

## **Informal Consultation for Europe and Central Asia**

**4-5 May 2023, Budapest, Hungary - (hybrid event)**

**Minutes by the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia Secretariat**

### **Introduction**

The FAO Informal Consultation for Europe and Central Asia 2023 was held in a hybrid format on **4–5 May 2023 in Budapest, Hungary**. It brought together **44 countries**, plus the European Union and **22 non-state organizations**. A total of 74 participants joined in person, and more than 80 participants followed the event online. The Informal Consultation comprised both work group discussions and plenary sessions with participants.

The Informal Consultation for Europe and Central Asia provides a platform on which the FAO Regional Office and Members can interact between sessions of the Regional Conference for Europe (ERC). It also facilitates regional consultation, considering the limited presence of FAO at the country level in Europe and Central Asia. Used successfully since 2010, this intersessional mechanism has been well received by all regional stakeholders – both state and non-state actors – in the region.

Since FAO programming for 2022–2023 was undertaken at the Thirty-third Session of the ERC in 2022, the region has been subject to significant political, social, economic and environmental risks that have become further pronounced, requiring short-, medium- and long-term responses.

The **Informal Consultation 2023** focused on a review of the four Priority Areas and Regional Initiatives for the 2024–2025 biennium, based on the latest challenges and new trends in the region. This review process was done through an exchange of views among all FAO Members of the Europe and Central Asia region and non-state actor representatives in the context of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The main purposes of the Informal Consultation 2023 were:

- 1) to facilitate an exchange of views among all Members of the Europe and Central Asia region;
- 2) to inform and update the Members of the region on the implementation of FAO's programme of work in the region; and
- 3) to review priorities in the region in preparation for the Thirty-fourth Session of the ERC, to be held in 2024.

The results of the Informal Consultation, the final approved Medium-Term Plan 2022–2025, the Programme of Work and Budget 2024–2025 and the Forty-third Session of the European Commission on Agriculture (ECA) will form the basis for the revised priority areas for 2024–2025, to be submitted for endorsement to the Thirty-fourth Session of the ERC in 2024, and will guide the workplanning in the region for the biennium 2024–2025.

The agenda and the background documents are available on the Informal Consultation webpage.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The webpage for the Informal Consultation can be found at <https://www.fao.org/europe/events/detail/informal-consultation-for-europe-and-central-asia-2023/en>.

## **Session 1 – Plenary: Opening, welcome and main objectives of the meeting**

In the opening session, remarks were provided by His Excellency Mr Zbigniew Rau, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland and Chairperson of the Thirty-third Session of the ERC (via pre-recorded video); Mr Oszkár Ökrös, Deputy State Secretary for International Relations, Ministry of Agriculture of Hungary; Her Excellency Ms Daniela Rotondaro, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of San Marino to FAO and Chairperson of the Europe Regional Group (via pre-recorded video); and Mr Vladimir Rakhmanin, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia.

Mr Zbigniew Rau highlighted the importance of discussing key challenges related to food security, nutrition and healthy diets and of reviewing FAO's priorities in the region in preparation of the next ERC. He stressed the political, economic and social crises as well as the slowdown experienced by the global economy, following the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Lastly, he mentioned that Poland gives great importance to its cooperation with FAO, particularly considering the food crisis, as also confirmed with the hosting of the Thirty-third ERC in Łódź, Poland, last year.

Mr Oszkár Ökrös welcomed the Informal Consultation, organized in Hungary since 2010, and emphasized its importance in discussing current regional challenges and in finding solutions and tools. He mentioned that Hungary has been pleased to host FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia since 2007 and that the Government of Hungary is committed to continuing this cooperation. He highlighted the FAO–Hungarian Government Scholarship Programme, which has reached more than 370 students. He also mentioned the FAO programmes funded by Hungary on agrifood value chains and the programme on extension services in Uganda, contributing to the Hand in Hand initiative. Lastly, he stressed the work that Hungary is carrying out on food systems through the national pathway, which focuses on nutrition and sustainable production, biodiversity, knowledge and innovation, and circular economy.

Ms Daniela Rotondaro congratulated FAO for taking the lead in organizing the Informal Consultation as a good practice and welcomed all country delegates and non-state actors. The multi-stakeholder format of the Informal Consultation brings more perspectives to the table, she said, contributing to policy development and successful implementation. She stressed the severe consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the recent earthquake in Türkiye and Syria, including economic shocks, social impacts, growing inequalities and increases in food insecurity. She mentioned the importance of the Initiative on the Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs from Ukrainian Ports, known as the “Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI)”, for food security and price stabilization. She also flagged key issues in the region, such as food loss and waste, healthy diets, rural youth and women's empowerment and innovation, and she urged FAO to continue playing a key role in the provision of knowledge, policy advice and capacity building, in close cooperation with the United Nations Resident Coordinators.

Mr Vladimir Rakhmanin expressed his gratitude to the Government of Hungary for hosting the Informal Consultation. He stressed the implications of multiple crises in the region and the importance of keeping a strategic vision to make food systems more sustainable. He flagged some key priorities for FAO's work in the region for 2023, including: the FAO strategies on climate change, science and innovation and private-sector engagement; the Rapid Response Plan for Ukraine; partnerships with regional organizations; contribution to the United Nations Food Systems Stocktaking Moment; One Health; the meetings of the Central Asian ministers of agriculture; climate finance; women's empowerment and rural youth; the Hand in Hand Initiative; and working together as one United Nations. He also stressed the key global policy processes planned for 2023, including the Food Systems Stocktaking Moment, the SDG Summit and the Twenty-eighth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28).

## **Session 2 – Plenary: Update on FAO’s responses to the multiple crises in the region**

Ms Tamara Nanitashvili, Senior Policy Officer in the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, presented the background document for the session ([IC/23/1](#)).

Main discussion points, key messages and suggested actions were:

- The devastating impacts of the crises on agriculture and on disruptions and destabilization in the countries were emphasized. In this context, emphasis was put on the importance to (i) strengthen the voice of civil society to address issues related to crises; (ii) consider small-scale farming, agroecology and other types of low-intensity agriculture; and (iii) focus on better anticipation of food crises.
- The importance of the Initiative on the Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs from Ukrainian Ports, known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative, adopted in Istanbul on 22 July 2022 and extended on 17 November 2022 and 18 March 2023, was highlighted. It was stressed that efforts need to be made to extend the initiative.
- The magnitude of the multiple crises and their negative impacts on the success of achieving the SDGs were mentioned. Concern was expressed that the most vulnerable population groups were the most affected.
- Support was expressed on the mechanisms of the informal consultations and FAO responses to the multiple crises, and appreciation was shared for the background document (IC/23/1) for providing good data for further discussion.
- It was proposed to evaluate the cost of inaction (true cost accounting) and an estimation of the expenses that may be needed to prevent those costs from happening in the first place. A need was mentioned to work for food systems that are not only sustainable but also resilient to crises and shocks.
- Challenges posed by crises cannot be overcome unless we work together. Dialogue and collaboration need to take place between representatives of different constituencies. For example, we have seen disruptions of supply chains resulting in food or feed being in excess in certain geographical areas while lacking in others. Other examples were the ad hoc imposition of trade policy changes.
- The successful implementation of many projects of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation with FAO and directly with countries was stressed, and the need for (i) strengthening cooperation in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation region in agrifood trade, establishing a way to measure progress on food systems transformation, and (ii) working with key network actors in the agriculture was pointed out.
- It was suggested that the possibility be provided for written comments to be added to the background document (IC/23/1) after the Informal Consultation.

## **Session 3 – Plenary: Key challenges and opportunities in the region that might affect the priority areas in the region and that should be addressed by the FAO work programme 2024-2025**

Mr Raimund Jehle, Regional Programme Leader for Europe and Central Asia, presented the background document ([IC/23/2](#)) for the session, providing an overview of the key challenges and opportunities in Europe and Central Asia that might affect the priority areas in the region and that should be addressed by the FAO work programme 2024–2025.

The objective of this session, as well as Session 4 on priority areas for the work programme in the region for 2024–2025 in light of the key challenges and opportunities, was to seek the Members’ views on the key challenges and opportunities in Europe and Central Asia and to identify the main areas of response by FAO under the key priorities in the region for 2024–2025.

It was noted that the feedback and views on points of relevance of the Members to Session 3 and Session 4 would be considered during the internal review of the Regional Priorities, taking place in May and June 2023, to better address the newly emerging challenges and opportunities, as well as during the corporate 2024–2025 workplanning exercise to set country and regional outputs for the next biennium, taking place between July and October 2023.

The main discussion points, key messages and suggested actions were:

- Representatives of the civil society organizations emphasized that small producers, Indigenous people and representatives of civil society are key for the sustainable transformation of agrifood systems and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Existing tools, such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication, and the Committee on World Food Security Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition, should be taken as a reference and implemented. It was suggested that FAO Members, in collaboration with key stakeholders, take all necessary action to ensure the participation and representation of small-scale producers and to prioritize support for a fair agricultural transition, which takes place with the fair transition of food systems. FAO's work should recognize that social environmental sustainability is close to social economic justice in current food systems. A focus on agroecological, small-scale, local, traditional as well as on youth-related work was seen as key. FAO was called to prioritize work around access to land for women and young farmers to promote agroecological use.
- The principle of circular economy and closing cycles on the lowest levels possible was suggested to be considered for the next workplan by FAO, as well as building more resilient food systems and supporting countries in trying to decrease import dependency, diversify markets and import/export supply routes, and focus more on local markets.
- Agriculture was identified as a key sector that not only helps ensure food security but also provides employment and income and plays a key role in the food systems transformation due to its socioeconomic importance. In order to achieve the SDGs, the development of holistic food systems is key, including focusing on scientific and innovative approaches and technologies, including in the area of digitalization.
- It is necessary to increase export-oriented and import-substituting production and apply new digital agricultural solutions.
- It is key to ensure that trade in food, agricultural commodities and inputs remains open.
- FAO should continue to play a role as a centre of knowledge and good practices and take on a coordination role in relation to international society and partners, bringing attention to food systems transformation, existing challenges and the development of policy recommendations in the agrifood sector.
- FAO needs to respond to the multiple crises in Europe and Central Asia, in close collaboration with other organizations. For the FAO budget and programming for 2024–2025, it was proposed to enlarge humanitarian engagement and work on building resilience.
- It is key to build on the existing momentum to transform food systems created by the new global biodiversity framework and the first United Nations Food Systems Stocktaking Moment. FAO was urged to contribute to the reduction of biodiversity loss through the implementation of its strategy on biodiversity. Regarding the Stocktaking Moment, the regional preparatory meeting for Europe and Central Asia has developed a number of priorities<sup>2</sup> to be highlighted during discussions. In particular, these are agroecology, inclusive and holistic food systems approaches, healthy diets for all, the promotion of the One Health approach, reversing biodiversity loss, the prevention of food loss and waste, supporting smallholders and youth, and addressing the generational gap in the food and agriculture sector.
- Food systems transformation is not possible without youth participation. Alongside the FAO Rural Youth Action Plan, it would be key to highlight the newly adopted Committee on World Food Security policy recommendations on youth engagement.
- Climate change, including weather extremes, affects sustainable agrifood systems. Central Asia had become a global climate hotspot. The region is severely affected by land degradation, water scarcity, droughts, desertification, salinization and biodiversity loss. Agricultural practices and

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<sup>2</sup> An executive summary of the discussions held at the meeting is available at [https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/stocktaking-moment/europe-and-central-asia/eca-preparatory-meeting---key-messages\\_final.pdf?sfvrsn=7cfceec3\\_3](https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/stocktaking-moment/europe-and-central-asia/eca-preparatory-meeting---key-messages_final.pdf?sfvrsn=7cfceec3_3).

knowledge among most farmers are insufficient to respond to the challenges posed by the impacts of climate change. Capacity building and green technologies, strategies and policies are needed to address and mitigate the negative impacts of climate change.

- FAO was encouraged to include the issue of Aral Sea degradation and its consequences, particularly those related to the environment and biodiversity, in the list of key challenges.
- The importance of creating a capable environment for agriculture – including the mobilization of investment and finance and the repurposing of agricultural support, digitalization, and the integration of science and innovation in the food and agriculture sectors – was highlighted.
- FAO was urged to enhance technical assistance to support policies and increase advocacy and outreach on the One Health approach, food loss and waste issues, climate funds and investment mobilization.
- The international community has supported the initiative of the President of Tajikistan to declare 2025 as the International Year of Glacier Preservation. The Ministry of Agriculture of Tajikistan hopes that the initiative will be supported within the future projects of FAO and other partners.

#### **Session 4 – Plenary: Priority areas for the work programme in the region for 2024-2025 in light of the key challenges and opportunities (to report and reflect on the outcome of the workgroup discussions)**

Mr Morten Hartvigsen, RI-1 Delivery Manager; Ms Mary Kenny, RI-2 Delivery Manager; Ms Tania Santivanez, RI-3 Delivery Manager; and Mr Keigo Obara, Food Security Officer, presented, respectively, the key conclusions from the breakout sessions on regional priorities 1, 2, 3 and 4. In the breakout sessions, participants were asked to exchange their views on the main challenges and opportunities in the region and to provide recommendations related to the main areas of response as key inputs for the formulation of the FAO work programme 2024–2025 for the Europe and Central Asia region. The four regional priorities are:

1. formulating effective policies, promoting innovation and digitalization, and facilitating rural livelihoods, with emphasis on smallholders, women and youth;
2. food system transformation promoting nutrition-sensitive value chains and healthy diets through the alignment of trade, food safety, and sanitary and phytosanitary policies, facilitating One Health;
3. promoting sustainable natural resources management and facilitating resilience in agriculture, forestry and other land use sectors, including mitigating and adapting to climate change; and
4. addressing food insecurity and reducing all forms of malnutrition.

The main discussion points, key messages and suggested actions were:

#### **PRIORITY 1**

##### **Youth**

- Outmigration from rural areas and an ageing rural population threatens food security in the region. Therefore, it is required to promote the generational sustainability of family farming and innovative tools to attract youth to agricultural value chains. This includes supporting start-up businesses and access to such resources as land, credit, extension services and digital solutions for rural youth. The importance of enhancing youth participation in policy processes was highlighted.

##### **Gender and territorial development**

- There is a need to continue promoting inclusive policy processes and social innovation and to enhance efforts to support the empowerment and employment of rural women.
- It is required to enhance a holistic, people-centred approach through territorial development.

## Digitalization

- It is important to raise awareness on how digitalization opens up possibilities in rural areas. Smallholders and family farmers need access to data and information through affordable digital tools. Therefore, the promotion of digitalization in agriculture, with a specific focus on smallholders, should be integrated into national policies and practical solutions. Also, the protection of personal data should be ensured.

## Cooperatives and cooperation among farmers

- Cooperatives usually do not function well in the Eastern part of the region due to its history. Supporting collective actions and cooperation among farmers and other local actors could increase productivity and access to markets for small farms, and farmers could benefit economically from working together. Therefore, mechanisms that stimulate this are needed.

## Strengthening local food production and addressing land abandonment

- Strengthening local food production is an obvious way to increase food security in many countries. One way is addressing agricultural land abandonment in an integrated approach by improving inefficient farm structures through land market development (including lease markets), introducing land consolidation and land banking instruments, and providing access to land to young farmers and women. It was mentioned that small farms are not only a challenge, but also an opportunity to provide ecosystem services, preserve traditional agricultural landscapes, conserve biodiversity and ensure clean water.

## Resilience of smallholders and family farmers

- Increasing the resilience and adaptive capacity of smallholders and family farms to the impacts of climate change, natural disasters and crises should be prioritized through the promotion, for example, of climate-smart agriculture practices and improved access to technology.

## Capacity development, good practices and knowledge sharing

- Smallholder farmers often lack access to knowledge, extension and farm advisory services. Technical capacity needs to be built at the national level. Therefore, it was mentioned that the further sharing of good practices, knowledge and innovative approaches among countries and within all technical areas of work would be beneficial. This could be facilitated through the building up of more regional technical networks. Also, the new Regional Technical Platform on Green Agriculture could be an important tool in this context.

## **PRIORITY 2**

### Food loss and waste prevention

- Preventing food loss and waste requires continuous attention, with greater emphasis on the reduction of post-harvest food losses, while food waste prevention is also critical. There is a strong interest from countries to share experiences and best practices in support of outreach and technical assistance efforts. Educating children on food literacy, including how food is produced and the real cost of food waste, should contribute to a reduction in food waste.

### Promotion of One Health

- Promotion of the One Health approach, including mitigating the threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), needs continuous attention across the region. Transboundary animal diseases are also of concern, with specific mention of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza and African Swine Fever (affected by systems with high animal density). Supporting countries in the development of national animal identification and tracing systems; the development of systems and capacities for prudent and safe use of pesticides, fertilizers and veterinary drugs; and the

promotion of better quality seeds and cultivars were highlighted. Strengthening the animal health system was stressed, in addition to managing food chain risks due to plant pest and diseases.

#### Market access and value chain development

- Market access and open trade are important, including solidarity lanes for Ukraine. Further emphasis should be given to supporting countries in the diversification of markets at both regional and national levels. Renewed efforts are needed to extend the Initiative on the Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs from Ukrainian Ports, known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative.
- Providing the right policies, investment opportunities and enabling environment for integrated and short value chains can lead to increased linkages among farmers and consumers, with associated socioeconomic benefits. Holistic value chain development requires increased access to finance and other support services for smallholders and small value chain actors and the promotion of inclusion, in particular among women and youth. Market access is subject to consumers' needs being met in terms of nutrition and food safety, and appropriate food safety rules can support this.
- The need to promote organic agriculture, geographical indications and other specific quality schemes was also highlighted. Small-scale farmers need more support, including access to finance and services to be able to access markets to improve their incomes and livelihoods.

#### Sustainable food systems

- A policy shift is needed to focus on inclusive, locally driven agriculture that is environmentally sound and socially inclusive, emphasizing bioeconomy and circular considerations. Participants asked that FAO and all United Nations agencies work closely together, including on the food systems transformative agenda to avoid duplications and overlaps. Advocacy and building capacity on true cost accounting was stressed in order to embed a new definition of “value” into policy dialogue, processes and policies that moves beyond purely economic value and instead considers a balance among economic, environmental, social and cultural value. In addition, promoting the use of the Committee on World Food Security Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition and others will support holistic food systems work, including on food policy alignment and coherence. The need to support investment for food systems transformation, including the repurposing of agricultural budget support, was raised. The challenge of measuring progress on food systems transformation was discussed, as while there is a focus on meeting the SDGs, the indicators are limited (for example, there are no specific targets or indicators on food safety).

#### Nutrition and food safety

- Participants discussed the need to increase work on educating consumers, adults and children, starting from a young age, in order to transform food systems and allow all to have access to healthy diets. Consumers need to be food literate and obtain skills related to food waste prevention and making healthy and sustainable food choices. Food labelling was mentioned as an important vehicle to provide consumers with nutritional and food quality information labels (e.g. organic, geographical indications and sustainable production practices). Supporting countries in the development of food system-based dietary guidelines is an important priority. To further support nutrition work in the region, FAO should consider greater interaction with the United Nations Food Systems Summit coalitions, with the Coalition on Healthy Diets mentioned specifically. Another essential aspect of consumer protection is access to safe food for all, and food safety controls require continuous strengthening, including preparedness for food safety emergencies.

### **PRIORITY 3**

#### Water management and governance

- One of the key challenges emphasized by participants is related to water issues. Due the significant challenges presented by climate change, water scarcity and drought are likely to worsen under projected climate change impacts. FAO was asked to broaden its activities at the regional level to address the challenges related to water availability and use, access and quality.
- Regional collaboration, including at landscape and water basin levels, was encouraged, along with support for the development and implementation of effective water policies. Effective and sustainable water management practices, including through improved range and efficient irrigation technologies, education and capacity building of national professionals and stakeholders on water management, were also highlighted. Further emphasis should be given to social aspects and sanitation. Collaboration is critical to addressing water-related issues.

#### Biodiversity

- Biodiversity preservation was mentioned in numerous interventions as a key regional challenge. Support was requested for the preparation, revision and implementation of national biodiversity strategies and action plans, in line with the new global biodiversity framework. Synergies between climate action and support for biodiversity should be exploited. FAO should continue to work on genetic resources in agrobiodiversity.

#### Climate change and climate finance

- Vulnerability to the impacts of a changing climate was brought up as a cross-cutting issue affecting water resources, biodiversity, natural resources and ecosystem services. The importance of the availability and access to climate finance to address key challenges linked to climate change in the agricultural sector was reiterated.
- It was requested that FAO provides continued support for the implementation and revision of the agricultural sector components of nationally determined contributions, including adaptation and mitigation priorities. Technical support also was requested for the implementation of climate-resilient agricultural practices, continued work on land degradation neutrality, reductions in soil erosion and disaster risk reduction.
- It was brought to FAO's attention to further enhance natural resources management using already-existing tools and technical commissions to meet the requirements of international agreements and commitments on climate change, biodiversity and the environment.
- There were several requests to continue work on evidence-based policy development connected to climate actions and natural resources management and to enhance FAO's role in support of the implementation of climate actions at the policy level, highlighting the potential role of agroecological practices in countries to enhance climate resilience in agrifood systems.
- Specifically on agroecology, indigenous and traditional knowledge related to pastoralism, grasslands and fisheries was emphasized.
- It was requested that FAO continue to work on agriculture inputs, with a special focus on the proper use of pesticides and fertilizers, and to support enhanced national institutional capacity for pesticide registration and post-registration systems. FAO assistance also was requested in the promotion of technologies and methodologies to reduce input dependency and the promotion of the principles of circular bioeconomy.

#### Resilient seed systems

- The Informal Consultation suggested continuing work on sustainable and resilient seed systems, including in the context of climate change.



## Enhancing the Regional Technical Programme (RTP)

- The establishment of the Regional Technical Programme on Green Agriculture, focused on the agrifood systems approach, was appreciated by the participants. Further emphasis was requested for conceptualization, dissemination, knowledge exchange, good practices and piloting on green agriculture.

## **PRIORITY 4**

### Regional challenges related to food security and nutrition:

#### Multiple burden of malnutrition

- Dynamic changes in food security and nutrition are a major challenge in the region. While overweight and obesity is increasing due to unhealthy diets and lifestyles, the reduction of undernutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies, is stagnant. Food access varies not only among countries but also within them, and FAO was advised to pay attention to such disparities when addressing the issues of food security, nutrition and food systems.

#### Social impact of food inflation

- Food inflation and food price volatility were also mentioned as a challenge, especially for vulnerable groups (those with a higher household expenditure on food), who may eat less (energy-dense foods) or reduce diet quality to cope with high prices (nutrient-dense foods vs. healthy diets). This could lead to undernutrition (undernourishment), overweight/obesity or micronutrient deficiencies.

#### Agrifood data availability, quality and reliability

- A wide range of views was shared on data on food security and nutrition. The key challenge related to data in the region seems to be less about the availability of national-level data than about the availability of disaggregated data (particularly for population groups vulnerable to socioeconomic shocks or living in areas where food access is a challenge). The quality and reliability of data were also mentioned, especially for data related to food consumption and understanding the causes of problems such as consumption behaviour and food loss and waste. The importance of paying more attention to qualitative data was also emphasized as necessary to better understand the issues underlying unhealthy dietary patterns and behaviours that lead to food loss and waste.

#### Suggested focus areas:

#### Enhancing coordination and collaboration:

- Intersectoral collaboration was stressed as key to addressing food security and nutrition challenges. This is because the underlying causes of lack of food access and unhealthy diets cannot be addressed by agriculture only; progress is also needed in poverty reduction, improvement of infrastructure, education and health. Some countries shared their experiences in cross-ministerial work in developing food security and nutrition action plans.
- The need for collaboration with other United Nations agencies was suggested throughout the discussions, especially in monitoring and analysing food security and nutrition. Members can benefit from complementary support from United Nations agencies.
- The importance of regional and subregional coordination mechanisms was highlighted. These mechanisms would be more beneficial in times of crisis and profound changes in the region, as they can provide a platform for the exchange of views, experiences and information on food security. The European Union shared its experiences, and the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Economic Cooperation Organization were mentioned as potential subregional bodies for such coordination.

## Promoting the consumption of healthy and diverse diets

- Consumer education was mentioned often as key to generating demand for healthy diets and in changing production patterns positively. The development and regular update of food systems based dietary guidelines are important, but emphasis should also be put on consumer education related to nutrition, nutrition education, food literacy and enabling consumers to make healthy food choices.
- The potential of aquatic products for improving dietary diversity and quality was discussed. The current per capita consumption level of aquatic products, apart from certain European countries, is very low in the region, and there is a potential for increasing consumption not only by increasing production but also through value chain development, processing, nutrition education and dietary guidelines. But the low availability and high market prices of aquatic products also need to be addressed.
- Regarding the challenge of dietary diversity, opportunities could be explored on so-called “orphan” foods or food/crops that are produced on a small scale and consumed mainly by smallholders themselves or by rural consumers. The possibility could be explored of identifying such crops, as they could contribute to the dietary diversity, nutrition and livelihoods of producers.

## Addressing socioeconomic shocks and urban food security

- Enhancing the capacity to monitor food security and market prices of food and agrifood inputs was suggested by all working groups as key actions to be taken, considering that food inflation could have both short- and long-term impacts on food access and nutrition. The importance of the Agricultural Market Information System was mentioned by some groups.
- Some delegates highlighted the importance of building food systems that are resilient to shocks and stresses. Possible key responses include securing the availability and affordability of socially important food items through local production or import diversification. The list of socially important food items could be considered or reconsidered by reviewing the consumption basket and nutritional requirements.
- The increasing importance of school meals was highlighted as an effective and targeted response to address the increasing risks of child malnutrition, including obesity, associated with the rising cost of a healthy diet.
- Two working groups touched on the issue of urban areas. There are some good practices in urban food systems transformation in the region, and those could potentially be promoted in other urban areas/cities that are increasingly facing issues of economic and physical access to nutritious diets.

## **Session 5 – Plenary: Regional Technical Commissions’ contribution to the regional priorities**

Mr Haydar Fersoy (Central Asian and Caucasus Regional Fisheries and Aquaculture Commission); Mr Ekrem Yazici (European Forestry Commission); Mr Raymond VanAnrooy (European Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Advisory Commission); Mr Fabrizio Rosso (European Commission for the Control of Foot-and-Mouth Disease, via recorded presentation); Ms Anna Carlson (General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean), and Mr Nabil Gangi (on behalf of the ECA) presented the contributions to the regional priorities of their respective technical commissions, as per the background document for the consultation ([IC/23/4](#)).

The main discussion points included:

- It was noted that the technical commissions are actively tackling, managing and overseeing the regional issues falling within their mandate, mostly via their work programmes, taking into consideration the needs, challenges and priorities identified by the subsidiary bodies of the commissions and/or by the members of the commissions.
- The commissions contribute to regional priorities and to the achievement of the SDGs.

- Intersectoral cooperation among agriculture, forestry and fisheries, including collaboration among the respective commissions at global and regional levels, was identified as a key element for the commissions and as a goal to further pursue.
- Members highlighted the importance and welcomed once again the reporting of the regional technical commissions to the ERC, as a tool for FAO Members to get familiar with the work and successes of these statutory bodies and for the commissions to provide information beyond their memberships. In this regard, it was mentioned that reporting from the European Commission for the Control of Foot-and-Mouth Disease at the ERC would be welcomed.
- It is important to ensure effective communication channels among FAO commissions and other stakeholders in the region, including regular meetings, workshops and webinars, for the sharing of knowledge, exchange of information and discussion of common challenges.
- Members raised the issue of the improvement of data collection and analysis to better understand regional challenges and opportunities through conducting surveys, monitoring and evaluation processes. Based on the conducted data collection and analysis, the commissions could develop targeted interventions to address the region's specific challenges, including developing training programmes to support the implementation of climate-smart agriculture techniques.
- The importance of increasing membership in the Central Asian and Caucasus Regional Fisheries and Aquaculture Commission (CACFish) was stressed. The commission is currently working actively with non-CACFish FAO Members from the Central Asia and Caucasus subregion to strengthen their engagement and increase membership.
- Climate change has become a key issue in the agendas of the commissions. Members provided examples of how climate change is increasingly affecting their aquatic and territorial ecosystems and habitats.
- Under the guidance of FAO, it will be important to develop a regional mechanism to assess land suitability and availability for forest landscape restoration and to establish a regional monitoring system to this end.
- It is key to provide pre- and post-harvest support to local communities, deal with water contaminated by mining, consider Indigenous Peoples and adapt livelihoods. The blue economy does not address the issue of marine resources sufficiently. It also will be key to consider further application and implementation in the region of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication.

### **Session 6 – Plenary: Draft annotated agenda for the Forty-third Session of the European Commission on Agriculture; Draft provisional annotated agenda for the Thirty-fourth Session of the Regional Conference for Europe**

Mr Marios Georgiades, Deputy Permanent Representative of Cyprus and Chairperson of the ECA, and Mr Nabil Gangi, Deputy Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia and Secretary of the ERC, presented respectively the draft annotated agenda for the Forty-third Session of the ECA and the draft agenda for the Thirty-fourth Session of the ERC, as per the background notes on the ECA ([IC/23/5](#)) and on the ERC ([IC/23/6](#)).

In relation to the agenda of the Forty-third Session of the ECA, the discussion touched upon the following key points:

The main technical theme of the Forty-third Session of the ECA, scheduled to take place in Budapest, Hungary, within the period of 26–28 September 2023, will be “Sustainable use of land and water resources in Europe and Central Asia.” The topic was welcomed by the Informal Consultation, and it was further highlighted that the selected theme is in line with the discussions held at the Informal Consultation and with the foreseen FAO biennial programme of work for 2024–2025.

- Members would welcome guidance on how to enhance links between FAO's knowledge on research and practice with policymaking.
- Sustainable water management cannot be decoupled from sustainable production methods/systems, in particular given water scarcity conditions in a changing climate, and both need to go hand in hand.
- Referring to the recent Committee on Agriculture decisions and FAO commitments at the United Nations Water Conference, Members requested that FAO provide more information on how FAO, and the ECA in particular, plan to engage on land tenure and national water roadmaps.
- The relevance of the FAO Global Framework on Water Scarcity in Agriculture and its reflections on drought preparedness, sustainable agriculture water use and financing mechanisms was highlighted.
- While the references to gender were welcomed, the youth- and gender-specific constraints and opportunities should be further highlighted in the background documents prepared for the session.
- The foreseen item on the assessment reflecting the regional impacts on women during COVID-19 should be expanded to include the impact of the war in Ukraine on gender and food security.
- In line with its rules of procedure, the ECA will be invited to elect from among the representatives a chairperson, a first and a second vice-chairperson, and six other members of the Executive Committee. The ECA Secretariat has invited Members to submit their nominations in advance by 30 June 2023.

In relation to the draft agenda of the Thirty-fourth ERC, the Secretary of the conference brought to the attention of the Members that the host country of the conference (13–17 May 2024) is still to be identified and invited Members to consider hosting the session and to provide inputs on the presented three topic proposals for the main theme. The proposed topics are:

- a) The role of innovation and digitalization in the sustainable use of land, forests and water resources to accelerate the implementation of nature-positive, climate-resilient and low-emissions pathways in agrifood systems.
- b) Ensuring sustainable and resilient rural development and local food systems for smallholders, family farms and rural communities through an inclusive policy environment, gender-responsive rural advisory services, innovation, digitalization and social protection.
- c) Bioeconomy for sustainable food systems in the Europe and Central Asia region: land, water and labour requirements and the role of green cities.

Members requested that the outcomes of the United Nations Food Systems Stocktaking Moment be included in the agenda.

### **Session 7 – Plenary: Wrap-up and closure**

Mr Vladimir Rakhmanin, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, and Mr Raimund Jehle, Regional Programme Leader for Europe and Central Asia, gave their closing remarks, highlighting the key points from the discussions. Further interventions from the audience stressed:

- The importance of improving the access of youth, women and smallholders to resources. Climate change puts pressure on resources and on people who rely on them, and all these drivers are resulting in migration, hunger and crises. Adapting to climate change requires social changes. Calls were made to intensify the cooperation of FAO and Members on the SDGs and on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.