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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

Priorities for FAO in the Near East and North Africa region

Executive Summary

The 42nd Session of the FAO Conference unanimously approved the *FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 (SF)*. The strategic narrative guiding the *Strategic Framework 2022-31* is the transformation to MORE efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for *better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life*, leaving no one behind. The 43rd Session of the FAO Conference endorsed the Medium Term Plan (Reviewed) 2022-25 and Programme of Work and Budget 2024-25 and approved the Biennial Theme 2024-25 on 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.

The 36th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East called for localizing the Strategic Framework in the specific conditions, needs and priorities of Members in the region.

During the 2022-2023 biennium, the region continued to face multiple challenges affecting food security, such as the continuation of the negative effects from COVID-19, coupled with economic challenges, particularly fiscal stress and inflation, as the war in Ukraine crisis further exacerbated food security challenges. The most important challenges, however, were climate change and conflicts, in particular the prolonged conflicts in some countries including in Gaza. Other challenges include population growth and rapid urbanization with close to stagnant food production; the rapid growth of overweight and obesity across the region; broadening divide between living conditions in rural and urban areas; extreme water and land scarcity; and degradation of natural resources.

FAO's work in the region focus on supporting countries in accelerating the transformation of their agrifood systems to address the above challenges and accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It will continue to do so by using the 20 Programme Priority Areas (PPA) of the *FAO Strategic Framework 2022-2031* to address the four Regional Priorities, and the result of extensive consultations with countries and regional stakeholders, endorsed by the previous Regional Conference.

- a. **Regional Priority 1: Rural transformation and inclusive value chains**, enhancing productivity and income, focusing on youth employment and women's empowerment to close rural-urban divide.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

- b. **Regional Priority 2: Food security and healthy diets for all**, focusing on trade, enabling policies, food safety and quality, food loss and waste, and advocacy for nutrition.
- c. **Regional Priority 3: Greening agriculture: addressing water scarcity and climate action.**
- d. **Regional Priority 4: Building resilience to multiple shocks**, protracted crises and emergency situations along the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

To accelerate progress and maximize efforts in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), FAO will continue to mainstream and intensify the application of technology, innovation and data, and bring greater focus on strengthening governance, human capital and institutional development in all interventions. It will also ensure that the three cross-cutting themes of gender, youth and inclusion will be systematically mainstreamed across its programme.

The Regional Conference is invited to take note and endorse the priorities for the region mentioned in this paper.

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I. Introduction

1. The 43rd Session of the FAO Conference endorsed the Medium Term Plan (Reviewed) 2022-25 and Programme of Work and Budget 2024-25 and approved the Biennial Theme 2024-25 on water resources management for the *four betters*.¹
2. FAO's work is guided by the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 which seeks to support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through the transformation to MORE efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable, agrifood systems for *better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life*, leaving no one behind. Its 20 Programme Priority Areas (PPAs) articulate FAO's thematic, technical comparative advantage. Regional Priorities are elaborated with the relevant PPAs and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
3. Beyond the 2024-2025 biennium, and in line with the programming and budgeting cycle elaborated in the FAO Basic Texts², input on priorities from the 2024 Regional Conferences will guide FAO's programming for the 2026-2027 biennium and will support the review of the FAO *Strategic Framework 2022-2031* to be presented to the FAO Conference in 2025.

II. Context

(1) Medium-long term futures of agrifood systems

4. Strategic foresight at FAO examines the alternative future patterns of agrifood, socioeconomic and environmental systems, and the dynamics of their driving forces to identify strategic options for triggering changes towards sustainable and resilient agrifood systems at all levels.
5. Following the guidance from the Committee on Agriculture and other Governing Bodies, FAO is reinforcing its strategic foresight capacity in collaboration with United Nations (UN) bodies, academia, civil society and other foresight networks. This includes implementing Regional Foresight Exercises (RFEs) in all five FAO regions, involving subregions and selected pilot countries. The RFEs aim to accelerate strategic thinking, increase capacity to support transformative changes of agrifood systems and inform Members on strategic options available to achieve sustainable and resilient agrifood systems.
6. The recently launched FAO flagship report [The future of food and agriculture –Drivers and triggers for transformation](#) (FOFA-DTT), which formed the basis of the [FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31](#) and provided the conceptual and methodological grounds for the RFEs, warns that current trends could threaten the sustainability and resilience of agrifood systems and jeopardize the achievement of the *four betters*, potentially leading to increased food crises. Drivers such as population growth, urbanization, macroeconomic instability, poverty, inequality, geopolitical tensions, competition for resources and climate change are already negatively impinging on agrifood, socioeconomic and environmental systems, while food prices are increasing. Transitioning towards sustainability may require a new mindset that prioritizes long-term objectives and addresses trade-offs through massive investment in domains with high transformative potential such as the four “triggers for transformation” proposed in the FOFA-DTT report: institutions and governance; consumer awareness; income and wealth distribution; and innovative technologies and approaches.
7. The RFEs started through an inception consultation with regional experts in September 2023. The consultations have showed that there are indeed drivers that appear to be more significant and impactful in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region, and that these priority drivers interact with each other, both being a source and a receiver of impacts in a dynamic manner. The importance of the drivers individual trends, plus their interaction/interplay, helps to lift the veil and understand certain past and recent trends and how socioeconomic and agrifood systems have come to be. Moreover, they also hint at possible future trends (weak signals). Accordingly, among the most

¹ C 2023/REP <https://www.fao.org/3/nm800en/nm800en.pdf>

² Basic Texts of FAO, II. F, Implementation of the IPA regarding the reform of the programming, budgeting and results-based monitoring system

important drivers and their interplays for the NENA region to be further analysed, supported or refuted, were the following:

- a. Climate change
- b. Scarcity and degradation of natural resources
- c. Economic growth, structural transformation and the macroeconomic outlook
- d. Population dynamics and urbanization
- e. Geopolitical instability and conflicts
- f. Food prices
- g. Cross-country interdependencies
- h. Rural and urban poverty, inequalities
- i. Science and innovation
- j. Public investment
- k. Consumption and nutrition patterns
- l. Migration

(2) Challenges and opportunities

8. The NENA region, home to over 400 million people, is the world's most land- and water-scarce region. Agriculture contributes 14 percent of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) (excluding oil-rich countries) and employs 38 percent of the economically active population. Per capita availability of agricultural land averages around 0.3 hectares (ha), and per capita water availability is 10 percent of the global average. Increasing conflicts have increased the prevalence of malnutrition and hunger, and obesity rates are high, particularly among children and women. The NENA is diverse, with some of the world's wealthiest and least developed countries.

Challenges and opportunities for Better Production

9. Water scarcity and climate change are the key challenges to achieving SDGs, including SDG 2, in the region. Water scarcity impedes agricultural production in the NENA region and contributes to region's dependency on food imports. Climate change exacerbates problems of land, water scarcity and degradation and could potentially lower the Arab region's GDP by 6-14 percent by 2050.

10. The smallholder farming sector has been overlooked in public policy and investment, with rural areas receiving significantly less public spending on infrastructure and services than urban areas.

Challenges and opportunities for Better Nutrition

11. Many of the region's food systems are neither healthy nor sustainable. The region suffers from the triple burden of malnutrition: undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and over-nutrition. Despite the huge dependence on imported food, the region has yet to develop a comprehensive framework to manage international trade in food, particularly the resilient supply chains for imported food.

12. Some of the other challenges for *better nutrition* are food safety and quality, food loss and waste, and lack of recognition and adoption of urban food systems.

Challenges and opportunities for Better Environment

13. Despite the diversity in natural endowments, the region shares the common challenge of being one of the land- and water-scarce regions of the world. High population growth and urbanization aggravate already fragile resources impacting available land and water resources.

14. The synergistic effect of the natural resource stresses can be seen by the projection that NENA is likely to be the only region in the world where the harvested area will actually shrink due to limitations imposed by water availability and soil degradation keeping the region dependent on food imports through 2050. Human-use and climate change-induced impacts on forest loss, waste, chemical contamination, reservoir sedimentation and urban sprawl have the potential to lower the region's GDP by 2.1 to 6 percent.

Challenges and opportunities for Better Life

15. Natural and anthropogenic shocks and emergencies, as well as protracted crises situations, affect several countries of the region. They are the biggest drivers of hunger, costing lives, decimating livelihoods, restricting people's future life opportunities and driving displacement and migration. Many rural communities in the region lack the technical and institutional capacities and means to anticipate, prevent, prepare for, respond to, cope with and recover from shocks and crises.

16. Across the region, there are declining incentives and reasons to stay in rural areas: a history of insufficient basic services (including health, education and communications), low exposure to opportunities for innovation, ever-greater pressures on natural resources, limited investment in productive infrastructure and value chains, and limited long-term employment opportunities. For many people, particularly the young, the pull of urban areas is far stronger than that of rural areas.

III. Priority areas of work in 2024-25 and beyond

17. Building on the aforementioned challenges and opportunities, four major priorities emerge for FAO to organize its support across countries in the NENA region and maximize its impact. These Regional Priorities are mutually dependent and inseparable. They have been endorsed by the previous Regional Conference with slight adjustments to the titles in Regional Priority 3 and 4. The challenges to food security and natural resources in the region are interconnected, and actions in one area will impact the others. Therefore, a comprehensive approach is needed to speed up the transformation of the Region's agri-food systems.

Regional Priority 1: Rural transformation and inclusive value chains

18. In this Regional Priority, FAO will support Members to address challenges such as high rural unemployment, youth migration to cities and rural poverty and the widening rural-urban divide.

19. To address these challenges, interventions must aim at raising incomes especially for smallholders. One intervention is to strengthen institutions that promote the development of market-oriented agriculture for smallholders. Efforts should be made to better integrate smallholders, in particular women, in profitable value chains such as fruits, vegetable, herbs and spices, and support their participation further along the value chains through enhancing the capacity of producers and their associations, and better territorial planning, including enhancing market access; creating off-farm employment opportunities; providing better social protection to help vulnerable populations; strengthening local governance and institutions; and ensuring access to land and other natural resources.

Regional Priority 1: Rural transformation and inclusive value chains

Programme Priority Areas (PPAs)	SDG Targets	Regional Areas of Emphasis
BP1: Innovation for sustainable agriculture production	2.3, 2.4, 6.4	Promote sustainable intensification of crop, livestock including water use efficiency
BP2: Blue transformation	2.1, 2.2, 14.2, 14.4, 14.6, 14.7, 14.b, 14.c	Fish production
BP4: Small-scale producers' equitable access to resources	1.4	Develop competitive and inclusive value chains and agri-business Support producers' organizations and agricultural services
BP5: Digital agriculture	1.4, 5.b, 9.c, 17.8	Promote digital innovation and extension

BL1: Gender equality and rural women's empowerment	5.a	Promote rural women's empowerment
BL2: Inclusive rural transformation	8.6, 10.1, 14.b	Promote rural youth employment Adopt a territorial approach to rural development, invest in basic infrastructure

Regional Priority 2: Food security and healthy diets for all

20. This Regional Priority will help FAO to provide its support to Members to better respond to challenges posed by the growing divide between food supply and demand driven by population growth and rising income, in the face of limited natural resources (water and land), and the growing problem of malnutrition, poor food safety and quality, in particular in urban areas.

21. To address these challenges, the interventions will aim at adopting an agrifood-systems approach to food security and nutrition. Interventions will focus on: making trade work for food security, nutrition and economic development; developing economically efficient national food security strategies, including through the modernization and strengthening of food markets; developing measures to manage the risks of import dependence and reducing exposure to global market prices; encouraging diversification of production and public-private partnerships towards healthier diets; and on strengthening national capacities to improve food quality, food safety, traceability and the detection of contaminants, and promoting public and private investments in agrifood systems.

22. Interventions will also seek to enhance the consumption of nutritious foods by reforming food subsidy policies, raising awareness about healthy diets, fostering consumer protection systems, encouraging appropriate food labelling policies and combating food losses and waste. These interventions will focus specifically on developing more sustainable and healthier urban food systems.

23. Regional Priority 2 is aligned with *better nutrition*, focusing on food security in all its dimensions, improved nutrition, and the associated elements of trade and food safety, adding a specific focus to address the nutritional needs of a rapidly growing urban population.

Regional Priority 2: Food security and healthy diets for all

Programme Priority Areas (PPAs)	SDG Targets	Regional Areas of Emphasis
BN1: Healthy diets for all	2.1, 2.2	Promote healthy diets and food diversification
BN2: Nutrition for the most vulnerable	2.1, 2.2	Revise food security policies and subsidies
BN3: Safe food for everyone	2.2	Enhance food safety and quality
BN4: Reducing food loss and waste	12.3	Reduce losses and waste along the value chain
BN5: Transparent markets and trade	2.b	Secure food import, promote export and intra-regional trade
BE4: Achieving sustainable urban food systems	2.1	Promote urban agriculture and green cities

Regional Priority 3: Greening agriculture: addressing water scarcity and climate action

24. The title of Regional Priority 3 is proposed to be more descriptive by including statements on water, environmental sustainability and climate. The Regional Priority will help FAO to provide its support to Members to address the challenges posed climate change, in particular the water scarcity.

25. The interventions aim at: protecting and restoring natural resources for enhanced productivity and sustainability; combatting deforestation; preventing over-grazing of rangelands; encouraging sustainable land management practices; protecting water degradation through the use of appropriate technologies and policies; encouraging water-reuse; and promoting good agricultural practices to better manage agro-chemicals and promote more efficient irrigation techniques and practices, as well as reuse treated water effluents. These actions are in line with the goals of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030, for the implementation of which FAO acts as a co-leader along with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

26. Regional Priority 3 embraces the full range of challenges addressed by *better environment*, and links them strongly with elements of *better production* to foster transformation towards sustainable agriculture. The table below present the regional areas of emphasis associated with the PPAs of *better environment* and *better production*.

Regional Priority 3: Greening agriculture: addressing water scarcity climate action

Programme Priority Areas (PPAs)	SDG Targets	Regional Areas of Emphasis
BP1: Innovation for sustainable agriculture production	6.4	Enhance water productivity and governance
BP2: Blue transformation	14.4	Adopt an ecosystem approach to fisheries and aquaculture
BE1: Climate change mitigation and adapted agrifood systems	2.4, 13.2	Climate change adaptation and mitigation actions
BE2: Bioeconomy for sustainable food and agriculture	12.2, 12.4, 12.5	Promote nature-based solutions and recycling
BE3: Biodiversity and ecosystem services for food and agriculture	2.5, 15.1, 15.3	Reduce land and soil degradation (including soil pollution) Scale-up landscape restoration and conservation of biodiversity Adopt an ecosystem approach to fisheries and aquaculture

Regional Priority 4: Building resilience to multiple shocks

27. Regional Priority 4 acknowledges the specific situation of countries in crisis and conflicts. The slightly revised title is proposed with the understanding that the term “shocks” is comprehensive. FAO will support Members in addressing the challenges arising from protracted conflicts and multiple shocks and crises faced by the agriculture and food systems.

28. To address these challenges, the interventions will focus on five areas of action:

- a. understanding multiple risks through supporting countries to establish agro-climatic, disaster and crisis risk information systems and to manage, analyse, interpret, disseminate, publish, and make use of data generated for risk-informed decisions and actions;

- b. promoting disaster risk reduction policies and regulations focusing on building resilient agriculture and food systems;
- c. reducing risks and vulnerabilities through the adoption of interventions at farm and landscape levels and along the food value chain;
- d. adopting a One Health approach against biological threats to address risks that originate at the animal-human-ecosystem interface, involving human, animal and plant health, antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and food safety; and
- e. enhancing anticipatory actions, emergency preparedness and response to shocks and crises, strengthening emergency preparedness (contingency planning) and mechanisms to provide anticipatory actions.

29. Regional Priority 4 aligns both with the resilience and emergency response agendas associated with *better life*, as well as with the response to the challenges associated with transboundary plant pests and diseases of *better production*, with a focus on environmentally sustainable pest control practices (*better environment*).

Regional Priority 4: Building resilience to multiple shocks

Programme Priority Areas (PPAs)	SDG Targets	Regional Areas of Emphasis
BP3: One Health	1.5, 3.d, 15.8	Enhance One Health approach to address transboundary pests and diseases
BE2: Bioeconomy for sustainable food and agriculture	12.2, 12.4, 12.5	Sustainable pest control practices and combatting antimicrobial resistance
BL3: Agriculture and food emergencies	2.1, 2.2, 16.1	Provide immediate support to crisis-affected households
BL4: Resilient agrifood systems	1.3, 1.5	Strengthen risk information and early warning systems Reduce risks and vulnerability Enhance the quality and impact of resilience programmes
BN2: Nutrition for the most vulnerable	1.3, 2.1, 2.2 3.1, 3.2	Provide immediate support to crisis-affected households to reduce malnutrition

Accelerators and cross-cutting themes

30. In order to accelerate progress and maximize efforts in meeting the SDGs and to realize the *four betters*, FAO will apply four cross-cutting accelerators in all programmatic interventions to accelerate impact while minimizing trade-offs:

- a. Technology for sustainable agrifood systems can be defined as the application of science and knowledge to develop techniques to deliver a product and/or service that enhances the sustainability of agrifood systems.
- b. Innovation is a central driving force for achieving a world free from hunger and malnutrition and includes technological, social, policy, institutional and financial innovations. The region has invested substantial efforts in innovation over the last years

and will continue focusing its attention on innovative approaches in support of more sustainable, inclusive, productive and resilient agrifood systems in the region.

- c. Data products contribute to strengthening evidence-based decision-making and include the development of methods, standards and frameworks and also the collection, processing and dissemination of data, together with required capacity building and partnerships. FAO has started working towards a regional food security and nutrition observatory that will bring together all existing data, through tailored analytics, in a dashboard that will support regional action towards agrifood system transformation.
- d. Complements (governance, human capital and institutions) are necessary and complementary dimensions of effective, collective action at all scales, considering in particular that, while technology and innovation have achieved important progress over the last decade, many stakeholders remain excluded from their benefits. FAO has also established a Regional Leadership Development Academy to strengthen capacities in leading the agrifood systems transformation.

31. The cross-cutting themes of gender, youth and inclusion, are critical areas identified to be taken into account across all of FAO's programmatic work in order to ensure the achievement of the UN programming principle of leaving no one behind, as reflected in FAO's strategic narrative.

32. Youth employment and women empowerment have been identified as priorities for FAO regional programmes and are therefore the backbone of Regional Priority 1 on rural transformation. Specific efforts are being made to foster the involvement of the youth in agrifood system transformation through the development of attractive new opportunities along the value chain. Women's empowerment is seen as a condition to achieve the foreseen transformation in rural areas.

FAO's corporate strategies and initiatives

33. FAO's Hand-in-Hand (HIH) Initiative seeks to enhance food security and eradicate poverty, facilitating agrifood transformation and sustainable development. It uses geospatial modelling and analytics to identify opportunities to raise incomes and reduce inequities. Yemen, Syrian Arab Republic and Sudan have joined this initiative which is expected to accelerate progress in the next biennium. The HIH Initiative also contributes to FAO's efforts to promote territorial approaches to rural transformation.

34. In September 2021, FAO launched its *Global Action on Green Development of Special Agricultural Products: One Country One Priority Product*, aiming to develop sustainable value chains for Special Agricultural Products (SAPs). SAPs include various agricultural products from various geographical locations and cultural heritages, significantly contributing to food security, healthy diets and livelihoods, while protecting the environment and biodiversity. The following countries are participating: Algeria for figs, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan for dates, Lebanon for pulses, Morocco for carob, Saudi Arabia and Yemen for coffee, Syrian Arab Republic for olives, and Tunisia for harissa.

35. FAO's 1 000 Digital Village Initiative aims to transform 1 000 villages into digital hubs - supporting agrifood systems transformation. In the NENA region, seven countries have implemented this initiative, combining digital literacy training, digital infrastructure enhancement and the development of digital tools and services in the fields of e-finance, agriculture extension and marketing.

IV. One FAO

36. The Regional Office has gone through a restructuring process to strengthen efficiency and effectiveness. This includes the establishment of a Strategy and Policy Unit, strengthening Partnerships and Resource Mobilization Units, and focusing on areas of expertise such as water scarcity, One Health and resilience. Other areas of focus are as follows:

- a. Strategic Positioning

37. FAO will promote policy dialogue, knowledge exchange and partnerships across the region. This involves strengthening partnerships and networks with civil society organizations, academia, think-tanks and specialized regional institutions, in line with the FAO Strategy for Private Sector Engagement, 2021-2025, also reinforcing regional capacity for knowledge management.

b. Programme Capacity

38. FAO will enhance its outreach and impact by restructuring programme delivery and strengthening collaboration on resource mobilization. Efforts will be made to allocate flexible funding for resources mobilization in addition to existing mechanisms. It will also seek to strengthen policy and technical support to countries through enhanced capacity at regional level and mobilizing technical support capacities from across FAO.

c. Operational Capacity

39. The focus will be on making FAO operations more efficient and effective in support to country programmes, improving business management at regional level and taking advantage of progresses at corporate level capitalizing on “One FAO”, and develop Standard Operating Procedures and Key Performance Indicators. The region will also support ongoing efforts towards country office transformation based on more delegation of authority to country level and more flexible resources allocation mechanisms.

d. Cross-Cutting Delivery Capacities

40. FAO will seek to further develop technical and managerial capacities across the region, including implementing capacity building programmes focused on internal processes and workflow, emphasizing soft competencies when recruiting new staff, encouraging initiative, and improving information exchange and collaboration between staff at all levels in the region. It will also strive to improve the visibility of the Organization and support Country Offices in better communicating FAO’s work through investment in communication capacities.