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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-seventh Session

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

Report of the NENA Regional Technical Dialogues

Executive Summary

Participatory approaches and multi-stakeholders' engagement in shaping the agrifood systems transformation agenda in the Near East and North Africa region has been at the heart of FAO's activities in the region.

The regional consultation events and dialogues are key in identifying challenges and priorities of the countries and gear FAO's strategic planning and interventions towards responding to the needs of the governments and non-state actors active across the agrifood sector. The outcomes of these dialogues and events are valuable inputs in informing and guiding the discussions at the Thirty-seventh Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC 37).

This information note presents a summary of objectives, recommendations, and action points of three regional technical dialogues namely:

- I. Engaging cities in the transformation of agrifood systems in the Near East and North Africa;
- II. One Health and the Regional Quadripartite: the way forward to regional implementation; and
- III. Water Scarcity in the region.

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I. Engaging cities in the transformation of agrifood systems in the Near East and North Africa

Rationale

1. Urbanization has been increasing in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region. 63 percent of the NENA region's current population lives in urban areas, projected to grow to 73 percent by 2050 totalling over 450 million people. At the same time, climate change, conflicts and protracted crises, geopolitical events, and growing natural resource scarcity all impact the ability of NENA's agrifood systems to meet growing food demand. Whereas 37 percent of NENA's population live in large metropolitan areas, over 50 percent lives in smaller urban and rural cities and towns which typically receive less investment in infrastructure and far less attention from policy and research. Considering the importance of these intermediary towns in linking rural and urban areas, they have the potential to play a crucial role in sustainable agrifood value chain development while generating income for producers and safeguarding natural resources.

2. The FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 includes Urban Food Systems (UFS) as one of the 20 priority programme areas. Under this framework, FAO has developed flagship initiatives such as the FAO Urban Food Agenda launched in 2019, and the FAO Green Cities Initiative, launched in 2021, focusing on urban food systems and urban greening.

3. As the NENA region is starting the journey toward recognition of the role of local and regional governments in sustainable urban food systems, FAO supports municipalities in identifying priorities and design processes with their stakeholders that deliver greater benefits for citizens. These priorities range from investing in sustainable urban and peri-urban agriculture, shortening supply chains, inclusive urban food markets, to creating healthier food outlets, school feeding programmes, and food waste prevention, reduction, and management. FAO, its partners, and global coalitions collaborate to support cities in their awareness of the topic and to mainstream food systems in their policies, planning, and actions and strengthen their capacities to implement national and local policies and programmes.

Objectives

4. Capitalizing on the power of partnerships and momentum driving the Urban Food Agenda at the global level, the event aimed to increase awareness of national and subnational governments and development partners in the NENA region about the important role that local governments and cities play in the agrifood systems transformation agenda.

5. Drawing on successful practices and experiences of the region and beyond, the sessions highlighted holistic agrifood systems strategies and policies developed at the local level, experiences of multi-actor food governance mechanisms as well as entry-points for integrating agrifood systems in local policies, planning, and actions. The event was successful in outlining the most pressing challenges that cities in the NENA region are facing in achieving food security and nutrition and access to healthy diets from sustainable agrifood systems. It facilitated peer-to-peer learning among cities and explored ways to scale up the urban food systems agenda through city-to-city exchange mechanisms. The workshop yielded significant outcomes in developing a shared vision and strengthening partnerships for sustainable urban food systems in the NENA region, further strengthening the collaborative network between cities in the NENA region. The recommendations, along with validated action points, will serve as the foundation for ongoing efforts to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and drive innovation in the pursuit of sustainable UFS.

6. The workshop was structured around six thematic sessions:

- Sustainable urban food systems: Challenges and opportunities.
- Stories from cities: Integrating agrifood in policy and strategy at urban level.
- Exploring three key thematic entry points to urban agrifood systems transformation – food waste, urban and pre-urban agriculture, urban markets, and food environment.
- Multilevel food systems governance - Bridging national and local governments.
- Accelerating urban food action in NENA region through city-to-city exchange.
- Way forward for promoting sustainable urban food systems in the NENA region.

Target audience and participants

7. The workshop was attended by a diverse range of participants from cities in NENA, representatives from the national governments, and selected champion cities from the global south and global north to create an opportunity to facilitate South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) in the region around the priority topics for sustainable urban food systems and bridge the gap in policy and governance between national and local level.

Recommendation and action points

8. The workshop resulted in a comprehensive set of actionable recommendations that form a strategic roadmap for advancing sustainable urban food systems in the NENA region. These recommendations collectively provide a robust roadmap to guide the region toward sustainable, inclusive, and resilient UFS:

- It is imperative to address the critical issue of Food Loss and Waste (FLW) reduction and management. This can be achieved through support in the assessment, design of solutions, and the development of action plans, with an emphasis on demand-based approaches.
- To enhance urban food systems governance, there is a need for improved data quality and access, with the possibility of adapting assessment methodologies to the regional context. Additionally, the workshop underscored the importance of stocktaking of cases and experiences, with a focus on proposals for scaling up successful initiatives. This aligns with FAO's plan for the next biennium in the region, which can serve as a catalyst for progress.
- Sharing the recommendations of the event with the NERC 37, is vital for securing the support needed to implement these actions.
- Showcasing urban food systems at regional and global levels, particularly at the World Urban Forum (WUF) in 2024, provides another excellent opportunity to raise awareness and garner support for the region's initiatives.
- Scale up peer-to-peer exchanges, various mechanisms, including city-to-city exchanges, should be expanded to enhance knowledge sharing and capacity-building. The FAO South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) mechanism can facilitate knowledge transfer and technical assistance, further supporting the region's objectives. Furthermore, strengthening exchanges among countries in the region, considering their varying levels of engagement, is crucial. A regional Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) and national TCPs can play a pivotal role in achieving this objective.
- Collaboration between the Ministries of Agriculture (MOA) and Ministries of Health (MOH) for urban planning, with the support of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), can help align urban food actors with broader development plans.
- Continuing to raise awareness among cities to sign the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFFP) and engage in the UFS initiative is important for expanding the network and fostering commitment to sustainable urban food systems.
- Utilizing a comprehensive framework and set of indicators to evaluate and monitor the progress of urban food systems is key to ensuring accountability and driving continuous improvement in the region.

II. One Health and the Regional Quadripartite: the way forward to regional implementation

Rationale

9. One Health is an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of humans, animals, and ecosystems. The approach mobilizes multiple sectors, disciplines, and communities at varying levels of society, to work together to foster well-being and tackle threats to health and ecosystems while addressing the collective need for clean water, energy and air, safe and

nutritious food, taking action on climate change, and contributing to sustainable development. The perpetual challenge of emerging infectious diseases, the persisting burden of endemic zoonotic, neglected tropical and vector-borne diseases, the global upsurge of food and water safety hazards and the growing threat of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) are challenges that require joint multi-sectoral efforts. Countries and regions are increasingly advocating collaboration among professionals from different disciplines and working from community to global levels across sectors to bridge silos.

10. At the 36th FAO Regional Conference for the Near East and North Africa (NERC 36), during the Senior Officer's meeting in January 2022, the participants welcomed FAO's plan to establish a Regional One-Health Platform in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders in the region and called upon regional organizations to strengthen interagency collaborations in support of countries' efforts to implement the One Health approach. In the 69th Session of the Regional Committee for World Health Organization (WHO) Eastern Mediterranean Region, held on 22 October 2022, countries expressed their agreement and underlined the importance of a Regional One Health approach by approving a resolution. Since September 2022, regular regional Quadripartite One Health online meetings have taken place to discuss and shape the concept note for the establishment of a Regional One Health Platform. In May 2023 in Oman, the first Regional Quadripartite One Health Meeting organized by WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO) in close collaboration with its regional Quadripartite partners has taken place. The overall goal of the meeting was to provide countries of the Region with approaches, methodologies, and tools that enable them to proceed with the implementation of One Health.

Objectives

11. The purpose of the session was to provide an overview of the Regional Quadripartite One Health activities, presenting ongoing activities of the Regional Quadripartite to advance One Health in the region, in particular the process of establishing a Quadripartite Regional One Health Platform and One Health Operational Framework. The One Health dialogue served as an opportunity to showcase experiences, challenges, and success stories in One Health implementation. The session started with keynotes from the Representatives of the Regional Quadripartite Organizations, followed by technical presentations from the Regional Quadripartite Organizations, the Global Quadripartite Technical Working Group, a presentation from Oman on its One Health Program, and a joint presentation of the Regional Quadripartite Organizations on the progress to control Antimicrobial Resistance in the Region.

Target audience and participants

12. The participants were the Regional Quadripartite Organizations (WHO-EMRO, the World Organisation for Animal Health [WOAH] North Africa and Middle East, FAO Regional Office for Near East and North Africa [FAO RNE], and the United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] West Asia and Africa), as well as from the respective Headquarters, the Global One Health Secretariat, Members (government, research, private sector) and stakeholders from the region involved in One Health, AMR, Animal Health, Human Health, and Environment.

Key points of discussions

13. Despite this wide support and engagement, implementing One Health in practice still proves to be challenging, facing technical, institutional, and professional barriers, in addition to sustainability concerns, competing priorities, and funding deficiencies. There was a wide consensus of the audience that implementing One Health needs regional and national institutionalization, building appropriate policy and legal frameworks that support its institutionalization, and investments for greater awareness among all stakeholders. It also needs cross-sectoral competencies and capacity building, joint workforce training, effective governance rooted in transdisciplinary and multi-sectoral principles, and inclusion of stakeholder and community engagement. FAO RNE as part of the Regional Quadripartite underlined its commitment to support countries in their efforts to advance One Health and presented together with the Regional Quadripartite their joint dedication to strengthen coordination of the One Health implementation at the animal-human-ecosystem interface.

Recommendation and action points

14. The five focus areas of One Health: governance, leadership, and financing; multi-sectoral coordination; developing a skilled multidisciplinary workforce; strengthening early warning and information sharing; and enhancing preparedness and response through investment in One Health multisectoral plans, were reflected in all presentations. The progress made in establishing One Health in the Region was recognized. The action points were the need to have the Regional One Health Platform formally established with clear roles and responsibilities, enabling them to develop a Regional One Health Workplan to be implemented in the countries. Financial commitment is needed from the Quadripartite Organizations not only to formalize the establishment of a Regional One Health Platform, but also to ensure its sustainability. Countries need to intensify their collaborative, cross-sectoral efforts to implement One Health activities and work plans.

III. Technical Dialogue on Water Scarcity in the Near East and North Africa region

Rationale

15. Water is a foundational component of agrifood systems, yet it is the number one limiting factor for agriculture in the NENA region. The region is currently facing increased challenges that undermine regional efforts toward achieving Sustainable Development Goals (i.e., water scarcity and climate variability, extreme events, and water pollution and quality deterioration). The State of the Land and Water Report (SOLAW) for the Near East and North Africa produced by FAO in 2022 illustrates that freshwater availability per capita declined in NENA by 78 percent between 1962 and 2018. It also emphasizes the need to increase the resilience of agricultural production systems by promoting efficient water management and climate-proof practices to optimize the use of limited water resources that are nearly at breaking point, threatening food security, livelihoods, and the lives of billions of people.

16. To ensure efficient management of limited water resources, it is crucial to have a comprehensive understanding of the interrelationships between water use efficiency and productivity approaches and land and water sustainability. Moreover, conducting in-depth reviews on the main transition pathways needed to accelerate the transformation of agrifood systems is highly needed.

Objectives

17. Considering the above and considering the recent outcomes of the 43rd Session of the FAO Conference, where the general debate theme was on water resources management culminating with its approval of the theme “Water resources management for the four betters: better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life, to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. FAO RNE organized its virtual Regional Technical Dialogue on water under the Theme “Water Use Efficiency and Water Productivity within Sustainability Boundaries for Resilient Transformation of Agrifood Systems in the NENA Region”.

18. The dialogue aimed at discussing pressing water-related challenges and devising innovative solutions within the context of enhancing water use efficiency and productivity as a means of accelerating the transformation of agrifood systems. It also aimed at breaking down the available courses of action required to accelerate agrifood systems transformation, using four main response areas:

- facilitating the transformation of legal and institutional frameworks by promoting multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral governance and by strengthening policy coherence;
- advancing water and agriculture sustainability by investing in improved water efficiency and productivity tools to meet sustainable boundaries of water use towards a more resilient economy;
- fostering a solid and standardized knowledge base for adaptive decision-making; and
- managing sustainability within uncertainty by maintaining a climate-smart transformation.

Target audience and participants

19. The event, which was held virtually on 25 September 2023 saw the participation of more than 90 participants including country representatives, international and local experts, policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders from across the NENA region. The events also included panellists from the League of Arab States, FAO, the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD), the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), the Green Climate Fund (GCF), the Regional Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (RECREE) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries of the Republic of Tunisia.

Key points of discussions

- Stocktaking on effective management response options in the agriculture water sector, potential areas of work to improve governance, policy coherence, and assist partner countries in implementing adaptive management in the agriculture water sector using appropriate and newly developed tools and methodologies (i.e. water productivity, water efficiency, water accounting, non-conventional water resources, inclusive land, and water governance among other topics);
- inputs to guide and influence NERC 37 water-related discussion topics, focusing on primary response options required to accelerate agrifood systems transformation and bring back agricultural water use within sustainable limits towards a more productive future; and
- recommendations on the modalities and transition pathways for addressing regional priorities in preparation for the Regional Conference.

Recommendation and action points

- There is a pressing need to underscore the significance of proper water allocation, including for groundwater, and how this concept could significantly improve agricultural production and water productivity, thereby overcoming the main challenges in food security. One crucial aspect is the importance of fostering collaboration at both the upper and lower levels of the system, with a specific focus on engaging smallholders to improve economic water productivity as well as physical water productivity.
- Interdependence and synergy among all related sectors are highly needed, with the water, food, and energy nexus serving as a prime example, particularly considering the imperative to mitigate the effects of climate change and biodiversity conservation.
- Enhancing legal and institutional reforms is required to facilitate an interdependent and nexus-oriented decision-making and governance approach for agricultural production, sustainable development, and resilience.
- A well-informed political will combined with a solid local capacity (i.e. farmers and professionals) is crucial, particularly for achieving water productivity and efficiency, promoting the growth of a resilient and efficient agrifood system.
- The localization of technology and science is an essential element in addressing the challenges of water scarcity. A particular emphasis should be directed towards technical innovative approaches, including drip irrigation, rainwater harvesting, precision agriculture, digitalization, soil moisture management using sensors, and modern techniques for monitoring.
- Enhancing regional and interregional cooperation across the NENA region is critical, as it enables the transfer of valuable insights and experiences from one nation to another.
- Climate adaptation in the water sector requires the integration of climate, science, and governance, and nexus approach in the decision-making processes. Crop selection and genetic innovations through the development and promotion of drought-resistant crops that can withstand water stress and using alternative crops that require less water are essential.
- Integrated water resources management is a fundamental element in water conservation and efficiency. It should be coupled with robust decision-making and adaptive management.
- Advancing the use of non-conventional water sources and water-saving techniques is no longer an option. Yet, it still requires efforts across multiple dimensions, including technology transfer, cost-benefit analysis, and social acceptance.

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- Investing in research and data, capacity building, and public awareness must become crucial components in planning the transformation of agrifood systems.