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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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10-13 January 2022 and 7-8 February 2022

Transforming agrifood systems to promote healthy diets for all

Executive Summary

The Near East and North Africa (NENA) region suffers from a triple burden of malnutrition with high rates of overweight, obesity and diet related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) along with a high prevalence of stunting and moderate rates of wasting among children under five years of age and micro-nutrient deficiencies. Conflict has been the main driver of acute food insecurity in the region for over a decade, accounting for 78 percent of the 48.7 million acutely food insecure people in 2020.

Agrifood systems in the region have contributed to these poor nutritional outcomes by failing to deliver safe, healthy and affordable foods in adequate quantities to all. There are gaps in institutional, regulatory and inclusion-related aspects in the regional agrifood systems. To meet the challenges of demographic changes, including high population growth and urbanization in the NENA region, and growth in demand for affordable, accessible, safe and nutritious food, policy-makers will need to develop strategies that promote economically, socially and environmentally sustainable agriculture and agrifood systems and adapt them to serve an increasingly urbanized society.

The NENA region is also heavily dependent on imported food to meet the needs of a growing population. By 2030, the region will meet 63 percent of its caloric demand through imported food. Trade, therefore, plays a key role in meeting the food security and nutrition needs of the region and needs to be recognised and internalised in relevant policies as an enabler for food security and enhanced nutrition. There is also a need to incentivize private sector investments in strengthening national and regional agriculture, food markets and value-chains. The role of science, innovation and on/off-farm technologies is also vital in ensuring sustainable growth in domestic food production, availability and access to healthy and safe food.

As part of FAO efforts to support the NENA countries to promote food security and healthy diets for all, this programme will focus on (i) fostering an agrifood systems approach; (ii) utilizing trade, investment and technology as enablers for food security and better nutrition; (iii) mainstreaming nutrition in food production and consumption-related policies and incentive mechanisms; (iv) ensuring food safety and quality, and reducing food loss and waste; and (v) adjusting the business models of agri-enterprises and improving access to inputs, finance and markets, especially for those who are currently at a disadvantage, such as rural women and youth, migrants, and refugees.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to call upon Members to:

- a) consider adopting a Regional Agrifood Systems Transformative Agenda with a focus on achieving more efficient, inclusive, resilient, sustainable, and nutrition-sensitive agrifood systems to reduce hunger, poverty, socio-economic inequalities and eliminate all forms of malnutrition at sub-national and national levels and request FAO to support its implementation;
- b) consider developing or strengthening national multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder dialogues and coordination mechanisms to implement the Agenda and request FAO's support in required capacity development. Such coordination mechanisms should involve a variety of stakeholders, with a particular focus on the important role of the private sector, civil society and academia. Countries, with support from FAO, could mainstream the outcomes of the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and eventual transformational pathways identified at country level, through United Nations Food Systems Summit Dialogues, into their national policies;
- c) consider establishing a Regional Food Security and Nutrition Observatory, to be hosted at the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE). The Observatory will serve as a knowledge and data hub and decision support system as well as an "adaptive management tool" for Members in tracking and assessing the performances of the food supply chains, including through international trade, food affordability (price and income), food utilisation (food consumption, food safety, nutrition profile of food intakes) and identifying areas of concern, tracking and tackling food loss and waste. The Observatory would benefit from existing platforms and data tools by FAO and other development partners;
- d) develop, with support of FAO, a national policy environment for using trade, investment and technology as enablers for developing regional and national markets and agrifood value chains that promote availability, accessibility and affordability of healthy diets for all, with a specific focus on marginalised communities and urban poor;
- e) promote, with support from FAO, consumer dietary practices, competencies and skills for achieving healthy diets from sustainable agrifood systems; and
- f) support the private sector in adjusting their business models in order to encourage and respond to consumer preferences for healthy diets.

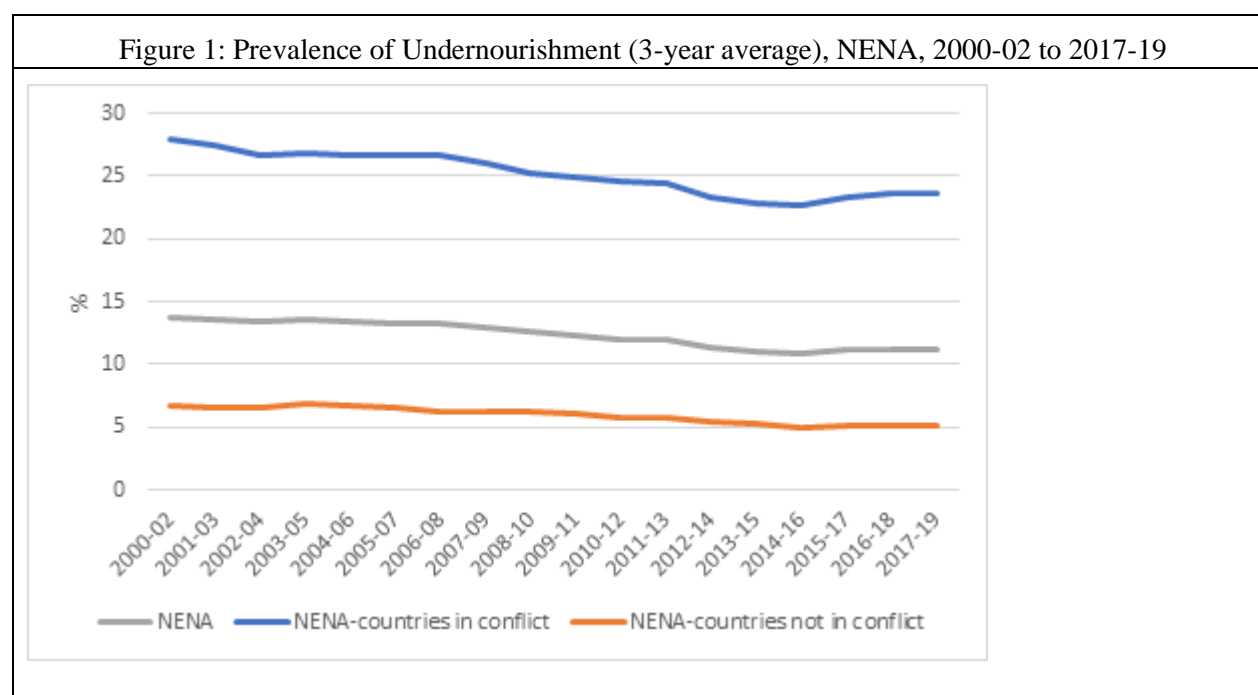
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Introduction

1. The agrifood system covers the journey of food from farm to table – including when it is grown, fished, harvested, processed, packaged, transported, distributed, traded, bought, prepared, eaten and disposed of. It also encompasses non-food products that also constitute livelihoods and all of the people as well as the activities, investments and choices that play a part in getting us these food and agricultural products. In the FAO Constitution, the term “agriculture” and its derivatives include fisheries, marine products, forestry and primary forestry products.

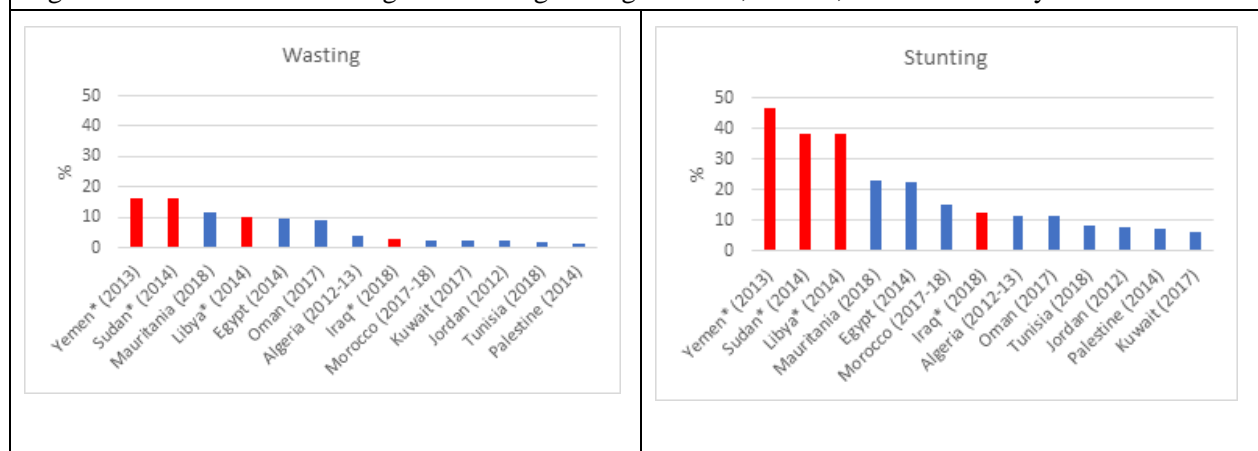
2. Agrifood systems’ functionality and their ability to deliver healthy diets is fundamental for ensuring food security and improving nutrition. The food security and nutrition status of the population remains dire for many countries in the region. Hunger continues to affect 55 million people (13.2 percent of the population) and child undernutrition is a severe public health issue with higher prevalence rates among NENA¹ conflict-affected countries. Prevalence of undernourishment, as shown in Figure 1, was 12.2 percent in the NENA Region in 2017-2019, with rates almost five times higher in NENA conflict-affected countries (25.2 percent) compared to those not in conflict (5.2 percent). As shown in Figure 2, the prevalence of wasting among children under five years living in conflict-affected countries is significantly higher than in countries not in conflict. The very high prevalence of stunting was found in three out of the four conflict-affected countries, with the rates for these three ranging from 38.1 percent in to over 46.4 percent.



Source: FAO ESS.2020.

¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, WHO and ESCWA. 2021. Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in the Near East and North Africa 2020 - Enhancing resilience of food systems in the Arab States. Cairo, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb4902en>

Figure 2: Prevalence of wasting and stunting among children, NENA, latest available year



*Countries in conflict

Source: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, WHO and ESCWA. 2021

3. The rates of obesity and diet related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are among the highest in the world and are growing rapidly. In 15 out of 17 NENA countries with data available, levels of obesity in 2016 were greater than 25 percent for adults, with rates ranging from almost 13 percent in Mauritania to 38 percent in Kuwait.
4. Refugees and internally displaced populations are particularly vulnerable to hunger and undernutrition. As a result of the gender inequalities that persist in the region, women and girls are also more likely to be affected by food insecurity and malnutrition.
5. Agrifood systems in the NENA region and the policies that support them have contributed to these poor nutritional outcomes by failing to provide adequate, safe, diversified and nutritious food for all that is economically, culturally and socially acceptable.
6. As expressed in the Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition, FAO envisages a world where all people are eating healthy diets from sustainable, inclusive and resilient agrifood systems, with a mission is to tackle malnutrition in all its forms by accelerating impactful policies and actions across agrifood systems to enable healthy diets for all.
7. An agrifood systems approach to healthy diets focuses on using entry points within the food systems to influence the consumption of healthy diets by populations with the aim of attaining optimal nutritional status in a sustainable manner. The food environment – the places and ways in which food is sold and accessed by people – is important to consider in addressing nutritional outcomes, as it serves as the interface between the agrifood system and an individual's diet.

Urban agrifood systems

8. The NENA region has diversified urban-rural population divide (Figure 3), with urbanization rates ranging from 37.5 percent in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) to 87 percent in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in 2020; however, consistent growth in urban population needs adoption of agrifood systems tailored to meet urban food and nutrition demand, particularly for urban poor.

Figure 3: Urbanization trend by NENA sub-regions, 1950-2050 (percentage urban)

Sub-region	1950	1970	2000	2020	2030	2050
GCC	23.6	52.9	81.1	87.0	89.2	92.3
Maghreb	25.3	38.5	59.0	69.9	74.5	81.7
Mashreq	32.8	45.7	52.7	55.6	58.0	67.0
LDCs	6.2	15.3	30.5	37.5	42.8	55.5
NENA Region	25.6	39.4	53.6	60.0	62.9	70.4
World	29.6	36.6	46.7	56.2	60.4	68.4

Source: UN. 2018. World Urbanization Prospects and UN. 2019. World Population Prospects

9. As NENA countries and cities move into the recovery phase from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity to rethink the way urban and peri-urban agrifood systems are managed and promote policies and programmes that create incentives and capacities towards economic, social and environmental sustainability and promote healthy diets for all.

10. The proximity of rural and urban spaces in the rural-small city interface means that actions in the “agrifood systems” to support the well-being of rural and urban populations will have spill over effects: urban policy actions (e.g. to support nutrition) will affect agriculture and rural well-being and vice versa.

11. Urban food systems could be transformed through FAO’s Urban Food Agenda,² including: i) strengthening urban and territorial food governance and approaches for agricultural and rural development; ii) integrating food systems into local planning; iii) harnessing the role of local governments in school feeding programmes and procurements, wherever applicable; iv) improving access to fresh food market and food retail environment; v) increasing public and private financing for ensuring affordable healthy diets for urban consumers; and vi) redefining city food supply chains.

A new global agenda for agrifood systems transformation

12. The year 2021 marked an important timeline not only due to the response and recovery from COVID-19 pandemic but also setting the global agenda on food systems. The UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) was held in September 2021 and launched a country-driven process to take forward bold actions designed to be implementable at scale and capable of transforming food systems by engaging various actors. As a key contribution to the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Summit aimed at generating momentum, expanding the knowledge base and sharing experiences and approaches to unleash universal benefits of food systems.

13. The Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit (N4G), held in December 2021, aimed to capitalize on momentum for accelerating progress on addressing malnutrition. FAO pledged up-scaled support for better nutrition and healthy diets for all.³

² <http://www.fao.org/urban-food-agenda/en/>

³ <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/fao-pledges-upscaled-support-for-better-nutrition/en>

14. The 42nd Session of the FAO Conference recognized the role of agrifood systems in addressing global hunger and malnutrition and approved the FAO Strategic Framework for 2022-31. FAO's Strategic Framework seeks to support the 2030 Agenda through the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life, leaving no one behind.

I. Stakeholders, drivers and trends in agrifood systems of the region

Stakeholders

15. Transforming agrifood systems to achieve healthy diets for all requires participation of all key stakeholders and sectors, ranging from government to large food manufacturers, to smallholder farmers and more.

16. **Governments** - a variety of national government departments and policies affect the agrifood system, including agriculture, trade, food safety and standards, health, education and social policies and government investment in infrastructure and research and development programmes.

17. **Producers, farmers and fishers** - The farming sector ranges from large-scale industrialized farms to small-scale family farms. This set of stakeholders is responsible for the primary production of food and is therefore heavily influential in the availability and affordability of diverse and nutritious food. Women provide key contributions to food production, especially as small-scale and family farmers, yet their role is heavily constrained by their unequal access to assets, technologies, and services. Addressing these inequalities and empowering women as food producers can substantially contribute to ensure food availability and affordability in the region.

18. **Processors, wholesalers and manufacturers** - Apart from traditional agrifood systems, a small amount of food in the system passes directly from producers to consumers, whereas the majority of food produced on farms is sold to a processor, wholesaler or manufacturer for processing, packing, storage, and/or value addition of the crop or commodity.

19. **Consumers and citizens** - Consumer preferences and purchases, influenced by income, relative food prices, knowledge and skills, time and convenience, culture and other factors, drive the demand for foods, which, in turn, influence and support the system of food production as well as its sale and marketing. Consumers can also actively change their food environments and demand changes in agrifood systems to become sustainable and focused on healthy diets.

20. **Youth and Women** - Investing in young people and involving them in agriculture-related activities is a key to enhancing agricultural productivity, boosting rural economies and ensuring food security. Involving women in agriculture, particularly agri-business related activities, would result in not only inclusive but also efficient agrifood systems.

Drivers of agrifood systems and related trends

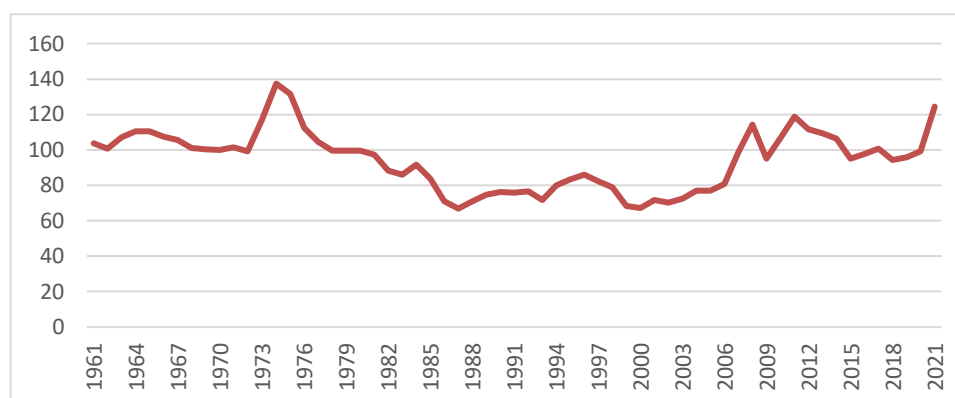
21. The following are the major drivers and related trends of agrifood systems in the NENA region:

- a) Population dynamics and urbanization, which are expected to change demand for healthy diets. For example, the urban population in NENA region was 60 percent in 2020, and is projected to increase to over 70 percent by 2050, with up to 92 percent in the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC).⁴

⁴ United Nations. 2018. World Urbanization Prospects and UN. 2019. World Population Prospects.

- b) Economic growth, structural transformation and macro-economic outlook, which are not always delivering the expected results in terms of inclusive economic transformation of societies.
- c) International trade and investments, which tie together agrifood systems globally, particularly in the context of heavy reliance on imported food.
- d) Big data generation, control, use and ownership, which enable real-time innovative technologies and decision making, including in agrifood systems.
- e) Geopolitical instability and increasing conflicts, with five⁵ out of 19 NENA countries in conflict, which include resource- and energy-based conflicts resulting in pressures on agrifood systems.
- f) Inequalities, characterized by high income inequality and employment gender-disparity, access to assets, basic services and inequitable fiscal burden. Between 2008 and 2019, the share of females in agriculture employment was below 20 percent in 12 out of 15 NENA countries with available data⁶ (with exceptions in Morocco and Mauritania).
- g) Food prices, as per Figure 4, which are in real terms lower than in the 1970s but higher than in the 1980s and 1990s despite the fact that they fail to capture the full social and environmental costs of food.

Figure 4: FAO Food Price Index in real terms, 1961-2020 (2014-2016=100)⁷



- h) Innovation and science including more innovative technologies (such as biotechnologies and digitalization) and systemic approaches (*inter alia* agroecology and conservation and organic agriculture). Notwithstanding continued gaps in use and deployment of innovation and technology in agrifood systems leading to low productivity and inefficiencies in food supply chains.
- i) Public investment in agrifood systems, e.g. investments in infrastructure such as roads, energy, among others, which would increase farmers' access to markets. Among the eight NENA countries with available data on the SDG 2.a.1 agriculture orientation index for government expenditures in 2019, seven are below the World index value of 0.53, and only one country, Bahrain, is above, primarily due to its very small value of agriculture value added share of GDP (0.30 percent). Moreover, the share of government expenditure in agriculture is

⁵ Iraq, Libya, the Sudan, Syria and Yemen

⁶ FAOSTAT, latest year available, downloaded 2021

⁷ FAO, World Food Situation, FAO Food Price Index, <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/>, accessed on 29/12/2021

low in these NENA countries ranging from 0.22 percent in Lebanon to 1.49 percent in Egypt compared to a World value of 2.12 percent.⁸

- j) Market concentration of food and agricultural input and output, which represents a challenge for the resilience and equitability of agrifood systems.
- k) Consumption and nutrition patterns, resulting from behavioural change of consumers which are increasingly being asked to make complex choices about the nutritional content and safety of what they eat and where shifting consumer demand in the direction of healthier diets is key. For example, the fat supply quantity (g per capita per day) in 2018 exceeded the average World quantity of 86.18 g per capita per day in 6 out of 14 NENA countries, with values up to 111.87 g per capita per day. Additionally, the sugar supply quantity (kg per capita per year) in 2018 was above the average World value of 26.35 kg per capita per year for 12 out of 14 countries, with quantities up to 67.84 kg per capita per year.⁹
- l) Scarcity and degradation of natural resources, including land, water, biodiversity and soil. For example, in 2015, Kuwait and Iraq had 64 and 26 percent of land degraded, respectively, which exceeded the world average of 20 percent. Moreover, water stress levels, calculated as the ratio between total freshwater withdrawn by all major sectors and total renewable freshwater resources, after taking into account environmental flow requirements, is high in all NENA countries (except Mauritania) ranging from 47.1 percent in Iraq to 3850.5 percent in Kuwait, compared to a world average level of 18.4 percent in 2018.¹⁰ Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Yemen have over 80 different threatened species with numbers reaching 108 threatened species in Egypt. Furthermore, the majority of the known threatened species in the region are classified as “critically endangered”.¹¹ Additionally, the proportion of local breeds classified as being at risk of extinction is 8 percent, 15 percent and 20 percent in Morocco, the Sudan and Tunisia, respectively, as of 2021. The average proportion of Terrestrial Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) covered by protected areas in all NENA countries except Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates is lower than the world average value of 43 percent in 2020.¹²
- m) Epidemics and degradation of ecosystems, which may increase in the future due to rising trends in transboundary plant pests and diseases, agriculture encroaching in wild areas and forests, Antimicrobial Resistance, the increasing production and consumption of animal source foods.
- n) Climate change, including weather extremes and variability of temperatures and rainfall patterns, which is already affecting agrifood systems and natural resources and is expected to accelerate hunger and poverty in rural areas. “The Near East and North Africa regions are expected to be one of the hotspots for worsening extreme heat, drought, and aridity. Climate projections in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report show that under a moderate scenario, temperatures will increase by 3 °C by the end of the century, while under a more severe, but highly likely scenario, the temperature increase would be of +4 °C.¹³ These data, coupled with projections of decreasing rainfall by up to 20 percent indicate that water scarcity will be exacerbated, while agricultural production reduced.”
- o) Blue or aquatic food systems, referring to the development of economic activities related to the fisheries and aquaculture sector, are increasing globally and arising trade-offs require sound policy-making that integrates technical, social and economic solutions, principles of

⁸ UNSD, Global SDG Indicators Database

⁹ FAOSTAT; accessed on 15/08/2021

¹⁰ UNSDG, SDG Database, accessed 2021

¹¹ UNEP/ROWA and FAO. 2015. Terrestrial Ecosystems and Biodiversity in the Arab Region. <http://css.escwa.org.lb/SDPD/3572/Goal15.pdf>

¹² UNSD, Global SDG Indicators Database

¹³ ICARDA 2017

ecosystem restoration for production systems, and cross-sectoral stakeholder involvement in the context of transformative agrifood systems.

- p) Political instability leading to massive waves of forced migration, both internally and between countries, thus threatening food production capacity and access to it. In 2020, the NENA region hosted 41.2 million international migrants with an additional 9.6 million refugees and 14.8 million internally displaced people (IDPs).¹⁴ Jordan and Lebanon are among the top 10 countries in the world hosting refugees, while Syria ranked the highest among the countries of the world with IDPs, having more than 6.5 million. The Sudan is hosting 1.1 million refugees (mostly of them from South Sudan) and 2.73 million IDPs.¹⁵
- q) Weaknesses, and absence in certain cases of relevant institutions, lack of cross-sectoral coordination, governance processes and legal frameworks for enabling agrifood systems. Concerns of food safety where the countries of the region have the third highest estimated prevalence of foodborne diseases among its population, following Africa and Southeast Asia.
- r) Gaps and lack of effectiveness in relevant policies, regulatory frameworks and consumer education/awareness towards healthy diets and nutritious foods.
- s) Lack of investments and enabling environment in agriculture and food related businesses.
- t) Gender gaps and social inequalities, which prevent some segments of the population – women, youth and rural communities – from participating in and benefitting equally from agrifood systems development.

II. Impact of COVID-19 on agrifood systems in the NENA region

22. The global economic and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are increasing poverty and food insecurity through complex pathways; the impacts will change over time and are likely to affect all dimensions of food security. Lockdown measures have resulted in major disruptions to supply chains, though it was less pronounced in the NENA region. Interruptions to international trade have affected producers who rely on export markets.

23. The pandemic has caused an economic recession that has reduced incomes and caused a massive loss of livelihoods, with resulting impacts on access to food. The World Bank estimates that between 88 million and 115 million people fell back into extreme poverty in 2020, with further increases projected for 2021. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA), the number of poor in 14 Arab countries is projected to be between 101.4 and 102.4 in 2019, rising to 114.9-120.9 in 2020 and 116.3-120.4 in 2021.¹⁶

24. Loss of incomes and rising prices have an impact on consumption and nutrition. Poor households were likely to reduce the number of their meals and shift spending away from foods with high micronutrient content to less nutrient-rich foods that are often high in salt, sugar or fats.

25. COVID-19 is also intertwined with the issue of overweight and obesity. A pooled data analysis showed that individuals with obesity had higher risks of testing positive, hospitalization, admittance to intensive care units, need for ventilators and death from COVID-19. Obesity may also

¹⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). International Migrant Stock 2020, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> and IDMC, Global Internal Displacement Database, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data>, accessed on 2nd June 2021

¹⁵ UNHCR, population figures, UNHCR data on displacement, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=TKsZ3Z> and IDMC, Global Internal Displacement Database, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data>, accessed on 2nd June 2021).

¹⁶ The information contained in the report is based on different sources. In most cases, it refers to the region defined by FAO as the 'Near East and North Africa' (NENA). Other sources refer to the 'Arab Region', which includes all the countries of the NENA region + Somalia, Djibouti and the Comoros. In the text, reference is made systematically to the country grouping to which the information refers.

have impacts on vaccine effectiveness. At the same time, obesity trends may be influenced by dietary shifts to less expensive and more shelf-stable foods and by reductions in physical activity owing to stay at home orders, although data to confirm these expectations are not yet available.

26. The disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 crisis have highlighted many of the fragilities of contemporary agrifood systems. Challenges include access to safe, nutritious food at affordable prices when movement is restricted and markets are closed, and the vulnerability of employees (in terms of health and income) across the agrifood system. There are risks to the very survival of firms and industries, particularly micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, from producers, manufacturers, traders and food processors to transporters and retailers.

27. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of issues such as antimicrobial resistance, zoonotic diseases, climate change and food fraud, each with potentially significant implications for the safety of food.

28. Disruptions to agrifood systems by COVID-19 also create opportunities to drive longer-term reforms. The crisis has shown how quickly many parts of the food system have been able to respond.

29. The COVID-19 pandemic has also disrupted urban food systems in the NENA region, particularly affecting the food distribution and the food retail sectors.

30. The pandemic has further exposed the food systems' reliance on women's invisible, unpaid care and domestic work, which in rural areas include fetching water, tending small livestock and farming tasks essential for household food security and nutrition. Response measures for COVID-19 pose therefore new challenges as well as new opportunities to strengthen rural women's multiple roles as care providers, agricultural producers, farm managers, food processors, traders, wage workers and entrepreneurs.

31. Designing and delivering gender-sensitive social protection measures is key to reducing risks and ensuring that rural women can benefit equally from such interventions. Investing in women's leadership and engaging them in the design and implementation of COVID-19 response strategies is critical to ensuring that their perspectives and needs are adequately considered.

III. The role of trade

32. The NENA region is characterized by high food import dependency particularly for cereals. Furthermore, 11 out of 13 NENA countries with available data had cereal import dependency ratios above 50 percent over 2016-2018. This ranged from 23.6 percent in the Sudan to 100 percent in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, all of the GCC countries with available data had average cereal import dependency ratios of more than 90 percent during 2016-2018.¹⁷ Trade, therefore, plays a key role in the food security policy of every country in the NENA region, but its sustainability is weakened by several stressors, including economic shocks in the countries of the region and political instability.

33. By bridging demand and supply, trade could play an important role in climate change adaptation and mitigating external shocks. Measures and trade policy adjustments such as stock piling, regional risk pooling, optimizing cropping patterns and adjusting trade patterns could also facilitate risk management to address impacts of productivity shocks.

34. Due to reforms in domestic policies and technological advances, trade in agrifood products is increasingly organized in global value chains (GVCs). The agrifood sector has also become increasingly integrated and developed deeper links between agriculture and other sectors. The policies such as tariffs, distortive subsidies, non-tariff measures (NTMs) and services trade restrictions reduce GVC participation. Measures taken to promote growth in domestic value added in GVCs can improve access to new markets and increase productivity gains from technological spill overs along the supply

¹⁷ FAOSTAT, Suite of Food Security Indicators, <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/FS>, accessed on 15/08/2021

chain. Therefore, it is important to recognize and adapt policies that reduce or increase participation in GVCs policies to create enabling environment for intra-regional and international agriculture trade in the NENA region.

35. The low level of intra-regional food trade in the NENA region is due not only to market access conditions but also to stringent and less harmonized regulatory systems, such as the Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary (SPS) requirements and Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs). Closing such regulatory gaps would help increase regional food trade and also strengthen national agrifood systems. This effort for regional regulatory cooperation includes national food safety level, coordination, equivalence, mutual recognition and harmonization, which may achieve the adoption of a single uniform system or standards across the region.

36. While global food commodity prices fell overall in the early months of the pandemic, they have surged upward in recent months. Localized price increases for certain food commodities affected some countries, including many of the NENA region, which are heavily dependent on food imports.

IV. Policy trade-offs

37. In order to promote healthy diets for all and achieve significant levels of affordability, national governments may have to analyse the trade-offs through fiscal and social protection policies. While many of the countries in the NENA region have one or other form of subsidies on selected food items (e.g. bread sugar and edible oils), these subsidies may be targeted to promote food items that are often more expensive and unaffordable such as pulses and legumes, nuts and seeds, vegetables and fruits that can contribute to healthy and nutritious diets. This may involve extra fiscal burden in some cases; however, it could be offset by additional taxation on less nutritious foods such as the ones high in sugar and salt contents.

38. Another trade-off, to promote healthy diets, could be the adoption of market-related policy measures in favour of healthy and nutritious diets. This could be achieved through the adoption of disciplines to restrict marketing and visibility of foods that are high in sugar, salt and contain high levels of trans-fats and managing the food labelling requirements accordingly. In addition, market promotion of local and traditional foods, increased incentives for their production, processing and marketing, can help in ensuring healthy diets are affordable, accessible, acceptable and available for all.

39. There are intrinsic trade-offs between nutrition and the environment, and nutrition and inclusiveness (particularly share of labour in supply chains). Policies need to be designed to minimize such trade-offs and maximize synergies for ensuring sustainability, particularly environment and inclusivity.

V. A regional action agenda on transforming agrifood systems to promote healthy diets for all

40. The world is not on track to eliminate hunger by 2030. After dropping for decades, the number of undernourished persons worldwide has increased in recent years, exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19. Furthermore, healthy diets are unaffordable for 3 billion people worldwide, or 38 percent of the population. In the NENA region, more than half of the population cannot afford healthy diets, and more than a quarter of the region's population cannot afford diets that meet only required levels of essential nutrients.

41. It is thus imperative to transform agrifood systems through international, regional and South-South cooperation and continued engagement with stakeholders including the private sector and civil society.

42. Transforming agrifood systems while meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would require reforms and transitions: to healthier and nutritious diets; to sustainable agricultural practices that protect and restore nature; to more inclusive and diversified livelihoods, which provide access to decent employment opportunities; and to greater efficiency of production, distribution, food handling, storage, processing, trade and marketing and consumption of safe, diverse and nutritious food and coordination across these functions.
43. This will require a number of incentives for agrifood system stakeholders – incentives that can overcome all of the hurdles preventing stakeholders from making a change, as well as incentives that address the costs of behavioural change, mitigate the costs of transition and, potentially, fund ongoing economic costs. These incentives must fill knowledge and awareness gaps and be powerful enough to change the mindsets of individuals.
44. The regional agenda would require shared understanding of the implications and key trade-offs of relevant policy measures towards transformation of agrifood systems. It would also require identification of appropriate governance mechanisms to maximize synergies and minimize possible trade-offs, while taking into account asymmetries of information, power and interest among stakeholders.
45. Tackling all forms of malnutrition will require multi-faceted actions - engaging sectors ranging from health, education and agriculture to social protection, planning and economic policy - to play active roles along with political leaders to foster the required range of actions at the individual, household, community, national, regional and global levels.
46. There is a need to transform the agrifood systems, which are:
- a) Inclusive: ensuring economic and social inclusion for all food system actors, especially smallholders, women and youth.
 - b) Sustainable: minimizing negative environmental impacts, conserving scarce natural resources and strengthening resilience to future shocks.
 - c) Efficient: producing adequate quantity and quality of food for regional needs while minimizing post-harvest loss and consumer waste; and
 - d) Resilient: withstanding the shocks and uncertainties through adaptation and mitigation measures.
47. In the light of the above, the following specific actions could be adopted at national levels, in order to transform agrifood systems and ensure healthy diets for all:
- a) Countries, with support from FAO, could consider adopting and strengthening policies, including incentives, regulations and dietary guidelines, to encourage people to adopt healthy diets.
 - b) Increasing capacity to reduce food loss and waste in an inclusive and sustainable way, through innovation (such as product reformulation), processing and preservation of better quality, safe and nutritious food products and using traditional foods that are socially, economically and environmentally viable, including those with a longer shelf-life.
 - c) Adopting policies, with capacity development from FAO and other partners, which create market incentives to encourage shifts in production towards nutritious food, while also using consumer education and school curricula to affect consumption habits.
 - d) Adopting policies to promote healthy diets should focus on actions that can simultaneously reduce risks of both the nutritional deficiencies associated with underweight, micronutrient deficiency, wasting and stunting and those dietary imbalances that are responsible for the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity.
 - e) Strengthening national food production capacities and linkages to regional markets will provide a strong basis for countries to boost intra-regional trade. Policies and programmes

need to encourage the private sector to inject new investments, add value to commodities, compete with imports and create jobs.

- f) There is a need to support the design and implementation of measures to avoid logistics disruptions in transportation, increase storage facilities and cooling infrastructure and ensure the safe functioning of wholesale and retail food markets, also through access to real-time information on the functioning of distribution systems.
- g) Strengthening rural-urban linkages, increasing the capacity of urban and peri-urban producers of nutritious and safe food, improving food storage capacity and promoting effective food.
- h) Developing an institutional and policy environment for supporting the analysis of key trade-offs facing agrifood system actors and decision-makers, including the mapping of vulnerable people, their retail food environments and means of physical and economic access to nutritious food.
- i) Building the capacity to enhance food safety and nutritional quality across agrifood systems, focusing on increased absorption and adaptation capacities that quickly facilitate a switch to “emergency mode”, while maintaining food safety, by rethinking and expanding food safety infrastructure, regulations and technologies, including general public health and pandemic-inducing causes, and promoting nutrition-sensitive approaches along supply chains.
- j) Enhancing capacity of agribusinesses and value chain stakeholders as key drivers of agrifood systems transformation and sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery, including through their interaction with the public sector and other key stakeholders, such as producers and consumers.

48. The following four strategic actions may form the basis for shared understanding, objectives and implementation modalities at the regional level and serve as accelerators for achieving the above-mentioned specific actions.

Strategic Action 1: Adoption of a regional transformative agenda

49. With less than nine years left to achieve the SDGs, there are global voices for a Decade of Action to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The UN Food Systems Summit 2021 has provided an important catalyst for mobilizing collective action to transform food systems and meet the SDGs. In this context, the NENA region may adopt a transformative approach for agrifood systems that contributes towards this decade of action.

50. Keeping this in context and in order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, there is a need to adopt and implement a “Regional Agrifood Systems Transformative Agenda” with a focus on achieving inclusive, sustainable, resilient and nutrition sensitive agrifood systems at national levels and request FAO support for implementation.

51. The Agenda could focus on using limited natural resources more efficiently, responding to climate change by adaptation and mitigation, maximizing use of innovative solutions, technology and providing enabling policies, enhancing national and regional partnerships, especially with the private sector, and promoting exchange of knowledge and best practices, while prioritizing access to decent employment and livelihoods opportunities for all. This can be achieved through coordination and support platforms provided by the FAO, through its existing national and regional initiatives such as the Hand-in-Hand and the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme.

52. Initiatives under this Agenda will lead to agrifood systems transformation that will require a focus on complex systems where communities, governments at all levels, as well as the private sector have a part to play in redefining actions, solutions, strategies and new partnerships to 'better recover' from COVID-19 and make progress on achieving the SDGs.

53. Given the heterogeneity in agrifood systems and related policies across the region, the Agenda would serve as a common platform such as the Sustainable Food Systems Mediterranean (SFS-MED).¹⁸

Strategic Action 2: Strengthening knowledge, data and analytical capacities

54. One of the main reasons for inefficient agrifood systems is the information asymmetry. Not only the production and market-related data and information but also the knowledge and advocacy material for consumers to convince them of healthier food choices have clear gaps between and even within countries.

55. Data and related analytics could play a vital role in supporting policy development and implementation across the spectrum of agrifood systems. Access to high quality, timely and user-friendly data could help transforming agrifood systems, through enabling policies, and ensure healthy diets for all. FAO has embarked upon a comprehensive agenda to help Members use data for better policymaking for agrifood systems. The Hand-in-Hand Geospatial Data platform is one such example, completed by comprehensive FAO statistics, data and decision support tools.

56. In order to mitigate this information asymmetry and strengthen the analytical functions and policy tools (in addition to data, e.g. to analyse trade-offs, synergies and implications of policy actions), Members may consider establishing a “Regional Food Security and Nutrition Observatory”, hosted at FAO RNE. The Observatory will serve as knowledge/data hub and decision support system for the Members in tracking food availability, including international trade, nutrition profile of food intakes and identifying areas of concern, tracking and tackling food loss and waste, support in designing the urban food systems, and promoting innovation and technology in agriculture and food. The Observatory will benefit from existing data sources and relevant tools developed by FAO.

Strategic Action 3: Using Trade, Investment and Technology as enablers for improving food security and nutrition

57. The Near East and North African (NENA) region has high food import dependency particularly for cereals. By 2030, the region will meet only 37 percent of its caloric requirements from local production, and the rest would have to be imported. The region’s strong population growth together with limited production capacity will drive higher food imports over the next decade. The region is expected to become the second largest net importer of food, following the Asia and Pacific region but on a per capita basis will be the largest. Therefore, trade plays a key role in the food security policy of every country in the NENA region.

58. Focus should be given to a well-designed, resilient and coordinated food trade policy at regional and country levels that meets the food security and nutrition demands and also takes into consideration the potential vulnerabilities of global food supply chains.

59. Focus is also needed to enhance public and private investments in agriculture, particularly to deploy on and off farm technologies and incentivizing innovation.

¹⁸ <http://www.fao.org/food-systems/news-events/news-detail/en/c/1411633/>

Strategic Action 4: Harnessing the power of transformative partnerships, platforms and networks

60. Transforming agrifood systems could be a time and resource intense exercise, which could be achieved better through partnerships at international, regional and national levels. Thus, the transformative partnerships, which aim towards sustained and significant changes to agrifood systems, are warranted.
61. Partnerships between and with the development partners, private sector and civil society at national and regional levels and establishing institutional dialogues to share and adopt best practices could help the agrifood systems respond to emerging challenges.
62. Such partnerships could develop and use digital platforms. For example, a digital platform providing agriculture extension services to farmers to help them analyse production and identify ways of increasing it and a digital platform for academia, civil society and consumers to support training, advocacy, education and awareness on healthy diets.
63. In this regard, FAO RNE may facilitate establishing and/or strengthening regional consultative mechanisms and platforms, in variable geometry, for sharing and implementing best practices, knowledge and support on transforming agrifood systems for promoting healthy diets for all. These mechanisms could be a component of the Regional Agenda.
64. The existing platforms such as the SFS-MED, established by FAO, the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) and the Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat (UfMS), could serve as a reference.

Annex 1: Contribution to achieving SDGs

The proposed actions in this paper will contribute to achieving the following specific SDGs:

Strategic Action areas	Relevant SDGs
Healthy diets for all	1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 12.8, 14.b
Transparent markets and trade	2.b, 2.c, 10.a, 17.11
Nutrition for the most vulnerable	1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2
Safe food for everyone	2.1, 2.2, 3.2
Reducing food loss and waste	2.1, 2.2, 12.3
Achieving sustainable urban food systems	1.1, 2.1, 11.a, 12.1