The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic poses significant challenges to already strained rural areas, where most of the world’s food-insecure and poor people live. It is exacerbating complex, long-term crises caused by economic downturn, extreme weather events and the generally low profitability of small-scale family farming. Its implications are making it more challenging to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in this context.

The associated socio-economic crisis has underlined the importance of enhancing efficiency of local food production and sustainable use of local natural resources for safeguarding food security for all. In Europe and Central Asia, the farm structures in most countries are dominated by small family farms, and land abandonment is widespread. More than one-third of all arable agricultural land in Armenia and North Macedonia, for example, is currently unutilized. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the figure stands at around 45 percent.

There are several economic, social and environmental reasons for land abandonment. Farms are small and excessively fragmented, with absent landowners and the overall aging rural population, insecure tenure, degraded land, and a lack of access to irrigation, among other issues. These factors are fueling a downward development spiral and the outmigration of youth from rural areas to urban centers and abroad. In several countries, the number of the agricultural landowners who no longer farm is increasing, resulting in a dearth of decent jobs, persistent rural poverty and a lack of access to nutritious food, alongside the growing untapped potential for local food production and economic livelihoods.

The action

The programme will enhance efficiency of local food production by improving local farm structures and bringing currently unutilized arable agricultural land into production, to help mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and boost countries’ efforts to strengthen resilience of the agriculture sector. It will further assist in advancing countries’ progress on the SDGs, including target 2.1 on ending hunger and ensuring access to food, target 2.3 on doubling the agricultural productivity and income of small-scale food producers and target 1.4 on ensuring equal access to land and other natural resources. It will also support the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT).

Budget: USD 2 million

Time frame: 2020–2024

SDGs

- Legal guide on land consolidation: Based on regulatory practices in Europe
- Regional Synthesis Report: Smallholders and Family Farms in Europe and Central Asia

Partnerships

In Europe and Central Asia, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is strengthening local food production and land management through its regional alliances with International Federation of Surveyors (FIG), the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Working Party on Land Administration, LANDnet and the European Union. It maintains regular technical dialogue with the World Bank and the French Development Agency. FAO is seeking to expand its partnerships with current and new partners among governments, bilateral and multilateral organizations, international financial institutions, development banks, the private sector and academia.
The programme includes the following components:

- **analysis of the factors and environmental considerations driving land abandonment and formulation of the needs-driven and context-tailored recommendations to promote the most suitable land management instruments**;
- **promotion of the integrated territorial development approaches** to link better land management and farm structures with investments in agricultural infrastructure, with a view to enhance economic and livelihood opportunities for returning migrant workers and their households in the countries of origin;
- **scaling up FAO’s support for the land reform and land market development** through pilot projects, including the rollout of a package of scalable digital solutions and tools;
- **facilitating use of the land management instruments, including land banking and land consolidation**, to combine agricultural land into larger and better-shaped parcels; facilitate voluntary farm enlargement based on local needs assessment; promote gender equality by registering land rights in the names of both spouses; and support non-agricultural projects, such as nature restoration and climate change adaptation and mitigation;
- **raising awareness among the rural population, including returning migrants and youth, of the support available on accessing agricultural land for productive purposes**; and
- **technical assistance for the national institutions working on land management and on developing and delivering land management services** (specifically those linked to the tenure and ownership of abandoned plots) as well as further relevant capacity development support in the public and private sectors.

**Expected results**

- **Countries will have greater capacity to respond to the impact of COVID-19 thanks to stronger local food production and will better understand the major causes of farm abandonment and the practical, proven measures to address them.**
- **Land management instruments, including land management services, adapted to the context of the recipient countries will be implemented and promoted** in an integrated territorial development approach, drawing on good European practices and tools to improve local agricultural infrastructure in ways that meet needs of the local communities.
- **Countries will have greater technical capacity for land consolidation and land banking**, both in the public sector (ministries of agriculture and land registry and local governments) and the private sector (including service providers contracted to conduct fieldwork).
- **Smallholders, youth and returning migrants affected by the COVID-19 implications will have access to additional agricultural land and be supported in an integrated territorial development approach, to boost their engagement in farming and better their livelihoods.**
- **National authorities will enhance their capacity to use digital instruments** for monitoring land abandonment and to facilitate the implementation and application of the land-consolidation and land-banking instruments.

**Programme links**

The programme will build on the FAO Regional Initiative on Empowering smallholders, family farms and youth, facilitating rural livelihoods and poverty reduction, and will create synergies with the ongoing and future projects in FAO Country Programmes, including on land tenure, local rural development and sustainable management of natural resources. It is aligned with other actions under FAO’s Response and Recovery Programme, including on boosting smallholder resilience for recovery.

**Country focus**

The programme will focus on the most affected countries, where land abandonment is among the key constraints to local production, including but not limited to, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Uzbekistan.

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