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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-seventh Session

Amman, Jordan 5-8 February 2024 and 4-5 March 2024

Report of the Regional Consultative Technical Meeting (RCTM) for the 37th Session of FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC37)

Introductory Items

I. Organization of the Meeting

1. The Regional Consultative Technical Meeting (RCTM) for the 37th Session of FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC-37) was held online, from 23 to 25 October 2023, under the theme of “Accelerating Transformation of Agrifood Systems in the Near East and North Africa”.
2. The meeting was convened in the form of a facilitated technical workshop. Themes submitted for discussion are introduced by FAO, followed by panel and thematic discussions leading to a set of recommendations presented by the closing plenary.
3. The Meeting was attended by over 200 participants in different sessions including senior and high-level professionals from the ministries of agriculture, water, environment and health from the member countries of the region, as well as their respective Permanent Representatives, FAO Representatives in the countries, experts from the region and from development and financial sector, civil society, academia, and other key stakeholders.

Inaugural Ceremony (Opening Session)

4. The Meeting was opened with statements by Mr Abdulhakim Elwaer, Assistant Director General and Regional Representative, FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE) and Mr Nizar Hadad, Director General of National Agriculture Research Centre (NARC) in Jordan and the Chairperson of the Regional Consultative Technical Meeting.
5. Mr Elwaer welcomed the participants on behalf of the FAO. He highlighted some of the key challenges facing the region and provided his sorrow to what is happening in Palestine. He emphasized on the outcome of this conference in programmatic action plan for FAO and all required preparatory actions for NERC-37 at Ministerial level in March 2024. By pointing out the challenges in the countries of the region which affected the agrifood transformation system in the region. In

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

particular, food, finance and fuel were introduced as the main factors affected by external challenges which has a major role in not achieving the productivity. He also emphasized on the financing and investment in the countries which is very important accelerator in transformation, including innovation and adopting innovative approach. He also assured that FAO will continue its support to the member countries to achieve sustainable resilient development in agriculture.

6. Mr Nizar Hadad, welcomed the participants and announced the NERC-37 to be conducted in Aman, Jordan on February 2024. While he highlighted the challenges in the region which is resulted to food insecurity, he asked the participants to use this opportunity to focus on the technical challenges in the region and share their knowledge and experience.
7. Ms Clemencia Cosentino, Director of Office of Evaluation, FAO, thanking the opportunity of participating in this meeting. She also provided the updates on the changes made in the FAO Evaluation Office as a part of the new strategy approved by the programme committee and endorsed by council and the conference. She emphasized that, the vision for the OED under this new strategy is to influence thinking, deliberations and ultimately, decisions of FAO member Nations, donors, partners and others.
8. Mr David Conte, Special advisor in the Office of Strategy and Planning, FAO, thanking the opportunity of participation in the meeting and provided his presentation on the overview of the strategic framework 2022-31 which is guided document in FAO. He highlighted the main content of this important document which is supporting the Agenda 2030 through the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems for better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life, leaving no one behind.
9. Mr Ahmad Mukhtar, Senior Economist, FAO, shared some of the regional context through a presentation. He highlighted on the content of this bi-annual regional conference to provide guidance to FAO on regional priorities and focus of FAO work in the region. He also emphasized, Regional Conference also provide regional perspective on programme and budgetary matters to FAO Council and on policy and regulatory matters to the FAO Conference.

II. Thematic Discussions

10. The Regional Consultative Technical Meeting structured around the four Regional Priority Areas, listed below. For each theme, a short background document prepared as a basis for discussion. Participants provided their views on the priority areas for action proposed for discussion and on the specific questions that they wish to see discussed at the NERC-37.

Priority 1: Rural Transformation

Priority 2: Markets and Policies

Priority 3: Greening agriculture, water scarcity and climate action

Priority 4: Resilience

Adoption of the Agenda and Timetable

11. The Regional Consultative Technical Meeting adopted the Agenda (Appendix A).

I. FAO New Strategy Framework: Operationalizing the regional priorities

A. Substantive Session-2: Transformation Towards Sustainable Markets, Trade and Consumption

12. The Meeting reviewed the document on ‘Accelerating Agrifood Transformation towards Sustainable Markets, Trade and Consumption’ and took note of the messages highlighted by the discussants and participants.
13. In the course of its deliberations on the item, the document:
 - a) recognized the importance of focusing on all dimensions of food security and addresses the triple burden of malnutrition in the region. Limited natural resources do not allow the region to produce all the food it needs;
 - b) acknowledged that delivering healthy diets for all in an increasingly urbanized region requires managing risks associated with the region’s growing dependence on food imports while encouraging the development of nutrition sensitive supply chains through diversification of production and public-private investments towards healthier and more affordable diets, strengthening capacities of governments, SMEs, small farmers and fishers to improve quality of food safety, traceability mechanisms, and the food environment;
 - c) raised concerns on the cost and affordability of a healthy diet continues to be challenging. Between 2017-2021, the average cost of a healthy diet in Arab States increased by 10.24 percent. As the result of UN-led food programmes and price stabilization initiatives, the cost of a healthy diet decreased by 7.5 percent in Arab State LDCs between 2019-2021. In high income oil exporting GCC countries, the cost of a healthy diet has risen steadily year on year, with the greatest increases of 5.5 percent in 2019-2020 and 6.4 percent in 2020-2021;
 - d) underscored the crucial role of the private sector in bringing solutions as well as in shaping changes in the food systems to promote better nutrition and healthier diet;
 - e) noted the strategic position of FAORNE as a hub for cross-regional and inter-sectoral collaboration, with special focus on four areas of intervention to accelerating the transformation process. These are Trade policy and partnership, Food loss and waste, Urban food systems and Nutrition.
14. The meeting then called upon countries, with the support of FAO, to:
 - a) adopt and strengthen policies to encourage transformation in production and consumption for healthy diets;
 - b) reduce food loss and waste via research and innovation;
 - c) encourage the private sector’s participation in agrifood systems transformation;
 - d) develop robust infrastructure and logistics in transportation, storage and cooling;
 - e) strengthen rural-urban linkages;
 - f) develop institutional settings that effectively analyse and act on vulnerabilities in the agrifood system;
 - g) track risks and prepare for emergencies.

15. The session also included very intensive and lively discussion. The discussion was opened by the AOAD representative pointing out that the regional priorities and interventions of RNE resembles those of AOAD. He raised two major challenges, namely the high food import dependency and scarcity of natural resources, particularly water.
16. In addition, Mr Stefanos Fatio reflected on three issues which were raised in the Regional Stock-taking organized in July 2023:
 - a) The issue of food loss and waste (FLW) is becoming more and more important as it encompasses and affects all the food system. FAO is working with UNEP but there is a need for more data and understanding of FLW;
 - b) The issue of nutrition comes often in all discussions following the UN Food System Summit of 2021 as it goes well beyond the calorie intake of people. Many countries are asking for more work on nutrition;
 - c) Trade is extremely important for food security in the region. FAO was leading the localization on food systems transformation during the UN SDG summit. The nexus between acceleration, transformation, food systems is important to accelerate progress on SDGs. This calls for focus on intra-regional trade and smallholder farmers.

B. Substantive Session-3: Greening Agriculture: Towards Transformation to Efficient, Climate-resilient Agrifood systems

17. The meeting opened with the statements by Mr AbdulHakim Elwaer, RNE ADG/RR, marked the meeting as a crucial step in a series of initiatives aimed at formulating innovative recommendations and action points for regional decision-makers, highlighted this biannual gathering as a provided platform to address the challenges prevalent in the region. He also emphasized that, outputs will be curated from concurrent meetings involving the public sector, civil society, and the private sector contributing to significantly enhance the discussions during the NERC-37.
18. The Meeting continued by Ms Theresa Wong, Delivery Manager a.i., who highlighted on the shared goal which is to make agriculture more efficient, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient. The discussion emphasizes resilience to climate change due to the emerging threat. She also provided the IPCC report highlighted the links between future agriculture drought and productivity and food security. It is emphasized, there is a need for sustainable practices and long-term planning to address climate impacts on agriculture, environment, and livelihoods.
19. In the course of its deliberations on the item, the Meeting emphasized on:

- a) *Water Scarcity*: as a critical concern in the region, which is highlighted in recent dialogue the importance of managing water resources effectively. Statistics from The State of Land and Water (SOLAW) report for the Near East and North Africa Region are used to assess the situation and explore mitigation techniques;
- b) *Land and Soil Degradation*: highlighted the ongoing efforts to combat land and soil degradation. The focus includes trans-boundary sand and dust storms, which pose a significant challenge and there is an emphasis on the restoration of ecosystems, forests, and rangelands.
- c) *Managing and restoring ecosystems*: marked the NERFC in Jordan with a participation of 19 countries aimed to reinforce linkages of forestry and agriculture and support agrosilvopastoralism as an opportunity to bring together environmental issues and livelihoods. The Subregional Office puts a programme together on oasis agroecosystems. It was also highlighted, UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration brings together a network to advocate for more Ecosystem Restoration projects to address climate change and degradation.
- d) *Sustainable animal production & fisheries/aquaculture*: highlighted that Increasing pests and diseases and decreasing land for pasture as well as feed are some climate impacts on animal production. RECOFI to take place in the coming months with special consideration on Aquatic resources i.e. Arabian Sea is expected to be highly affected by temperature rises and decreased precipitation, threatening fish stocks, yet there untapped potential for fish protein sources in the region.
- e) *Green Cities and Sustainable Consumption*: The "green cities" initiative has been introduced, focusing on sustainable consumption and circular economy. Regional assessment to start soon. The potential linkages between rural and urban areas for innovation and resources reuse.

20. The Meeting then called upon member countries on four main response areas:

- a) Enhancing sustainability and climate resilience of agricultural production practices;
- b) Addressing land ecosystems, degradation, and biodiversity loss;
- c) Focusing on aquatic and marine resources, including biosecurity;
- d) Promoting integrated water resources management and the water-energy-food nexus;

21. The Meeting then followed by panel discussion, moderated by Mr Mohamed Amrani, Senior Policy Officer, Subregional Office for North Africa. The chair of the panel requests the panelists to concentrate on ideas that are directly related to the challenges and solutions for achieving a greener agriculture. The responses included:

- a) Panelist 1- Ms Rafla Attia, Director of Soil Resources at the General Directorate for Development and Conservation for Agricultural Land Restoration, Ministry of Agriculture, Tunisia, highlighted the North Africa region experiencing various climate change impacts, including extreme heat, water scarcity, and desertification. She emphasized to enhance the region's adaptive capacity to climate change, the integration of green agriculture is essential. She also pointed out on promoting good agricultural practices, such as soil fertility improvement, seed management, organic amendments, composting, crop rotation, adoption of innovative technology, linking farmers to markets, and establishing sustainable supply chains.
- b) Panelist 2- Mr Chadi Mohanna, Director of Rural Development and Natural Resources Director at the Ministry of Agriculture in Lebanon, highlighted the forest fires as a major issue, leading to challenges in natural regeneration and reforestation activities. He also emphasized that, there is a misconception about the role of animals like goats and sheep in forestry. When managed properly, they can help prevent forest fires by removing biomass under trees. He also mentioned, decarbonization of agriculture should be pursued, which involves more efficient and eco-friendly engines for agricultural production. It reduces fossil fuel use and environmental impact.
- c) Panelist 3- Mr Abdelaziz Al Marzouki, Director General of Fisheries Resources Development, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Sultanate of Oman, highlighted the fisheries sector as a significant driver of the economy in the Gulf region which provides a major source of food and nutrition for the population. It plays a crucial role in employment, social development, and supports coastal communities. He also shared the Omani government experience in addressing climate change risks through sustainable fisheries management practices (e.g close fishing season), developing resilient aquaculture systems, recycling water, and investing in research. He also emphasized on cooperation with other countries in the region is ongoing to develop a regional strategy for addressing climate change's impact on fisheries. Regional study developed for acidification
- d) Panelist 4- Mr Hammou Laamrani, Economist, Food and Environmental policy section and climate change and natural resources sustainability cluster, ESCWA, recommended focus on sustainability, biodiversity, and nature-based solutions in greening agriculture. He also emphasized on the Investigate opportunities in emerging carbon markets for financing agriculture. Innovation and finance to position better the region to use emerging mechanisms for agriculture and carbon market. To prioritize the reduction of food loss and waste and engage youth in agriculture through entrepreneurial opportunities. He also requested to integrate and converge existing data and geospatial platforms for more effective decision-making.
- e) Panelist 5- Mr Ajit Govind, Senior climatologist, ICARDA, also Acknowledged the complexity of challenges in the region, including climate change, economic volatility, conflicts, and geopolitical issues affecting smallholders. Greening agriculture is seen as crucial in this context. He also highlighted on two essential pathways in greening agriculture, including climate-smart agriculture and sustainable intensification. From his point of view, water is identified as a critical issue, whether in irrigated or rainfed systems. Water productivity enhancement, technology adoption, and science-based approaches are essential. Rainwater harvesting is an adaptation action that could be embraced in this region.

C. Substantive Session-1: Enabling Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Transformation

22. The Meeting considered the document on RP-1 presented by May Hani, Delivery Manager and Senior Programme Officer, FAORNE which was despite the challenges that the region is facing, but also emphasized the existing opportunities in the region for the inclusive rural transformation. Among these opportunities the diversity of the agroecosystem, fertile soils, the fact that the region has one of the youngest populations around the world, in addition to the richness of the genetic resources, biodiversity, and livestock that lend itself for a generating and promoting climate change adaptation as well as traditional knowledge for one of the oldest farming communities in the world.

23. In the course of its deliberations on the item, the paper emphasized on pursuing rural transformation leveraging six interlinked action areas:

- a) Promoting context specific solutions across the rural-urban continuum;
- b) Developing competitive, sustainable and inclusive value chains and agribusinesses. This point was raised and touched upon during the first two days in the different sessions;
- c) Promoting decent rural employment and social and economic inclusion for youth and women.;
- d) Supporting producer organizations, extension, and rural advisory services;
- e) Promoting sustainable intensification of agricultural production;
- f) Fostering inclusive digital innovation.

24. The Meeting then called for responses and related actions, including:

- a) *Policies*: the specific actions of this response area are related to the six priority actions areas, looking on how policies can be coherent and complementary. Often time we see good policies but lack in implementation strategy, or we have strategy but lack legal framework to regulate it;
- b) *Investments*: Promote comprehensive and targeted investment and innovative finance solutions at different levels with a focus on rural finance, blended finance and financing for agribusiness startups and MSMEs for inclusive and sustainable rural transformation;
- c) *Capacities*: the RP1 has exerted many efforts in this area, and we need to capitalize these experiences and move forward into a more holistic programme for building national capacities, and maintain these capacities on the long term;
- d) *Cooperation*: that can range from public, private, PO partnership which can bring successful initiative into scale, foster multi-stakeholders' partnerships, to nurture and harness the potential of technology and digital solutions, and support, promote, and capacitate the AFRAS.

25. The Meeting then followed by panel discussion, highlighted following points:

- a) Trade-off exists among the priority areas hence balancing and prioritization of major objectives are important;
- b) Interlinkage and synergies with other regional priorities could be more considered.
- c) The importance of embedding the resilience aspect into the different approach
- d) Gender is fundamental but to be more explicit with the interventions.
- e) Top-down and bottom-up approaches to be considered with special attention on the marginalized groups, not only women and youth but also refugees, and people with disabilities should be centered as a starting point of policy work.
- f) The water–energy–food nexus is important for a holistic agrifood system
- g) The multistakeholder and multisectoral approach is a very important prerequisite for successful policy development
- h) How to target investment windows is critical and the projects should be tailored for specific groups to access investments
- i) Industrialization of agricultural products including fisheries and livestock is important. The focus is on accessing knowledge.
- j) Importance of bridging research and science with practice.
- k) Importance of attracting rural youth who are reluctant to work in the agriculture sector by promoting technologies and transferring knowledge
- l) Circular economy becomes important as the multisectoral approach and the water-energy-food nexus have become mandatory

D. Substantive Session-4: Anticipatory Action to Address the Impacts of Compounded Crises

26. Mr Ayman Omer, Senior Field Programme Officer and Coordinator of Regional Priority 4 (Resilience), FAO, presented the NERC-37 paper titled “Anticipatory Actions to Address Compound Crises in the Near East and North Africa Region”, highlighted the drivers of the region’s structural vulnerability to disasters, the compounded impacts of various natural and man-made hazards on food security and nutrition, and the strategic need to establish / strengthen Anticipatory Action systems in the region. He presented the key elements of an effective Anticipatory Action and, two sets of key recommendations suggested by the paper to countries and FAO.
27. In continue, Ms Sandra Ruckstuhl, Senior Adviser, International Water Management Institute, of the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centres (CGIAR), Middle East and North Africa, provided thorough comments on the paper, and highlighted on the relevancy of the recommendations of the paper and would strengthen Anticipatory Action in the region, which, in-turn, would reduce vulnerability and impact of disasters. She also recommended that the paper indicate the high vulnerability of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees and how they would benefit from effective Anticipatory Action systems especially within the framework of the Refugees-Climate Nexus Initiative presented by Jordan during the COP27 in Egypt. She also emphasized on establishing / strengthening multi-hazards early warning systems as an important recommendation of the paper.

28. The Meeting then followed by panel discussion, moderated by Mr Mohammed Bengoumi, Livestock Officer, FAO. He requests the panelists to concentrate on the recommendations they would prioritize in the paper based on their experience in Jordan for establishing a food security and nutrition dashboard with FAO support, Egypt on establishing climate-related early warning system, and Morocco on implementing agricultural insurance, the panelists underscored the importance of:
- a) Setting / strengthening early warning systems to inform evidence-based decisions and Anticipatory Actions, especially in view of the climate forecasts that expect increasing frequency and severity of climate extremes in the region.
 - b) Sharing of knowledge and good experiences among Technical Government Officers of the regions.
 - c) Prioritizing smallholders in agriculture credit and insurance schemes.
 - d) Scaling-up the coverage of successful initiatives such as the early warning systems (including the number of hazards covered by the systems and the number of audiences reached by the messages from the systems), agriculture insurance, and credit schemes.
 - e) Applying holistic approach that emphasize the food-water-energy nexus to ensure food and nutrition security in the region.

II. Transformation in Action: Accelerators, Policies and Regional Action

29. The Meeting highlighted a number of areas and issues, including the statistical challenges many governments face with implications for future engagement in the initiative, linkages with other ongoing regional and national approaches, as well as implementation modalities with countries across the region.
30. The Meeting took note of:
- a) Policy Shift: According to increasing food demand while facing climate change negative effects such as increasing drought events, a policy shift is required to encourage crop pattern and irrigation system changes, as well as reliance on drought-resistant crops. Increasing the water productivity in agriculture to be the aim in all the future projects;
 - b) Trade and Investment: that could achieve food security and food sovereignty in the region, and this is achieved through two directives: supporting local agricultural systems that depend on small farmers and by striving towards Arab agricultural integration by enhancing integrated intra-Arab trade.
31. The Meeting valued the Hand-in-Hand Initiative and welcomed its country-led character as well as its emphasis on ending poverty and hunger through accelerated agricultural transformation, evidence-based platform, analytics, integrated GIS platforms, partnership and territorial approaches.
32. In the quest of converting the aforementioned priorities into programmes, the Meeting called upon FAO to develop programmes that take account of the following:

Gender

- a) Reality of social norms between women and men was discussed and training should target both women and men for better integration of women in communities;
- b) Social norms that still constitute obstacles for women on access to productive assets and to access and use the technologies should be clearly addressed;

- c) National coordination for policy towards gender quality is implemented by many countries however, they are often not action-oriented. We have to push down and trickle down to activities.

Investment

- d) Concrete measures of economic impacts/return are required (evidence) for decision making;
- e) promote sharing of experiences and learning among countries in using the Food Safety Index;
- f) Explore options for improving resource mobilization, fund allocation, and subsidies for farmers transitioning to green agriculture. Build farmers' capacity through partnership development and agreements

Water-Energy-Food NEXUS

- g) interlinkages and synergies between different priority areas to be explored;

Rural Transformation

- h) Achieving rural transformation requires working with small-scale producers to market agricultural production. Especially in places highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, the rewards can be significant – if we plan carefully;
- i) to have a holistic approach to improve the living condition in general among the rural population and not only focus on the technical or technological approaches in agriculture. This requires the interagency and inter-organization cooperation. There are successful national initiatives like 'Hayat Karima' in Egypt which we can take insight from.

Resilience

- j) Recommended the establishment of multi-hazards regional early warning system / observatory and establishment of a regional emergency fund;
- k) Underscored the importance of financing Anticipatory Action and social protection through various means including establishing national forecast-based financing mechanisms to fund Anticipatory Actions, expanding agriculture insurance schemes with particular focus on the vulnerable groups;

Sustainability

- l) For any project to remain sustainable in the long term, it must include technical training so that the infrastructure is maintained even after project support ends. Furthermore, successful projects must be transparent and designed with an understanding of local contexts and cultural background;

Accelerators

- m) Inclusiveness and gender responsiveness are highlighted as critical for sustainability;
- n) Countries are encouraged to seize opportunities in areas like water, aligned with the FAO biennium theme for 2024-2025;

Cross-cutting issues

- o) climate change is a cross-cutting risk across the different areas of greening agriculture;
- p) Cross-sectoral coordination, policy integration and political will continue to be necessary to help address threats to sustainability of agrifood systems;
- q) The Regional Technical Dialogue on Water produced a series of recommendations which will be taken into consideration in the NERC process.

III. Concluding Session

In conclusion, Mr Abdulhakim Elwaer, ADG/RR, RNE, thanked all the participants for their active participation in the meeting, and shared some views focusing on Food Security (4 As) including Availability, Access, Affordability and Adaptability, Challenges (4 Cs), including Climate Change, Conflicts, Calamities and Consumers, and finally Transformative Solutions (4 Ts) including Technology, Trade, Tapping into local resources and Transforming Diets.