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STRENGTHENING OF FOOD SECURITY INFORMATION AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS AFFECTED BY THE PROTRACTED SYRIAN CRISIS

June 2020

SDGs:



Countries: Syrian Arab Republic

Project Code: TCP/SYR/3603

FAO Contribution: USD 400 000

Duration: 1 April 2017 - 31 December 2019

Contact Info: FAO Representation in Syria
FAO-SY@fao.org

Implementing Partner

Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR).

Beneficiaries

Technical personnel who use and/or produce food security data in the MAAR and the Ministries of Economy and Foreign Trade (MEET), Environment (MoE), Health (MHO), Industry (Mol), Internal Trade and Consumer Protection (MITCP), Social Affairs (MOSA) and Water Resources (MOWR); Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS); national and governorate-level policymakers; food insecure rural households.

Country Programming Framework (CPF) Outputs

The project contributed to FAO's Regional Initiative for the Near East and North Africa on building resilience for food security and nutrition.



BACKGROUND

Rural and agricultural livelihoods in the Syrian Arab Republic have been severely affected since 2011 as a result of economic, environmental and humanitarian factors. Trade sanctions, disrupted supply chains, restricted movement of goods and ailing infrastructure have increased production and transportation costs. In addition, a limited access to productive land due to internal conflict and damage to essential irrigation systems put additional pressure on rural communities, the majority of whom had already been struggling to adapt to decreased rainfall. Consequently, ensuring food and nutrition in rural and agricultural communities has become an especially top priority for the government and for national and international development actors alike.

However, current national information systems and data collection protocols specific to food security and early warning systems have proven insufficient vis-à-vis the severity of the national context, thus shedding light on the urgent need to strengthen data and information generation and sharing systems. Planning for emergency, recovery and development interventions in the absence of regular, robust and reliable food security data has made it more challenging to respond to the country's priorities.

As such, the project addressed a number of capacity gaps and priority actions, as identified by FAO, the MAAR and other government actors: (i) the need for more consistent, credible, timely and easily accessible food security and agriculture information that leads to actionable evidence and policy analyses; (ii) the need for improved understanding of the impact of the national protracted crisis on national food security and rural livelihoods; (iii) renewed series of technical assistance to the Food Security and Early Warning Unit of the MAAR; and (iv) stronger institutional frameworks to coordinate food security information systems and knowledge sharing activities.

In doing so, the project responded to the Syrian Arab Republic's Five-year Plan (2011-2015) and its following goals on agricultural and food production, which depend on robust, timely and accessible information systems.

- Achieve food security and ensuring the availability of staple foods;
- Ensure the sustainability and responsible management of natural resources, including land, water, forestry and pastures, and preserving them from degradation and pollution;
- Improve the marketing and commercialization of agricultural and food products;
- Expand the banking sector's role in financing agricultural insurance schemes; and
- Alleviate poverty through rural development plans that improve small-scale producer incomes and that support an economic integration of rural livelihoods.

Similarly, two recommendations from the 2015 Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM) for the Syrian Arab Republic point to the timeliness of the project's technical assistance: (i) establish a food security monitoring system to produce regular updates on agricultural production, food prices and household dietary diversity, and (ii) ensure in-depth assessments to improve the estimates of food insecure populations and household coping strategies.

Given the need for more effective, accountable and cost-effective targeting, the project's activities underscored the value added of robust information systems that lead to evidence-based policy recommendations and budgetary allocations. These efforts also initiated a multi-stakeholder design and financing process for a fully-fledged Food Security Information System (FSIS).

IMPACT

In providing critical technical reviews, statistical and data collection assistance and multi-stakeholder capacity assessments, the project responded to critical technical gaps in the existing food security and early warning information systems of the Syrian Arab Republic, thus providing actionable recommendations for food security authorities. These efforts allowed national and governorate-level authorities to generate more reliable data to inform their decision-making processes, thus providing enhanced support to food-insecure rural and agricultural communities. In turn, these efforts supported the project's formulation of funding proposals for an integrated food security information and early warning system (FSIEWS) moving forward.

ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS

In response to the 2015 CFSAM recommendations and building on agricultural production and food security assessments in the Syrian Arab Republic, the project adopted a robust capacity development, knowledge sharing and policy coordination approach around food security and early warning information systems to produce the following key results.

- FSIEWS were assessed, mapped and formulations of actionable evidence and recommendations were suggested;
- A capacity development action plan was prepared, discussed and approved with MAAR leadership, and operationalized through trainings on data collection and analysis protocols, on coordination, information sharing and utilization of data sources throughout the information management cycle;
- Trainings on satellite imagery technologies, geographic information systems (GIS) and their applicability to food security and natural resource management were provided;
- Multi-stakeholder consultations for a fully-fledged FSIS supported the formulation of funding proposals for an integrated FSIEWS.

These results were made possible, in great part, by having a national project coordinator who already worked in the MAAR, hence capitalizing on the positive FAO-MAAR working relationship. This also minimized training times of new hires, facilitated the joint monitoring of activities and ensured timely corrective action when needed.

Moreover, the project's inter-institutional steering committee and its broad participation of actors reflected the need for diverse technical expertise working together, in line with the synergetic nature of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To this end, the steering committee helped identify synergies between the Planning and International Cooperation Commission (IPCC) through its National Programme for Food Security, the CBS and a wide array of line ministries: MAAR, MHO, MOSA, MEET, MITCP, MOWR, Mol and MoE. The active involvement of the CBS was essential in ensuring that common data collection protocols were understood and applied by all. Lastly, all capacity development and knowledge transfer activities benefited from the project's training-of-trainers modality, such that national and local MAAR staff members and the communities they support were actively involved. This best practice showed that a decentralized training methodology worked well since it reflected the similarly decentralized structure of the institution being supported.

IMPLEMENTATION OF WORK PLAN

In light of the sensitive security context in the Syrian Arab Republic between 2014 and 2017, the project, initially slated to start in April 2017, was delayed by one year. The original timetable for activities was adjusted accordingly, with all activities carried out successfully and within the planned budget, thanks in part to a necessary no-cost extension that moved the project's end date from 31 March 2019 to 31 December 2019.

In terms of human resource and operational impediments, the project carried out repeated attempts at securing international experts with the required specialized expertise and ability and willingness to working in the Syrian Arab Republic. As this was part of the project's risk management strategy, the project was prepared to make use of a roster of qualified international consultants pre-identified by the lead technical unit (LTU) in FAO headquarters, as well as plan and budget ahead for any technical support services (TSS) needed from the LTU.

In terms of programmatic challenges that were ultimately resolved, the project's activities depended heavily on a close coordination of tasks with many government actors, but in light of the prevailing security conditions some government departments and their teams saw their delivery and coordination capacities interrupted. Nonetheless, the project's support to and strengthening of several inter-institutional technical working groups and information sharing platforms on food security helped respond to these disruptions.

FOLLOW-UP FOR GOVERNMENT ATTENTION

Given the momentum that the project helped create around enhanced food security and early warning information systems, a number of key follow-up actions have been identified to guarantee the progressive scalability of the project's results.

In working towards the institutionalization of food security coordination and information sharing mechanisms developed thus far, the MAAR, IPCC and other key stakeholders are invited to initiate a consultation platform to discuss the need for and design of a potential Inter-sectoral Institutional Framework for Food Security Coordination and Analysis. This consultation should create a common understanding for the framework and a shared vision around the roles of each actor in order to facilitate improved emergency response and recovery efforts and long-term development and resilience plans.

Similarly, the CBS and the MITCP are encouraged to initiate a joint technical coordination mechanism to identify major market information activities and agree on a set of market data collection and analysis standards.

In terms capacity development, the MAAR and other institutions should be reminded that further training is still required at the governorate and regional levels, especially on using GIS and satellite imagery to interpret and cross-reference food security and early warning information. These institutions are also reminded of the value added of working towards a national platform that harmonizes all food security information, especially in light of certain data producers remaining unwilling to share information with others.

Moreover, the different food security and early warning system working groups and platforms, along with their national and international development actors and resource partners, are invited to support the establishment of the FSIS by way of the proposed project entitled, *“Establish integrated National Food Security Information and Early Warning Systems (FSIEWS) for decision support in Syria.”* With an estimated cost of USD 600 000, external funding from international donors must be identified to make the project operational in support of a comprehensive governance structure responsible for developing the FSIS and maintaining an integrated FSIEWS.

SUSTAINABILITY

1. Capacity development

Four training courses were organized for data collection and statistical analysis trainees from the MAAR and other relevant ministries, who would in turn become the pillars of the training-of-trainers modality envisioned. These courses aimed at creating a shared understanding for the trainees on the basic concepts of food security and the guiding principles and skills required to develop and operate an FSIS. These capacity development activities on data collection, inter-institutional data analysis, information system coordination, GIS technologies, and joint policy design have allowed the MAAR and other line ministries, national and local authorities and the CBS to improve collection, compilation, aggregation and presentation of food security data to inform policymakers and development actors.

The capacity development component of the project was based on context-specific capacity gap assessments, including on gender equality priorities, sociocultural and environmental dimensions and operational bottlenecks, thus ensuring that the specific needs and opportunities to improve within the Food Security Departments and Early Warning Units of different government authorities were duly reflected in all knowledge transfer activities.

2. Gender equality

The project actively engaged with data collection and analysis personnel from different government authorities around the importance of collecting, processing and analyzing gender-responsive and gender-disaggregated food security data, where possible. As part of these efforts, 65 percent of all data collection and statistical analysis trainees who took part in the project's training-of-trainers modality were women.

3. Environmental sustainability

The project succeeded in mainstreaming the importance of environmental sustainability through its support for integrated information systems for food security and early warning, which include mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the use and stocks of natural resources. These improved information systems will allow for a wider acceptance of the principles and tools of natural resource management.

4. Human Rights-based Approach (HRBA) – in particular Right to Food and Decent Work

In light of the project's contributions to more integrated and effective information systems for food security and early warning systems, the Syrian Arab Republic is better suited to identify vulnerable populations, food insecure communities and other at-risk segments of the population. The project has contributed to more informed policy making processes and evidence-based decisions that will reach those most in need in a non-discriminatory, accountable and transparent fashion. These contributions exceeded the project's initial expectations given the degree and extent to which the improved data collection and evidence-based policies will translate into improved food security and support of rural livelihoods, thanks in great part to more accurate beneficiary targeting, cost-effective resource allocation and coherent multi-stakeholder actions.

5. Technological sustainability

Since FSIEWS rely on multiple sources and long-term chains of data, the project's activities actively contributed to more automated, cost-effective and reliable data collection and analysis mechanisms. These efforts benefited the Food Security Departments and Early Warning Units of different institutions by helping coordinate national food security activities, improve the production of food security monitoring indicators and identify opportunities for information sharing between data producers and users.

Similarly, the project trained technical and statistical personnel from the MAAR and other line ministries on the principles of food security indicators, as well as on satellite imagery and GIS technologies to document, process and interpret food security information. In this respect, national data and statistical analysis personnel can more strategically interpret linkages between food security and climate variability indicators, as well as integrate into their analysis the developments of the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) needed to monitor seasonal crop production.

These skills have empowered government authorities to produce and act on information that more accurately reflects food security, natural resource management and climate variability on the ground. As such, this knowhow can be integrated into a broader and strengthened FSIS.

6. Economic sustainability

The project, through Output 4, focused on the institutionalization of the project's results and the identification of resources to guarantee their scalability. In this respect, the project supported the formulation of funding proposals to establish a fully-fledged FSIS through a new project proposal entitled, "*Establish integrated National Food Security Information and Early Warning Systems (FSIEWS) for decision support in Syria,*" aiming to contribute an additional USD 600 000 to continue strengthening food security and early warning information systems.



DOCUMENTS AND OUTREACH PRODUCTS

- ❑ Capacity Assessment Report of Food Security Information and Early Warning Systems of the Syrian Arab Republic. D. Mengistu. 2018. 20 pp.
- ❑ Progress report of training courses conducted under the projects activities (January 2019). R. Hamza. 2019. 6 pp.
- ❑ Final Report of training courses conducted under the projects activities (March 2019). R. Hamza. 2019. 9 pp.



ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS - LOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Expected Impact	Food security and early warning information systems developed and established to support improved decision-making and response-planning of food and nutrition security and resilience-building interventions	
Outcome	Enhanced capacity within the relevant national institutions for the design and maintenance of food security and early warning information systems	
	Indicator	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of stakeholder analysis conducted (Output 1). 2. Percentage of human, financial and other resource requirements covered by available resources (Output 2). 3. Number of in-depth capacity assessment conducted, and capacity gaps identified (Output 2). 4. Number of capacity development plans developed, approved and operationalized (Output 2). 5. Number of personnel in the relevant institutions who are knowledgeable on the design, implementation and maintenance of FSIEWS (Output 3). 6. Number of training activities for FSIEWS undertaken (Output 3). 7. Total value (and number) of proposals designed and submitted for funding in support of the development of FSIEWS (Output 4).
	Baseline	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No baseline present (indicator concerns an activity to be carried out for the first time). 2. 35. 3. No baseline present (indicator concerns an activity to be carried out for the first time). 4. No baseline present (indicator concerns an activity to be carried out for the first time). 5. Less than or equal to 50 percent. 6. No baseline present (indicator concerns an activity to be carried out for the first time). 7. 0.
	End Target	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 20. 2. 75. 3. One capacity assessment including nine national institutions. 4. One capacity development plan approved and signed by key partners. 5. 30. 6. 4 7. 600 000 USD (1 proposal).
	Comments and follow-up action to be taken	<p>All resident organizations identified in the stakeholder analyses and the in-depth capacity assessments are participating in national food security and natural resources management coordination and analytical platforms.</p> <p>With respect to the FSIS, the project proposal will require resource mobilization efforts to operationalize the USD 600 000 intervention.</p>

Output 1	Existing food security information and early warning systems in Syria assessed, mapped, and recommendation for improvement made		
	Indicators	Target	Achieved
	Number of stakeholder analysis conducted.	20	Yes
Baseline	No baseline present (indicator concerns an activity to be carried out for the first time).		
Comments	-		
Activity 1.1	Conduct a stakeholder analysis on producers and users of food security and nutrition information		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	The project's international consultants and advisory support missions helped identify and assess the main food security information stakeholders (MAAR, MEET, MHO, MITCP, MOWR, IPCC and CBS).	
Activity 1.2	Review existing information on all aspects of food security, including availability, stability of supply, accessibility and utilization		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	The international consultants and advisory mission members worked closely with national stakeholders to map and review the food security information producers and users. The project identified the MAAR, MHO, MITCP, MOWR and CBS as data producers and the IPCC, the MEET and other line ministries as data users.	
Activity 1.3	Identify strengths, weaknesses and challenges associated with data, its collection, processing, dissemination and use mechanisms		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	The programmatic constraints and operational bottlenecks associated with data collection, processing and dissemination mechanisms were identified, thus shedding light on a number of key areas of work that, if improved simultaneously, can allow actors to work harmoniously and in a more cost-effective fashion. Key weaknesses related to outdated food security data, manual data collection, transmission and dissemination and unwillingness of some organizations to share their information with others.	
Activity 1.4	Make recommendation for improvement of existing information and data gathering, processing and dissemination mechanisms		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	A series of recommendations for information and data collection, processing and dissemination mechanisms was completed and included in the Capacity Assessment Report of Food Security Information and Early Warning Systems of the Syrian Arab Republic prepared by the international food security consultant.	
Activity 1.5	Organize multi-stakeholder workshop to present findings and to validate recommendations		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	Under the auspices of the Deputy Minister of the MAAR and the FAO Representative in Syria, this multi-stakeholder workshop convened the project steering committee members and stakeholders to validate the main findings, ensuring that the results continue building on each other and support and address governmental priorities, plans and strategies for FSIEWS.	

Output 2	In-depth capacity assessment undertaken of key national stakeholders responsible for the production and use of food security information in Syria		
	Indicators	Target	Achieved
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Percentage of human, financial and other resource requirements covered by available resources. – Number of in-depth capacity assessment conducted; capacity gaps identified. – Number of capacity development plans developed, approved and operationalized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 75 – One capacity assessment including nine national institutions – One capacity development plan approved and signed by key partners. 	Yes
Baseline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 35. – No baseline present (indicator concerns an activity to be carried out for the first time). – No baseline present (indicator concerns an activity to be carried out for the first time). 		
Comments	-		
Activity 2.1	Collect data and interview wide range of stakeholders, to review the structure and functions of the existing multi-sectoral food security working groups		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	All data collection exercises and participatory interview processes were successfully carried out by the FAO project manager, the national project coordinator housed in the MAAR and the international food security consultant through bilateral meetings and multi-stakeholder platforms.	
Activity 2.2	Analyze data and write the capacity assessment reports		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	The required data analysis and capacity assessment report preparations were successfully completed during the FAO international advisory support mission.	
Activity 2.3	Identify strengths, weaknesses, and desired changes and develop subsequent work plans		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	The required tasks to develop work plans were successfully completed during the FAO international advisory support mission.	
Activity 2.4	Organize workshops to validate review's findings and recommendations		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	<p>The workshop was headlined by the Deputy Minister of the MAAR, the FAO Representative in the Syrian Arab Republic and the project steering committee.</p> <p>The most important recommendations from the workshop are as follows.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strengthen food security information systems. – Harmonize existing data collection standards, methodologies and tools. – Consider additional capacity development for key MAAR and CBS technical personnel. – Promote electronic and automated methods throughout the information management cycle. – Design an effective food security information communication strategy and diversify data dissemination methods. – Strengthen the national and governorate-level food security institutional setup, and ensure policy coherence for an integrated institutional framework. – Explore effective coordination and collaboration mechanisms between government institutions integrated data analysis. 	

Output 3	Prioritized actions identified to strengthen the capacity of the MAAR in the areas of food security information, and risk management, particularly early warning system, price monitoring and natural resource management		
	Indicators	Target	Achieved
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Number of personnel in the relevant institutions who are knowledgeable on the design, implementation and maintenance of FSIEWS. – Number of training activities in FSIEWS undertaken. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 30 – 4 	Yes
Baseline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Less than or equal to 50 percent. – No baseline present (indicator concerns an activity to be carried out for the first time). 		
Comments	The target for number of MAAR and other ministerial personnel trained on FSIEWS was surpassed from 30 to 35, of whom 65 percent were women.		
Activity 3.1	Conduct joint review of capacity assessment (Output 2) for specific plan in support of MAAR		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	-	
Activity 3.2	Develop a capacity development plan together with senior management inside the MAAR		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	An integrated capacity development plan designed with MAAR senior leadership was developed and implemented, based on capacity building and training gaps and major scenarios and outputs expected.	
Activity 3.3	Conduct training among Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform staff		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	Four training courses were conducted for MAAR and other ministerial personnel on food security concepts, statistical foundations for data collection and analysis, natural resource management and satellite imagery and GIS.	
Output 4	Project documents for establishment of fully-fledged FSIS in Syria developed and submitted for donor funding		
	Indicators	Target	Achieved
	Total value (and number) of proposals designed and submitted for funding in support of the development of FSIEWS.	USD 600 000 (one proposal)	Yes
Baseline	0		
Comments	<p>At the beginning of the project, FAO and the MAAR agreed to focus only on the food security information component of the broader FSIEWS strategy, as per Activity 4.2.</p> <p>With respect to the FSIS, the project document and proposal have been designed and developed, but are pending FAO and governmental approval, as well as a very likely resource mobilization effort to operationalize the USD 600 000 intervention. In light of current funding priorities among resource partners, the funding proposal has not been officially submitted to partners yet.</p> <p>As part of the capacity development initiatives for the next stage and continuation of FSIEWS efforts, an additional seven follow-up training modules for relevant stakeholders and beneficiaries have been identified.</p>		
Activity 4.1	Initiate consultations with food security partners and other stakeholders and donors within the Syrian crises response framework to build consensus for the establishment of a fully-fledged FSIS		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	As part of the international consultant's advisory support mission and bilateral meetings with the MAAR and other stakeholders, it was decided to continue working towards an integrated FSIEWS through a subsequent project.	
Activity 4.2	Formulate project documents for fully-fledged Food Security Information System (FSIS)		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	The project document has been completed and is currently under revision for approval by FAO and the government of the Syrian Arab Republic.	
Activity 4.3	Submit the project documents to potential donors and follow up for funding		
	Achieved	Partially	
	Comments	Due to the humanitarian situation in the country, international resource partners are prioritizing humanitarian support over long-term resilience building, hence the reason the project document has not been shared with resource partners.	

Outreach, Marketing and Reporting Unit (PSRR)
Business Development and Resource Mobilization Division (PSR)

For more information please contact: Reporting@fao.org

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