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Progress on the implementation of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration in NENA

Executive summary

The United Nations (UN) Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), through Resolution A/RES/73/284 on 1 March 2019, and provides unique opportunities for the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region to “scale up efforts to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide and raise awareness of the importance of successful ecosystem restoration” while addressing its pressing environmental challenges amidst climate change, urbanization, population growth, water scarcity, and unsustainable farming practices. Launched at regional level in 2022, the UN Decade serves as a framework for NENA countries, encouraging advocacy, enhancing partnerships and knowledge exchange, as well as scaling up restoration efforts. As co-leaders of the UN Decade, FAO and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) are committed to support implementation through a regional workplan built on three pillars and focused on enhancing knowledge exchange, political commitment and technical capacities on ecosystem restoration.

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I. Introduction

1. The NENA region faces many challenges related to its environment and ecosystems that form the foundation of agricultural production systems (crops, livestock, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture). Increased urbanization and rapid population growth, coupled with water scarcity and unsustainable farming practices and uses of agroecosystems are leading to the degradation of land and water resources. The NENA region is already affected by the impacts of climate change, but regional climate change projections estimate that temperatures could further rise from 1.7 to 2.6 °C by mid-century,¹ demanding a multi-pronged approach to adapt to increasing water scarcity and risks to productivity and rural livelihoods.
2. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), through resolution A/RES/73/284 on 1 March 2019, with the aim of supporting and scaling up efforts to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide and raise awareness of the importance of effective ecosystem restoration. All initiatives within the context of the UN Decade will consequently have a dual focus – to avoid degradation as well as to restore ecosystems.
3. In 2020, FAO produced an Information Note titled “Position paper on *ecosystem restoration*” of production ecosystems, in the context of the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030² for consideration by the Committee on Agriculture (COAG), the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) and the Committee on Forestry (COFO). At the heart of the position paper is the recognition that food production from various sectors comes frequently at a cost to ecosystem integrity that is acceptable and within the ecosystem’s carrying capacity, yet there are always options and opportunities to improve trade-offs between economic, social and ecological objectives, ensuring the efficiency, resilience and sustainability of these systems and reducing their overall footprint.
4. Ecosystem restoration aligns with, and contributes to the objectives of the three Rio Conventions: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD); the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD); and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as the new FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31.
5. The UN Decade provides an opportunity to upscale and amplify restoration efforts, engage a range of stakeholders, and identify good practices and restoration actors and champions who are strong advocates for combating ecosystem degradation. The UN Decade can contribute through encouraging advocacy on the importance of ecosystem restoration, fostering partnerships of stakeholders at national and regional levels, enhancing knowledge exchange and scaling up restoration efforts.
6. With these objectives in mind, the regional NENA action plan on the UN Decade was launched in 2022 to serve as an overall framework and provide guidance to NENA countries to make progress towards ecosystem and natural resources restoration and preservation. The FAO Regional Office for Near East and North Africa (FAO RNE) and the UNEP Regional Office for West Asia (UNEP-ROWA) are conveners of the UN Decade at the regional level and are committed to supporting countries in the implementation of the UN Decade, developed a regional biennium workplan in this regard that outlines regional activities and ensures their effective implementation.

II. FAO’s involvement in the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030)

7. FAO and UNEP are co-leading the implementation of the UN Decade, in collaboration with the secretariats of the Rio Conventions, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the Global Landscapes Forum, the Center for International Forestry Research and other key partners.

¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) *et al.* 2017. *Arab Climate Change Assessment Report – Main Report*. Beirut.

² COFO/2020/Inf.7

8. The Strategy³ for the UN Decade was finalized in June 2021. The Global Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy⁴ was launched in April 2023 and is structured across 12 thematic areas.

9. The implementation of the UN Decade is supported by an Advisory Board,⁵ a network of over 200 partners⁶ and five task forces⁷ on (i) monitoring; (ii) best practices; (iii) finance; (iv) science; and (v) youth.

10. The Monitoring Task Force⁸ is led by FAO and supports the development of the Framework for Ecosystem Restoration Monitoring⁹ (FERM) for the transparent monitoring and reporting on the progress in restoration throughout the duration of the UN Decade by providing monitoring tools and geospatial information related to ecosystems. The FERM consists of a geospatial platform and a registry of restoration initiatives. It is the official monitoring platform for tracking global progress and disseminating good practices for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. It also supports countries in reporting areas under restoration for the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework Target 2.

11. The Task Force on Best Practices¹⁰, also led by FAO, is focused on enhancing capacity development and knowledge dissemination efforts, including the development of principles¹¹ and standards of practice¹² to guide ecosystem restoration, as well as an action plan for capacities, knowledge and learning for the UN Decade.¹³ Likewise, the Task Force on Best Practices collaborates with the Monitoring Task Force on the capitalization, sharing and dissemination of good practices for restoration of all ecosystems through the FERM.

12. In January 2022, the UN Decade launched the first call for countries to nominate their World Restoration Flagships, and the 10 best initiatives were unveiled at the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15) receiving 154 expressions of interest and 73 government-endorsed proposals. FAO supported the assessment of the submitted flagships through the work of the Best Practices Task Force, which – in collaboration with the Science Task Force – coordinated and developed the evaluation process building on the guiding principles for ecosystem restoration of the UN Decade.

13. A UN Decade's Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) was created in 2021 by FAO and UNEP with the ambition to raise USD 100 million by 2030 to support the implementation of the UN Decade Strategy and its flagships.

14. The Agadir Commitment, endorsed in 2017, encourages management actions in Mediterranean forest ecosystems and other wooded lands that strengthen restoration efforts. Countries are committed to restoring at least 8 million ha of degraded lands by 2030 via dedicated restoration actions. The overall objective is to reverse land degradation, restore the composition, functioning and sustainability of ecosystems, thus contributing to improving the livelihoods and well-being of local populations.

15. Aligned with the aims of the Agadir commitment, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Türkiye, supported by the Committee on Mediterranean Forestry Questions-Silva Mediterranea, submitted and had approved a World Restoration Flagship in the context of the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. The Mediterranean restoration flagship showcases the region's significant advancements in post-fire restoration and its potential to inspire other countries outside the Mediterranean region.

³ <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/strategy>

⁴ [Action Plan for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, 2021-2030 Version April 2023 \(unep.org\)](#)

⁵ <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/advisory-board>

⁶ <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/partners>

⁷ www.decadeonrestoration.org/task-forces

⁸ <https://www.fao.org/3/cb0424en/cb0424en.pdf>

⁹ <https://ferm.fao.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.fao.org/in-action/forest-landscape-restoration-mechanism/our-work/gl/tfbp/en/>

¹¹ <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CB6591EN>

¹² <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc5223en>

¹³ <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc6592en>

III. Regional status of ecosystem degradation

16. To better understand the perception and status of ecosystem degradation in NENA, a stocktaking exercise was conducted in five countries (Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and the Sudan) in 2022 to map existing restoration initiatives, their successes, identify challenges and explore possible options for scaling up and scaling out. The methodology involved qualitative and quantitative data collection through research and literature review as well as through an online questionnaire and direct consultations with key stakeholders involved in ecosystem restoration programmes.

17. Results showed that all five countries consider their ecosystems degraded although the type of ecosystem and degrees of degradation vary among them. In Algeria, Jordan and Morocco, grasslands are considered the most highly degraded ecosystems. Forests in Algeria and Jordan were indicated as highly degraded while oceans were classified as highly degraded by Lebanon and mostly slightly degraded in Jordan and Morocco (Figure 1).

18. *The State of Land and Water Resources (SOLAW) for Food and Agriculture in the Near East and North Africa region* report¹⁴ states that unsustainable farming practices such as extensive use of pesticides and fertilizers, soil and water quality deterioration, biodiversity loss, deforestation, overgrazing, water pollution, overfishing, erosion, land use change and urban environment degradation are issues that require attention towards building resilient ecosystems.

19. Deforestation rates in the NENA region are high when considering the limited forest cover in the region. According to data from FAO, NENA experienced a significant net loss of forest cover (6 percent) during the period of 1990 to 2020 and recorded a 15 percent decline of other wooded lands during the same period.¹⁵ Forest degradation is also reported by NENA countries as increasing and while an exact estimation is not available, it is a key topic that needs to be addressed and consistently monitored.

20. Soil salinization undermines the essential ecosystem services provided by soils and have negative impacts on agricultural productivity and thus livelihoods. Based on the regional action plan for NENA to sustainably manage salt affected soils and boost soil organic carbon sequestration,¹⁶ soil salinity is a significant issue, affecting a significant portion of soils in the area. Findings indicate that more than half of the examined soils in 11 countries in NENA are affected by salinity, with 36.8 percent concentrated within the 0-30 cm depth range and 39.1 percent observed between the 30-100 cm depth range. These findings underscore the extensive prevalence of soil salinity throughout the region.

21. The main gaps identified in the stocktaking exercise lie within the following areas: i) mobilizing finance and improve coordination mechanisms for the implementation of initiatives at national and local levels; ii) improving technical capacities in certain areas of expertise; iii) awareness of the national restoration strategies; and iv) including gender considerations in restoration projects.

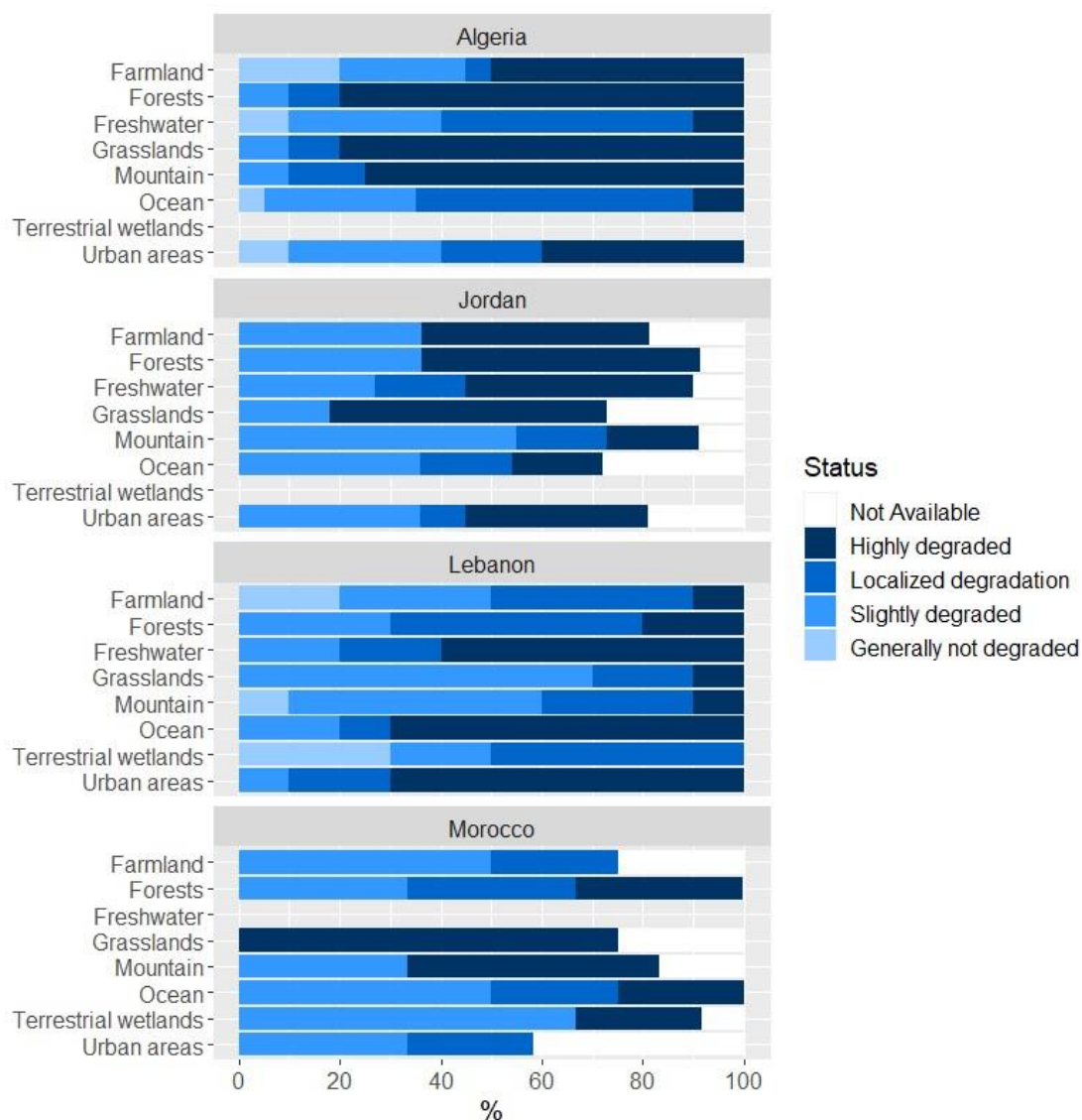
22. To make progress in ecosystem restoration, it is crucial to expand such analyses and gain a comprehensive understanding of the status of degradation across farming systems, agroecosystems and at the national level, to guide national-level planning and policy.

¹⁴ FAO. 2022. *The State of Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture in the Near East and North Africa region*. Cairo.

¹⁵ FAO. 2021. *Forest Resources Assessment for Near East and North Africa 2020 in the global context*. www.fao.org/3/cb6781en/cb6781en.pdf.

¹⁶ FAO. 2023. *Regional action plan for Near East and North Africa (NENA) to sustainably manage salt affected soils and boost soil organic carbon sequestration* (Unpublished)

Figure 1. Percentage of survey responses on the current status of degradation of various ecosystems in surveyed countries



Note: The rest of the 100% inside each category for Jordan represents missing data

IV. Regional workplan and activities

23. FAO and UNEP, as co-conveners of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, joined forces and developed a regional workplan that encompasses three priority actions aiming to support NENA countries in their ecosystem restoration efforts:

i) **Increase knowledge and awareness on ecosystem restoration opportunities in the region:**

The workplan prioritizes the dissemination of knowledge and best practices pertaining to restoration initiatives with the aim of empowering stakeholders to actively engage in the restoration of ecosystems. As part of this effort, Members were initially requested to designate National Focal Points from the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Environment to coordinate efforts related to the UN Decade's objectives in their respective countries.

The regional high-level launch followed in March 2022 to raise awareness of the importance of healthy ecosystems for livelihoods in the region, deliberate on policy and technical challenges impeding the implementation of the UN Decade in the region, present success stories at country level as well as identify opportunities for collective action. The launch was

attended by 242 participants from 38 countries. Following the regional launch, a meeting with the UN Decade National Focal Points was organized in April 2022 to introduce the regional action plan, reflect on potential actors and partners at national level and discuss ways of engagement in the UN Decade. As a fourth activity under this pillar aiming to boost experience and knowledge sharing, six webinars on ecosystem restoration were organized featuring successful case studies at country level.

- ii) **Increase political will and commitment to mainstream ecosystems restoration efforts in national and sectoral plans and strategies:** The workplan emphasizes the importance of political support and commitment to integrate ecosystem restoration into policy frameworks. The regional stocktaking exercise contributed to enhancing understanding of key restoration actors and their capacities, significant initiatives undertaken at country level, as well as the major constraints and challenges associated with the implementation of ecosystem restoration initiatives. This will benefit countries to take action by reviewing their policies and governance mechanisms in order to address these challenges effectively.
- iii) **Improve technical capacity on ecosystems restoration of country focal points and planners:** Guidelines for community-based ecological and landscape restoration in the Middle East and North Africa are being developed aiming at outlining the process and requirements towards developing a restoration plan for a certain project area.

V. Future directions and priorities for ecosystem restoration in NENA

24. The status of ecosystem degradation in the NENA region highlights the urgent need for comprehensive actions. Members have set targets to fulfil their international commitments to achieve land degradation neutrality, biodiversity conservation and restoration of ecosystems. However, often countries need further technical and financial support to develop effective strategies and turn their commitments into action. It is crucial to further strengthen policy frameworks at national and regional levels to better integrate ecosystem restoration into the sustainable development agendas.

25. Strengthening funding mechanisms is crucial to ensure adequate resources are allocated for ecosystem restoration projects. It is essential to explore funding sources to promote investments and project implementation that focus on nature-based solutions, biodiversity conservation and sustainable land management.

26. The UN Decade regional workplan recognizes the need to enhance technical capacities of country focal points, planners and local stakeholders involved in ecosystem restoration. Hence, developing a regional Community of Practice (CoP) will foster regional collaboration, and provide training and knowledge sharing opportunities among practitioners at both regional and national levels.