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Report of the Synthesis of Past Evaluations in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region

Executive Summary

The FAO Office of Evaluation (OED) commissioned a synthesis of evaluations completed between 2014 and 2019 of FAO projects and programmes in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region. This synthesis is one of five regional syntheses carried out at the request of the FAO Programme Committee with a view to informing the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC) on the results, issues and lessons learned from OED evaluations. Each regional synthesis was required to address the following questions:

- What are the main results, in the regional priorities/thematic areas that have been achieved through FAO support to the region and countries in the region?
- What issues and gaps emerge from the evaluations which require attention/consideration by the FAO Regional Conference?
- What lessons can be learned from evaluations that can inform FAO's future programming /actions in the region?

The NENA synthesis focused on three regional priorities: building resilience for enhanced food security and nutrition, water scarcity; and small-scale agriculture. It reviewed 32 evaluations (three country programme evaluations, five NENA project evaluations, three global project evaluations and 21 thematic evaluations). These evaluations provide only a partial view of FAO's contribution to regional priorities and should be viewed as the first step in a more systematic and comprehensive evaluation.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is recommended to take note of the findings and progress.

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Queries on the content of this document may be addressed to:

RNE NERC Secretariat

FAO-RNE-NEERC@fao.org

1. Introduction

1. FAO OED commissioned various syntheses of findings, recommendations and lessons learned from past FAO evaluations in all regions during the 2014–2019 period. This report presents the synthesis of the NENA region.

1.1 Purpose, objectives and scope of the regional synthesis

2. The terms of reference required the synthesis to cover all OED evaluations in the region: project/programme evaluations, country programme evaluations, thematic and strategic evaluations and joint evaluations. The terms of reference also stipulated that the synthesis select and focus on a few regional priorities to draw specific lessons and identify definite gaps and trends. For each of the identified priorities, the synthesis was required to address three key questions:

- i. What are the main results in the regional priorities and thematic areas that have been achieved through FAO support to the region and countries in the region?
- ii. What issues and gaps have emerged from the evaluations which require attention/consideration from the FAO Regional Conference?
- iii. What lessons can be learned from evaluations that can inform FAO's future programming and actions in the region?

3. The synthesis focuses on the three priorities that the NERC endorsed as a basis for FAO's work in the region: water scarcity, small-scale agriculture and increasing the resilience of vulnerable communities. The primary audiences for the synthesis report are NERC and the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE); FAO Country Offices and the FAO Programme Committee are secondary audiences.

1.2 Methodology

4. A rapid inventory was undertaken of evaluation reports and other background documents relating to the NENA region. The inventory helped to identify the three focus priorities and select relevant evaluation reports for review. A total of 76 OED evaluation reports were consulted and 32 were deemed relevant to the focus priorities.

5. The inventory included three reports prepared by external consultants, commissioned directly by RNE: two reviews of the Regional Initiative on Small-Scale Family Farming (RI-SSFF) and the Regional Initiative on Food Security and Nutrition (RI-FSN) and one on FAO's achievements on water scarcity in the NENA region. These reports are not independent evaluations like OED's, but proved relevant for background information on FAO's contribution at regional, subregional and national level. They were not used as a source of evidence of FAO's contribution.

Country programme evaluations	NENA project evaluations	Global projects	Thematic evaluations	Total
3	5	3	21	32

1.3 Limitations of the synthesis

6. The evaluations do not cover all programmes and activities in the region, so present only a partial view of FAO's contribution in terms of the regional priorities identified. This synthesis should be viewed as the first step in a more systematic and comprehensive future evaluation.

7. The three country programme evaluations are on Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. None of them pertains to a typical FAO NENA Country Office. Palestine is not an FAO Member, but has observer status. In Saudi Arabia, FAO does not have a Country Office, but has a Programme Coordination Unit, while Egypt lacked a full-time FAO Representative (FAOR) at the time of writing (one was subsequently recruited).

8. To mitigate the coverage limitations, the regional synthesis drew on additional material from FAO sources, including NERC meeting minutes, Country Programming Framework (CPF) documents, reports, pamphlets and brochures on projects and regional initiatives. The material provided good background information on FAO's contributions to the region and complemented the evaluation reports.

1.4 Structure of the report

9. The report consists of four chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 outlines the regional context. It describes the agricultural sector and the state of food security and nutrition in the NENA region, the related structures and bodies and the overriding regional priorities. Chapter 3 presents the evidence of FAO's contribution to the NENA region with a focus on the three regional priority areas: building resilience for enhanced food security and nutrition, water scarcity and sustainable small scale agriculture and inclusive development. Chapter 4 presents an overall synthesis of the criteria for and indicators of FAO's contribution to the NENA region. It analyses enabling and inhibiting factors, sustainability, gaps and emerging issues and lessons learned. Because of overlap, the synthesis of the criteria and indicators does not focus on the priority areas. Chapter 5 sets out the report's conclusions and recommendations for strengthening FAO's work in the region.

2. Regional context

2.1 State of food security and nutrition in the NENA region

10. FAO's NENA region comprises 18 countries plus Palestine, which differ vastly in terms of their natural and human resources and level of economic development. Agriculture is a vital economic and social sector in several states. Excluding the oil-rich countries, agriculture provides jobs and incomes for 38 percent of the economically active population and contributes on average 14 percent of gross domestic product, ranging from more than 5 percent in Algeria, Iraq, Tunisia and Yemen to more than 20 percent in the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic.

11. Key challenges facing agriculture, food security and nutrition in the NENA region include the poverty and vulnerability of smallholders, extreme aridity and water scarcity, climate-change impacts, high levels of population growth, increasing urbanization, economic slowdown, environmental degradation, transboundary animal diseases, and conflict and its effects. Growth

in domestic food production lags food demand, creating a widening gap that is redressed by rising imports. NENA already imports 50 percent of the calories it consumes. Despite a high average calorie intake, the region suffers from various forms of malnutrition, including chronic undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and obesity.

12. Small-scale agriculture provides more than 80 percent of agricultural production in the region, but a number of intertwined constraints impede its productivity, profitability and contribution to economic growth. These include limited access to productive assets (land, water and capital), poor links to markets and the absence of an enabling environment and supportive policies.

13. Fourteen countries in the region have achieved the hunger target of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but the region as a whole has witnessed a dramatic setback in its fight against hunger. A major driver of food insecurity and nutrition challenges is poverty, which is higher in rural areas than in cities and towns. NENA is also the only region in the world where extreme poverty has increased, and in the less-developed countries it escalated to 21.6 percent.

14. Several countries in the region endure direct conflict, a major driver of food insecurity: Iraq, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Conflict has caused food insecurity to more than double since 1991–1992, with a widening gap in well-being between conflict and non-conflict countries. The level of undernourishment in the conflict countries is six times higher than that in non-conflict countries, and the level of severe food insecurity in the conflict countries is twice that of the others.

15. Some drivers of food insecurity are transboundary, such as refugee flows in Lebanon and Jordan and animal and plant pests and diseases. Preventing and responding to these issues requires cross-border approaches and management.

2.2 Regional structures

16. FAO NERC, comprising regional ministers for agriculture, is the highest governance structure at regional level in which FAO participates. It deliberates on issues relating to agriculture, food security and nutrition, identifies priorities, and endorses plans for RNE and its Subregional Offices for North Africa (SNE) and the Gulf Cooperation Council States and Yemen (SNG). The two work closely with RNE to ensure a multidisciplinary approach, identify priorities for action, implement programmes and monitor implementation in the subregions, drawing attention to problems and deficiencies.

17. Country Offices assist governments in developing policies and support projects that address food security and nutrition, agricultural productivity and the resilience of rural livelihoods to threats and crises. The priorities for Country Offices are defined in CPFs in consultation with government and other stakeholders. The CPFs specify the planned outputs and required resources and partnerships of country programmes.

18. In many of its interventions, FAO partners with the League of Arab States and its affiliates, especially the Arab Ministerial Water Council and the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development. Partnership is also forged with strategic partners such as the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the World Bank. Depending on the nature of intervention, RNE and the Country Offices collaborate with many

United Nations agencies, particularly the Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and World Food Programme (WFP).

2.3 Regional Priorities

19. In 2014, RNE set out six priorities, endorsed by NERC, as focus areas for work. The six priority areas fall within the five FAO Strategic Objectives as follows:

- i. enhancing food security and nutrition and strengthening capacity to address vulnerability (SO1)
- ii. protecting and managing scarce and fragile natural resources and adapting to climate change (SO2)
- iii. fostering sustainable and inclusive agricultural production (SO2)
- iv. enhancing livelihoods of rural people, smallholders and vulnerable populations (SO3)
- v. developing efficient, sustainable and competitive food systems and reducing food losses and waste (SO4)
- vi. increasing resilience of livelihood systems of communities and ecosystems to threats and crises (SO5)

20. NERC instructed RNE to focus its work in 2014–2017 on three top priorities, endorsing this with the launch of three regional initiatives on water scarcity, the RI-SSFF and RI-FSN. At its 34th session, NERC decided that FAO's work in 2018–2019 would remain anchored in the three regional initiatives, requiring RNE to adjust its focus areas and results frameworks.

3. FAO's contribution in the NENA region

21. The synthesis focuses on three regional priority areas: building resilience for enhanced food security and nutrition, water scarcity and small-scale agriculture. Drawing on the reviewed evaluation reports, this chapter presents evidence of FAO's contribution to each of the priority areas. The contribution was analysed at three main levels: the enabling environment (policies, strategies, institutional setup and systems), information and knowledge, and local community interventions.

3.1 Building resilience for enhanced food security and nutrition

Key question: What are the main results in the area of building resilience for enhanced food security and nutrition that have been achieved through FAO's support to the region and the countries in the region?

22. Building resilience for enhanced food security and nutrition is both a regional priority, as confirmed by NERC and SO5. It seeks to replace short-term emergency response to the consequences of disasters and crises and address the root causes. Emergency interventions are useful in short-term crises, but become inappropriate if repeated year after year in a context of protracted crisis. The resilience approach underscores that the crises in Iraq, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen are not only humanitarian and political, but also developmental, and that the development needs of the population should be addressed simultaneously with other needs. In effect, the approach links the processes of relief, recovery and development.

3.1.1 The food security and nutrition enabling environment

Finding 1. FAO has supported the development of food security and nutrition strategies and plans of action with a strong resilience component, strengthened institutional systems and facilitated coordination.

23. Evidence of FAO's support for the development of food security strategies in NENA countries is reported in Egypt, the Sudan, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Yemen. Most strategies are national or countrywide, but FAO also extends support to lower administrative levels, as in the Sudan, where strategies have been developed for four states and localities – the third and lowest administrative tier. In Yemen, FAO extended support to four of the Sana'a subbasins.

24. The lack of an overall regional strategy for building food security and nutrition resilience in the NENA region is conspicuous. Some of the resilience strategies and frameworks supported by FAO cover the entire NENA region, though these are mostly sectoral and relate to transboundary animal and plant pests and diseases. FAO has also supported the multicountry Subregional Strategy and Action Plan for Resilient Livelihoods for Agriculture and Food and Nutrition Security in Areas Affected by the Syria Crisis, developed in 2014.

25. FAO has further extended support to the Afro-Arab Parliamentary Economic Forum of parliamentarians, comprising legislators and constituency representatives. Through this forum, FAO has raised awareness and provided inputs to guide parliamentarians in the African and Arab regions on identifying strategic and priority issues.

26. The extent to which countries have benefited from FAO support varies. In the Sudan, for example, the Food Security Policy and Strategy Capacity Building initiative supported state-level strategies, but did not chime with the five-year state and federal strategy processes.

27. There were two cases reported in Egypt where FAO projects contributed to capacity development at all three levels (policy and strategy, organization and capacity-building of government staff): Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Disease (ECTAD) interventions and the Capacity Enhancement to the Food Security Policy Advisory Board, which was dormant at the time of evaluation.

28. There is evidence of FAO's contribution to institutional strengthening in Saudi Arabia and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where FAO supported the establishment of laboratories. In both cases, the initiative failed to build the capacity to run the establishments or ensure their sustainability beyond the life of the project.

29. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, FAO has fostered coordination in defining cross-disciplinary policies and programmes and has supported government involvement in the management of transboundary animal and plant pests and diseases.

3.1.2 Food security and nutrition information and early-warning systems, preparedness and response

30. FAO has numerous global and NENA-specific knowledge products for building resilience. The annual overview of food security and nutrition for the NENA region has established a baseline for measuring and monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets on hunger and food insecurity.

Finding 2. FAO has assisted NENA countries in building well-functioning food security information systems with the potential to inform evidence-based risk-reduction strategies and investments.

31. FAO assisted numerous NENA countries in building food security and nutrition information systems and in bolstering government capacity to monitor trends and analyse the contribution of sectors and stakeholders. The support included the food security and early-warning information systems in the Sudan, the early-warning mechanisms for natural hazards in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the early-warning systems for desert locusts and the strengthened surveillance, prevention and response capacity to transboundary animal diseases in Egypt, supported by ECTAD.

32. FAO has also supported the establishment of the Regional Food Security Analysis Network (RFSAN), which provides assistance on food security and nutrition, as well as livelihood assessments and analysis, including in NENA countries affected by the Syria Crisis (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic). Likewise, FAO has supported regional multistakeholder workshops on aspects of food security and nutrition, including the side-event on zero hunger during the 34th Session of NERC.

Finding 3. FAO has played a direct and effective role in supporting countries in managing and eradicating transboundary animal and plant pests and diseases that threaten livestock and major crops in the region.

33. Effective preparedness and response to disasters and crises remains, first and foremost, a responsibility of government. The FAO-supported food security and nutrition strategies and related capacity-building interventions described earlier augment country capacity in that respect.

34. FAO has supported the protection of livestock, poultry and fish populations, particularly through its Emergency Prevention System (EMPRES) and the ECTAD units. An acknowledged FAO contribution is its development of measures to prevent and control transboundary animal and crop pests and diseases, such as avian influenza, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus, Desert Locust surge and Rift Valley fever.

35. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, FAO has collaborated with the World Health Organization on transboundary animal diseases, while in Egypt and the Sudan, FAO has boosted community preparedness by training community animal health workers, who play a crucial role in prevention and response.

3.1.3 Reduction of risks and vulnerability at household and community level

Finding 4. FAO's resilience approach to vulnerable households and communities has combined – with varying degrees of success – immediate effects (household food security) with a search for medium- and long-term effects on food security and natural-resource management, effectively reducing future risks and vulnerability.

36. FAO's support for vulnerable communities in disaster-hit areas is often coordinated with other United Nations agencies, notably WFP. In the Kassala Joint Resilience Project (JRP), FAO successfully adopted two innovative means of food distribution: "food assistance for assets", to motivate community work on certain constructions, and "food for training", to motivate women's participation in literacy classes. The project simultaneously provided new varieties of seed, thereby improving diet. Fostering home gardening was an important achievement from a gender perspective, as it involved women in planting, an activity hitherto forbidden for women in the local communities.

37. FAO's work on building resilience is often based on the promotion of production, productivity and value-chain interventions (see section 3.3.3). Its dairy-sector project in Lebanon corroborates the success of the approach in bridging the gap between emergency and development activities. The project was initially an emergency intervention, but then changed focus and managed to revive a sector in crisis and improve the livelihoods of participating farmers and processors, many of whom belonged to the poorer strata of society.

38. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, FAO's project on livestock-based livelihoods promoted asset building and land and water rehabilitation, providing households and communities with critical assets to enhance agricultural production. The project had several other components and activities (such as a national animal identification system [NAIS], a gene bank and laboratory), designed in such a way that each activity would achieve a broader goal. Upon evaluation, however, none of these other activities had any tangible direct or indirect impact on herders' livelihoods. The project evaluation noted a coordination gap between the two types of activity and underlined the learning potential of the West Bank and Gaza Strip approach for FAO as a whole.

39. FAO also contributed to reducing risk and vulnerability at local level through interventions to tackle plant diseases. In Saudi Arabia, for example, extension services and local-level capacities were improved by pest management, ensuring that communities had the ability to take protective measures for their crops against the red palm weevil.

3.2 Combating water scarcity

40. The NENA region is naturally exposed to chronic shortages of water and may be facing the most severe intensification of water scarcity in history. Per capita fresh water availability has declined by two-thirds over the last 40 years and will probably fall by another 50 percent by 2050. Groundwater is a significant source of fresh water across the region, facilitating rapid growth of new agricultural economies on the Arabian Peninsula, but with steady groundwater depletion. In addition, the degradation of water quality and the competition for water between all sectors are accelerating, while climate change is likely to exacerbate the already severe conditions. Agriculture, which already consumes more than 85 percent of available fresh water resources in the region, will most likely have to absorb the bulk of this shock, with major consequences for food security and the rural economy.

Key question: What are the main results in the area of water scarcity that have been achieved through FAO's support for the region and the countries in the region?

41. FAO has long addressed issues of water scarcity in the NENA region through numerous country, regional and global projects. Virtually all CPFs in the region included water scarcity as a

priority and FAO's projects on water scarcity cover all countries. The Regional Initiative on Water Scarcity added more projects in its focus countries. The SO2 evaluation noted that external stakeholders viewed the regional initiative as effective in organizing and communicating more clearly FAO's work on water scarcity, bringing initiatives and projects into a cohesive programme. FAO staff acknowledged the usefulness of the regional initiative in starting a debate on the strategic use of water resources by introducing the concept of water productivity. The main achievements reported at various NERC sessions show an emphasis on water accounting; the use of global information systems and remote sensing tools; modelling and integrative systems; water governance and innovative technologies.

3.2.1 Contribution to the water scarcity enabling environment

Finding 5. FAO's contribution to water scarcity-related policy and strategy is more prominent at regional level than at national or country level.

42. RNE launched its regional collaborative strategy to complement existing projects in a search for a structured mechanism to address water scarcity beyond the national level and to give an agricultural water slant to the Arab Water Security Strategy (2010–2030). RNE supported the Arab Water Security Strategy and the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region, which is being implemented in Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Yemen.

43. RNE has strategic partnerships with the League of Arab States and its affiliates: the Arab Ministerial Water Council, the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development and the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands. These partnerships are valuable in securing national support for the strategic planning of water resource management, water security and water use efficiency.

44. In the three country programme evaluations (Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the West Bank and Gaza Strip), evidence of FAO's contribution to national policy and strategy is mostly found only in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where FAO facilitated the development and adoption of common guidelines for the identification, design, implementation and coordination of land and water interventions. FAO also supported the development of national standards for wastewater treatment and the development of a bye-law on water user committees.

45. In Saudi Arabia, the FAO Programme Coordination Unit worked from 2014 to 2019 based on Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) on individual, largely unconnected projects, with no strategic dialogue with government. The MOUs were a constraint on addressing emerging issues outside the scope of the agreed projects.

46. FAO's Sana'a Basin Project (SBP) is a contribution to the institutional setup at sub-basin level. Yemen's policy to decentralize authority to regulate water usage by water users associations (WUAs) was a new approach that was not effectively implemented. The SBP was launched to support the policy and to enhance food security among farming households and reduce groundwater depletion in four sub-basins of the Sana'a basin. Through an Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) approach, SBP has successfully built the capacity of local communities to control the management of their common natural resources. The activities

encompassed capacity-building, awareness-raising, groundwater monitoring, rehabilitation and the construction of water-harvesting and recharge structures, as well as changing local cropping patterns and practices (see section 3.2.3).

3.2.2 Knowledge and analysis of water scarcity

Finding 6. FAO's clearest contribution to tackling water scarcity in the region is in knowledge and analysis, including the experimentation of new techniques and technologies.

47. FAO's assessments and studies of the region are numerous (three studies in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, for example, identified gender-related indicators). FAO has also supported the creation of the regional collaborative platform as a key mechanism to implement the regional collaborative strategy for evidence-based policy decisions. The regional initiative on water scarcity supported the workshop to implement the platform.

48. In Morocco, FAO's technical assistance supported the State Secretariat for Sustainable Development's creation of a national greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory in the agricultural sector, as well as the development of national indicators for tracking and improving biodiversity and soil quality.

49. In Egypt, FAO launched the Support Sustainable Water Management and Irrigation Modernization programme for newly reclaimed areas to foster solutions to reduce agricultural water productivity gaps. As part of this, FAO supported the development of an action framework to develop workable solutions to sustainably increase agricultural land and water productivity. FAO also extended support to the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt's 1.5 million Feddan (or REEF) project and fielded a team in 2016 that explored potential support in four technical components.

50. In Saudi Arabia, FAO has made substantial progress in introducing technologies and techniques aimed at promoting drip irrigation, enhancing efficiency and fostering the use of treated and agricultural drainage water for irrigation. However, challenges of extension and staff training were not addressed to ensure these innovations were adopted by producers in the field.

51. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the interventions did not always make use of FAO's global natural-resource assessment tools or methodologies. The impacts of water-related projects (for example, cisterns) are assessed solely on the basis of water value or price. A separate evaluation of a project in the West Bank and Gaza Strip noted the existence of, but did not assess, three applied-research activities on water management and reuse (intercropping fodder using treated wastewater).

3.2.3 Tackling water scarcity at local level

Finding 7. At local level, FAO has worked to address the challenge of water scarcity through several interventions aiming at rehabilitating and constructing water infrastructure, rainwater harvesting, promoting irrigation efficiency, establishing local-level sustainable water-resource management systems, technology transfer and GAPs.

52. Most of FAO's resilience interventions in the region involved the provision of water, for example, the Kassala JRP and a number of projects as part of the West Bank and Gaza Strip

country programme. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, FAO's interventions sought to improve livelihoods through rainwater harvesting cisterns, reservoirs and grey wastewater treatment units. The cisterns addressed a pressing need, given people's limited to no access to water and water infrastructure. The harvested rainwater increased beneficiaries' ability to irrigate their rehabilitated land and reduced their reliance on purchased water for irrigation, domestic consumption and watering of small stock. Women who used to fetch water from nearby wells concurred that a cistern next to their home was a welcome relief. In some instances, however, projects involving discrete water infrastructure components were found to be implemented with limited attention to existing institutional arrangements, or to requirements to ensure their use.

53. In Saudi Arabia, FAO has several interventions that have effectively promoted irrigation efficiency and reduced water use and the consequent depletion of groundwater, while in Yemen, the SBP project has strengthened WUAs, which have helped guide local farmers to adopt change and innovation in their crops and practices, reduce water use and participate in the sustainable management of their common water resources.

54. FAO's contribution to the reduction of water use in agriculture through technology transfer and Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) is highlighted in section 3.3.3.

3.3 Promoting small-scale agriculture

55. Small-scale agriculture is not well recognized in the region's statistical systems and there is no uniform definition of it. Smallholder family farmers are poorest in all countries in the region and agricultural activities are their main, though not sole, source of income.

Key question: What are the main results in the area of small-scale family farming that have been achieved through FAO's support to the region and the countries in the region?

56. As part of its contribution to small-scale agriculture, FAO has launched several country, regional and global projects, including the RI-SSFF, which has eight focus countries. The projects did not limit their focus to agricultural productivity due to the overlap of membership in small-scale family farms and membership in consumption, labour and residence units. FAO has thus approached small-scale farming using a holistic approach, addressing poverty reduction, rural employment (particularly for youths and women) and diversification beyond agriculture. Most, if not all, FAO projects in the NENA region contribute directly or indirectly to improvements in smallholder farming.

3.3.1 Enabling small-scale farming

Finding 8. FAO contributed to an enabling environment for small-scale farming in all of the domains in which it intervenes – policy and strategy, institutional setup and systems, and staff capacity development.

57. FAO's West Bank and Gaza Strip project on livestock-based livelihoods put in place new systems (such as NAIS) and processes (a laboratory system and gene bank) for the livestock sector. It also supported the creation of an insurance system for the livestock sector and built the capacity of government staff on indicators, laws, processes and strategies so that they could run the system.

58. The project to reform Egypt's cooperatives law was directly aimed at changes in policy and the country's institutional setup. In effect, it lessened the Ministry of Agriculture's tight rein on agricultural cooperatives, enabling them to partner with private-sector operators.

59. To support the Government of Tunisia, FAO developed a quality approach to enhance the value and price of products of poor farmers, forging a strategy to develop quality products linked to origin. FAO trained government staff involved in the valorization process, along with representatives from producer organizations.

60. In Saudi Arabia, FAO's extension project strengthened the Rural Extension Directorate and its counterparts at district and local level, while the advocacy of the rural institutions project for increased rural finance seems to have prompted the Ministry of Agriculture to allocate SAR 50 million to support cooperative societies.

61. Poverty often drives farmers' children out of school to search for employment. FAO conducted a study of farmers employing children in Lebanon and partnered with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) on child advocacy to combat child labour. The Lebanese Government developed a guide and subsequently launched a national plan to tackle child labour. The political success of the advocacy in Lebanon drew attention from the League of Arab States, which commissioned FAO and ILO to conduct the first ever study on the role of children in agriculture in the Arab countries.

3.3.2 Information and knowledge on small-scale agriculture

Finding 9. FAO has contributed to information and knowledge on small-scale agriculture in the region in an effort to plug the gaps limiting the effectiveness of projects aimed at understanding and improving the conditions of smallholders.

62. Several FAO projects generated information and knowledge on issues relevant to small-scale agriculture. Some projects were regional or multicountry, such as a study in six countries on the typology of smallholders to identify the constraints and barriers farmers face. Another study was on the trends in support of governments on social protection and agricultural policy in rural development contexts. Several FAO projects aim to incorporate smallholders into value chains, for example, on food losses in the wheat value chain in Egypt and on food loss and waste reduction and value-chain development in Egypt and Tunisia.

63. FAO is not the only actor supporting Egypt on food value chains (the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and the United States Agency for International Development are both active in this area, for example). However, FAO is the only one developing a methodology to assess and reduce food loss and waste. FAO's assessment methodology for its two projects is well designed and effective and has revealed far higher losses than the value-chain actors thought. The relevance of this result cannot be overstated, as it can be used for other crops than those in the two FAO projects.

64. Most FAO studies are country- or project-specific, such as those on the inclusion of farmers in the milk and dairy value chain in Lebanon. To improve the quality of raw milk at various levels of the milk chain, FAO conducted diagnostic tests to evaluate the quality of milk and the improvement in milk hygiene.

65. FAO projects in Saudi Arabia have a strong research and experimentation focus, for example, on the control of the red palm weevil and the application of additional advanced technologies. The rural development projects have disseminated significant knowledge, while the Camel Breeding, Protection and Improvement Centre (the Camel Project) conducted surveys on brucellosis and calf diarrhoea to understand causes of abortion and calf mortality.

66. Based on lessons learned from previous groundwater support projects, FAO's SBP in Yemen conducted studies to develop seasonal cropping patterns aligned with sustainable irrigation from groundwater resources without adverse impact on farmers' livelihoods.

67. In Tunisia, FAO has supported the government with a study in three pilot regions to define small-scale agriculture, its characteristics, challenges, functioning and methods of organization. Under another project, FAO conducted diagnostic tests on Tunisian youth migration and employment.

3.3.3 Small-scale agriculture at community and field level

68. A credible assessment of FAO's contribution to small-scale agriculture at community and field level should not be conducted based on geographical or social (beneficiary) coverage, as on both measures, FAO's interventions appear small compared with the need. In this subsection, the objective is to highlight FAO's unique added value, which lies in its knowledge base, technical advice, capacity-building and normative frameworks – all of which are deployed through projects at community and field level as models for upscaling, replication and learning.

Finding 10. FAO has contributed significantly to improvements in agricultural productivity and efficiency among smallholders through the dissemination of GAPs and technology transfer.

69. FAO is recognized for its role in improving agricultural productivity and efficiency through the dissemination of GAPs and technology transfer. This role is evident in virtually all FAO projects at local community level. In Egypt, the projects include the GAPs for Sustainable Intensification of the Smallholder Horticulture Sector, date cultivation in the Siwa Oasis, and the use of solar energy in water pumping irrigation. The challenge, however, is to scale up these pilot projects. In the case of the solar energy project, the validity of the approach has been confirmed, but the sunk cost is a disincentive for the farmers, who prefer to use subsidized electricity to pump water.

70. A project to improve household food and nutrition security in Egypt by targeting women and youth (the nutrition project) has successfully demonstrated GAPs through the Junior Farmer Field and Life School methodology. Community members enthusiastically adopted the GAPs and use the improved seeds and seedlings, which saw a yield increase of 150 percent in pilot fields. The United Nations Country Team cited the nutrition project as one of the best contributors to the lives of people in Egypt in 2017.

71. Through the livestock-based livelihoods project, FAO introduced the artificial insemination of sheep in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Breeders have seen breed improvement, with a reduced gestation period of eight months rather than one year, increased incidence of twin births (70 percent) and better economic return from milk.

Finding 11. FAO projects helped to prepare smallholders for effective and beneficial inclusion in value chains, for both local and export markets, building asset capacity and organizing producers.

72. The concept of value-chain development implies win-win relationships, upgrading, innovation and added value. But market-based interventions work for those who meet minimum asset thresholds and are, thus, value-chain ready. Through several projects in the region, FAO sought to build the capacity of smallholders in preparation for their inclusion in value chains. FAO's adoption of a food value-chain approach in the NENA region is evident. Several CPFs have prioritized or referred to food value chains, while in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the entire programme has adopted a value-chain model as the basis for its focus on resilience and development growth.

73. Reference was already made to the successful dairy-sector project in Lebanon and the three pilot projects in Egypt and Tunisia (see section 3.1.3). The dairy-sector project shifted its focus from emergency to concentrated organizational improvements, such as the creation of village dairy producers' associations to better negotiate with suppliers and dairy processing plants. The desired impact was reached: the reactivation of the value chain and the inclusion of (and appreciable incomes for) small farmer households.

Finding 12: FAO projects in the region adopted – with varying degrees of success – community participation approaches to promote sustainable rural development, including the sustainable management of natural resources and poverty reduction. Notwithstanding inadequate capacity for gender mainstreaming, several FAO projects promoted the socio-economic empowerment of women, often through women-specific components.

74. The SBP in Yemen (see section 3.2.3) amply demonstrates the benefits of substantive community participation and empowerment. The project has successfully secured community involvement and active participation in the common water resource. This success of the SBP is in stark contrast to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where a lack of community involvement was evident in the general reluctance to cooperate with the NAIS.

75. Inadequate consultation and awareness-raising can result in misunderstandings and frustration. This was exemplified by the Kassala JRP, where communities set out their priorities and needs in community action plans, but JRP technical experts revised those plans without consulting the community, diminishing ownership and buy-in.

76. FAO has also created employment outside agriculture for youths and women, as in Egypt's nutrition project, although these have not been quantified. Young girls and women from villages have been trained in innovative methods of food preparation. To facilitate training in town and to respect the local culture, the project agreed to chaperones for all girls, so as to avoid any potential gossip or loss of reputation for the participants.

77. Community participation requires an enabling environment, hence, conducive national policy. The absence of such policies has frustrated FAO's project on forests and rangelands in Saudi Arabia. The kingdom's land tenure system made it challenging to promote local participation; it proved a disincentive for local communities to play a role in environmental rehabilitation and sustainable utilization and the management of rangelands and forests.

78. Egypt's nutrition project has organized a farm school for women in a village where men have all sought employment elsewhere. In Saudi Arabia, women were trained in using dates in some nutritional preparations and in sampling techniques to detect date defects. In the Sudan, the Kassala JRP undertook an activity not normally associated with FAO: a one-year training course for 70 women to qualify as village midwives, with a maternal health component conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

79. The dairy-sector project in Lebanon is the most gender-sensitive and aware of FAO's projects in the region. It does not have a specific "women's component", but has integrated women into its main activities by including "women-headed households" in its criteria for selecting beneficiaries.

80. A key result of the IWRM approach in FAO's SBP in Yemen ensured the participation of women in the management of the common water resources. Gender was mainstreamed in all project activities while other activities, such as food processing, targeted women exclusively.

4. Factors affecting FAO's contribution in the NENA region

81. The purpose of this chapter is to compile an evidence-based synthesis of the criteria for and indicators of FAO's contribution in the NENA region, looking at enabling and inhibiting factors, sustainability, gaps and lessons learned. The synthesis aims to inform the future response and actions of RNE and other stakeholders to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of FAO's work in the region. It provides an overall assessment of the factors influencing FAO's contribution in the region, focusing on issues that have broader relevance beyond specific programme and/or project details.

4.1 Enabling factors

82. FAO has significant comparative advantages underpinning the added value of its interventions. From a technical perspective, the Organization is respected and trusted by governments and citizens for its policy development, knowledge and work in the field.

83. Government commitment is a major factor enabling FAO operations. This is exemplified by the Organization's dairy-sector project in Lebanon, where the Ministry of Agriculture provided additional funding to scale up interventions and assumed a critical role in promoting consultations and concluding agreements between various value-chain actors to determine the price of dairy products to the benefit of farmers.

84. The SBP in Yemen has underlined the importance of FAO's access to sufficient resources and its comprehensive beneficiary consultation and participatory planning, both of which have improved information flows and increased local participation in WUAs. This has ensured strong community participation in the sustainable management of natural resources.

85. Another important factor enabling FAO's contribution to small-scale agriculture is its facilitative and participatory approach to disseminating the GAPs. As noted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip evaluation, the proven effectiveness of training provided by the High Value Crops project demonstrates the importance of practical training for the immediate application of knowledge and skills, as well as the need to accompany such training with initiatives to strengthen management and organizational capacity (marketing).

4.2 Hindering factors

86. It was evident from some of FAO's joint interventions that coordination has proved challenging at times. The Kassala JRP is a case in point: FAO collaborated with UNICEF and WFP as implementing partners, while the donor United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) also assigned another DFID organization to implement certain components of the project. Coordination between the three United Nations agencies and between the agencies and the DFID organization proved difficult. Other joint projects struggled to synchronize timeframes for agreements with partners, as procedures differed from one United Nations agency to another, hampering the coordination of activities. Similar challenges arose when interventions involved inter-sector or inter-ministry coordination and collaboration.

87. In both the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Saudi Arabia, adverse contexts made it difficult for FAO to make an effective contribution to addressing water scarcity. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip hindered operations, while the constraints in Saudi Arabia stemmed largely from a lack of dialogue between FAO and government, such that FAO was unable to provide technical advice to remedy a detrimental national policy that led to the steady depletion of groundwater.

88. Furthermore, many of the pilot projects launched by FAO have started and ended without any prospect of being scaled up or replicated. Upscaling and replication tend to depend on government commitment, willingness and capacity, so are often beyond FAO's control. Nevertheless, this raises questions as to the wisdom of FAO launching such pilots when government commitment is not assured and no clear exit strategy is in place.

4.3 Sustainability

89. FAO's contribution at community level, for example, the dissemination of the GAPs, has good prospects for sustainability in a number of facets. Owing to the higher returns they have experienced, the direct beneficiaries will probably maintain the innovative practices and continue to grow the new crops (sustainability of benefit), while farmers not directly involved in the demonstration projects may replicate the GAPs on their own (sustainability of process). Governments may replicate the innovations in other parts of the country.

90. FAO's contribution in NENA included establishing various producer organizations and community structures. Organizations formed to facilitate the distribution of assets and inputs usually have no sustainability beyond the life of the project. Agricultural cooperatives may also be transient when the primary aim is to access project benefits. However, the prospects for sustainability of FAO-supported producer cooperatives and local committees seem promising, as in the Lebanese dairy-sector project and the SBP in Yemen, where the projects have been accompanied by diligent capacity-building and clear guidance on their role as long-term service providers. Ultimately, sustainability will depend on FAO's ability to provide quality service to Members, including the sustainable management of revolving funds.

91. Project information systems and knowledge products are likely to continue to be of value. Likewise, cross-sector coordination may endure beyond the life of a project.

92. The sustainability of structure and process can face challenges even when the beneficiary is the government. This is particularly true when an intervention puts new systems and processes

in place, but without building the capacities to manage and operate them or ensuring their financial sustainability upon project termination. Government interest and willingness are, thus, critical in furthering the sustainability of external support, though financial capacity may also be a constraint.

4.4 Gaps and emerging issues

93. A serious gap affecting FAO's overall contribution to the NENA region is the paucity of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) at both country programme and project level. Virtually all of the reviewed evaluations noted this shortfall, which poses challenges when it comes to monitoring implementation progress and to programme/project evaluation. It is worth emphasizing here that M&E is not a stand-alone issue that can be addressed and rectified on its own, but rather a component of a larger results-based management system (RBMS).

94. Related to the RBMS challenges are clear gaps in intra-project coordination between the different components and/or activities of some projects. This was evident in a number of missed opportunities to capture synergies, whereby one project activity could be used to promote another, for example, with the free distribution of fodder and animal-tagging campaigns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In some instances, such gaps ensued from challenges in the sequencing of activities, such as delays in the completion of studies prior to the development of strategies they were supposed to support.

95. The synthesis also showed inadequate capacity of technical staff to comply with FAO normative policies and priorities, particularly on gender equality and the empowerment of women, the key priority of poverty reduction and FAO's corporate commitments on accountability to affected populations. Technical staff often conceive of these issues as being the responsibility of regional gender officers, rural development experts or Focal Points in Country Offices.

96. There were shortcomings in the engagement of some FAO programmes on nutritional issues, for example, in Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This is one area where FAO has both the mandate and clear competence. Nutrition is often overlooked, with the dominant focus on food security and increased food production. It is, however, a cross-cutting area where there needs to be both specific projects and mainstreaming in other interventions. There is a need for support in the field of nutrition in NENA in relation to both malnutrition and obesity.

97. FAO's efforts to build capacity have focused almost exclusively on training, leaving gaps in its contribution to institutional strengthening, which also needs attention. Cases in point are FAO's interventions in Egypt and Saudi Arabia to train extension officers without commensurate efforts to strengthen the extension units where these officers work, particularly in the countryside.

4.5 Lessons learned

98. One major lesson for interventions at community level is that inadequate knowledge of the local context may frustrate efforts and threaten sustainability. In projects in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Saudi Arabia, a lack of knowledge of the intricacies of local tenure systems frustrated project efforts. In another project in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, activities were planned on the basis of background studies on the West Bank that proved irrelevant to the reality on the ground in Gaza Strip. Inadequate knowledge of beneficiaries and their needs,

problems and capacities can compromise the relevance and effectiveness of interventions, even though beneficiaries may accept whatever is offered to them.

99. An important lesson is that interventions should not start from scratch, but build on the experience of comparable past interventions. The success of the SBP project in Yemen is to a large extent attributable to learning from previously unsuccessful projects with similar objectives in the same area. The project has, thus, adopted a participatory approach rather than a heavy top-down approach, thereby ensuring community buy-in. It also undertook a rigorous assessment of good economic returns in the choice of crops to be introduced so farmers would adopt them instead of oats. Oats are one of the most widely cultivated crops due to their high market price, but which alone account for 30 percent of agricultural water use in Yemen.

100. Sensitivity to local culture and traditions, particularly conservative communities in the NENA region, can turn constraints into opportunities. This was the case with the nutrition project in Egypt, which sought to train young girls and women from beneficiary villages. To transcend cultural constraints, the project invited male chaperones to accompany the trainees when travelling to town and used an official vehicle with government number plates to avoid gossip and any potential damage to the reputations of participants.

101. It is futile for FAO to launch pilot projects in NENA without parallel efforts to enhance the prospects of upscaling. One strategy is to involve more effectively and from the outset those capable of upscaling and replication, namely, governments and other actors, such as the AfDB, IsDB and the World Bank.

102. A lesson from FAO interventions at community level is the need to dedicate sufficient time to key activities, such as forming producer organizations, developing management capacities and establishing services to help improve the sustainability of project structures, as in the successful cases of the SBP in Yemen and the dairy-sector project in Lebanon.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

103. Conclusion 1. FAO's contribution in the NENA region has proved relevant to country priorities and aligned with FAO's Strategic Objectives and international commitments, for example, the SDGs. The comparative advantage and added value of FAO's contribution to agricultural development in the NENA region is widely acknowledged by stakeholders and partners, including multilateral organizations and bilateral donors. FAO's comparative advantage is generally said to stem from the Organization's status as an honest broker, its knowledge base and its capacity to transfer technology, good practices and experience from elsewhere.

104. Conclusion 2. FAO's support for policy and strategy development enabled governments to set clear and feasible priorities. The main individual components of FAO's information and early-warning systems are also well established and have made significant progress in terms of results and adoption at country level. With FAO's support, governments have become better placed to take evidence-based decisions in the pursuit of countrywide sustainable development objectives.

105. Conclusion 3. FAO's interventions at local community level have limited geographic and social coverage compared with the needs of the NENA countries. Nonetheless, they set examples for upscaling and replication through the dissemination of GAPs, technology transfer and the adoption of innovative participatory approaches and normative frameworks. Local farmers who were not among project beneficiaries have replicated innovations introduced by FAO at their own cost.

106. Conclusion 4. FAO's resilience approach, though applied with varying degrees of success, has proved valid and appropriate in the context of conflict-ridden countries. Likewise, the focus on developing value chains and support to enable poor producers to acquire assets and ensure their inclusion in value chains have been relevant. Where attention has been on awareness-raising and the organization of small producers, interventions have proved effective in improving the livelihoods of poor households.

107. Conclusion 5. FAO's interventions in the region have included some valuable efforts towards the socio-economic empowerment of women, but the examples are limited and, more often than not, pursued through the adoption of women-specific project components. Gender mainstreaming in core project activities remains a challenge.

108. Conclusion 6. Despite the demonstrated relevance and appropriateness of the RI-SSFF, FAO needs to exert more effort to build the capacity of government extension units to facilitate the replication of pilots in other areas, to ensure government commitment for upscaling and to win the support of the "big actors" (IFAD, IsDB and the World Bank).

5.2 Recommendations

109. To improve and consolidate its contribution in the NENA region, FAO may want to consider adopting the following recommendations.

110. Recommendation 1: The gap in FAO's M&E systems could be better addressed by adopting a robust RBMS with an M&E component. Results based management (RBM) starts with the specification, scheduling and budgeting of outcomes, outputs and activities and associated targets and indicators. It acts as a basis for guiding implementation, supports monitoring for corrective measures and facilitates evaluation. The responsibility for RBM is shared by all staff and does not fall solely to the M&E Officer.

111. Recommendation 2: FAO should focus more on baseline and needs assessments in its project design. The planning of many FAO projects in the region failed to include background socio-economic analysis, including of gender issues. Small interventions may have limited resources to undertake rigorous analysis, but they could benefit from a wealth of accessible information and knowledge generated by researchers and students at universities and institutions. Investing in baseline and background socio-economic and gender analysis is a prerequisite to the preparation of larger projects, with high returns.

112. Recommendation 3: FAO needs to further strengthen the capacity of Technical Officers to mainstream gender in their work, particularly through customized advice and support from Gender Officers and Gender Focal Points (GFPs) in the Decentralized Offices. FAO needs to

ensure that GFPs are equipped and available to provide this support. Strategic Programme teams and technical departments also need to provide advice on how to mainstream gender in programmes and projects in their areas of specialization.

113. Recommendation 4: FAO should reconsider the manner in which local partners, particularly non-governmental organizations, are involved in projects. The current MOU format restricts the potential role of local partners to that of implementing subcontractor, when they could participate effectively in the planning and implementation of activities due to their local knowledge and connections.

114. Recommendation 5: The absence of a regional resilience-building strategy is a gap that challenges FAO interventions in the face of disasters and risks in the NENA region. Such a strategy is not the direct responsibility of FAO, but rather of the League of Arab States and its affiliated organs. RNE could identify those League of Arab States organs and United Nations agencies in the region that have the mandate and interest in collaborating in advocacy for the establishment of a regional charter and strategy on building resilience in conflict contexts. Needless to say, resilience-building is one of FAO's Strategic Objectives (SO5), with a Programme to address it, but countries and regional bodies do not seem to have the same perspective. Development of an FAO strategy for resilience-building in the region may gain support from countries and regional bodies and facilitate the work of FAO and other actors.

115. Recommendation 6: The challenge faced by FAO's resilience approach in effecting the link between emergency and development activities could be mitigated or transcended by better intra-project coordination and the synchronization of components and activities, as well as the capacity development of technical staff on issues of social development (poverty reduction, social inclusion and participatory approaches) and gender mainstreaming.

116. Recommendation 7: FAO's efforts to address water scarcity and the steady depletion of groundwater basins in the region are highly relevant. However, its projects on sub-basin management serve only as models for community mobilization and organization. FAO may want to consider follow-up action to have a wider perspective over the entire basin.

Annex 1. List of background documents

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