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منظمة
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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-fifth Session

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**Innovation in Agriculture and Food Systems for Achieving SDGs - Note on
COVID-19**

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¹ Rescheduled from 2-4 March 2020, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.

I. Update on International Forum on Innovation in Agri-Food Systems

1. Due to the emergence of COVID-19 and the related restrictions on travel, the Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture of Saudi Arabia and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) – as principal organizers of the forum – agreed to postpone the [International Forum on Innovation in Agri-Food Systems to achieve the SDGs](#) from its original dates in March 2020 to the second half of 2021.
2. The forum will address the three thematic areas of 1) Agri-food systems innovation for markets and value chains; 2) Innovation for youth and women employment and ensuring more inclusive access to technologies without further marginalizing women and vulnerable communities; and 3) Technologies and innovation for agricultural production, including livestock, and plant health, bearing in mind the new regional and global context due to the impacts of COVID-19 and subsequent challenges and opportunities. The pandemic has underscored the need for innovative policies, technologies, organizational processes, governance mechanisms, institutions, finance and investment with a view to building back better. These, along with strengthened regional cooperation and innovative ways to reduce import dependency and boost local production, not only hold the key to overcoming the current disruptive impacts of COVID-19, but also to making farming and the entire agri-food system more sustainable, efficient and inclusive.

II. RNE Innovation Zoominar Series

3. Following the decision to postpone the Forum on Innovation, and building on the preparatory process for the forum, including agenda, background documents and network of experts, the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE) has organized a series of virtual sessions, or ‘Zoominars’. The Zoominars aimed to develop and promote knowledge and practical experiences on various facets of innovation applicable to agriculture, food systems and rural development in the region. The sessions have helped identify pathways on how innovation and technology can be used effectively to help small producers cope with the impacts of COVID-19 in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region and the specific measures needed to bridge the literacy and digital gaps in rural areas to avoid the risk of excluding small producers, rural women and the most vulnerable groups who lack the skills and resources to access the technologies. Each session captured the latest thinking on each of the various dimensions of agri-food system innovation and identified i) support needed from FAO, and governments in the region; ii) key partnerships needed for effective implementation of inclusive and sustainable rural transformation and to achieve the SDGs; iii) important knowledge or information gaps that need to be filled.
4. More than 1 500 individuals registered for the first nine Zoominars, including representatives of government institutions, academia, regional institutions, United Nations agencies, private sector, research institutes, farmers’ and producers’ organizations, young entrepreneurs and start-ups.

III. The creation of a Regional Innovation Flagship

5. Building on the large and well-established network of experts and partners engaged in the preparations for the Forum on Innovation and the outputs of the Innovation Zoominar Series, FAO is creating a regional innovation repository of knowledge and a community of practice bringing together diverse stakeholders from across the region and beyond, to support the scaling up of innovation work in the NENA region. The Flagship initiative will also work with partners

to design policy and programmes that can support innovation with an emphasis on fostering economic inclusion and environmental sustainability.