FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa in collaboration with International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), has organized a regional meeting to discuss the vision, mission and roadmap towards the establishment of the Arab Forum for Rural Advisory Services (AFRAS). The meeting took place in Cairo, Egypt, on 24 and 25 July 2023.

The Forum is envisaged to operate under the umbrella of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS), hence joining the array of existing regional networks of RAS across the globe.

AFRAS was conceived following a recommendation of a regional study on extension and RAS conducted by FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa in 2021. The study assessed RAS from the perspective of their market-orientation, pluralism and responsiveness to the specific needs of different categories of farmers, with a focus on smallholders and vulnerable producers. The opportunity of establishing such network was concertedly discussed and endorsed in the context of a regional consultation organized in June 2022. In that occasion, stakeholders from the Region considered the strategic importance of regional networking to advocate for and favor the modernization of RAS in the region and their central role in contributing to the broader processes of rural and agrifood system transformation.

The meeting was attended by official representatives of Ministries of Agriculture in 14 Arab countries\(^1\) along with experts and practitioners representing various national stakeholders and international and regional organizations (ACSAD, ICARDA, AARINENA, AWO, NARC-Jordan), as well as GFRAS and its regional networks of South Asia, North America and Africa.

Deliberations focused on the roadmap for the establishment of AFRAS which was developed with the support of a voluntary advisory group of experts facilitated by FAO. They also focused on the priority functions for AFRAS, viable institutional format, operational and technical modalities.

Participants agreed to form a core group of AFRAS community with all participants, acting voluntarily as focal points for their respective countries and institutions, in the initial stages of AFRAS formation.

The participants call on FAO and IFAD to take necessary steps in support of the establishment of AFRAS in close collaboration with interested regional and national organizations and stakeholders.

FAO, jointly with IFAD, will communicate to ministries of agriculture through its country offices the outcomes of the meeting and will solicit interest and support from stakeholders in member countries towards the official a launch of AFRAS, tentatively envisaged in the first months of 2024.

The meeting discussed and agreed on the vision and mission of AFRAS as outlined below, as well as on AFRAS values and principles, areas of thematic focus and priority functions.

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\(^1\) Countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen, Libya.
1. VISION

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

2. MISSION

Strengthen networking, knowledge sharing, 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.

3. PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

AFRAS’ operations will observe and respect the following principles:

- Democratic processes
- Respect for nature and all its inhabitants
- Inclusivity
- Participatory/self-determination
- Transparency
- Accountability and learning from processes

In alignment with the above principles, AFRAS will internalize the below values when operating and implementing its functions:

- Gender equality
- Bottom-up approaches/demand-driven
- Lean, flexible and responsive structure
- Multistakeholder process
- Learning and adapting
- Collaboration

4. TARGET AUDIENCE

AFRAS will address a varied audience comprising actors operating at the regional and country or national level.

- National level: representatives of the public and the private sector, extension institutions, producer organizations, NGOs, research organizations and individuals championing RAS.
- Regional level: international and regional organizations, research organizations, development agencies working in/on the region.
5. 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

6. 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

7. INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

Participants considered elements and processes required for the establishment of AFRAS from an institutional and organizational perspective. Deliberations touched upon the following:

- Learning form GFRAS and its regional networks; starting with a lean, agile and informal institutional format which allows for flexible operationalization of AFRAS and which can evolve and adapt as the Forum matures.
- Engaging stakeholders at national and regional level, with a clear message and vision.
- Considering the diversity of stakeholders which reflects the pluralism existing in the service system (including public sector, the private sector, the civil society and the media).
- Soliciting the support of FAO and IFAD to accompany AFRAS in the early stages of its establishment/incubation
- Mapping and developing a database of institutions and stakeholders engaged in service provision and RAS at regional and country level
8. IMPLEMENTATION AND OPERATION MODALITIES

An on-line platform already exists as an idea and will be developed by FAO and IFAD during the coming months in consultation with AFRAS core group. FAO will continue facilitating the interaction of the core group providing a suitable communication platform.

9. STAFFING

Deliberations highlighted the importance of a small secretariat to support coordination, communication, knowledge management and financial management.

10. CORE GROUP

Participants in this meeting will voluntarily form a core group or nucleus community of AFRAS in pursuing the process towards the establishment of AFRAS.

11. NEXT STEPS

Deliberations pointed to the importance of continuing exchanges over the coming weeks and months to identify a suitable institutional mechanism that facilitates AFRAS functioning. Participants appreciated that the establishment of AFRAS entails a gradual process requiring the engagement of a wide array actors at national and regional level. They also appreciated the space provided by the meeting to connect and exchange and wished to continue such exchange and consultative process towards the establishment of AFRAS.