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# FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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### DEVELOPING A REGIONAL STRATEGY TO IMPROVE AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS IN THE NEAR EAST REGION

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## **I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

1. The urgent need to improve agricultural statistics was recognized by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC), which at its 40<sup>th</sup> Session in February 2009 recommended the development of a Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics. The purpose of the Strategy is to provide a framework for national and international statistical systems to produce the basic data and information on agriculture to guide decision making, and is based on three pillars:

- (i) development of a minimum set of core data that countries will provide to meet the current and emerging demands;
- (ii) integration of agriculture into the national statistical systems, and collecting sex-disaggregated data in order to meet expectations of policy makers and other data users that they can make use of the evidence on gender gaps in agriculture and that the data will be comparable across countries and over time;
- (iii) sustainability of the agricultural statistics system through strong governance and statistical capacity.

2. The 41<sup>st</sup> Session of the UNSC endorsed the Global Strategy and recommended for FAO to take the lead in the preparation of an Implementation Plan for a comprehensive statistical capacity building program to rebuild or improve the statistical systems in developing countries.

## **II. CHALLENGES OF AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS IN THE NEAR EAST REGION**

3. In many Near East (NE) countries the agricultural statistical systems are weak, feeble, uncoordinated, insufficiently resourced and essentially unsustainable; and their outputs are inadequate in terms of quantity, quality and dissemination.

4. At the same time data users at country, regional and international levels need quality data on regular basis, but unfortunately the national statistical offices that produce the data and information lack the capacity to generate the required information on time. These requirements make agricultural statistics activities of the NE region more demanding. To meet these pressing demands, NE countries must overcome existing challenges of data quality by developing a regional strategy to improve agricultural statistics and provide a framework for the national statistical systems that enables them to produce and to apply the basic data and information needed to guide decision making processes.

## **III. RATIONALE, SYNERGIES AND TARGET BENEFECIARIES**

5. The regional strategy is a priority required to improve agricultural statistics capacity at regional level, and provide for a Statistical Quality Framework with a greater transparency of countries in the process of data generation. It will also serve as a window of opportunity for mobilizing resources for the development of agricultural statistics, and offers a demand driven and well focused training through workshops and seminars. Furthermore, it strengthens networking with member countries and partners to make countries accessible to most recent and advanced developments, and offers the occasion for bringing together all stakeholders and establish a forum for experts to exchange experiences, developments, and challenges. In addition, the holistic approach of agricultural statistics including forestry and fishery statistics would generate meaningful results for the region. The linking of agricultural statistics with food security, agriculture and rural development, trade policy and nutritional issues including gender gaps in food and nutrition security will also enhance the quality and completeness of the data and information.

6. The principal stakeholders of the strategy are the regional and sub-regional organizations (ESCWA and AOAD etc.), and donors like the Islamic and African Development Banks, and Arab Fund, and other regional institutions including Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRTCIC) and Arab Training and Research Institute for Statistics (ATRIS). The direct beneficiary of the project will be the member countries in the region,

particularly their ministries dealing with agriculture and rural development and the Central Statistics Offices (CSOs). Other beneficiaries include all data users and producers in and outside the region.

#### **IV. IMPACT, OUTCOME AND MAIN OUTPUTS OF THE STRATEGY**

7. The goal of the regional strategy is to contribute to greater food security, reduced food price volatility and improved income and well being of rural populations through evidence-based policies in line with the Millennium Development Goal (MDG 1) to “Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and ensure gender and social equity.” In addition, improved policies will contribute to the sustainable use of land and water resources and the adaptation of agricultural activities to climate change to meet the challenges of MDGs 7 “Ensure environmental sustainability”.

8. The outcome of the strategy is to enable countries develop sustainable statistical systems, which will produce accurate and reliable agricultural and rural data, comparable over time and disaggregated by sex and age across countries, for use by decision makers. Specific outcomes include:

- Substantial increase in the number of countries with the capability to produce a minimum set of core data, including sex-disaggregated data (SDD), provide analysis and disseminate results to meet current and emerging statistical demands of national and international stakeholders;
- Substantial increase in the number of countries able to develop a sustainable agricultural statistics system through coordination and integration of agriculture in national statistical systems;
- Increased number of people working on agricultural statistics that have appropriate skills resulting from training and technical assistance.

9. The main outputs of the strategy include:

- Advocacy materials and technical tools promoting the need for and use of statistics for effective decision and policy purposes developed and applied in countries;
- Systems in place in countries for easy access and dissemination of national and sub-national statistics such as Country STAT;
- Methodological guidelines, norms and statistical standards, handbooks and documentation of good practices for data collection, analysis and dissemination and technical assistance provided to countries to apply these methodologies, including on the generation and analysis of SDD ;
- New cost-effective methodologies in data collection, elaboration, analysis and presentations developed by leading research institutes, with a synergic approach, avoiding duplication of efforts ;
- A living data base which includes relevant research projects and best practices for sharing knowledge and a roster of experts;
- Technical assistance procedures developed and harmonized for improving institutional, organizational and technical capacity of agricultural statistical systems and applied at regional and country level;
- A network of agricultural statistics offices to exchange experiences and practices through capacity development, technical backstopping, and other related guidelines to member countries to produce and analyze data and information including sex disaggregated data;
- Training material, including e-learning and used at regional and country level produced and disseminated.

## V. PREPARATORY PROCESSES

10. A Regional Strategy Steering Committee that includes National Statistical Offices, Ministries of Agriculture, representatives of international and regional coordinating organizations and donors will be the decision making body for the implementation. It will provide strategic leadership and oversight of the Global Office which will be created at the FAO Statistics Division and guided by the Global Coordinator.

11. Regional coordinating bodies will provide direct training and technical assistance to the integrated national statistical systems and will liaise with other offices within the region to coordinate the respective efforts and avoid duplication. Governance at the national level involves the organization of a national statistical system that brings together the national statistics office, sector ministries and other agencies that

provide data in the scope of the Strategy. The national coordinating body will also be responsible for within country advocacy for resource mobilization and establishing and maintaining communications with stakeholders for the content and scope of the national statistical system. The national coordinators will determine the methodology and work plan they will adopt to implement the Strategy.

12. Country assessment will be carried out to allow for categorizing countries by their capacity to produce the minimum set of core data and will serve as the basis to determine where training, technical assistance and research are needed for each country to prepare a national action plan and to determine the choice of methodology and technology it will implement. A standard assessment questionnaire will be used to obtain basic information from each country to determine which items in the minimum set of core are being provided, by whom, their frequency, and indications of quality. A more detailed country assessment will be carried out after the categorization of the countries.

13. The capacity building programme will start by providing technical assistance and training for basic statistical methods and on the use of the new methodologies and technologies. Statistical standards and technical guidelines will be developed in all aspects of the agricultural statistics system, including the following:

- Develop and strengthen institutional and organizational capacities to integrate agriculture into the national statistical system;
- Design and implementation of a master sampling frame;
- Design and implementation of an integrated survey programme;
- Harmonization of data across different sources, including administrative data;
- Integration of data across the economic, social, environmental domains, including the production of SDD for policy making;
- Adoption of new technologies for data collection, processing and dissemination.

14. Technical assistance will be provided to the countries using the guidelines and documentation provided by the Global Office through a combination of knowledge transfer and direct country assistance. Guidance will be provided to guide each country in the preparation of a specific national action plan to implement the global strategy under the auspices of the National Strategy to Develop Statistics (NSDS). The national action plan will consider other capacity developmental initiatives already underway to avoid duplication of efforts and coordinate the activities. These standards will be supported by the training of trainers in the region in the use of these guidelines.

15. Main responsibilities of the Global Office will be to design training curricula and prepare training materials, including for e-learning, as well as to define the theoretical and practical knowledge requirements for different levels of core skills needed to produce basic official statistics.

16. At the regional level, the main training activities will be to assess countries' training needs, train the trainers and support the use of e-learning for on-the-job training. Direct training on specific topics will be provided in-country and in regional seminars. The regional coordinator will provide support to strengthen the capabilities of selected training centres and will promote the access to training by national agricultural statisticians. Countries will contribute to the identification of their training needs, organize in-service training, ensure access to e-learning materials, and select the staff for the different training opportunities.

## **VI. IMMEDIATE ACTIONS AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION**

17. The immediate planned activities include the following:
  - Prepare country assessment reports on the level of agricultural statistics and country specific needs.
  - Engage with partners and stakeholders.
  - Organize expert meeting/ consultation on developing the strategy.
  - Prepare Regional Strategy Paper to improve the agricultural statistics of the Near East region.
18. A Global Trust Fund and a Regional Fund for Africa will be established. Communication, advocacy and resource mobilization will be crucial activities in the next months.