providers generally isolated. Knowledge-sharing mechanisms either for cross-learning or for advocacy to strengthen RAS at the country and/or regional level are insufficient.

⁸ Pluralistic and market oriented advisory services cover a range of economic, technical, social, organizational and legal services. They are provided by different actors and funded from different sources (public, private sector and non-profit). This plurality of actors holds potential to make services more inclusive, responsive to demands, and adapted to the diverse needs of farmers.

⁹ FAO. 2023. *Advancing Rural Advisory Services in Arab countries to promote market-orientation and inclusive transformation: a regional study*. FAO, Rome.

¹⁰ Producer organizations (POs) support small-scale family farmers (SSFF) with access to rural advisory services, market and value addition to varying degrees in countries across the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region. However, the scale of such initiatives is still limited. POs are generally seen as weak and not sufficiently enabled. Support is needed in upgrading the laws and regulations governing POs, developing their technical, managerial and business capacity, and restoring their image as crucial actors in service provision and market access for small-scale farmers. The regional studies conducted in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt as well as the country efforts in most Arab countries validate the importance of POs in affecting small-scale farmers and in contributing to sustainable rural transformation.

III. Worldwide efforts towards the advancement of RAS

10. The above challenges are not unique to the Arab region. Actually, they are common to extension and RAS systems in many countries across regions. International efforts to tackle challenges pertaining to RAS have culminated in the establishment of the GFRAS in 2010. GFRAS' goal is to provide advocacy and leadership for pluralistic and demand-driven RAS to enhance the performance of RAS providers to better serve farming families and rural producers at the country level.

11. GFRAS focuses on four strategic fields of action: 1. Policy: advocacy and support for an enabling policy environment and appropriate investment in RAS; 2. Professionalization: improving the quality and standards of RAS to meet stakeholders' changing demands; 3. Knowledge: facilitation and enhancement of effective and continuous knowledge generation and exchange; 4. Network Strengthening: providing targeted support for the various Regional and Sub-Regional Networks to develop skills and strengthen capacity to advance the mission and vision of GFRAS.¹¹

12. GFRAS has been able to impact RAS performance and outreach through the development of 18 regional networks and more than 40 country fora. Country fora help prioritize national-level issues and formulate demands to be taken to the regional and global levels. The regional networks engage in regional advocacy and knowledge management and provide mentoring and resource mobilization support to national platforms.

13. So far, RAS providers in Arab countries of the NENA region have been generally isolated from the activities of GFRAS, due to the absence of a regional network covering this region. At both the regional and country level, there are no platforms for cross-learning or for regional advocacy to represent or strengthen RAS.

IV. Advancing RAS in the Arab Region: recommendations for policy and programming

14. The FAO study on advancing RAS in Arab countries called for fostering an enabling environment for RAS within a broader context of inclusive rural transformation. Recommendations included, among others: enhancing public investments in RAS and resource mobilization for relevant and effective market-oriented support to small farmers at decentralized level; broad-based capacity development that enables RAS transition to support farming-as-a-business'' along with strengthening farmer organizations and cooperatives as central players in pluralistic service systems; enhancing the image of POs and cooperatives and their role in the inclusive provision of market-oriented services; and promoting exchange of knowledge and good practices across the region.

15. The study recognized the role of information and communication technology (ICT) and digital technologies in the provision of RAS, with attention to aspects of inclusivity, accessibility, and gender equality, including digital literacy, through the sharing of practices, approaches, and lessons learned across countries in the region.

16. The study further advocated for regional programmes for modernizing RAS, to support policy dialogue, enhance the capacities of RAS providers, strengthen cooperatives in service provision and market access, generate knowledge, digital tools, learning material, and good practices; and facilitate cooperation and learning through academic exchange and joint research programmes.

17. Importantly, the study recommended strengthening regional cooperation through the establishment of a regional forum for extension and RAS in the region affiliated to the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS), in line with its other regional networks worldwide. Indeed, regional cooperation and networking can make an important contribution to address the above recommendations, by leveraging the power of experience sharing, knowledge dissemination, and cross-learning.

¹¹ Source : <https://www.g-fras.org/en/>

V. Policy dialogues on advancing RAS in the Arab region

18. The above recommendations were discussed and concertedly endorsed in the context of a regional consultation organized by FAO in June 2022 engaging RAS stakeholders from the region, including policymakers, the private sector, and representatives of cooperatives and farmer organizations.
19. Stakeholders from the region considered the strategic importance of regional cooperation and networking towards the modernization of RAS and their contribution to a broader process of rural transformation in the region. Ample time was dedicated to discussing the study recommendation of strengthening regional cooperation and networking on RAS, referring to the experience of GFRAS. Participants concertedly discussed and endorsed the opportunity to establish a forum on RAS dedicated to the Arab region, called Arab Forum for Rural Advisory Services (AFRAS) in line with the regional fora operating under the umbrella of GFRAS in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and more recently North America. The call to establish AFRAS aligns with the FAO Science and Innovation Strategy and its regional action plan which call for supporting policy and stakeholder dialogue on advancing rural advisory services as pluralistic and market-oriented systems for inclusive rural transformation.
20. Consequently, FAO catalysed the elaboration of a roadmap for the establishment of AFRAS, with the support of a voluntary advisory group composed of ten experts and practitioners from the region, including IFAD and GFRAS. The draft AFRAS roadmap was presented and discussed during a virtual meeting held on 23 February 2023, attended by over 80 participants from the region, with participants' feedback subsequently collected through an online questionnaire.
21. The AFRAS roadmap was then presented at a regional hybrid meeting organized by FAO in collaboration with IFAD in Cairo on 24 and 25 July 2023. The meeting objective was to discuss, validate and reach consensus on AFRAS' vision, mission, and functions, and on the steps involved towards its official launch, planned in the first months of 2024. The meeting convened official representatives of ministries of agriculture of 14 Arab countries¹² along with experts and practitioners representing various national stakeholders and international and regional organizations including the Association of Agricultural Research Institutions in the Near East and North Africa (AARINENA), the Arab Centre for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD), the Arab Women Organization (AWO), the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), the National Agricultural Research Center of Jordan (NARC-Jordan), as well as GFRAS and its regional networks of Africa, North America and South Asia.
22. Participants reached consensus on the vision, mission, principles, values, and functions of AFRAS as stated in the outcome note agreed upon by all participants during the meeting. They also explored viable institutional formats, and operational and technical modalities for AFRAS to deliver its functions. The meeting offered an opportunity for forming a nucleus "AFRAS community". Participants agreed to form a core group of AFRAS community, acting voluntarily as focal points for their respective countries and institutions in the initial setup phase. Participants expressed support for the initiative and called on FAO and IFAD to take the necessary steps to facilitate the establishment of AFRAS in close collaboration with interested regional and national organizations and stakeholders. IFAD expressed commitment to further its collaboration with FAO to continue supporting AFRAS until its launch and establishment.
23. The outcomes of the meeting were jointly communicated by FAO and IFAD to ministries of agriculture through the official channels, soliciting interest and support from stakeholders in member countries towards the official launch of AFRAS, envisaged in the first quarter of 2024.

¹² Countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Syria, Yemen, Libya.

VI. Towards the launch of AFRAS: vision, mission, and roadmap

24. The following paragraphs present AFRAS' vision, mission and functions, principles and values, and thematic focus, as endorsed by participants in the above-mentioned regional meeting.

Vision: Rural Advisory Services effectively contribute to sustainable inclusive agrifood systems transformation in the Arab countries.

Mission: Strengthen networking, knowledge sharing, and learning, and advocate for an enabling policy and legal environment to promote innovation and modernization of extension and rural advisory services to be inclusive, gender-responsive, pluralistic, market-oriented, and demand-driven.

Principles and values: AFRAS' operations will observe and respect the following principles: (i) democratic processes; (ii) respect for nature and all its inhabitants; (iii) inclusivity; (iv) participatory/self-determination; (v) transparency; and (vi) accountability and learning from processes. In alignment with the above principles, AFRAS will internalize the below values when operating and implementing its functions: (i) gender equality; (ii) bottom-up approaches / demand-driven; (iii) lean, flexible, and responsive structure; (iv) multistakeholder process; (v) learning and adapting; and (vi) collaboration.

Priority functions: Participants in the meeting endorsed the seven functions identified for AFRAS and their prioritization as spelled out below:

1. networking among stakeholders;
2. information sharing and exchange of experience;
3. knowledge management;
4. facilitate access to capacity development and learning opportunities;
5. promote digitally enabled RAS;
6. advocacy and policy dialogue;
7. inform efforts towards RAS modernization at national level.

Thematic focus: The thematic areas of focus will cover the following key themes:

- climate change adaptation, mitigation, and natural resource management;
- sustainable intensification and productivity;
- market-oriented services and agripreneurship;
- inclusivity, youth inclusion, and gender equality;
- collective action and farmer organizations;
- RAS governance and multi-stakeholders collaboration;
- innovation, ICT and digital technologies.

25. In line with the above, FAO/RNE in collaboration with IFAD, will continue supporting the process towards the launch of AFRAS in a concerted and consultative manner, focusing on the following actions:

- engage stakeholders at the national and regional levels, with a clear message and vision, taking note of the pluralism existing in the service systems;
- support AFRAS' incubation phase and favour a flexible operationalization of AFRAS through a lean, agile, and informal institutional format which can evolve and adapt as the forum matures; and
- support the development of communication, technical tools, and organizational arrangements for a prompt and effective operationalization of AFRAS (i.e., creation of a communication web platform to facilitate interaction among stakeholders; development of a database of RAS institutions and stakeholders at regional and country level; and development of a knowledge base for information generation and dissemination).

26. FAO calls on member states to endorse the launch of the Arab Forum for Rural Advisory Services and support its establishment; assign focal points and encourage pertinent institutions and stakeholders to join AFRAS and reinforce its mission as a lever for inclusive and sustainable rural transformation at country and regional level.