Executive Summary

The 2030 Agenda has heightened awareness of the key role that future food systems will play in meeting the global challenges of malnutrition, poverty, use of biodiversity and ecosystems services and climate change. Food systems stakeholders are beginning to take actions and to change behaviour, but their many independent initiatives lack a common framing of the complex interactions, dependencies and trade-offs intrinsic to food systems. This is constraining the ability of societies to identify and implement appropriate pathways towards more sustainable food systems.

The overarching goal of the Food Systems Summit, to be convened by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2021, is to help stakeholders to better understand and manage the complex choices that affect the future of food systems and to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Structured around engagement at the national, regional and global levels, the preparatory process towards the summit will enable stakeholders to develop, test and adapt frameworks and decision-making tools and will provide platforms for the innovative partnerships and initiatives needed to catalyse significant commitments for action and investment towards more sustainable food systems.

A Summit Advisory Committee chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General (DSG) and with multistakeholder membership including the Principals of FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP), country representatives and representatives of the private sector and civil society will be responsible for oversight of the preparatory process and for defining the summit outcomes, expected to include a political declaration outlining principles for sustainably transforming food systems, a set of commitments for action by all stakeholder groups and a voluntary system of follow-up and accountability.

This item will allow Members to discuss, and provide guidance on, the process towards the UN Food Systems Summit and to identify opportunities for engagement in contributing to the summit objectives and outcomes.
Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to:

- affirm the critical importance of action and investment towards more sustainable food systems to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda;
- acknowledge the need for improved frameworks and decision-making tools to guide interventions in support of more sustainable food systems;
- support the decision of the United Nations Secretary-General to convene a Food Systems Summit in 2021 and provide guidance on the summit’s objectives and its expected outcomes;
- share experiences of initiatives that have been taken to ensure that food system developments contribute to an acceleration in the delivery of the SDGs;
- provide guidance on opportunities for multistakeholder engagement during the preparatory process towards the summit.

Queries on the content of this document may be addressed to:
ERC Secretariat
ERC-ECA-Secretariat@fao.org
The rationale for a Food Systems Summit

1. In 2021, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General will convene a Food Systems Summit as part of the UN Decade of Action. The summit reflects the increased recognition that in delivering greater quantities of more affordable food, food system developments have worked against a number of societal objectives including improved health and nutrition, reduced poverty, improved ecosystem services, and social inclusion.

2. Today, over 821 million people are hungry and more than two billion people are overweight or obese. Despite a 300 percent increase in global food production since the mid-1960s, malnutrition in all its forms is now the number one factor contributing to the global burden of disease and reduced life expectancy. Levels of extreme poverty persist in rural areas, with the majority of more marginalized populations relying on food production and the food economy for their livelihoods. Addressing poverty and malnutrition requires that future food systems are more inclusive of vulnerable groups of producers and consumers.

3. The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report on Climate Change and Land has highlighted the trade-offs between the need to meet projected food demands with current practices and the prospects of achieving global sustainability goals. Food systems today contribute up to 29 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions, significantly contributing to climate change. Climate change will in turn alter food production patterns, increasing risks and threatening food security everywhere, particularly for the most vulnerable. The report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services shows that one million species are now threatened with extinction, posing serious threats for human beings. Agriculture is responsible for up to 80 percent of biodiversity loss, and continues to overuse increasingly scarce natural resources including water, forests and land. It is the largest consumer of the world’s freshwater resources, and more than one-quarter of the energy used globally is expended on food production and supply.

4. The 2030 Agenda and its associated SDGs have shone further light on the importance of these objectives and on the key role that future food systems can play in their achievement. Indeed, the Global Sustainable Development Report identifies food systems as one of the few key entry points to bring about a worldwide transition to a more sustainable trajectory.

5. Food systems stakeholders are beginning to take actions and to change behaviour. Producers are experimenting with alternative practices to reduce impacts on biodiversity, natural resources and climate; the food industry is engaging in more sustainable sourcing, product reformulation, and reduction of losses; consumers, where they can, are seeking out better information about foods for healthier diets and advocating for more environmentally friendly food products and reduction and better handling of waste.

6. However, 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, observing different trends and having different agro-ecological and institutional potentials to identify and implement appropriate pathways towards more sustainable food systems. It is also limiting their ability to communicate and share learning.

How will the summit address these constraints?

7. The overarching goal of the Food Systems Summit is therefore to help stakeholders and leaders of transformation initiatives better understand and manage the complex choices that affect the future of food systems and accelerate progress toward the SDGs. Grounded in the context of the 2030 Agenda, the summit will help UN Member States and their many partners meet the challenges of malnutrition, poverty, use of biodiversity and ecosystems services, and climate change.

8. This will be achieved by working towards a series of objectives which will help to define the different elements of the preparatory process towards the Food Systems Summit:
a. Affirming, through a process of UN Member State and stakeholder consultation, the centrality of food systems to the sustainable development agenda and the urgency of investing in more sustainable food systems.

b. Aligning UN Member States and stakeholders around a common definition of a practical food systems framework as a foundation for concerted action.

c. Developing strengthened evidence and tools for improved measurement, analysis and management of trade-offs in specific contexts by providing open data sharing platforms for modelling and analysis.

d. Strengthening the science/policy interface to allow for the identification of realistic, inclusive and innovative solutions.

e. Catalysing and accelerating multistakeholder action for the transformation of food systems to ensure that the summit provide the opportunity to endorse effective and intensified action including scaled-up investment and innovation and rapid dissemination of experience and knowledge based on increased science-based policy dialogue.

What will the process look like?

9. The summit will bring together world leaders at the highest possible level from all regions and all sectors. It will be informed by an inclusive, far-reaching preparatory process culminating in a concise political declaration to be agreed prior to the summit. This process will be supported by robust and independent evidence to work through the complex linked, or nexus, challenges that must be addressed if more sustainable food systems are to be achieved.

10. Structured around engagement at the national, regional and global levels, it will enable diverse stakeholders to develop, test and adapt decision-making tools in a variety of contexts and will provide a platform to strengthen existing and spark new partnerships and initiatives inspired by the high ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. At the national level, stakeholders will be supported to develop action plans for change. A series of regional consultations will allow knowledge and experience sharing. Engagement with existing global platforms and contemporaneous events will ensure improved alignment of understanding and coherence of action.

11. These engagements will provide substantive inputs to the summit, which is expected to yield the following outcomes:

a. A political declaration outlining principles for sustainably transforming food systems, broadly endorsed on a voluntary basis by all stakeholder groups.

b. A set of significant commitments and partnerships to action with measurable outcomes, to be made voluntarily by different actors.

c. A policy framework and a diverse set of practical tools to manage trade-offs, to design food systems transformation strategies and to develop multistakeholder platforms or governance models for food systems.

d. A voluntary system of follow-up and accountability that would allow for the continuation of sharing experiences and results, and incorporate new metrics for impact analysis.

How will the process be governed?

12. A Summit Advisory Committee chaired by the DSG and with multistakeholder membership, including the Principals of FAO, IFAD, WFP, country representatives and representatives of the private sector and civil society will be responsible for oversight of the preparatory process. The Advisory Committee will provide guidance to the Special Envoy for the Food Systems Summit, Ms Agnes Kalibata. The Special Envoy will provide leadership, guidance and strategic direction towards the
summit. The Summit Advisory Committee will also draw upon a Scientific Group to ensure independence in the generation and use of evidence.

13. Coordination of the activities comprising the preparatory process will be led by the UN Rome-based Agencies (RBAs), with a small Rome-based Secretariat composed of staff seconded from the three RBAs.