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**The road to transformative agrifood systems in Europe and Central Asia –
Regional actions to implement the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31**

Executive Summary

This background document synthesizes the priority issues for the Europe and Central Asia region to gain the optimal balance needed among agrifood systems, the environment and natural resources; to promote healthy diets; and to give focus and voice to consumers. It also highlights how the principle of leaving no one behind should be considered in agrifood transformative efforts, and it covers key interventions in the region to advance sustainable agrifood systems that balance economic, environmental and social aspects.

Enablers and frameworks to achieve agrifood systems transformation are considered, including follow-up to the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) through national dialogues, National Pathways, and United Nations Climate Framework Convention on Climate Change 26th Conference of the Parties (COP 26) commitments. This paper underlines the need to continually address persistent challenges (e.g. malnutrition, natural resources degradation, inequality and resilience) and discusses alignment with and support available through the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 (FAO, 2021c) to address these priorities.

This paper also notes efforts made in the region and highlights commitments to further enable better communication between line ministries and stakeholders, to break down silos, move towards policy coherence and encourage greater interaction and coordination among governments, the private sector, academia, civil society and communities.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to urge Members to:

- affirm the critical importance to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda of coordinated action and investment in technology, innovation, data and complements (governance, human capital, and institutions) towards more sustainable agrifood systems;
- continue facilitating cooperation among multiple stakeholders and across sectors to build upon the UNFSS results and commit to supporting national, regional and local actions, including the implementation of national pathways;

- work together to address common regional agrifood systems issues, including through multilateral instruments and platforms;
- continue collecting and sharing data and evidence to inform policy decisions and actions.
- measure the performance of agrifood systems by including targets and results for sustainability;
- strengthen resilience by investing in smallholders and family farms and updating agrifood systems to be better prepared, adaptable and autonomous;
- commit to focusing sustainable agrifood interventions to provide healthy diets, including a production shift to increased availability of plant-based foods, with due attention to facilitating the nutrition transition;
- work in a cross-sectoral way to improve the food environment for consumers to make nutritious and informed food choices;
- promote sustainable agrifood systems through nature-based solutions and the greening of the sector, including through responsible investments, agroecology, bioeconomy, and climate change mitigation and adaptation;
- share experiences on effective actions and best practices identified as critical to ensuring that agrifood systems developments contribute to an acceleration in the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- improve the social sustainability and inclusivity of agrifood systems through gender- and age-balanced approaches in order to ensure sustainable and equitable agrifood livelihoods.

The Regional Conference is invited to call upon FAO to:

- continue to support Members to effectively implement the food systems transformation agenda, including accelerators to fast-track progress and maximize prospects for contributing to achieving the SDGs;
- support Members and agrifood systems actors through implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 addressing the four regional priorities, including a focus on accelerators, cross-cutting themes and FAO corporate strategies and initiatives;
- support the follow-up to the UNFSS, including addressing common regional issues and supporting countries during the implementation of National Pathways, in coordination with the United Nations Coordination Hub in Rome, and relevant regional mechanisms;
- continue to work with other United Nations partners in the regional Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems to support regional and country efforts.

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I. Introduction

1. Members affirmed the importance of sustainable, holistic agrifood systems (FAO, 2021a)¹ at the 32nd Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe (FAO, 2020a). This highlighted the need to address inequalities, empower vulnerable and marginalized groups, and provide affordable healthy diets for all, in line with the economic, environmental and social pillars of sustainable development. Subsequently, valuable global initiatives and discussions took place at the United Nations Climate Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, COP15), the Nutrition for Growth Summit, and the UNFSS, including Member Country Dialogues and National Pathways.² The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the relevance of strategic commitments to strengthening agrifood systems' resilience as well as the conflict in Ukraine and its consequences for regional and global food security (FAO, 2022g).
2. Building on commitments and the momentum generated, countries in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region are implementing ambitious policies and actions transforming the full food systems spectrum (HLPE, 2017).³
3. The main purpose of this document is to facilitate the discussion and actions of this transformation process. Therefore, the common challenges faced and the sustainability issues to be addressed in transformative processes are discussed. Agreed policy instruments and drivers of change are outlined for their useful roles and effectiveness in supporting governments' current considerable work with stakeholders on the road to transform agrifood systems. The background document also profiles key initiatives and the supporting role of the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31, with its focus on deepening partnerships with Members to assist their transformative agenda for more sustainable agrifood systems.
4. Section II of this document defines transformative agrifood system needs in the ECA region and synthesized priority issues to help better balance economic, environment and social aspects. Section III elaborates on opportunities for concrete sustainability measures to address regional- and country-level priorities emerging from the UNFSS that are consistent with the Action Tracks. Section IV concludes with recommendations to Members and FAO.

II. Context, challenges and drivers of change for ECA agrifood systems' transformative agenda

5. The ECA region includes 54 high- and middle-income countries with a total population of 921 million people, one-third of whom live in rural areas (World Bank, 2020). In recent decades, agrifood systems across the ECA region have achieved high levels of food security and have been under continual improvement to meet food safety requirements and provide consumers with ample food choices. The region's agrifood systems remain diverse, at different development stages, with different structural and policy contexts in terms of development status, natural resources and structural characteristics. Differing challenges occur when transforming towards more sustainable and inclusive agrifood systems, applying nutrition-sensitive approaches and developing rural areas. While agriculture remains key for rural livelihoods and income across the ECA region, the gross domestic product (GDP) share varies considerably (FAO, forthcoming), with the commonality that small family farms (FAO, 2020b) predominate farming's structural characteristics in many countries.

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 constitute livelihoods and all the people and activities, investments and choices that play a part in getting us these food and agricultural products.

² Members' UNFSS National Pathways constitute a rich source of information on game-changing actions and systemic solutions to transform food systems. As of 8 March 2022, the 24 countries that have published UNFSS National Pathways are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Poland, Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Uzbekistan. For more information, see <https://summitdialogues.org/overview/member-state-food-systems-summit-dialogues/convenors/>.

³ The term "food system" covers "all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes."

6. Agrifood sector transformation has historically focused on production. Now, broader sustainability considerations are increasingly integrated to balance the importance of environmental, social and economic aspects. Despite progress, there is a need to further reduce fragmentation between agrifood policy rhetoric and the reality of agrifood activity at field level to capitalize on possibilities for enhanced sustainability – particularly for nutrition, climate, natural resources, livelihood equality and resilience.

7. The impact of the war in Ukraine calls for a thorough assessment and mitigation. The security of food production and trade is being compromised by conflict and sanctions. Specific concerns in Ukraine (FAO, 2022b) include the food security situation, the availability of inputs for the imminent spring planting season (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, equipment and fuel), meat production activities and management of animal stocks and disease control (supply of animal feed, veterinary drugs), and uncertainty regarding farming activities and the ability to reap the current harvest. Food supply and marketing channels have been disrupted and impacted by damage to infrastructure. African swine fever risks have risen,⁴ and new threats to food security, nutrition, natural resources and social inclusion now also exist and are spilling over to countries in the ECA region and to other regions of the world. Increasing food prices and fuel costs, disruption to supply and trade in food and agricultural commodities (e.g. grains, fertilizers and animal feeds), and increasing poverty rates due to the overall downturn in the economy are just some of the challenges requiring policy decisions. The impacts of the war need continuous and close monitoring by the international community. Countries that depend on food imports from the Russian Federation and Ukraine can strengthen resilience and autonomy through diversifying their domestic production bases, and export restrictions should be avoided (FAO, 2022g).

8. The FAO Strategic Framework's aspirational and inspirational intentions can support Members progress their goals for transforming agrifood systems to address current challenges within a coordinated and coherent policy fabric focused on sustainable development that leaves no one behind. FAO work on sustainable agrifood systems contributes to the SDGs more broadly. SDGs 1, 2 and 10 are three main guiding SDGs for the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31, which is designed to support Members through promoting better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life.

2.1 *Better Production*

9. Better production in the ECA region (FAO, 2021e) is needed for improving food security and nutrition by taking advantage of opportunities and tackling challenges (FAO, 2022c). Production factors vary across the ECA region, with modernization, valorisation, environmental sustainability and social considerations being common objectives along the farm to fork continuum for agrifood transition in all countries. Issues hindering production capacity include the extent of informal markets as well as underutilization, land fragmentation, dysfunctional agricultural land markets or limited access to land, water availability, skills, technology, finance and infrastructure. Smallholders and family farms are a key pillar of agrifood systems in most of the countries in the region, with high proportions (up to 99 percent in some cases) of farms being under 5 ha in size (FAO, 2019a). Improving smaller farms' productivity can help tackle a broad spectrum of sustainable development challenges (FAO, 2020c). The challenge of inefficient and suboptimal supply chain infrastructure – including weak internal connectivity between stages, including distribution and market linkages – can lead to inadequate practices for food safety, hygiene and animal husbandry and can result in food loss and waste (OECD, 2021).⁵ The inability to access domestic and international markets, especially by smallholders, is a further manifestation.

⁴ Member Countries' UNFSS National Pathways constitute a rich source of information on game-changing actions and systemic solutions to transform food systems. <https://summitdialogues.org/overview/member-state-food-systems-summit-dialogues/convenors/>. As of 8 March 2022, the 24 countries that have published their UNFSS National Pathways are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Poland, Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and Uzbekistan.

⁵ Global food losses of 14 percent of total production are noted by the [OECD](#), and the [UNEP 2021 Food waste Index 2021](#) refers to 931 million tonnes of food waste in 2019.

10. Food and agricultural commodity supply chains involving cross-border trade provide strategic regional benefits and can be strengthened. Advantages also exist for rural and urban stakeholders in reinforcing shorter value chains that are nutrition sensitive. Pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the potential for better production and related support initiatives (including leveraging public and private financing) to help pave the way towards transforming regional agrifood supply chains.

2.2 Better Nutrition

11. Nutrition in the ECA region continues to show positive development, with countries on track to achieve the 2025 and 2030 SDG targets for childhood stunting. However, the prevalence of childhood overweight and adult obesity in the region is increasing. The region is also not on track to tackle iron deficiency among women aged 15-49 (FAO *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, small increases in undernourishment were reported (2019-2020) in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Western Balkans. Exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life is below the world average, though progress is being made in reducing various forms of malnutrition. The region's aggregate average red meat and milk consumption is above optimal intake standards,⁶ and the cost of a healthy diet is relatively more expensive (approximately 5 times the cost of an energy sufficient diet and 1.6 times the cost of a nutritionally adequate diet). Despite increased per capita availability for consumption of plant-based foods in ECA-15 countries⁷ during the past 15 years, gaps exist in the availability of fruits (limiting related health, nutritional and economic benefits) and pulses (limiting related health, nutritional, environmental and economic benefits).

12. Investment in food safety through effective policy and preventive controls by food chain actors is a priority to protect consumers' health and raise nutrition levels. Creating an "enabling food environment" for consumers is critical – one in which diverse and nutritious food is available at affordable prices and the phenomenon of food deserts (Beaumont *et al.*, 1995)⁸ is eliminated. Actions (including financing) to promote affordable healthy diets and improve nutrition for all should be prioritized across the region during sustainable food system transformations (Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems, 2021).⁹ The consequences of the war in Ukraine are expected to have significant impacts on food security in the region.

2.3 Better Environment

13. COP26 and UNFSS have elevated global focus on environmental protection and natural resource management and how we produce, use or consume food. Protecting natural resources through nature-based solutions (FAO, 2021d; Global Program on Nature-Based Solutions for Climate Resilience, 2022), agroecology (FAO, 2020d), and climate-resilient agriculture (FAO, 2021b) is productive for transforming agrifood systems in the ECA region. The loss or damage of wildlife habitats or other natural capital (including soil and water) following land conversion, agricultural pollution, or run-offs from agricultural land needs mitigation through holistic solutions.

14. Such solutions can also help mitigate serious climate trends (e.g. unprecedented floods in Western Europe, drought in Kazakhstan, forest fires in Greece and Turkey) that adversely impact agrifood systems. The growth of holistic, green and climate-resilient agriculture models is needed, noting that livestock products (especially cattle and sheep) have emission intensities larger than most food crops (UNDP, 2021). The COP26 climate convention underlined the urgency for green agrifood solutions to help achieve global targets for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (UNEP, 2021) by 55 percent and for limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees. The World Bank calculates (World Bank, 2022a) that if no climate action is taken, economic damages from droughts and floods in Central Asia will be up to 1.3 percent of the GDP per annum, while crop yields are expected to decrease by

⁶ The consumption of animal-based foods in the region is above the world average, and European Union consumption is more than double the world average.

⁷ References to the ECA-15 in this report include the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

⁸ "Food deserts" refers to the phenomenon in communities where there is a lack of affordable and healthy food options and/or a high proportion of fast food outlets is a concerning and contributing factor.

⁹ The Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems is a regional UN platform with members FAO, WHO, UNICEF, WFP, UNECE, WMO, UNDP, IFAD. For more information, see <https://unece.org/issue-based-coalition-sustainable-food-systems>.

30 percent by 2050. Ambitious GHG proposals are set out in the European Union Green Deal’s “Fit for 55 package”, including new pricing mechanisms, targets, standards and support measures (European Commission, 2022a). These will help European Union countries reduce large impact risks from extreme weather that are predicted to have an overall European Union cost reaching EUR 170 billion by the end of the century (World Bank, 2022a). Increased energy costs, the need to identify alternative supplies of fuel, and the expected downturn in economies due to the war in Ukraine may result in a slowdown in achieving the ambitious GHG emission reduction target.

2.4 *Better Life*

15. Transforming agrifood systems sustainably involves preventing poverty and inequality by leaving no one behind. The scope exists to deploy agrifood systems as transformative channels for confronting poverty paradigms and improving equitable livelihoods for all. Key constraints still exist in accessing information, services and finance, with direct impacts on the efficiency of farming and the cycle of poverty. Farmers should be paid fairly for providing public goods, especially when time and resources are invested in applying practices that lead to improved nutritional quality and safety of agricultural produce, carbon capture, protection of biodiversity, and bioeconomy (FAO, 2015). Although regional agrifood employment conditions are improving (e.g. new social conditionality through the European Union countries’ Common Agricultural Policy European Commission, 2021b) and eliminating forced labour elsewhere (ILO, 2021), the region-wide demand for decent employment has not diminished, and “digital divides” persist throughout the region. Increased resilience is also key to improving livelihoods and addressing inequalities through policies, strategies, programmes and legal frameworks for inclusive rural transformation, which has broader benefits for the livelihoods of all the rural community, in addition to smallholders. Tackling poverty requires agrifood analysis of recent shocks in the ECA region, including the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2022b)¹⁰ and the war in Ukraine (Kazatchkine, 2022).

16. FAO country gender assessments (FAO, 2022f) draw attention to the need for gender-transformative policies that address the root causes of inequality. Women play vital roles in agrifood systems as food producers, consumers and wage-earners engaged in the processing trade and small businesses. However, they often work informally, in unpaid or underpaid positions. Women can also suffer disadvantages from lack of access to land, farm ownership, inputs, control of resources, advisory and extension services, financial services and credit, and education and training. Enhancing infrastructure and services can help transform the quality of life and sustainable livelihoods for women and their families in rural areas (FAO, 2020e). A lack of territorial techniques in rural spatial planning or agrifood policy can obstruct such benefits (FAO, 2021f), and better rural transformation should build on equitable, digitalized and resilient foundations.

III. Priorities to overcome ECA agrifood system challenges and move from strategic vision to concrete action

17. The following sections elaborate on opportunities for concrete sustainability measures that reflect regional- and country-level emerging priorities following the UNFSS and the implementation of FAO’s work programme in 2020-21. Roles and importance are reinforced for the FAO Strategic Framework accelerators¹¹ as well as the cross-cutting themes of gender, youth and inclusion. COP26 commitments direct green priorities and provide channels for multisectoral cooperation among public, private, academic and civil society, established through the UNFSS National Pathways’ scope as a nexus for country-level nutrition–health–climate–food actions.

3.1 *Achieve better production: resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses*

18. Building back better from the COVID-19 crisis and Ukraine war shocks includes an unprecedented transformative opportunity to build in new sustainability solutions, with a strong focus

¹⁰ World Bank pandemic assessments indicate that 4.3 million additional people in the ECA region may have slipped into poverty (using the USD 5.50/day poverty line).

¹¹ The four accelerators are: technology, innovation (including digital), data (including big data) and complements (human capital, governance, institutions).

on building resilience. Innovation, technology, data and complements can accelerate SDG contributions that exclude no one while improving production and resilience to crises (including pandemics, climate change and conflict) through fortified agrifood systems that are better at being prepared, adaptable and autonomous.

19. UNFSS National Pathways are important starting points to boost actions for improved sustainability and should be incorporated into key sectoral policies and national sustainable development plans as policy vehicles. Resilience, for instance, is a priority for the Italian (UNFSS, 2021c) and Serbian (UNFSS, 2021a) National Pathways. A 2022 Western Balkans assessment of COVID-19 impacts (FAO, 2022d) on agrifood systems promotes resilience through better production, fostering economic growth while decreasing dependence on food imports. COVID-19 recovery measures in Central Asia and the Caucasus encourage high-value processed products with longer shelf lives while enabling compliance with international food safety standards. Innovation and technologies are important to improve the efficiency of value chains, including increased access to markets, trade diversification and value addition. Improving biosecurity through the One Health approach also supports resilience throughout the agrifood system.

20. Territorial approaches³⁵ can support resilience and provide other advantages by enabling multisectoral coordinating mechanisms to build agrifood systems suitable to the specific community and region. Territorial techniques and bottom-up delivery also can be applied by farm advisory bodies, community groups and others. Resilience gains from effective extension services are signalled through the Kazakhstan National Pathway, among others (UNFSS, 2021b).

21. Opportunities for transforming ECA agrifood systems allow systems to be evolved and constructed without silos, providing more integrated and efficient solutions from the synergies that are harnessed. This can inspire more holistic approaches for measuring the performance of agrifood system transformations vis-à-vis production, nutrition, the environment and people's livelihoods. Applied science and knowledge can fast-track progress in such monitoring and evaluation shifts using redistributed public costs and benefits across agrifood system chains during resilience planning. Long-term resilience success will rely on short- and medium-term responsible investments (CFS, 2014) from simplified, cohesive financial instruments that leverage large proportions of private investor funds for public purposes. The InvestEU financing guarantee (European Commission, 2022b) holds strong international demonstration value for its innovative ability to solve old problems in new ways by making public money (EUR 370 billion) go further and allowing investments to become more affordable for all.

3.2 *Achieve better nutrition: nourish all people*

22. Nutrition is a prominent theme in National Pathways (UNFSS, 2022), including Armenia's recognition of nutrition's role in strengthening shock resilience to the Russian Federation's priority of reducing all forms of malnutrition. Finland's National Pathway features silo-free policy coherence through its National Nutrition Council, and Kyrgyzstan's National Pathway encourages synergies among stakeholders to achieve healthy food consumption.

23. Focusing agrifood systems transformation on improving nutrition outcomes contributes to social and environmental sustainability (FAO, 2022c). Sustainable healthy diets (FAO and WHO, 2019), consumer behaviour change and agrifood innovations can address the dual challenges of nutrition and climate. Shifting consumption patterns toward low-fat, increased consumption of plant-based foods and reduced animal-based foods is recommended on health grounds (in particular to tackle overweight and obesity and the risk of non-communicable diseases), and in terms of resource use and reduction in greenhouse gas emissions that exacerbate climate change. The available toolkit of policy and practical actions includes the Committee on World Food Security Voluntary Guidelines on Food Safety and Nutrition (CFS, 2021) and national food-based dietary guidelines (FAO, 2016a). International frameworks also support these efforts, such as the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, the Second International Conference on Nutrition Framework for Action (FAO and WHO, 2014), and the Nutrition for Growth Summit pledges.

24. Further progress on improving nutrition can be made by the game-changing solution of promoting healthy food consumption through schools and other public facilities. Nutrition education and food literacy inform consumer food choices, behaviours and habits, leading to improved nutrition and less food loss and waste. Increased consumer awareness creates demand for foods from sustainable sources that can support fair trade, decent working conditions for food producers, animal welfare, and environmentally responsible green consumption (purchasing and disposal).

25. Consumer food choices are determined by availability, physical access, personal knowledge about nutritious food, and affordability, among others (EUFIC, 2006). Mainstreaming gender in actions is important for recognizing women's and men's distinct roles in family nutrition and for ensuring that women and men, girls and boys benefit and have the required skills and knowledge to improve their food and nutrition status. Food pricing can be rebalanced through nutrition-sensitive incentives (e.g. consumer-level subsidies [Flores and Rivas, 2017]) and disincentives [e.g. fiscal penalties]). Targeted policy actions can help create healthy food environments (Djojoseparto *et al.*, 2021) (e.g. bans on trans fats in processed and ultra-processed foods; mandatory and/or voluntary food, composition and reformulation targets for added sugars, salt and saturated fats for various food categories, including for ultra-processed meals; and a 0 percent VAT exemption for all fresh fruit and vegetables). Use of new technologies, appropriate food and nutrition labelling, and large-scale food fortification are other intervention channels to provide affordable and accessible healthy diets in the region. Prioritizing performance targets for enabling food environments can be a powerful results-led driver for sustainable change in the consumption, production and processing of agrifood commodities.

26. Safe trade mechanisms, including formal trade agreements, appropriate tariffs and food safety regulations, offer more opportunities for better nutrition by directing food availability and relative prices. The COVID-19 pandemic experience illustrates the vital value of policies that sustain food trade during times of stress. The Agricultural Trade Expert Network (ATEN) (FAO, 2022e) is an important informal platform for discussion among participating countries.

3.3 *Achieve better environment: boost nature-positive solutions*

27. The ECA region has rich natural resources but suffers from water scarcity, land degradation, biodiversity loss and the impacts of climate change. Unsustainable farm practices can obstruct the efficient use of land and water; for example, more than half the agricultural land in Central Asia is degraded by water scarcity, salinization or pesticide contamination (FAO, 2021d). Many European Union countries face problems with high nitrate content in groundwater (European Environment Agency, 2021).

28. Agrifood policies need to sustainably, responsibly and inclusively manage natural resources while tackling climate change and minimizing food loss and waste. Agrifood system approaches for a better environment are highlighted in UNFSS National Pathways. In Tajikistan, for example, environmentally friendly practices are reported over the whole food system as consistent with agreed climate change measures and strategies to preserve and promote biodiversity. Turkey's National Pathway is another example confirming how food systems are to be transformed, providing healthy diets for all while mitigating climate change, protecting biodiversity, improving food supply chains and protecting smallholders. Strengthening resilience against food loss and waste is spotlighted by Denmark's National Pathway via public-private partnerships and voluntary agreements as game-changing tools for the reduction of food loss and waste.

29. Nature-positive production in agrifood systems depends on all actors adequately understanding and playing their parts in safeguarding natural resources for future generations. Transforming agrifood systems sustainability involves reducing pesticide pollution, protecting waterways, expanding organic production systems, promoting the bioeconomy and preventing food loss and waste, in addition to managing natural resources through evidence-based actions to shield them against depletion. Upscaling agroecology approaches (IISD, 2018) in the ECA region can boost the greening of agrifood systems by utilizing science and economic knowledge to direct nature-positive approaches (e.g. climate-smart agriculture, nature-based solutions and sustainable land management). Additionally, agroecology approaches contribute to enhanced resilience and improved livelihoods. Decreasing GHG emissions through increased afforestation, reforestation and protection

of agroecosystems is promoted. Encouraging and facilitating One Health approaches (including the fight against antimicrobial resistance) is imperative for the region's people, animals and ecosystems. Furthermore, the region's food processing sector sits at the supply and demand interface, so its investments in technologies and complements, (governance, human capital and institutions) can improve efficiency and shape environmentally sustainable production and consumption patterns (e.g. by requiring improved sustainability monitoring and performance by suppliers and providing consumers with information on performance [OECD, 2021]).

30. Members can do more to scale up data-driven, nature-positive production in the region. Evidence-based, data-led approaches through methods, standards and frameworks are key to accelerating the efficient transformation of agrifood systems, and data are becoming referred to as “the new soil” because it supports existing prosperity and stimulates new growth (European Commission, forthcoming). The ECA Regional Technical Platform (FAO, 2022a) on green agriculture prioritizes digital tools for accelerating innovation and knowledge sharing among FAO Members. The European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019) also advocates for data quality across 27 countries through frameworks and capacity building to help fast-track the greening of European Union agrifood systems. It also influences European Union accession criteria and the greening of global trade. In addition to prioritizing evidence-led interventions, another Green Deal success factor is the accompaniment of financing to support agrifood sectors.

31. Across the ECA region, the financing of nature-positive production is needed to ensure producers, processors and consumers are incentivized and compensated for providing public benefits that sustain a better environment. A portfolio of financing is required to meet the range of different transformative needs. Demand for grant schemes and investment support differ among stakeholders, and their context (urban versus rural, age, gender, etc.). Good practice in public policy investment support takes advantage of possibilities for harnessing private sector investment to provide public sector results.

3.4 *Achieve better life: equitable livelihoods, decent work*

32. Stimulating investments and financial instruments is important for empowering smallholders and small producers to ensure more efficient, shorter value chains that provide nutritious and safe foods while addressing the ECA region's widening rural–urban inequalities. Advancing equitable livelihoods to leave no one behind requires appreciation of the ease at which well-intended actions can result in inequitable outcomes. For example, transforming food systems to reach environmental and nutritional objectives can come at the detriment of vulnerable groups (Davis, Lipper and Winters, 2022) whose competitiveness and purchasing powers could be adversely affected by any inherent additional costs. It is critical to overcome the persistent constraints encountered by smallholders and family farms, including access to timely and quality data, extension services and finance. FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative strives to facilitate the equitable transformation of agrifood systems by supporting acceleratory complements (e.g. governance, human capital and institutions), rectifying stakeholder exclusion risks. Tajikistan is currently the only ECA region country using Hand-in-Hand's data-driven (FAO, 2019b) systems. Aforementioned territorial approaches (FAO, 2021f) can also address livelihood improvement, and building capacities for evidence-based decision-making on rural development can contribute to the achievement of inclusive, resilient rural transformation. The *Regional Synthesis Report on Empowering Smallholders and Family Farms* (FAO, 2020b) provides related policy recommendations.

33. The affordability of nutritious food is a contributory factor in poverty paradigms. Greater equity can be achieved through the UNFSS game-changer of strengthening and mainstreaming true cost accounting (Hendriks *et al.*, 2021) to redefine value in food systems. Improving the affordability of nutritious food will help empower smallholders, family farms, women and youth to benefit from an inclusive, better life. This empowerment also can be supported by the transformative potential of digital developments. This received prominence during the 32nd Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe (ITU and FAO, 2021), because digital technologies can accelerate food systems transformation by, for example, improving efficiency in food supply chains, increasing access

to markets through online marketing and sales, reducing food loss and waste, and improving water management.

34. It is necessary to advance gender equality in the ECA region to address persistent gender gaps that limit progress among Members. The importance of gender equality in the ECA region was underscored by a specific background paper discussed during the recent session of the European Commission for Agriculture (FAO, 2022f). The paper proposed further strengthening the evidence base of gender gaps and gender data relevant to agriculture and rural development. Targeted economic, social and environmental policies and projects are needed that empower rural women by providing them with diverse and viable opportunities for income generation, decent work, entrepreneurship and inclusive value chains, and by reducing the gender pay gap and women's unpaid workload. The FAO Decent Rural Employment Toolbox (FAO, 2017) is designed to help countries advance with equitable livelihoods. Its modules feature case studies, guidance materials and other useful resources promoting decent employment for priority groups, including youth and women. Members should continue to invest in physical and social infrastructure and recognize women's role in unpaid domestic and care work to reduce this burden. Implementing these gender recommendations (FAO, 2016b) for the ECA region will also build long-term advantages in terms of resilience to vulnerabilities, shock and stress through improved collaboration, participation, ideas and experience.

3.5 *Support means of implementation*

35. Holistic, territorial and results-oriented management tools for agrifood systems offer a good basis for moving forward efficiently. Agrifood transformation processes allow systems to be evolved and constructed without silos. Integrated thinking permits the inclusion of inspired and innovative commitments in the ECA region to update the way we value and measure production, the environment and people's livelihoods.

36. Robust policy processes, including local governance, are needed to avoid diverging interests and overcome value differences, leading to improved policy coherence, coordination and public-private initiatives. Synergies and trade-offs need to be understood and evaluated. Choices must be made and priorities established in ways that attract broad societal support by providing inclusive platforms for multiple stakeholders and disciplines to come together to shape agrifood systems at national and local levels. Public costs and benefits can be redistributed all along the agrifood system chain during resilience planning. Evolved thinking and other drivers of change can, for instance, lead to more production of diversified foods to meet nutritional needs, and they can help balance agrifood production pressures with more environmentally friendly practices to lessen impacts on natural resources.

37. National targets and guidelines can help drive progress towards achieving the Agenda 2030 framework of targets and indicators for sustainability by, for example, promoting certifiable sustainable standards. Targets and results-based policy programming rely on evidence-based decision-making and contribute to Members' other sustainability goals, including COP26 commitments and bioeconomy ambitions for plastics, soil, water and air. Examples can include using science and knowledge to determine sustainability criteria within industry tools like the OECD-FAO Guidance for Responsible Agricultural Supply Chains (OECD and FAO, 2016) and the European Union Farm to Fork Code of Conduct for Responsible Food Business and Marketing Practices (European Commission, 2021a). FAO's new corporate strategy on science and innovation will allow for greater impact at country level through the better use of science and innovation. Two other measurable Farm to Fork innovations with transferability potential for the wider ECA region are derogations, used in competition law to promote sustainability agreements for producer organizations (ENRD, 2022b), and financing (supported by extension capacity building) for the upscaling of carbon farming (ENRD, 2022a). These are being developed through broad consultation schemes, and dialogue is fundamental to implementing change through stakeholder cooperation.

38. Disruptive impacts from COVID-19 and the conflict in Ukraine have created significant recovery needs and subsequent opportunities for territorial agrifood system policies at local, in-country levels. These can promote cooperation via dialogue and development based on cross-cutting

age and gender-balanced needs being confirmed and considered through evidence-led, bottom-up consultation techniques.

39. Building skills and understanding among producers, processors and consumers through dialogue and information networking helps everyone make sustainable choices. Food systems assessment tools also are useful for helping provide much-needed evidence and data at the country level to operationalize synergies and interpret trade-offs. Several countries in the region¹² are developing food systems profiles to provide snapshots of key drivers, statuses and national food systems outcomes using methodologies and assessment tools.¹³

IV. Policy recommendations for FAO and Members

40. Considering all the points above, the following recommendations are based on findings and reviews of the main drivers of change aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31, the UNFSS and regional priorities. National Pathways offer useful opportunities as transformative vehicles.

4.1 *The Regional Conference is invited to urge Members to:*

- **Affirm the critical importance to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda of coordinated action and investment in the four accelerators – technology, innovation, data and complements (governance, human capital and institutions) – towards more sustainable agrifood systems.**

They will help fast-track progress, contribute to the continual modernization and efficiency of agrifood systems, and maximize prospects for contributing to the SDGs.

- **Continue facilitating cooperation among multiple stakeholders and across sectors to build upon the UNFSS results and commit to supporting national, regional and local actions, including implementation of national pathways.**

This should include building on the processes of national dialogues and the implementation of National Pathways and preparing for continued engagement, including the priorities for FAO in the region under the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 and the process of UNFSS follow-up and review planned for autumn 2023.

- **Work together to address common regional agrifood systems issues, including through multilateral instruments and platforms.**

Certain agrifood issues have a regional dimension, as they impact many countries and can be transboundary in nature – for example, those related to health, environment, trade, food supplies, gender, age, inclusion and smallholders. Bilateral information exchange and engaging in existing mechanisms – such as the World Trade Organization, Codex Alimentarius, International Plant Protection Convention, ATEN, ministerial meetings and territorial planning – are recommended.

- **Continue collecting and sharing data and evidence to inform policy decisions and actions.**

This includes solving old problems in new ways by applying science and knowledge. Evidence is also needed to understand trade-offs. Adopting data helps to strengthen collection, processing and data dissemination for evidence-based decision-making, and this will require building capacity through partnerships.

- **Measure the performance of agrifood systems by including targets and results for sustainability.**

¹² The Members of the Organization for the Black Sea Economic Cooperation are listed at <http://www.bsec-organization.org/member-states>.

¹³ For more information, see <https://www.fao.org/support-to-investment/our-work/projects/fsa2021/en/>; the 2016 Global Panel Report on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition; and the CFS 2017 High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition report.

Expanding the way we measure success will catalyse and accelerate transformative pledges and commitments into concrete results throughout the ECA region. Measuring sustainability means simultaneously considering the multiple dimensions of environmental, economic and social, and recognizing and understanding their trade-offs. True cost accounting also drives policy-makers to consider “value” beyond a purely economic focus to one that encompasses nutrition, health, and social and environmental values.

- **Strengthen resilience by investing in smallholders and family farms, and updating agrifood systems to be better prepared, adaptable and autonomous.**

Converting the resilience rhetoric into reality at the country level requires a focus on generational renewal and new solutions for the new problems that continue to create unexpected crises in the ECA region. More resilience can be achieved by using public guarantees to leverage private investments that provide SDG contributions. Decision-makers are encouraged to strive for “autonomy” as a high-level goal, with the range of options, opportunities and priorities it may present.

- **Commit to focusing sustainable agrifood interventions to provide healthy diets, including a production shift to increased availability of plant-based foods, with due attention to facilitating the nutrition transition.**

Climate and health benefits flow from shifting long-term horizons away from red meat and towards the production and consumption of plant-based foods. The pandemic and extreme climate have highlighted the importance of a transition to carbon-capturing, emissions-reducing and sustainable healthy diets to tackle all forms of malnutrition, including obesity. Climate finance can be harnessed to provide health benefits while contributing to the FAO Strategy for Climate Change . Enabling this shift calls for policies and interventions to address the affordability of a healthy diet.

- **Work in a cross-sectoral way to improve the food environment to enable consumers to make nutritious and informed food choices.**

Working in partnership helps to accelerate policies and actions across agrifood systems to enable healthy diets at the scale needed to achieve the SDGs, while also striving to improve social, economic and environmental outcomes. Collective action by policy-makers, private sector and others across food systems, including trade, can influence and shape the enabling food environment for consumers. Synergies throughout food systems adds value to efforts to achieve better production, better nutrition, better environment and a better life.

- **Promote sustainable agrifood systems through nature-based solutions and the greening of the sector, including through responsible investments, agroecology, bioeconomy, and climate change mitigation and adaptation.**

Balancing how we use, produce and consume food brings the agriculture–environment interface to the fore. Game-changing solutions and actions have emerged from the UNFSS, and previously negotiated CFS texts are a valuable resource for countries, including the CFS Responsible Investment in Agriculture Principles and the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition, for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

- **Share experiences on effective actions and best practices identified as critical to ensuring that agrifood systems developments contribute to an acceleration in the delivery of the SDGs.**

Networking and knowledge transfer regarding success and development related to country priorities and National Pathway actions should prioritize accelerators and cross-cutting actions, supporting inclusion, gender and youth.

- **Improve the social sustainability and inclusivity of agrifood systems through gender- and age-balanced approaches in order to ensure sustainable and equitable agrifood livelihoods.**

FAO’s cross-cutting themes of gender, youth and inclusion are critical areas for supporting the aspirational principle of leaving no one behind, and territorial approaches have proven track

records for fast-tracking the inclusive transformation of agrifood systems. This should enable a further localization of food systems.

4.2 *The Regional Conference is invited to call upon FAO to:*

- Continue supporting Members in effectively implementing the agrifood systems transformation agenda, including accelerators to fast-track progress and maximize prospects for contributing to the SDGs.
- Support Members and agrifood systems actors through the implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31, addressing the four regional priorities and including a focus on accelerators, cross-cutting themes and FAO corporate strategies and initiatives.
- Support the follow-up to the UNFSS, including addressing common regional issues and supporting countries during the implementation of National Pathways, in coordination with the Food Systems Coordination Hub in Rome, and relevant regional mechanisms.
- Continue to work with other United Nations partners in the regional Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems to support regional and country efforts.

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