



Food security and nutrition in the Near East and North Africa

With high annual population growth rates, increasing urbanization and slow growth in domestic food production, the gap between aggregate consumption and domestic production of food in the Near East and North Africa Region (NENA)¹ is likely to continue to widen.

The key challenge in the years to come will be to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population in the context of increasingly scarce natural resources and climate change.

KEY FACTS

- In 2006-10 the region imported 47 percent of cereals needed, 72 percent of vegetable oils and 60 percent of sugar.
- Cereals account for about 40 percent of the region's total food imports.
- Nine countries from the NENA region spend over 20 percent of their merchandise export earnings on food imports, while four spend over 100 percent.
- At 1.8 MT/ha in 2006/10, cereal yields of the region are only 56 percent of the world average.

Conflicts and civil insecurity in the region have been the key driving factor of food insecurity in the NENA

■ Increasing food import dependency

The rise in agricultural commodity and food prices in recent years has triggered renewed concerns about food security in the Near East and North Africa.

As a large importer of basic foodstuffs, the region imports 56 percent of the total food calories it consumes and continues to rely on the international market to meet its basic food needs.

It is for this reason that NENA countries are more vulnerable than others to increases in world food prices and to year-to-year price volatility.

FAO/OECD projections to 2022 point to an increasing dependency among the 19 NENA countries on imports for most basic foodstuffs, especially cereals.

Why is this happening?

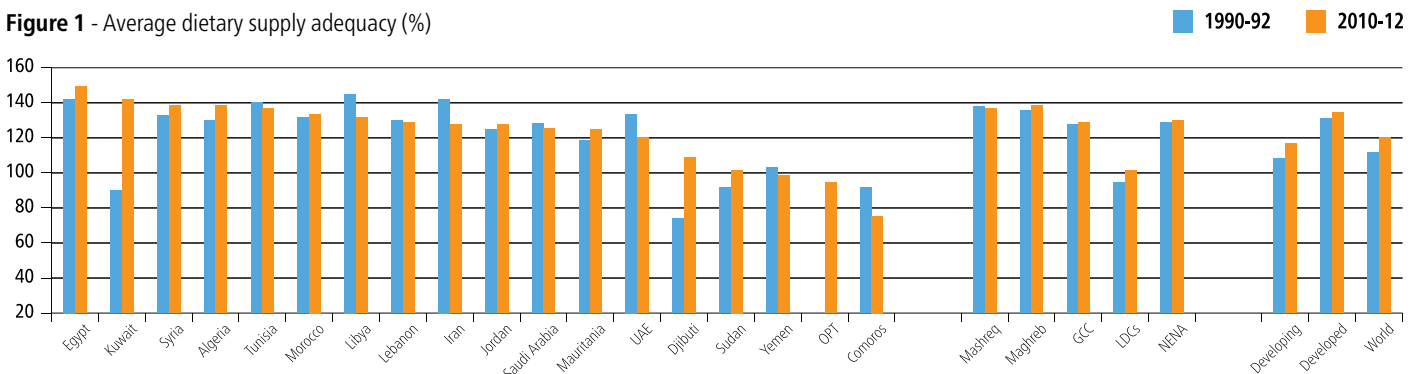
- NENA is generally characterized by low growth in food production, mainly caused by a scarce and degraded natural resources base (especially with regard to land and water) and a low performance in productivity gains.

- Arable land per capita is one of the lowest in the world, having fallen from 0.54 ha in 1961 to about 0.19 ha in the region today. Per capita availability of fresh water resources in the region is 10 percent of the world average and is projected to decrease by 50 percent by 2050, if the current trends in population growth and consumption patterns continue at the same pace. As for productivity, cereal yields of the region are only 56 percent of the world average.
- The NENA region's population growth rate is very high (around 2 percent) compared to the world average (1.2 percent). Nearly one third of the population is under the age of 15. The region is expected to have about 200 million more people to feed by 2050 (UN DESA – Population Division).
- Urban population is rapidly increasing and is projected to account for 70 percent of the total NENA population by 2050. Food consumption patterns of the urban population are noticeably different from those of rural populations; with a heavier consumption of luxury products, prepared food and animal products, urban population consumption patterns easily prompt a greater dependency on the market.
- The NENA region loses a huge part of the food it produces every year along the food supply chain. With an estimated 20 percent of food supplies suitable for human consumption being lost, food losses and waste represent a major challenge to food availability in the region.

By and large, food production in NENA has not matched the growth in food consumption.

While including countries with the highest burden of stunting in the world, the NENA region is also among the regions with the highest prevalence of obesity. Nearly one quarter of the population is obese

Figure 1 - Average dietary supply adequacy (%)



¹ Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, the Islam Rep. of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.



■ Under-nutrition and malnutrition

Generally under-nutrition refers to a continued inability of individuals to obtain enough food. It is an extreme form of food insecurity, occurring when an individual's habitual dietary energy intake is below the minimum level nutritionists deem appropriate.

The prevalence of undernourishment measured in terms of caloric deficits, though, does not tell the full story of malnutrition. In diets consisting mainly of staple cereals or root crops, it is possible to consume enough calories without consuming enough micronutrients (fruits, vegetables and animal-source proteins).

Malnutrition includes not only situations of inadequate calorie supplies but also the quality and variety of the diet.

Chronic under-nutrition in the NENA region, as measured by stunting among children under five, is estimated at 24.5 percent. Micro-nutrient deficiencies are quite common in both affluent and less affluent countries.

Excessive intake of food leading to obesity is also considered malnutrition. NENA is among the regions with the highest prevalence of obesity, with nearly one-quarter of the population being obese. This is double the world average and nearly three times that of developing countries as a whole. Within the NENA region, the GCC countries have the highest prevalence of obesity averaging 34.4 percent. The prevalence of overweight and obesity is increasing in nearly all countries, even in low income countries where it coexists with high rates of under-nutrition and micronutrient deficiencies.

This simultaneous occurrence of under- and over- nutrition among different population, the so called "double burden of malnutrition" has been instilling itself at different paces in almost all of the countries of the NENA region, and in some cases aggravating in recent years.

■ Conflicts, social and civil instability

Conflicts and civil insecurity, remained a key driving factor of food insecurity in the region. In Yemen, Sudan, Iraq, West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGs), and most of Syria neighbouring countries, the increase in food insecure people is mainly due to the ongoing conflicts.

Food security in Yemen has reached alarming levels with over 10 million people (44 percent of the population) food insecure. Among this population, 5.4 million are severely food insecure. In Sudan 3.5–3.7 million people are estimated to be food insecure; they are mainly located in areas affected by conflict and protracted crisis. It is estimated that within Syria, 6.3 million people are highly vulnerable and in critical need of sustained food and agricultural assistance.

Similarly, the countries affected by the Syria crisis continue to receive influxes of refugees in the border communities. The total number of registered Syrian refugees reached more than 2.1 million by November 2013. Most are living in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

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■ The way forward

Although countries in the region have made progress in addressing food and nutrition challenges, actions are not yet commensurate with the magnitude of the problem: options and solutions to improve food security and malnutrition cannot be sustainable if they don't cross the borders of the single countries and don't build long term resilience to internal and external shocks.

Strengthening regional cooperation

Cooperation and joint actions in response to challenges is key to supporting national efforts.

- A greater integration in food trade could help to facilitate collaboration among countries.
- Regional food security stocks, created through resources pooled into a common reserve, could benefit economies of scale, price stability and movement of supplies across borders.
- Strengthening market information systems on basic foodstuffs at the regional level could help both consumers and governments to make informed choices, especially during crisis periods.

Greater cooperation among countries can also play a strategic role in conflict resolution, as conflict has been the key driving factor of food insecurity in the region in 2012-2013.

Building long term resilience

Understanding the multi-faceted dimensions of resilience is crucial for improving food security and malnutrition over the long term in the NENA region.

Building resilience implies prediction of the likelihood and location of shocks; promotion of preventive actions; and, mitigation of damage where damage has occurred.

To support resilience building for improved food security and nutrition, the following actions are crucial:

- Enhance smallholders' access to technologies, improve their access to safety nets, and provide them with educational opportunities and financial services, as smallholders account for a large share of the most vulnerable and most food insecure populations in the region.
- Promote more investments in agriculture as a strategic contributor to the economies of many countries of the region.
- Encourage further agricultural research to improve agricultural productivity.
- Facilitate the creation of multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder partnerships.
- Acknowledge the importance of safety nets to ensure food access to everybody and mitigate the impact of price volatility.

Access to diversified diets and nutrition education

Increasing the availability and access to food are not enough to address the "double burden of malnutrition": policies need to make the food supply more diversified and adapted to the nutritional challenges, while consumers need to be made aware of available options for healthier diets and life standards.

