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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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The state of food security in the Near East and North Africa

Executive Summary

This paper provides hunger, food security and nutrition situation analysis in the 19 countries supported directly by FAO's Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE).

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Conference is invited to take note of the findings and use them to inform policies, programmes and projects in the region.

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I. Introduction

1. The Near East and North Africa (NENA) region¹ faces significant challenges in eliminating hunger and ending all forms of malnutrition by 2030. Conflict, protracted crisis and lack of capacity of current food systems to deliver healthy diets to all have been the major drivers of hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition in the region. Covid-19 pandemic that brought the overwhelming economic disruptions in the region has further aggravated the situation. Ending conflict and restoring peace and adopting focused, targeted multisectoral approaches and coordinated actions for transforming food systems for healthy diets are necessary for addressing hunger and nutrition problems in the region.

2. The most recent data show a significant deterioration in hunger and food security situation across almost the entire region. In 2020, the ranks of undernourished people in the region whose food consumption is insufficient to provide the dietary energy levels required to maintain a normal, active and healthy life has increased by 4.3 million from the previous year. Similarly, number of food insecure (moderate as well as severe) people has also increased. This trend, in a large part, could be attributed to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic that has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities and negatively impacted peoples' lives and livelihoods.

3. The region is affected by multiple burdens of malnutrition with worsening trends in overweight and obesity. At current trends, malnutrition rates will require further investment and action in order to reach the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 2.2 of eliminating all forms of malnutrition by 2030. While undernutrition is closely linked to conflict and protracted crisis in the region, high rates of overweight and obesity affect the majority of countries in the region. This points to other drivers that need to be addressed through food systems transformation towards healthy diets and integrated policy responses linking health, nutrition, education and agriculture and food supply policies.

4. This paper provides a snapshot on the hunger, food security and nutrition situation in the 19 countries, which are supported directly by FAO's Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE).

II. Undernourishment and food insecurity in NENA Countries

5. This section examines the hunger and food insecurity situation in the 19 countries of the FAO RNE. It shows the recent trends in the prevalence rates as well as the levels of undernourishment and food insecurity and discusses the high level of variation that exists in the region.

6. The NENA region needs to make considerable progress if SDG 2.1 target of zero hunger is to be achieved. In 2020, 59.3 million people were undernourished in the NENA region, which corresponds to 14.2 percent of the region's total population. There are significant variations in both prevalence rates and in the absolute numbers of undernourishment by countries². In 2018-2020, four countries (Egypt, Iraq, Sudan and Yemen) accounted for nearly 70 percent of the total number of undernourished people in the region. Yemen had the highest prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) of 45.4 percent, followed by Iraq at 37.5 percent. In contrast, two countries for which data is available, such as Algeria and Kuwait had minimal prevalence of below 2.5 percent. In the other countries, including many that are high- and middle-income, persistent pockets of undernourishment existed.

¹ NENA region includes the following countries and territories: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen

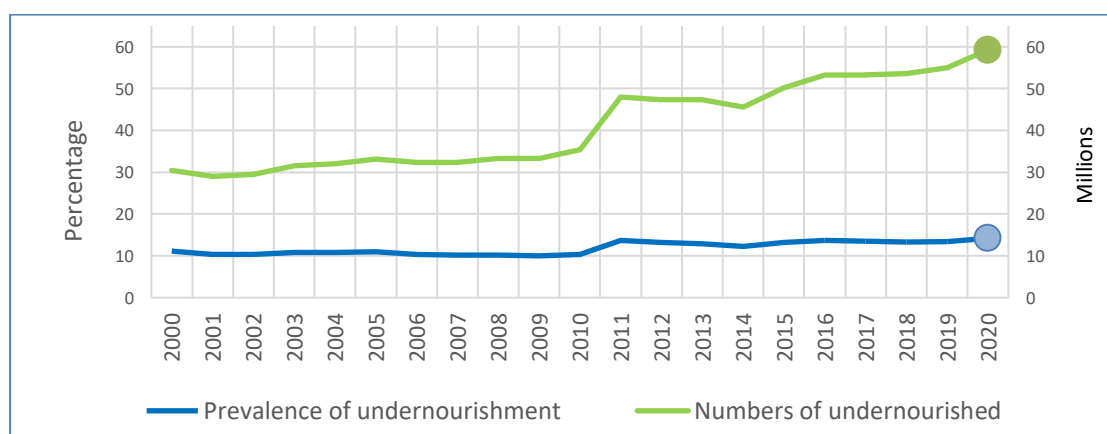
² At country-level, the PoU and NoU data is available as three-year averages

7. The available PoU data displays a relatively mixed trend in NENA countries in the previous decade. Between 2010-2012 and 2018-2020, the PoU in the region increased by 1.1 percentage points. This trend was driven by increases in five NENA countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania and Yemen). The most sizeable increase was recorded in Yemen, where the PoU has augmented by 17.5 percentage points. The prevalence has declined in the other countries during this period. Notably, the trend is rather homogenous when comparing data for 2017-2019 and 2018-2020. The PoU has increased in almost all NENA countries where data is available (14 countries out of 19)³. Specifically, the prevalence rose in 11 countries and remained unchanged in the other three countries (Algeria, Kuwait and Yemen).

8. The hunger situation is less positive when examined in terms of the absolute number of undernourished people in the region. Between 2010-2012 and 2018-2020, the number of undernourished people in the region has increased by 12.4 million. However, the trends are mixed among the countries. The level of undernourishment has increased in six countries for which official FAO data is available (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Oman and Yemen); fell in five countries (Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates); and remained constant in Lebanon. In 2020, the number of undernourished people in the region increased by 4.3 million from the previous year. The increases have been recorded in all countries for which data is available⁴ with the exception of four countries where the numbers have remained constant (Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia).

9. Conflict-driven crisis has been the principal driver of undernourishment in the region. Hunger in conflict-affected countries has always been much higher than in non-conflict countries, in the order of 14.1 to 28 percentage points. In 2020, the PoU in conflict-affected countries was 31.9 percent, nearly six times as high as in non-conflict countries, 5.4 percent. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic is not fully reflected in the available data. However, a sizeable increase in the levels of undernourishment in 2020 from the previous year suggests the impact of COVID-19 pandemic that brought major disruptions to the region's economy and people's livelihoods.

Figure 1: The prevalence and number of undernourished people in the NENA region



10. The data on the prevalence of food insecurity and number of food insecure people is only available for eight NENA countries and territories³. The aggregated data for the NENA region shows that the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity stood at 30.4 percent in 2020. This translates into nearly 127.2 million people who face moderate or severe constraints on their ability to obtain sufficient food over the course of a year. The prevalence in the NENA region is 1.6 percentage points higher compared to the previous year, which is equivalent to an increase by 8.8 million people in

³ Algeria, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia

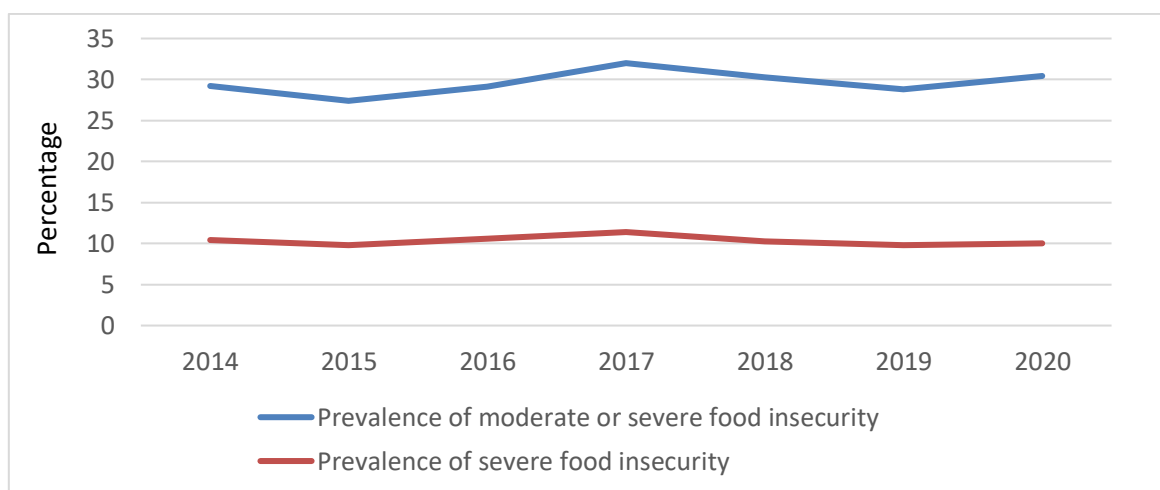
absolute terms. The highest prevalence in 2018-2020 was recorded in the Sudan at 49.4 percent, followed by Mauritania at 39.8 percent and Libya at 37.4 percent.

11. Prevalence of severe food insecurity, which approximates hunger indicator and refers to situations when individuals have likely run out of food, experienced hunger and, at the most extreme, gone for days without eating, stood at 10 percent in the NENA region in 2020. This is equivalent to 42 million people. When comparing the two most recent years, the number of severe food insecure people show an increase by 1.9 million people.

12. Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in 2020 is 1.2 percentage points higher compared with the level in 2014, whereas prevalence of severe food insecurity is slightly lower (0.4 percentage points). However, the absolute number of food insecure people have increased for both severity categories. The number of people experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity increased by 18.3 million whereas the number of severely food insecure people augmented by 3.1 million.

13. Between 2014 and 2020, the increase in the number of people who were moderately or severely food insecure was greater in conflict-affected countries⁴, a 27.1 percent increase, compared to non-conflict countries, 9.3 percent. In the same period, the number of severely food insecure people has increased considerably in conflict-affected countries, by 22.7 percent, whereas it fell by 2.7 percent in non-conflict countries. This trend again emphasizes a devastating impact of conflict on hunger and food security situation in the region.

Figure 2: The prevalence of food insecurity in the NENA region



III. Malnutrition in the NENA region

14. This section looks at malnutrition data in 19 NENA countries. In particular, four global nutrition indicators are discussed, including stunting, wasting and overweight in children under 5 years of age, and adult obesity (18+ years old).

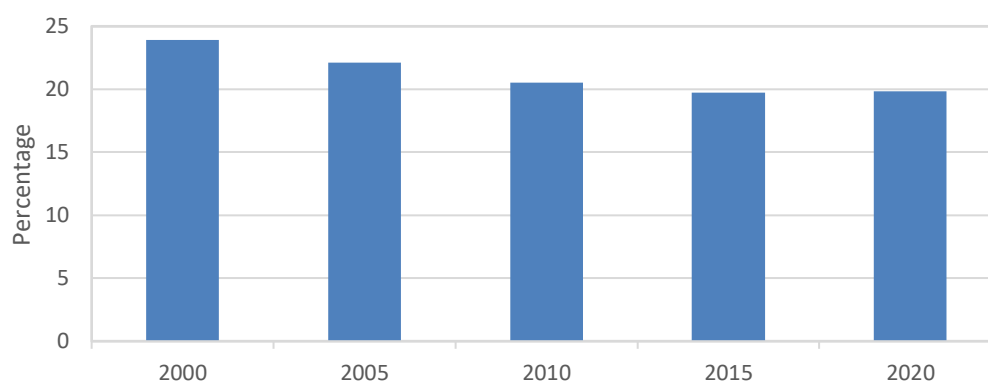
⁴ Conflict and non-conflict countries are identified on the basis of the Center for Systemic Peace data on Major Episodes of Political Violence, 2012-2018. The cut-off of a minimum of ten episodes of all interstate and civil violence was applied for disaggregating countries into conflict/non-conflict categories. (<https://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html>). Conflict-affected countries in the NENA region include Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Yemen

15. The worsening trends in hunger and food security situation described above suggest that a greater number of people face difficulties in accessing healthy diet. This will have negative implications on already precarious nutritional situation in the NENA region, which continues to suffer from multiple forms of malnutrition. Many countries show high levels of stunting and overweight in children under 5 years of age. Prevalence of adult obesity is on the rise in most countries of the region and the regional average significantly exceeds the global average.

Stunting and wasting in the NENA region

16. In the past two decades, there has been some progress in reducing maternal and child malnutrition across the region. Prevalence of stunting in children under five years of age has declined steadily since 2000. Currently the prevalence of stunting in the NENA region is estimated at 19.8 percent, which is considered as ‘medium’ public health problem⁵ based on the World Health Organization (WHO) classification of malnutrition severity. The stunting rates have declined in the vast majority of the NENA countries, with the exception of Kuwait, Libya and Syria where they have increased. In 2020, Libya, the Sudan and Yemen exhibited ‘very high’ prevalence of stunting while Egypt, Mauritania, and Syria had ‘high’ levels of stunting among children under five years of age. Figure 2 below shows a regional trend in the prevalence of stunting among children under five years of age in the past two decades.

Figure 3: The prevalence of stunting among children under five in the NENA region



17. The prevalence of wasting in children under five years of age in the NENA Region stood at 7.8 percent⁶ in 2020, indicating a ‘medium’ public health problem⁷. Based on the most recent country-level data, two conflict-affected NENA countries such as the Sudan (16.3 percent) and Yemen (16.4 percent) have the highest prevalence of wasting in the region. Two other conflict-affected countries, including Libya and Syria also display high prevalence of wasting (10.2 and 11.5 percent respectively). This suggests that undernutrition is closely linked to conflict and protracted crisis. Seven countries and territories have low wasting rates of below five percent (Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait,

⁵ Stunting prevalence cut-off values for public health significance: very low <2.5 percent; low 2.5–<10 percent; medium 10–<20 percent; high 20–<30 percent; very high ≥30 percent.

⁶ Data on the prevalence of wasting is for 22 Arab countries, which includes all NENA countries and three other countries such as Comoros, Djibouti and Somalia. Considering that these three additional countries have high to very high wasting rates, the prevalence of wasting in the NENA region could be lower than 7.8 percent.

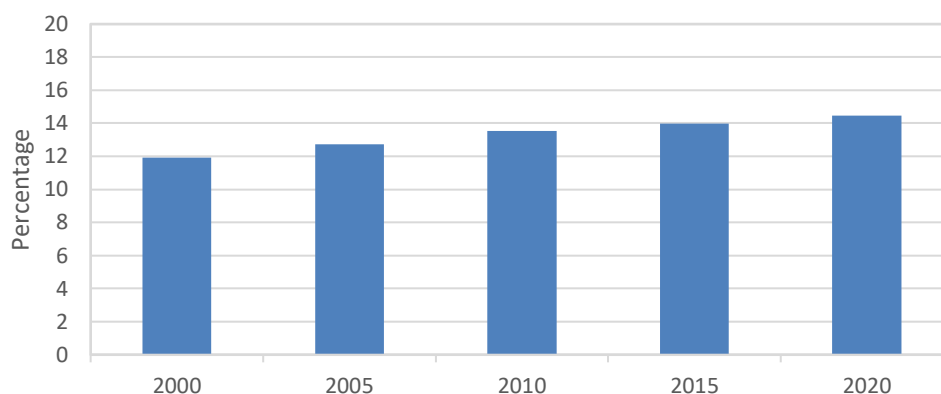
⁷ Prevalence cut-off values for public health significance for wasting in children under 5 years of age are as follows: very low <2.5 percent; low 2.5–<5 percent; medium 5–<10 percent; high 10–<15 percent; very high ≥15 percent.

Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia). These figures point at significant challenges the region will face to achieve the SDG 2.2. target of eliminating all forms of malnutrition by 2030.

Overweight and obesity in the NENA region

18. In the NENA region, 14.5 percent of children under five years of age were overweight in 2020, indicating a ‘high’ public health problem.⁸ In the past two decades, childhood overweight in the region has shown a steady increase. Most NENA countries exhibited increases with the exception of Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan, and Yemen where the prevalence of overweight in children under 5 years of age has declined. Childhood overweight is a ‘very high’ public health problem in five countries of the region such as Egypt (17.8 percent), Lebanon (19.7 percent), Libya (25.4 percent), the Syrian Arab Republic (18.2 percent) and Tunisia (16.5 percent). The levels are ‘high’ in three other countries, including Algeria (12.9 percent), Morocco (11.3 percent) and Qatar (13.9 percent). Only four countries in the region displayed ‘low’ prevalence of childhood overweight, including Mauritania, the Sudan, Yemen and Oman. Figure 3 below shows a regional trend in the prevalence of overweight in children under five years of age in the past two decades.

Figure 4: The prevalence of overweight among children under five in the NENA region



19. The latest year estimate for the NENA Region shows that 30.2 percent of adult population is obese, i.e. significantly higher than the global average of 13.1 percent. The prevalence of obesity increased at different rates in all countries of the region since 2000. The most significant increase of 10 percent is recorded in Algeria and Jordan. Based on latest estimates, nine out of 19 NENA countries display particularly high rates of adult obesity of above 30 percent⁹. This suggests that significant efforts are needed to encourage healthier eating and lifestyle to curb overweight and obesity rates in the region.

⁸ Prevalence cut-off values for public health significance for child overweight are as follows: very low <2.5 percent; low 2.5 –<5 percent; medium 5 –<10 percent; high 10 –<15 percent; very high ≥15 percent.

⁹ Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates