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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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Update on implementing FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative in the Near East and North Africa

Executive Summary

This report summarizes recent progress in the implementation of the Hand-in-Hand (HIH) Initiative, with specific reference to:

- i. Brief case reports of progress in the three most advanced HIH-supported countries in the region (out of a total of 45 countries now participating in the HIH Initiative worldwide).
- ii. Lessons learned from these and other HIH Initiative implementation experiences.
- iii. Implications and benefits of designating the HIH Initiative as a Priority Programme Area (*better life 6*) in the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31.
- iv. The fortuitous positioning of the HIH Initiative as a platform for supporting stakeholders and cross-sectoral implementation of national programmes for agri-food systems transformation.
- v. Progress on the development of a dashboard to ensure effective delivery, management, governance and impact of the Initiative.
- vi. Challenges and opportunities for using HIH Initiative facilities to reinforce the development pillar in the humanitarian-development-peace nexus in food crisis countries.

This report builds on information provided in previous reports to the Programme Committee and the Council. Additional information on the Initiative is available on the Hand-in-Hand webpage on FAO's corporate website and on the Hand-in-Hand Geospatial Platform.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to call upon Members to:

- a) Welcome the continuing growth in the number of countries participating in the Hand in Hand Initiative and how participating countries are using the Initiative to strengthen and accelerate existing programmes or develop ambitious new ones, build national capabilities, and strengthen national ownership and achieve sustainable development.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

- b) Welcome with appreciation the actions and outcomes at country level and highlight the country-owned and country-led nature of the Initiative.
- c) Recognize the extraordinary challenges faced by the HIH Initiative-supported countries during the past 18 months and appreciate the flexibility and agility of the HIH Initiative-supported programmes to sustain work-in-progress under extreme crisis conditions.
- d) Recognize that FAO Members may participate in the HIH Initiative, not only as direct or indirect beneficiaries, but also as development and resource partners through multiple channels, including direct assistance, South-South and Triangular Cooperation, in-kind technical support, support to public-private exchanges and support to mechanisms such as the Flexible Multi-donor Mechanism (FMM) which affords the flexibility to respond quickly to emerging needs and to develop new tools and training jointly with some of the least developed countries.
- e) Welcome the more ambitious programming, spurred by the HIH Initiative's commitment to promote and sustain more transformative, inclusive and collective action.
- f) Recognize the progress made in the development of a monitoring dashboard based on the establishment of rigorous, empirically based typologies, as well as its functions not only as a monitoring system for reporting progress, but also as a knowledge management repository and a communications platform for the host governments and partners.
- g) Take note of the diverse benefits presented by the designation of the HIH Initiative as one of the 20 Priority Programme Areas (PPAs) under the Strategic Framework 2022-31, in particular the ability to use the HIH Initiative as proof of concept and learning laboratory for an Organization-wide shift from a fixed, project orientation to a more dynamic, scaled-up programmatic approach.
- h) Appreciate the HIH Initiative as a transparent and accountable working platform for improved multisectoral and multistakeholder collaboration to foster accelerated agrifood systems transformation at national level.

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I. Introduction

1. This report responds to requests by the Programme Committee at its 130th Session (CL 166/9) and the Council at its 166th Session (CL 166/REP) to provide regular updates on progress and results achieved in the implementation of the Hand-in-Hand (HIH) Initiative.

2. The Initiative was announced by the Director-General on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in late September 2019. A few weeks later, in October and November 2019, FAO Members that met objective criteria of status as Land-locked Developing Countries (LLDCs) or Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and that were also Least Developed Countries (LDCs), or other Least Developed Countries, Food Crisis Countries as defined by the Global Network against Food Crises, and countries with large poor populations, were invited by the Director-General to participate in the Initiative. Since then, and often following extensive consultation, countries, at an average rate of about two per month, have submitted their requests to benefit from the Initiative's many special programmatic supports. Today, 45 countries have expressed their desire to participate.¹

3. Early experience confirms that the HIH Initiative offers FAO Members and their development partners a powerful new way of strengthening, expanding and sustaining ambitious national programmes for agrifood systems transformation priorities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular emphasis on SDGs 1, 2 and 10. The HIH Initiative is quickly emerging as the world's largest and most capable platform for food and agriculture data and information exchange and analysis – the HIH Geospatial Platform. Under the HIH Initiative, multi-disciplinary, cross-organizational FAO technical task teams work with national counterparts to apply analytical methods that help identify territories and populations where programmes and investments to unlock market-oriented opportunities for inclusive and sustainable growth have potential to eradicate poverty, end malnutrition and measurably reduce inequality.

4. More than 20 Members have completed (or are near to completing) the necessary technical studies and have agreed (or will soon agree) upon programme entry points, value chains, territories and markets (typically both national and international), as well as required investments. Most have begun preliminary partner consultations; the remaining are expected to begin within the next two quarters of 2022. Concise concept notes are being prepared to summarize key study findings, government-selected priority objectives, a preliminary programme outline, theory of change for achieving measurable progress on SDGs 1, 2 and 10, and key programme metrics. These will be supported by needs assessments for both public and private investments. The concept notes and investment needs assessments (or “prospectuses”) will be used as a basis for matchmaking with investment partners and other programme partners.

5. This report provides additional details highlighting progress in the three NENA countries which are currently covered by the Initiative.

II. Country Progress Highlights

The Sudan

6. The Sudan formally requested support under the Initiative in the summer of 2021. Following guidance from the Prime Minister, a key objective of the supported programme is to establish an agriculture transformation agency as a nodal entity to support national programmes to accelerate

¹ HiHI countries: Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Chad, Congo, Ecuador, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, the Gambia, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, the Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Solomon Islands, Somalia, the Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

progress toward inclusive and sustainable agrifood systems development and rural transformation. The official name of the agency will be the Agriculture and Livestock Transformation Agency (ALTA).

7. A technical task force has been organised with participation of government technical focal points. The FAO support team, led by the Director for Innovation is consulting with different ministries and has identified a first set of thematic entry points. These include: livestock sector development that would feature slaughterhouses and processing facilities for sheep, meat and dairy products, but also support services such as extension and vaccination programmes. In the crop sector, priorities include value chain development (sorghum, groundnuts), distribution of seeds, water management and irrigation, financial services as well as innovative practices for energy generation (i.e. solar infrastructure).

8. Support from the HII Geospatial Platform is ongoing and an initial set of multi-criteria decision analyses have been conducted to identify possible locations for interventions. FAO is supporting the programme with additional data collection and analysis to improve precision of interventions. Economic, financial, and social return analysis of interventions in discussion will also be underway soon. The HII Initiative in the Sudan operates with support from the FAO Representation in the Sudan, the Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa and FAO headquarters.

9. The HII Initiative will support the ALTA establishment with analyses, training, recruitment, etc., but also, as indicated above, in supporting national programme development and implementation based on country priorities. Territorial analysis/GIS data are foundational for the initial set of activities within the context of operationalizing ALTA. The adaptation of Ethiopia's experience provides an important example of knowledge sharing and learning in the context of the HII Initiative. The ALTA team has already developed a results framework and a roadmap for the HII Initiative team in the Sudan.

Syria

10. In October 2020, FAO received a letter from the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR) and formally requested technical cooperation support from FAO Representation in Syria to implement the first phase of the Initiative. Resources have been identified through the Technical Cooperation Programme Facility (TCPF), an ongoing TCP on capacity building for statistics, and a number of projects with water-related components with a need to assess natural resource balance and sustainability of future natural resource use.

11. The FAO Representation in Syria and the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR) agreed that the first phase of the initiative would focus on building the capacity of the relevant institutions in analysing data and drafting investment plans for the sector, particularly for policy and programming. This will then be supported by limited investment planning for targeted areas. The initiative prepares the way for small-scale public/private investment ahead of a time when Syria can once again access funds from international financing institutions to support reconstruction. This is in line with the results of the National Agricultural Development Forum which took place in Damascus in 2021.

12. Following discussions with the Minister for Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, a technical task force was established. A higher-level national team for the overall coordination of the Initiative is currently under preparation, to include additional representatives from all other key line ministries.

13. FAO is cooperating actively with MAAR to overcome data collection challenges and fill the existing data gaps. Five training courses have been held (October-November 2021) to build the capacity of technical staff at MAAR to collect, analyse and integrate data related to natural resources as well as for social economic analysis.

14. Informative maps have been produced showing land capabilities for rainfed farming, long term annual precipitation, and suitability maps for the rehabilitation of ground water wells. Three potential areas have been identified as locations for future investment: E. Ghoutta in Rural Damascus;

Al Ghab in Hama; and Acar plain near the Lebanese border in Tartus. Work will continue to develop investment opportunities at these selected locations, with round-table discussions planned for the first quarter of 2022 to select specific sub-sectors or value chains based on investment criteria established by the technical team.

Yemen

15. Jointly with the World Bank in May 2021, FAO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP) mobilized a comprehensive USD 127 million project, including Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) funding, that supports the poverty reduction and food security improvement objectives of the HIH Initiative. Specifically, the project aims to provide nutritious food products and support livelihood restoration (nutritious sensitive value chains: crops, livestock and fisheries).

16. The dedicated TCP (TCP/YEM/3802) is progressing and is proving to be instrumental to support the process. Key outputs include evidence generation, stakeholder engagement, planning² and capacity development to government entities.

17. Preparation of investment-oriented diagnostics started in January 2021 and is ongoing, with initial drafts completed for review in September 2021. A multidisciplinary team has been established with more than 20 national and international experts. The diagnostics are at an advanced stage and ready for in-country technical validation.

18. Data collection and analysis has been challenging in the context of conflict, a global pandemic and socio-economic and environmental shocks. Under the HIH Initiative, FAO Yemen has received strong support from the FAO Geospatial Platform team, FAO Agrifood Economics Division (ESA) and FAO Data Lab (March-June 2021) to address these gaps. Effective joint (interdivisional) work was undertaken to map poverty, welfare and potentials for agrifood value chains. An important innovation introduced by the technical team has been a new generation of “vulnerability maps” to capture the full impacts of war, economic disruption, and environmental and climate shocks.

19. A results architecture has been drafted for the emerging HIH Initiative-supported programme, including an indicative five-component structure. A joint FAO-International Finance Corporation (IFC) work has started, with an in-depth analysis of the coffee and fisheries value chains. The output will comprise a joint FAO-IFC publication, scoping private sector and missing middle investment potential. The result will further guide blended financing support on the two mentioned value chains. Work is continuing to gather more granular data and draw pertinent lessons from development, emergency projects and investment being implemented in the country.

III. Two lessons learned from early country experiences

20. Because the Initiative seeks to drive investment in agrifood systems and rural transformation to higher levels of technical competence, coherence, scale and ambition, it is only natural that FAO Members and their development partners, including resource partners, International Financing Institutions (IFIs), large and small private enterprises and investors, sister UN entities, research and technical partners, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), need a clear understanding of what the HIH Initiative purports to be and do. While the HIH Initiative remains a work in progress, fundamental lessons identified can be expressed in terms of two principles:

A. The HIH Initiative is not a programme, but a distinctive new way of supporting nationally owned and led programmes for agricultural and rural transformation.

² National Agriculture Strategy, (NAS) 2030 and National Agriculture Investment Plan, (NAIP) 2025

21. The HIH Initiative is not a programme to be exported to countries, but offers a series of supports that are designed to ensure that national and international programme, policy and investment decision making are founded on the strongest available science and country-specific evidence; fully achieve the potential of both traditional and non-traditional development partners to work together to mobilize means of implementation and accelerate achievement of national priorities for the SDGs, adhering to established international norms and standards; promote and facilitate scaled-up public and private investment as essential drivers of transformative change; and provide an enabling environment, including state of the art monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, to sustain collaborative action over time.

22. As it is clear from the case studies, HIH Initiative-supported programmes are seldom new programmes. Most, in fact, have a history and in many cases the role of FAO and key supporters predates the launch of the HIH Initiative. Yet, as the case studies also indicate, the HIH Initiative adds significant value even where a programme is well established and funded. It provides access to a wealth of data that is of higher quality, lower cost, georeferenced and able to be combined easily and efficiently – data that can be updated with greater frequency than in the past. It offers a growing set of tools and analytical methods that sharpen analysis, improve programme targeting, and enable near real-time assessment of potential and actual impacts of interventions or events. And it also introduces methods and mechanisms to tackle many of the most difficult coordination challenges of sustainable development: building and sustaining multistakeholder and cross-sectoral coalitions; ensuring alignment with UN norms, standards and principles; identifying and enabling better management of trade-offs among alternative policy interventions; and strengthening national capacities for complex programme management.

23. The programmes that the HIH Initiative supports are not FAO programmes, nor programmes of donors, investors, the United Nations or any of the other important development partners. Each may contribute an essential or even indispensable component to the overall programme, but the owner of the programme is always the national government. FAO works with the government to put in place a real-time performance M&E system to ensure high levels of transparency, information-sharing, communications and mutual accountability among the partners. The M&E system, like all HIH Initiative products, is designed to be fully owned and, sooner rather than later, fully controlled by the programme country.

B. National Ownership is not a posture, but a principle and a practice that needs to be recognised and enacted from the beginning.

24. A second critical lesson from the case studies is that the programmes work best when national ownership is built in from the beginning. This can be accomplished in many ways. Programme governance, for example, supports ownership when it is joint and practiced daily. In the cases of Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nigeria, reported here, to a varying degree in many other cases, steering and technical committees are fully joint, improving transparency, accelerating mutual learning and simplifying coordination. While decisions are ultimately the purview of the government, the joint structures tend to improve understanding and the quality of decision-making.

25. Experience also teaches that ownership must also extend to technical work. An important objective has been to accelerate technical learning even as we are introducing and developing new technical innovations. Fortunately, FAO has been able to count on voluntary contributions from several resource partner countries, such as the Flexible Multi-donor Mechanism project on “Accelerating Innovation through the Hand-in-Hand Initiative”³ to develop a variety of training seminars and supports that can be delivered remotely to make the technical work of HIH a fully transparent and, in some cases, joint undertaking.

26. As the country cases demonstrate, the HIH Initiative is designed to enhance national capacities to identify, analyse and solve a complex array of technical, policy, investment and coordination

³ FMM/GLO/158/MUL

problems for themselves. The lesson learned so far is that building ownership, capacity and human capital are complementary and mutually reinforcing activities.

IV. Development of a dashboard to ensure the effective delivery, management, governance and impact of the Initiative

27. A programme dashboard is in the development stage, incorporating baseline indicators, progress towards target outcomes, intervention maps, anchor investment and the diverse contributions of partners and governments. Initial implementations are under way for programme support in Ethiopia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Nepal, Solomon Islands and Tajikistan. The dashboard builds upon months of painstaking data collection and agricultural typology building, as well as close consultations between host governments and multiple partners, all of which have informed the country's strategic programme and investment plan.

28. The dashboard is designed to provide regular, real-time reporting of progress against programme milestones and SDG objectives, all with visualizations that serve as a guide and touchstone for the government and partners. It also provides key impacts and cost-benefit analysis, showcasing advancement in the areas of interventions.

V. The HII Initiative as a Programme Priority Area (PPA) in the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31

29. This report has focused principally on actions and outcomes at country level. Future reports will need to report on equally important measures and arrangements implemented in the Organization and its institutional relationships to deliver and sustain the Initiative's enhanced programming support at country level. While it is essential to prioritize the transformation of the country nexus, there are two other vital dimensions of the implementation: one internal to the Organization, covering changes in the capabilities, knowledge production and management, practices, processes, rules and organizational culture; the other reflecting the HII Initiative's commitment to a vastly expanded reliance on multidimensional partnerships with external entities.

30. To date, the HII Initiative has largely been developed from the country back across the Organization with claims on human resources addressed from within on an as needed basis. This demand-driven approach has been efficient in its own way, working principally with existing corporate resources, mobilizing expertise, know-how and relationships from within, and with identified country needs exercising a kind of discipline on the use of resources by sharpening focus, adding urgency, and stimulating improvisation and innovation. But with coverage now extended to 45 countries, the Initiative is increasingly challenged by outdated assumptions, structures, processes, technological assumptions and perceptions that need to be adapted to support the very high efficiency and trust requirements of the HII Initiative operating at full-scale implementation.

31. Until recently, efficiency in organizational performance at FAO has tended to be equated with cost reduction, that is, for a knowledge-based organization, a reduction in the labour inputs required to produce a given set of outputs. A broader concept, adopted in the development of the HII Initiative, would refer to, in addition to resource efficiency, an increase in the relevance, quality and impact of outputs per given unit of inputs (mostly skilled labour in a knowledge-based organisation, but with non-trivial capital consumption in utilization and maintenance of enabling technologies and facilities).

32. An early demonstration of the remarkable gains that can be achieved through changes in organizational alignment, operating structure and culture has been provided by the creation and accelerated development of the HII Geospatial Platform. During the past two years, following a senior management decision in late 2019 to consolidate and enable access to all FAO-held data through an open platform, technical experts from 20 technical units have been working with the Geospatial Platform team in the Digitalization and Informatics Division (CSI) to catalogue, cleanse,

georeference, provide metadata according to validated standards and enable access to a large number of data sets previously held separately by the different technical divisions and by the Regional and Country Offices.

33. Under pressure of the demands of the HII Initiative, the Geospatial Platform was adapted to serve as an open information-sharing platform providing access to millions of data “layers” that can be combined to enable a new class of multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA) tools that are now reshaping FAO’s offer to its Members and other stakeholders as global public goods. These tools include the stochastic profitability frontier analyses that are used to generate typologies for the HII Initiative, a HII storage location tool to reduce the impact of aflatoxin blooms, the Crop Water Requirement Tool to combine soil, crop and climate information to estimate water needs in different locations, and new tools for Desert Locust Monitoring, Forecasting and Assessment and for Rift Valley Fever decision support. Partnerships with the European Space Agency, Google Earth Engine, the private firm Atlas AI, the institute for Earth System Science at Tsinghua University, and the Copernicus Climate Change Service (AgERA5) are rapidly increasing both data and data quality available through the platform, but also adding new analytical capabilities. This rapid expansion in capability, reach and technical competency comes not as the result of a massive investment of capital and the use of large pools of dedicated human resources, but as the result of a management decision to redeploy existing resources and proactively seek strategic alliances with world-class research institutions.

34. A similar logic informs the commitment of senior management to support the HII Initiative without recourse to budgetary resources or large changes to the allocation of resources across units of the Organization. While units of the Organization are now directly involved in programme-support activities under the HII Initiative, it is a misnomer to describe the application of unit resources as a “contribution” to it. Instead, it is more accurate to describe the HII Initiative as an intangible change in the Organization’s way of working, offering the participating Centres, Divisions and Offices, as well as units and teams located in Regional, Subregional and Country Offices, a clear structure and operating code within which they can more effectively combine forces to attain greater scale and impact than each could achieve on their own.

35. The designation of the HII Initiative as a Programme Priority Area (PPA) under the Strategic Framework 2022-31 provides an institutional framework for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to address existing institutional bottlenecks and develop the set of institutional supports required to unlock the full potential of the Initiative. The PPA core and extended teams are expected to serve as an Organization-wide think tank for developing required institutional capabilities required for each area. In the case of the HII Initiative, this will extend beyond purely technical concerns to important operational topics.

36. It is expected that the work plan will be built around strengthening the five pillars of the HII Initiative Framework:

- i. The Geospatial Platform and its associated analytical tools (georeferenced welfare and nutrition analysis, HII typologies, CDMA tools, etc.).
- ii. Integration of all agri-food systems dimensions into differentiated strategies based on geospatial analysis and a territorial approach.
- iii. Efficient donor and investor matchmaking, to include the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and Global Environment Facility (GEF) engagements that adopt “global programme” management approaches similar to the HII Initiative.
- iv. Partnerships engagement with key stakeholders (national producers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), private sector, research institutions, UN agencies, civil society and other non-governmental organizations).
- v. A state-of-the-art M&E system guided by a priority metric, abundant and efficient data collection, systems-enabled information-sharing and transparency, quarterly and annual reviews and (near) real-time impact evaluation.

37. Lead coordination for this broad PPA effort, as well as comprehensive day-to-day programme oversight and management for the 45 HIH Initiative-supported countries, will rest with the governance unit under the direct supervision of FAO Chief Economist. The designation of the unit as PPA Lead reflects the underlying nature and intention of the HIH Initiative to provide diverse and integrated means to solve the many coordination problems that threaten all efforts to promote agrifood systems transformation within the demanding framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

VI. Strengthening the development pillar in the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus

38. An outstanding challenge, faced repeatedly during the past year, is the need to strengthen the development pillar in the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus. Afghanistan, Haiti, the Sahel countries, Syria and Yemen have endured extreme economic, environmental, natural, and political and military shocks (in most cases in combination), and progress toward moving beyond emergency response has been challenging. The prevailing situations in these countries, although fraught with serious risks, also offer important opportunities to apply HIH Initiative methods and supports, particularly from the technical side, with remote assistance backing up innovative programmes to spur inclusive sustainable and resilient agrifood systems development.