FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR
THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-fifth Session

Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman, 2-4 March 2020

Provisional Annotated Agenda

Ministerial Meeting
2-4 March 2020

I. Opening Session

1) Appointment of the Rapporteur
2) Adoption of Agenda and Timetable
3) Statement by the FAO Director-General
4) Statement by the Chairperson of the 35th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East
5) Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council
6) Statement by the Chairperson of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS)
II. Transforming food systems in the Near East and North Africa Region

Food systems across the Near East and North Africa (NENA) need to change in order to ensure healthy diets for a growing, increasingly urban population in a context of water scarcity and advancing climate change. Such transformation should address the challenges of ensuring availability, access, stability and use of food in ways that provide smallholder producers and rural communities with opportunities in terms of driving income-growth, employment and increases in food production and productivity, while ensuring the sustainability of the region’s ecosystems and addressing climate change adaptation and mitigation targets.

7) The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the Near East and North Africa - Adapting food systems to respond to an increasingly urban population

Unlike other regions, the NENA region has seen no significant decline in either the absolute or the relative number of hungry people since the start of the 21st century. The region also experiences other forms of malnutrition and, whilst child stunting and wasting continue to fall, their absolute levels remain high. The levels of overweight and obesity in children and adults are amongst the highest in the world and continue to rise. In addition to these challenges, the NENA region is experiencing rapid urban growth, with inequalities for the way food is produced, distributed and consumed. These challenges require decision-makers to reflect on food security and nutrition from a more holistic, namely a food systems perspective. The paper discusses the conditions under which food policies must operate and the potential strategies to promote equal access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food as well as healthy diets for urban populations while creating jobs and business opportunities throughout the food system.

8) Building Resilient Farming Communities to Boost Local Economies and Promote Rural Employment

The complexity of the multiple environmental and socio-economic challenges faced by the farming communities of the region requires a strategic reappraisal of rural development strategies to address these challenges. Food and agricultural policies need to better integrate rural development concerns, operating at the nexus between productivity, environment, rural development and health. Three possible solutions that strengthen the resilience of farming communities are applicable in the region: territorial approaches that link rural communities with social and environmental opportunities; climate-smart agriculture that makes production systems resilient to climate change; and innovations in agri-food systems that support job creation for rural youth and women through improved and more sustainable value chains.

9) Ensuring Environmental Sustainability in the Context of Water Scarcity and Climate Change

The intensification of agriculture across NENA has contributed to a widespread degradation of land, water and biodiversity, and these effects are now being exacerbated by climate change. A range of policy responses are available for the region. They need to be considered carefully and adapted to local realities. They include: enhanced agriculture-environment policy coherence; the adoption of international standards for sustainable agriculture and environmental protection; investing in evidence; developing incentive mechanisms for sustainable land and water management and environmental conservation; ensuring that public investment complement and engage private sector energies and investment; as well as specific approaches to enhance the
sustainability of water management and rainfed agriculture. Regional cooperation has an important role to play in moving the region on the path towards sustainable agriculture.

- **FAO Support to Countries for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

  The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires better-coordinated support across the United Nations system and better alignment of individual entities’ support to the SDGs. As outlined in the Medium Term Plan 2018-21 (reviewed) and the Programme of Work and Budget (2020-21), trends, challenges and developments identified in the reviewed Strategic Framework provide the basis to focus FAO’s Strategic Objective results framework and programmes on the commitments made by countries and the international community, in particular the overarching SDGs. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development constitutes a new global charter for international development cooperation and governance, and defines the context in which FAO and its member countries will be working toward reaching the SDGs and achieving country specific targets.

- **UN Food Systems Summit 2021**

  In 2021, the UN Secretary-General will convene a Food Systems Summit as part of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition. The summit reflects the prominence that the 2030 Agenda has given to improved health and nutrition, reduced poverty, improved ecosystem services, and social inclusion and to the key role that future food systems will play in the achievement of these goals. Although food systems stakeholders are beginning to take actions and to change behaviour, the many independent initiatives of governments, private sector and civil society that have emerged in support of more sustainable food systems lack a common framing of the complex interactions, dependencies and trade-offs intrinsic to food systems. This is constraining the ability of societies with different priorities, and with different agroecological and institutional potentials to identify and implement appropriate pathways towards more sustainable food systems.

  The overarching goal of the Food Systems Summit is therefore to help stakeholders understand and manage these complex choices. It will be informed by an inclusive, decentralized preparatory process supported by robust and independent evidence and will provide a platform to build partnerships and ambitious initiatives. This agenda item, supported by an information note that will elaborate the rationale, proposed outcomes for and process towards the summit, will provide an early opportunity for member countries to request clarification and to provide their inputs.

  The discussions under the round table are expected to forge a broad agreement amongst the Members of the region of the principal drivers transforming food systems as well as of the urgency for a sustainable transformation of the food systems as a critical entry point to achieve the SDGs, including notably SDGs 1 and 2. In this context, desired outcomes from the deliberations would comprise the acknowledgement of the need for investments to transform food systems by enabling the implementation of solutions that strengthen the resilience of farming systems, such as climate-smart agriculture, territorial approaches and innovation to support rural youth and women job creation through improved sustainable value chains, including by harnessing the development potential of migration.
III. The Hand-in-Hand Initiative to Leave no one behind

There are considerable opportunities for raising agricultural productivity, and consequently, rural incomes, by increasing public and private investment in the sector, expanding innovation, particularly for smallholders, and building stronger and more effective food systems with strengthened links around rural and urban areas. The Hand-in-Hand Initiative could galvanize public and private sector attention and investment in high potential agricultural areas to drive a market-orientated food systems approach to increasing the quantity, quality, diversity and accessibility of nutritious foods available in local, regional and national food markets. This would lead to improve food system capacities to deliver nutrition and healthy diets for everyone and improving household livelihoods by reducing extreme poverty and eliminating pockets of deep and persistent hunger and poverty in countries across the region.

• FAO’s Hand-in-Hand Initiative: a New Approach

Hand-in-Hand is an evidence-based, country-led and country-owned initiative of FAO to accelerate agricultural transformation and sustainable rural development to eradicate poverty (SDG 1) and end hunger and all forms of malnutrition (SDG 2). In so doing, it contributes to the attainment of all the other SDGs. The initiative adopts a robust match-making approach that proactively brings together target countries with donors, the private sector, international financial institutions, academia and civil society to mobilize means of implementation that support accelerated action. It prioritizes countries and territories within countries where poverty and hunger are most concentrated or where national capacities are most limited. It also introduces a framework for monitoring and impact analysis.

The initiative deploys sophisticated tools, including advanced geospatial modelling and analytics, to identify the biggest opportunities to raise the incomes and reduce the inequities and vulnerabilities of the rural poor, who constitute the vast majority of the world’s poor. It uses these tools to present an evidence-based view of economic opportunities and to improve targeting and tailoring of policy interventions, innovation, finance and investment, and institutional reform. Hand-in-Hand adopts a market-oriented food systems approach to increasing the quantity, quality, diversity and accessibility of nutritious foods available in local, regional and national food markets. The initiative prioritizes countries where national capacities and international support are most limited or where operational challenges, including natural or human-induced crises, are greatest. This is in keeping with the UN’s commitment to “leave no one behind.”

IV. Harnessing the power of innovation and digitalization

The NENA region faces a series of challenges related to food and nutrition security, and the degradation of the already scarce natural resources. Conflicts, migrations, and climate change exacerbate these challenges. Current trends are clearly unsustainable and if not adequately addressed, will lead to aggravation of the aforementioned problems and hinder the achievement of the SDGs. Harnessing and promoting the potential of innovation as well as innovative approaches across the technological, social, policy, institutional and governance dimensions in addition to the use of digital innovation, is increasingly critical to improve agriculture and food systems.

• Digital Innovation for promoting Agriculture 4.0 in the Near East and North Africa

To address the challenges of agri-food systems and rural transformation, new development approaches are needed, that combine innovative policies, technologies and organizational
processes and practices, and use of digital and other types of innovation for the improvement of agriculture and food systems, into Agriculture 4.0 (the Fourth Agriculture Revolution). Developing, adopting and scaling up of digital innovation technologies requires that the stakeholders and decision-makers develop a better understanding of impact pathways, risks and benefits of technologies, as well as new partnership and business models involving the public and private sectors, civil society and farmer organizations. Digital innovation (Agriculture 4.0) is not just about improving the practice of farming. It refers to changing how the entire agriculture food system value chain works, from sourcing the necessary inputs for farming to crop production to the distribution of the harvest to optimizing end-consumer experience. Innovation should also embrace the social, policy, institutional and governance dimensions.

- **Innovation in Agriculture and Food Systems for achieving SDGs**
  The International Forum on Innovation will be held in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in March 2020, on the margins of the G20 ministerial meetings. The event is organized in partnership with MEWA-KSA, World Bank, IFAD, ESCWA, ICARDA and ITU. It is conceived as a dynamic multistakeholder and multidisciplinary event that aims to exchange experiences on agricultural innovation, understand the key drivers and processes for innovation, and the impact pathways to foster and scale up innovation through exchange of knowledge and practices, adaptation of enabling policies and incentives, and the development of partnerships and action plans. The forum will foster innovative multisectoral partnerships to support effective coordination between all public and private innovation actors and stakeholders. It will mobilize the means of implementation, finance and investment required to promote and sustain transformative change in the region’s agriculture sector and food systems.

The objective of the round table is for Members to discuss the policy implications and actions needed to address the challenges of the NENA region, by harnessing the multiple facets of innovation. A number of outcomes are expected from these deliberations, including notably: (i) recognition of the importance of harnessing the potential of digital innovation for promoting Agriculture 4.0, youth employment and accelerating rural transformation in the region; (ii) the significance of countries in the region to enable the emergence and integration of digital, social and policy innovation based on modern science and technology, strong rural organizations, and agroecological innovation that together promote sustainable intensification and boost the productivity and resilience of smallholder farmers; (iii) the need to increase investment in Research and Development (R&D) to develop digital solutions that meet the demands of all actors of the agri-food system and develop a regulatory environment that promotes the application of digital technologies and limits their risks; (iv) the importance of considering cohesive actions by FAO to support member countries in establishing and implementing digital agriculture strategies for the respective countries in the NENA region; (v) acknowledging the potential of sharing innovation knowledge and technology between countries in the region, with improved digital innovation infrastructure, capacity and skills, within the overarching scope of FAO’s Hand-in-Hand Initiative; (vi) the agreement for countries to provide guidance on policy-level interventions by FAO to tap into private sector investment and innovations in digital agriculture in order to extend the benefits of digital technologies to small-scale family farmers through public-private-people partnerships; and introduce fiscal incentives to accelerate agriculture digitalization and to facilitate market access; (vii) endorsement by Members of the establishment of the International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture; and (viii) support the development of a regional innovation hub for Agriculture 4.0, as an ecosystem incubator for digital, social and policy innovation and experimentation in the NENA region, to strengthen skill development, youth and women engagement and digital literacy training for smallholder farmers and other actors in the agri-food system.
V. The Way Forward

Having deliberated on the criticality of transforming food systems as an entry point to achieving the SDGs and on the importance of the Hand-in-Hand Initiative in establishing an umbrella framework and platform to promote evidence-based policies and programmes in this respect as well as the significance of harnessing the multiple facets of innovation in this connection, the conference will consider the priorities of and measures being taken by FAO to align and reinforce its capacities to lend the requisite policy and technical support in the light of the priorities defined by the Members in the quest to transform the food systems across the region.

10) Results and Priorities for FAO in the Near East and North Africa Region

The Regional Conference will consider how FAO activities have addressed previously agreed regional priorities during 2018-2019 and will provide guidance on areas of regional priority for 2020-2021 and beyond.

The discussion will be informed by the results of FAO’s work in the region, the Medium Term Plan 2018-21 (reviewed) and Programme of Work and Budget 2020-2021 approved by the FAO Conference in June 2019; priorities and recommendations of the Regional Technical Commissions; and the plans and priorities of partners such as the Regional Economic Organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs) and the private sector.

11) Decentralized Offices Network

The paper will outline the way forward, challenges and opportunities for FAO’s decentralization policy, taking into consideration the conclusions of the 159th Session of the FAO Council (June 2018) and the 41st Session of the FAO Conference (June 2019) on the need to continue efforts to strengthen the technical capacity of the Organization including through the review of FAO’s decentralized network coverage and of the country office staffing model. The paper will present for consideration the outcomes of the corporate Internal Review of FAO Regional Structures carried out in 2018-2019, and the progress made in the implementation of United Nations General Assembly resolution RES/A/72/279 on the repositioning of the United Nations development system launched in January 2019 across the region, with priority attention to the Rome-based Agencies (RBAs) collaboration format.

12) Multi-year Programme of Work for the Regional Conference for the Near East

This document presents the revised Multi-year Programme of Work (MYPOW) for the Regional Conference for the Near East for the period of 2018-2021. The MYPOW describes the overall objectives, results and mechanisms underlying the operations of the Regional Conference for the Near East for the coming years. FAO Regional Conferences prepare a MYPOW covering a minimum period of four years. The 34th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East approved its MYPOW for the period 2018-2021.

The expected outcome from the deliberations under this session of the conference is an endorsement by the assembled Members of the priorities and multi-year programme of work, as well as the measures being taken to reinforce decentralized structure with a view to enhancing FAO’s capacity to deliver the requisite programmes in support of the said priorities, in recognition of the fact that these are effectively aligned to the priorities and direction set forth by the Members for the upcoming years.
VI. Partnering for Results

The NENA regional landscape presents opportunities for enhanced regional integration and cooperation among stakeholders towards achieving the SDGs. Several regional initiatives have been launched recently to promote the necessary transformation of food systems that is needed in order to achieve food security, improved nutrition, and build more resilient and sustainable agriculture, including: the Arab Sustainable Agricultural Development Strategy, the Pan Arab Strategy for the Development of Renewal Energy Applications, the League of Arab States Strategy for Water Scarcity and the Arab Framework Action Plan on Climate Change, among others.

Achieving the SDGs related to poverty (SDG 1) and food security (SDG 2) can only be obtained if all stakeholders including governments, donors, private sector, civil society and academia work ‘Hand-in-Hand’, making good use of their specific skills and comparative advantage towards a common goal. Innovation, policies and investments are the three pillars of the paradigm shift that is needed to transform the region’s food systems.

At the national level, governments and key stakeholders are now moving policies and actions in a more sustainable direction. National action plans are being designed and progressively implemented that explore the potential of innovations towards more sustainable food systems.

Innovations will be at the centre of the transformation process. They have the potential to address many of today’s food security challenges by transforming the way food is being produced, processed, traded, distributed and consumed. Unlocking the potential of innovation will be essential in bringing countries on the path towards sustainable development.

Investments are key. Governments have the potential to orient their public expenditures towards more effective investments for poverty reduction and food security. New opportunities exist for accessing global financing to invest in climate adaptation infrastructure such as the Green Climate Fund. A region with growing and unlimited business opportunities, NENA is also attracting partners from within and from outside the region: the private sector and financial institutions in NENA are willing to invest in developing sustainable agriculture, water use and energy, food and nutrition security.

As an expected outcome from the session, it is expected that partners from the private sector, and academia as well as CSO acknowledge the significance of leveraging multistakeholder approaches and multisectoral engagement as crucial for the transformation of food systems and the achievement of SDGs. By endorsing the initiatives and priorities emanating from the Regional Conference and recognizing the substantive contributions that could potentially be made by the private sector, and academia in terms of promoting innovations and investments, it is expected that this session could establish an understanding of pursuing a tangible framework of strengthened collaboration that could yield the desired impacts in this endeavour.

V. Other Matters

13) Date and Place of the 36th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East

14) Election of Chairperson and Vice-Chairpersons of the 36th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East

15) Any other business
Information Notes

- **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**

This item presents the conclusions and recommendations of the Regional Commissions and other relevant regional meetings in the Near East with regard to: (i) policy and regulatory matters; and (ii) programme and budget matters. This includes regional fora such as the Regional Commission for Fisheries (RECOFI), the Near East Forestry and Range Commission (NEFRC) and the Commissions for Controlling the Desert Locust in the Central and Western Regions (CRC and CLCPRO). This also includes summaries of the outcomes of high-level meetings.

- **The International Year of Plant Health 2020 (IYPH 2020)**

In December 2018, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2020 as the International Year of Plant Health (IYPH). The year is a once in a lifetime opportunity to raise global awareness on how protecting plant health can help end hunger, reduce poverty, protect the environment, and boost economic development. As part of this, the FAO, the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and their partners are leading the global effort to promote plant health in 2020 and beyond. The IPPC is a global treaty, signed by over 183 countries, that provides a framework for protecting plant resources from pests and diseases. It leads to the development of international plant health standards and promotes safe trade among all countries.

- **United Nations Decade of Family Farming**

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2019-2028 as the UN Decade of Family Farming (UNDFF) at its 72nd Session, resulting in the UNDFF being launched in Rome, Italy in May 2019. UNDFF serves as a framework for countries to develop public policies and investments to support family farming and contribute to the achievement of the United Nations’ SDGs. To guarantee the success of the UNDFF, action must be supported by coherent, cross-sectoral policies, concurrently addressing the environmental, economic and social dimensions of agricultural and rural development. To oversee the implementation of the UNDFF, an international steering committee was established, composed of representatives of UN Member States and family farmer organizations. The International Steering Committee of the UN Decade of Family Farming (ISC UNDFF) is supported by the FAO and IFAD joint secretariat. The FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE) is planning to launch the UNDFF in the region in 2020. This regional launch aims to translate the UNDFF into the regional context and harmonize with the pillars of the Regional Initiative on Small-scale Family Farming.

---

1 If they wish, delegates may comment on information notes under “Any Other Matters”.
• **Red Palm Weevil Management in the Region**

As a follow-up to the consultation and high-level meeting on Red Palm Weevil (RPW) management that took place in Rome from 29 to 31 March 2017, a regional project (GCP/RNE/012/MUL) for RPW management has been presented to NENA countries and the trust fund has been established. Following this presentation, a pledge from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia of USD 2 million has been announced and a pledge from the Sultanate of Oman of USD 100,000 has been received. FAO and CIHEAM convened a scientific international meeting on “Innovative and Sustainable Approaches for the Control of Red Palm Weevil” in Bari, from 23 to 25 October 2018. On 9 March 2019, the United Arab Emirates pledged to host a donor meeting in order to support the RPW management trust fund. This donor meeting concluded with a pledge from the United Arab Emirates of USD 2 million and from the State of Libya of USD 250,000. RNE issued a vacancy announcement for a project manager. The inception meeting will be organized as soon as the pledged resources become available in the FAO account.

• **United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition and Follow-up to the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2)**

As recommended in 2014 by Members at the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed in 2016 the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025, a time-bound framework to implement the ICN2 commitments. The Nutrition Decade is a vehicle to advocate for more policy and programme implementation, increase nutrition investments and align existing efforts towards achieving a healthier and more sustainable future. In April 2018, a first report giving an overview of progress made in implementing the Nutrition Decade was submitted to the General Assembly by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Paragraph 91 of this report elicited that the Decade’s Work Programme provides for the convening of dialogues among all stakeholders to review progress in implementing the Nutrition Decade. The mid-term review of the Nutrition Decade is envisaged for 2020 in order to assess and evaluate the achievements in individual policy areas of the ICN2 Framework for Action, as reflected in the action areas of the Work Programme of the Nutrition Decade, over the time period from 2016 to 2020. The process leading to the mid-term review will include a series of consultations and dialogues with various stakeholders, including with FAO’s member countries participating in the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East, with the aim of evaluating progress made towards implementing the ICN2 global commitments and seek guidance on future priority areas and the way forward for the second half of the Nutrition Decade.

• **Update of the Strategy and Vision for FAO’s Work in Nutrition**

In April 2019, the 161st Session of FAO Council endorsed a recommendation for the development of an updated Strategy and Vision for FAO’s work in nutrition. The updated Strategy and Vision for FAO’s work in nutrition will consider: 1) all forms of malnutrition; 2) food systems over and beyond nutrition-sensitive agriculture; and, 3) the current global context building on the outcomes of ICN2, the Rome Declaration on Nutrition and its Framework for Action, and the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition. It will also include a robust implementation plan and accountability framework, and take into account context- or regional-specific considerations.

• **Food Loss and Waste Measurement linked to Food Loss Analysis Methodology**

3 https://undocs.org/A/72/829
This Information Item will update delegates on FAO’s Food Loss Analysis Methodology for identifying critical loss points in food supply chains, and will highlight their importance and relevance in the efforts of countries to measure food loss and waste.


The report provides a synthesis of evaluations conducted by the Office of Evaluation (OED) of FAO’s work in the NENA region over the 2014-2019 period. It documents FAO’s contribution to results, identifies gaps and emerging issues, and lessons learned. The report also includes some recommendations for consideration. The synthesis focuses on the three priorities, which the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East endorsed as a basis for FAO’s work in the region: water scarcity (WS), small-scale agriculture (SSA) and increasing resilience of vulnerable communities.