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منظمة
الأغذية والزراعة
للأمم المتحدة

CONFERENCE

Forty-second Session

2021

**Report of the 35th Session of the Regional Conference for
the Near East (21-22 September 2020)**



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

NERC/20/REP

REPORT

Muscat,
Sultanate of
Oman

21-22
September
2020

(Virtual)

Thirty-fifth Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East

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FAO Member Nations in the Near East Region

Afghanistan	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia
Algeria	Kyrgyzstan	Somalia
Azerbaijan	Lebanon	Sudan
Bahrain	Libya	Syrian Arab Republic
Cyprus	Malta	Tajikistan
Djibouti	Mauritania	Tunisia
Egypt	Morocco	Turkey
Iran, Islamic Republic of	Oman	Turkmenistan
Iraq	Pakistan	United Arab Emirates
Jordan	Qatar	Yemen

Date and place of the Sessions of the FAO Regional Conferences for the Near East

First	- Cairo, Egypt, 2-14 February 1948
Second	- Bloudane, Syria, 28 August – 6 September 1951
Third	- Cairo, Egypt, 1-9 September 1953
Fourth	- Damascus, Syria*, 10-20 December 1958
Fifth	- Tehran, Iran (Islamic Republic of), 21 September – 1 October 1960
Sixth	- Tel Amara, Lebanon, 30 July – 8 August 1962
Seventh	- Cairo, Egypt**, 19-31 October 1964
Eighth	- Khartoum, Sudan, 24 January – 2 February 1967
Ninth	- Baghdad, Iraq, 21 September – 1 October 1968
Tenth	- Islamabad, Pakistan, 12-22 September 1970
Eleventh	- Kuwait, Kuwait, 9-19 September 1972
Twelfth	- Amman, Jordan, 31 August – 9 September 1974
Thirteenth	- Tunis, Tunisia, 4-11 October 1976
Fourteenth	- Damascus, Syria, 9-16 September 1978
Fifteenth	- Rome, Italy, 21-25 April 1981
Sixteenth	- Nicosia, Cyprus, 25-29 October 1982
Seventeenth	- Aden, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, 11-15 March 1984
Eighteenth	- Istanbul, Turkey, 17-21 March 1986
Nineteenth	- Muscat, Oman, 13-17 March 1988
Twentieth	- Tunis, Tunisia, 12-16 March 1990
Twenty-first	- Tehran, Iran (Islamic Republic of), 17-21 May 1992
Twenty-second	- Amman, Jordan, 3-6 July 1994
Twenty-third	- Rabat, Morocco, 26-29 March 1996
Twenty-fourth	- Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic, 21-25 March 1998
Twenty-fifth	- Beirut, Lebanon, 20-24 March 2000
Twenty-sixth	- Tehran, Iran (Islamic Republic of), 9-13 March 2002
Twenty-seventh	- Doha, State of Qatar, 13-17 March 2004
Twenty-eighth	- Sana'a, Republic of Yemen, 12-16 March 2006
Twenty-ninth	- Cairo, the Arab Republic of Egypt, 1-5 March 2008
Thirtieth	- Khartoum, the Republic of the Sudan, 4-8 December 2010
Thirty-first	- Rome, Italy, 14-18 May 2012
Thirty-second	- Rome, Italy, 24-28 February 2014
Thirty-third	- Rome, Italy, 9-13 May 2016
Thirty-fourth	- Rome, Italy, 7-11 May 2018
Thirty-fifth	- Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, 21-22 September 2020 (virtual)

*Known as the United Arab Republic from 01/03/1958

**Known as the United Arab Republic until 02/09/1971

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SUMMARY OF MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

Matters for the Attention of the Council

- *Recommendations endorsed through the Written Correspondence Procedure (Paragraph 26)*
 - *Decentralized Offices Network (Paragraph 26 a – f)*
 - *Multi-year Programme of Work (MYPOW) 2020-23 for the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (Paragraph 26 g)*
- *Regional results and priorities (Paragraph 25 b)*
- *Date and Place of the 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (Paragraph 28)*

Matters for the Attention of the Conference

- *Transforming food systems to achieve the SDGs and respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Paragraphs 20 a – g and 21 a – f)*
- *FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative: A New Approach (Paragraph 23 a – c)*
- *Reports of the first and second Regional Consultative Technical Meetings (Paragraph 25 a – d)*

I. Introductory Items

Organization of the Conference

1. The Thirty-fifth session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC35) was held from 21 to 22 September 2020. The session was convened virtually on an exceptional basis in light of the COVID-19 public health concerns and constraints. This followed consultations by the Director-General with the Chairperson of the NERC35, the Government of the Sultanate of Oman, and the Regional Group for the Near East. Because the General Rules of the Organization and the Rules of Procedure adopted by this Regional Conference presuppose in-person sessions of the Regional Conference, the Members agreed to suspend any rules incompatible with the virtual setting.

2. The Regional Conference was organized as a Ministerial-level Meeting only following formal consultations with the host country and the Near East Group. The Senior Officers Meeting preceding the Ministerial-level Meeting in previous Regional Conferences has been replaced with two Regional Consultative Technical Meetings (RCTMs) conducted from 20 to 21 January 2020 in Cairo, Egypt, and on 1,2,15 and 23 July 2020, through virtual meetings hosted by the Sultanate of Oman.

3. The Regional Conference was attended by 304 participants including 13 Ministers and three Deputy Ministers. This included delegates from 29 Members of the NERC region (out of 30), three Observers and representatives from 12 organizations of the United Nations, 13 Intergovernmental Organizations and 32 representatives of the Private Sector, Non-governmental Organizations, research institutions and Civil Society Organizations. The list of Delegates who participated in the Regional Conference is available on the NERC35 webpage at: <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/regional-conferences/nerc35/documents/en/>.

Adoption of the Agenda and Timetable

4. The Regional Conference endorsed and adopted the Agenda (*Appendix A*) and Timetable as well as the documents submitted to the Regional Conference, which were circulated to Members through an online Regional Dialogue Area and listed in *Appendix B*.

Appointment of the Rapporteur

5. The Regional Conference designated Ms Wafaa Dikah Hamze, Senior Advisor at the Ministry of Agriculture, Lebanon, as Rapporteur.

Inaugural Ceremony

6. His Excellency Saud bin Hamoud bin Ahmed Al-Habsi, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources, Sultanate of Oman, welcomed delegates and participants. He highlighted the strategic importance of the NERC in discussing policy and programming matters as well as in jointly developing a roadmap to help the region's food systems respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thereafter, H.E. Al-Habsi formally opened the Regional Conference.

Statement by the Director-General

7. Dr QU Dongyu, the Director-General of FAO, extended his gratitude to the Sultanate of Oman for hosting and providing excellent chairpersonship of the first virtual Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic, as well as chairpersonship of the Regional Consultative Technical Meetings (RCTMs), which preceded the Regional Conference. He applauded the region's forward-looking approach in transforming the Regional Conference into an exclusively Ministerial-level Meeting to ensure high-level and priority-focused discussions, as

envisaged by the FAO Constitution while organizing RCTMs as platforms for in-depth discussions on strategic technical matters. He also commended the heightened inclusion and consultation with representatives of Private Sector and Civil Society Organizations in both the run-up and during the Regional Conference.

8. The Director-General highlighted that the changes introduced to make the regional conferences into more dynamic, interactive and continuous processes are part of a bigger set of actions that are transforming FAO. A series of far-reaching adjustments, endorsed by Council, help build a more dynamic and efficient FAO, entirely aligned with its core vision and mandate, creating an agile Organization that serves its Members. As such, he established a core leadership team consisting of the three Deputy Directors-General, the Chief Economist, Chief Scientist and Director of Cabinet and announced the appointment of the new Chief Scientist from the region, Ms Ismahane El-Ouafi. In addition, he outlined the newly established Offices, namely: the Office for Innovation, the Office of climate change, biodiversity and environment, the dedicated Office of SDGs and Office dedicated to assisting Small Island Developing States, Least Developed Countries and Landlocked Developing Countries. He also established FAO's first Women's and Youth Committees.

9. He highlighted the challenges posed by COVID-19 on food security and people's lives, particularly to the most vulnerable communities, as a compounding threat to existing crises such as conflict, natural disasters, climate change, pests and plagues. The Director-General outlined the FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Program, with its seven key priority areas, as a truly coherent, joined-up corporate response to countries' needs, linking all parts of the Organization, harnessing FAO technical, operational, normative and data capacities to support action at global, regional, and country levels. He, called on Members, however to maintain focus, while addressing the effects of the pandemic, on the achievement of the SDGs by 2030.

10. The Director-General stressed the new approaches promoted by FAO, namely the Hand-in-Hand Initiative, which is a country-owned and country-led initiative that prioritizes those who are at risk of being left behind, where extreme hunger and poverty are increasing. He outlined how the Initiative introduces a new business model for collaboration, which uses a broad spectrum of partnerships and leverages the technical and data capacity of the Organization, to determine where and how actions can be targeted to reach the most vulnerable and have the greatest impact on poverty and hunger.

11. The DirectorGeneral emphasized some of the challenges the region is facing from alarming water scarcity, persistent hunger but also growing levels of overweight and obesity, increasing gaps between rural and urban areas, as well as deep and enduring pockets of hunger and poverty in many rural areas.

12. The Director-General requested Members to outline the priorities they wish to see included in the new FAO Strategic Framework and to share their expectations from the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021.

13. He extended his gratitude to Mr Abdessalam Ould Ahmed, the former Assistant Director-General/Regional Representative for his valuable contributions to the work of FAO and for the countries of the region.

Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

14. Mr Khalid Mehboob, the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council, addressed the Regional Conference, emphasizing the unique role of the Regional Conference in defining FAO policies and priorities for the region. He noted that this Regional Conference will have an opportunity to give impetus to the drive begun by the Director-General for innovation and the Hand-in-Hand Initiative. Mr Mehboob urged Members to ensure that regional priorities were appropriately incorporated in the new FAO Strategic Framework. He noted the convening of the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 and recognized the central role of FAO, reflecting the prominence that the 2030 Agenda affords to the Organization's core mandate.

Statement by the Chairperson of the 35th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East

15. His Excellency Saud bin Hamoud bin Ahmed Al-Habsi, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources of the Sultanate of Oman, commended the Director-General's efforts for a new vision for FAO towards more efficiency in its programmes and initiatives at country and regional levels. He appreciated the innovative approach adopted by the Regional Conference for the Near East leading up to the Ministerial Meeting to discuss a number of pressing regional issues including: i) the transformation of food systems; ii) FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative, in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals; iii) the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; and iv) the environmental challenges facing the region. H.E. Al-Habsi concluded by recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic had revealed the centrality of food security for the economic development of the countries of the region.

Statement by the Spokesperson of the Civil Society Organizations

16. Ms Samah Jabir, Palestine Women Workers Union, summarized the views of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for the Regional Conference, building on the outcomes of the CSOs' consultations meeting held in Casablanca, Morocco in February 2020 in preparation for the Regional Conference. She highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic showed the vital role of local food systems in sustenance, recovery and food sovereignty. She emphasized the important role of CSOs in development and noted the enhanced collaboration between FAO and CSOs in the region and called for further cooperation. Ms Jabir recommended greater inclusion of rural women, fishers, agricultural workers, pastoralists, herders, artisans, consumers and youth in all aspects of agricultural development.

II. Regional and Global Policy and Regulatory Matters

A. Transforming food systems to achieve the SDGs and respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

17. The Regional Conference reviewed the document on "The impact of COVID-19 in the Near East and North Africa Region and FAO's Response Plan" and noted the messages from the document presented by Ms Elizabeth Bechdol, Deputy Director-General, FAO.

18. The statements by the Ministers are available at:
<http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/nerc35/statements/ar/>

19. The Regional Conference:

- a) Noted with concern the serious impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other shocks and crises – including conflicts, desert locust, floods and economic downturns, on smallholders and other vulnerable groups, food systems and the economies of the countries in the region;
- b) Highlighted the intensive efforts and initiatives made by countries of the region to address the impacts of COVID-19 and promote sustainable agriculture;
- c) Emphasized the importance of prioritizing the agriculture sector in national and regional efforts to accelerate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- d) Confirmed the urgent need to transform the region's food systems in a manner that ensures food security and nutrition, as well as food safety, and to move towards more sustainable and resilient agriculture;
- e) Emphasized the importance of a One Health Approach to prevent future zoonotic diseases, and to address transboundary plant pests and animal diseases, and the role of FAO in promoting regional cooperation on this subject;

- f) Stressed the importance of supporting small producers and their organizations, in particular women and youth, through technologies that raise productivity and innovation and that support more efficient agri-food systems;
 - g) Recognized the challenge of water scarcity, the vulnerability of the agriculture sector to climate change and weather extremes, and the need to develop agricultural practices that are adapted to climate change;
 - h) Stressed the important role played by the private sector and the need to ensure that it can contribute actively to the development of value chains that are efficient, inclusive and sustainable, and deliver healthy and nutritious food for all;
 - i) Called upon countries of the region to strengthen regional collaboration and sharing of experiences and good practices, and to strengthen food security at the regional level;
 - j) Stressed the importance of intraregional integration and work on food safety to promote trade and facilitate exchanges of agricultural products across the region;
 - k) Recognized the important role of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as a multistakeholder platform for policy convergence, commended its inclusive approach, stressed the importance of country ownership, and called upon FAO, in collaboration with other CFS stakeholders, to support national governments and regional institutions with the implementation of CFS policy guidance in line with the SDG 2030 Agenda to effectively transform food systems;
 - l) Welcomed and supported FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative;
 - m) Supported FAO's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan and the regional results and priorities;
 - n) Supported the proposed process for developing FAO's new Strategic Framework presented by the Organization and requested that regional priorities be considered as an integral part of this process;
 - o) Expressed its appreciation to FAO for its support to the countries of the region especially in supporting national priorities, responding to the COVID-19 crisis and the current Desert Locust upsurge.
20. The Regional Conference encouraged Members to:
- a) Ensure better preparedness for future shocks while addressing drivers of structural vulnerabilities;
 - b) Increase investments in agriculture with particular focus on responsible investments that enhance food security and nutrition while generating employment, especially for youth and women, supporting local value chains, closing the urban-rural gaps, promoting innovation and good governance;
 - c) Establish Regional Trust Funds to support COVID-19 response and recovery, accelerate food system transformation and ensure food and nutrition security;
 - d) Strengthen public partnerships with the private sector and civil society organizations;
 - e) Strengthen interregional trade;
 - f) Facilitate movements of food aid to ensure timely access of the most vulnerable groups to food; and
 - g) Adopt innovative policies, technologies and tools to increase agriculture sustainability and productivity, including leveraging the potential of digital technologies to create new jobs and economic opportunities while supporting food security and nutrition in the region.
21. The Regional Conference requested FAO to:
- a) Establish a clear protocol to guide and support countries of the region in addressing COVID-19;
 - b) Support countries especially with regard to (i) promoting innovations; (ii) building resilience to multiple shocks; (iii) responding to crises and emergencies; (iv) implementing

- innovative agro-processing activities; (v) applying a One Health Approach; (vi) adopting food safety standards; (vii) addressing transboundary plant pests and animal diseases; and (viii) implementing climate smart agriculture, agro-ecology and other measures that enhance resilience to climate change;
- c) Increase its support to women, youth, producers organizations and cooperatives as well as to vulnerable groups;
 - d) Support countries in resource mobilization and in accessing climate financing;
 - e) Establish platforms and e-learning programmes to facilitate sharing of experiences and good practices among countries of the region, as well as share information on food surpluses and demand to facilitate intraregional trade; and
 - f) Support increased data collection, analysis and use in evidence-based policies and programmes and the monitoring of COVID-19 impacts on agriculture and food chains.

B. FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative: A New Approach

22. Ministers and delegates appreciated the presentations and perspectives on the Hand-in-Hand Initiative provided by Mr Máximo Torero Cullen, Chief Economist, FAO. The Regional Conference recognized the role that the Hand-in-Hand Initiative could play to strengthen national ownership and capacities to accelerate progress to end poverty and hunger and promote rural development as well as economic growth and employment, particularly to support smallholders, youth, women and their organizations. The benefit of improved use of data and analytics for informed decision-making was underscored and the flexible new matchmaking approach to building multidimensional partnerships was welcomed. Delegates supported the extension of the Hand-in-Hand Initiative to strengthen FAO country support in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated impacts.

23. During the course of its deliberations, the Regional Conference:

- a) Endorsed and supported FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative noting that the Initiative is timely, country-driven, innovative and much needed in the region;
- b) Called for stronger partnerships among various stakeholders within the framework of the Hand-in-Hand Initiative; and
- c) Noted the importance of providing opportunities for youth engagement in the agriculture sector and the inclusion of smallholders in financial systems including their access to agriculture insurance and entrepreneurship support as well as promoting policy dialogue as part of the Hand-in-Hand Initiative.

III. Programmatic Matters

A. Reports of the First and Second Regional Consultative Technical Meetings¹

24. The Regional Conference noted the reports of the first and second Regional Consultative Technical Meetings (RCTMs) held on 20 and 21 January 2020 - under the theme of "Transforming Food Systems to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)", and during the period 1 to 23 July 2020 - under the theme of "Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Agriculture and Food Security in the Near East and North Africa Region", respectively, which were presented to the Regional Conference by Ms Wafaa Dikah Hamze, the rapporteur of the two RCTMs.

25. The Regional Conference:

- a) Adopted the reports of the first and second RCTMs (available at <http://www.fao.org/3/nd676en/nd676en.pdf> and <http://www.fao.org/3/nd677en/nd677en.pdf>);
- b) Endorsed the recommendations of the first and second RCTMs including the recommendations of the regional results and priorities;

¹ NERC/20/INF/22 - <http://www.fao.org/3/nd676en/nd676en.pdf>
and NERC/20/INF/23 - <http://www.fao.org/3/nd677en/nd677en.pdf>

- c) Welcomed the novel approach of RCTMs noting the benefits of such multistakeholder consultation and interactive dialogues; and
- d) Recommended RCTMs be instituted as an integral part of future Regional Conferences as Preparatory Committees.

IV. Other Matters

A. Recommendations endorsed through the Written Correspondence Procedure

26. Documents on Decentralized Offices Network (NERC/20/3) and Multi-year Programme of Work (NERC/20/7) were circulated to Members through the online Regional Dialogue Area prior to the Conference and comments from Members were gathered. Accordingly, the Regional Conference:

- a) Supported FAO Management's efforts towards increasing delegations of authority and decentralizing decision-making in administrative and programmatic areas, including human resources and procurement, aiming to improve overall delivery of the Strategic Results Framework and respond to the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda;
- b) Requested FAO to further pursue the adjustment of its Decentralized Offices business models, in particular in light of the United Nations Development System (UNDS) repositioning;
- c) Called upon FAO to continue its efforts to strengthen its technical capacities and policy integration at regional and subregional levels, to ensure FAO leadership in the region across relevant SDGs, including those under FAO's custodianship, and to contribute effectively to the new UN Cooperation Frameworks and Common Country Analysis, including through the data platform that is being established as part of the Hand-in-Hand Initiative;
- d) Requested FAO to shift towards a full programmatic approach at decentralized level to better demonstrate its valuable contributions to SDG achievement in line with recommendations of the Evaluation of FAO's Strategic Results Framework;
- e) Supported FAO's continued engagement in the implementation of the UNDS repositioning at regional and country levels, and provide guidance on FAO's strategic direction with regard to its value proposition in the region;
- f) Requested FAO to evaluate, identify and seize emerging opportunities arising from the UNDS repositioning at country and regional levels, building on lessons learned and successful experiences in collaboration with other partners, especially in the RBA environment; and
- g) Endorsed the revision of the Multi-year Programme of Work 2018-21 for the Regional Conference for the Near East.

B. Ministerial Declaration

27. The Regional Conference adopted a Ministerial Declaration, the text of which can be found in *Appendix C*.

C. Date and Place of the 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East

28. As no official candidatures were presented to host the 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East in 2022, the Regional Conference called upon the Near East Regional Group to discuss and agree on the date, place, Chairperson and Vice-Chairpersons of the 36th Session in consultation with the Director-General prior to the end of 2020.

V. Concluding Items

Adoption of the Report

29. The Regional Conference unanimously adopted the report as presented by the Rapporteur.

Closure of the Conference

30. On behalf of the Government of Oman, His Excellency the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources of the Sultanate of Oman thanked the Director General, the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa, the FAO Office in Oman and the participants for their positive contributions, which had led to the success of the 35th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East. He then declared the session closed.

31. Participants expressed their heartfelt appreciation to the Government of Oman and FAO for the efficient arrangements, preparation and organization of the 35th Session of the Regional Conference.

Appendix A. Agenda

MINISTERIAL MEETING

21 September 2020

I. INTRODUCTORY ITEMS

- 1) Adoption of the Agenda and Timetable
- 2) Appointment of the Rapporteur
- 3) Statement by the FAO Director-General
- 4) Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council
- 5) Statement by the Chairperson of the 35th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East

II. REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POLICY AND REGULATORY MATTERS

- 6) Transforming food systems to achieve the SDGs and respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic
- 7) FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative: A New Approach

III. PROGRAMMATIC MATTERS

22 September 2020

- 8) Statement by the Spokesperson of the Civil Society Consultation
- 9) Summary presentation of the reports of the First and Second Regional Consultative Technical Meeting for the 35th Session of FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC35) by the rapporteur
- 10) Date and Place of the 36th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East
- 11) Election of Chairperson and Vice-Chairpersons of the 36th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East
- 12) Review and adoption of the Report

Appendix B. List of Documents

DISCUSSION ITEMS

NERC/20/1 Rev.3	Provisional Annotated Agenda
NERC/20/2	Results and Priorities for FAO in the Near East and North Africa Region
NERC/20/2 WA1	Overview of FAO's Strategic Objective Programme
NERC/20/2 WA2	Contribution of Results in the Near East and North Africa Region to FAO Strategic Objectives in the 2018-19 Biennium
NERC/20/2 WA3	FAO Country Planning and Programming in the context of repositioning of the United Nations development system
NERC/20/2 WA4	Corporate Outcome Assessment 2019 - Near East and North Africa Regional Results
NERC/20/2 WA5	Update on the development of the new Strategic Framework
NERC/20/3	Decentralized Offices Network
NERC/20/4	The State of Food Security in the Near East and North Africa: Adapting food systems to respond to an increasingly urban population
NERC/20/5	Building Resilient Farming Communities to Boost Local Economies and Promote Rural Employment
NERC/20/6	Ensuring Environmental Sustainability in the Context of Water Scarcity and Climate Change
NERC/20/7	Multi-year Programme of Work for the Regional Conference for the Near East
NERC/20/8	The impact of COVID-19 in the Near East and North Africa Region and FAO's Response Plan

INFORMATION ITEMS

NERC/20/INF/1 Rev.1	Information Note
NERC/20/INF/2 Rev.2	Provisional Timetable
NERC/20/INF/3 Rev.2	Provisional List of Documents
NERC/20/INF/4	Statement by the FAO Director-General
NERC/20/INF/5	Summary of the Recommendations of Regional Commissions and Major Meetings in the Near East on: i) Policy and Regulatory Matters; and ii) Programme and Budget Matters
NERC/20/INF/6	FAO support to countries for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

NERC/20/INF/7	The International Year of Plant Health 2020 (IYPH 2020)
NERC/20/INF/8	Innovation in Agriculture and Food Systems for Achieving SDGs
NERC/20/INF/8 WA1	Innovation in Agriculture and Food Systems for Achieving SDGs - Note on COVID-19
NERC/20/INF/9	United Nations Decade of Family Farming
NERC/20/INF/10 Rev.1	FAO Programme on Red Palm Weevil Eradication in the Near East and North Africa Region
NERC/20/INF/11	Statement by the Chairperson of the 35th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East
NERC/20/INF/12	Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council
NERC/20/INF/13	Statement by the Chairperson of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS)
NERC/20/INF/14	Statement by the Spokesperson of the Civil Society Consultation
NERC/20/INF/15	UN Decade of Action on Nutrition and Follow-up to the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2)
NERC/20/INF/16	Update of the Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition
NERC/20/INF/17	Food Loss and Waste Measurement linked to the Food Loss Analysis Methodology
NERC/20/INF/18 Rev.1	UN Food Systems Summit
NERC/20/INF/19	Report of the Synthesis of Past Evaluations in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region
NERC/20/INF/20 Rev.2	FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative: a New Approach
NERC/20/INF/21	Digital Innovation for promoting Agriculture 4.0 in the Near East and North Africa
NERC/20/INF/22	Report of the First Regional Consultative Technical Meeting for the 35th Session of FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC35)
NERC/20/INF/23	Report of the Second Regional Consultative Technical Meeting for the 35th Session of FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC35)

Appendix C. Ministerial Declaration

We, the Ministers and Heads of Delegations of the Near East, assembled at the 35th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East held in virtual format on 21-22 September 2020;

Noting with deep concern the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on the health, employment, well-being, food security and nutrition of our region's populations;

Noting the extraordinary efforts put in place by the governments of the region in response to the COVID-19 pandemic through a combination of socio-economic, logistics, innovation and trade-related measures and initiatives;

Remaining deeply concerned about the trend of hunger and malnutrition in the region that was already rising prior to the pandemic and the increasing regional challenges resulting from conflicts, climate change, water scarcity, land degradation, loss of biodiversity and eroded resilience, as well as poor diets and the surge of non-communicable diseases;

Aware of the region's increasing reliance on food imports to ensure the availability of food for its growing population;

Acknowledging that employment, and in particular youth employment, is one of the prime challenges of the region, and the need to generate more and better rural employment in the agri-food sector;

Concerned by the growing divide between living conditions in rural and urban areas;

Acknowledging the importance of small family farmers and fishers and of their organizations, and the need to support and empower these organizations to contribute effectively to our countries' economies;

Acknowledging the central role played by women all along the food value chain, and the need to strengthen their economic and social empowerment by guaranteeing their equitable access to resources, assets, job opportunities, markets, services, knowledge, institutions and decision-making;

Underscoring the interdependency between health, food security, nutrition, environment and energy for development, stability and peace in the region;

Recognizing that a radical transforming of the region's food systems is needed to address the above challenges and thus achieve many of the Sustainable Development Goals;

We, the Ministers and Heads of Delegations of the Near East Regional Conference,

1. **Commend** Dr QU Dongyu for the initiatives undertaken since his election to the position of Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in June 2019 and his commitment to reinforce and reinvigorate FAO as a dynamic and agile technical specialized development agency;
2. **Reaffirm** the vital role that FAO plays in setting standards and norms, generating information and analyses in support of evidence-based policies, investments and field programmes which are instrumental in transforming the region's food systems, boosting smallholder farmers' capacities, productivity and resilience, and addressing the immediate needs of vulnerable communities in countries afflicted by conflicts or crises;
3. **Commend** FAO's early response to the COVID-19 pandemic, its leadership in ensuring the continued functioning of the global food supply chains, its continuous efforts to place food and agriculture at the center of the COVID-19 socio-economic response strategies, and its early engagement in the Global COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Plan;

4. **Welcome and endorse** the regional priority areas for FAO's action to support countries in the region in transforming their food systems to achieve the SDGs, and request FAO to consider these regional priorities in the revision of its Strategic Framework to be submitted to the FAO Conference in June 2021;
5. **Further endorse** FAO's COVID-19 Comprehensive Response and Recovery Plan and its Regional Response Plan, confirming that the areas of priority actions are both highly relevant and consistent with the needs and priorities of the countries of the region;
6. **Stress** the importance of regional and global solidarity in responding to COVID-19, and request FAO to develop a plan of action based on the proposed priorities and to pursue resources mobilization efforts by working with countries towards the establishment of a Regional Solidarity Trust Fund to combat COVID-19 and build more resilient food systems;
7. **Welcome** the participation of the private sector, the civil society and other non State actors in the Regional Conference, recognizing their fundamental role in the achievement of the SDGs and the COVID-19 Response Plan, and that engagement with them is based on complementary, shared interest and mutual accountability for concrete, measurable and impactful results towards the fulfilment of the SDGs;
8. **Welcome and endorse** the Hand-in-Hand Initiative as an umbrella partnership initiative to promote and strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation for the transformation of food systems, foster innovation and technologies in food and agriculture systems, mobilize resources and forge solidarity, to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs, and in particular SDG1 and SDG2;
9. **Recognize** the important role of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as a multi-stakeholder platform for policy convergence, commend its inclusive approach, stress the importance of country ownership and implementation of its products, and call upon FAO - in collaboration with other CFS stakeholders - to support national governments and regional institutions with the implementation of CFS policy guidance in line with the SDG 2030 Agenda to effectively transform food systems;
10. **Urge** countries and partners, including International Financial Institutions, the Private Sector, FAO and other UN bodies, to secure greater investments in view of accelerating the transformation of food systems and put them on a sustainable and inclusive path, including through gender-sensitive value chain development, technological innovation for all, digitalization that links farmers and their organizations to markets, and targeted initiatives to promote the socio-economic empowerment of rural communities, in particular women and youth;
11. **Confirm** our commitment to further strengthen regional collaboration to effectively address common challenges, including food security and nutrition, water scarcity, climate change and challenges of transboundary pests and diseases, mobilizing the requisite timely support to mitigate the adverse impacts of the related outbreaks;
12. **Express gratitude** to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sultan of Oman, to the Government and His Excellency Saud Hamoud Al-Habsi, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources of the Sultanate of Oman and his aides, for the excellent organization of the 35th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East.

Muscat, 21 September 2020