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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration

Executive Summary

The United Nations General Assembly declared 2021–2030 as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration with the main target of preventing, halting and reversing degraded, damaged and destroyed ecosystems worldwide. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and FAO were designated as lead agencies for the Decade implementation. The Decade is a global call to action to draw together political support, scientific research and financial muscle to massively scale up restoration. It also acts as a framework for action to “revitalize” existing environment-related international agreements and commitments. In the NENA region a joint programme of work is being developed in coordination with UNEP and a community of practice is being established that includes representatives from the different ministries with ecosystem subsectors, civil society organizations and the private sector in order to build synergies between agriculture, ecosystem conservation and restoration interventions.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to urge Members to:

- a) take note of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and efforts to develop a joint programme of action by FAO and UNEP at regional level to reverse the degradation of ecosystems in the region.

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Introduction

I. General Context

1. Ecosystems, with their potential provision of services that are of vital importance to human livelihoods and survival, are under threat with increasing rate of degradation, biodiversity loss and adverse impact of climate change.
2. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to end poverty, end hunger, conserve biodiversity, combat climate change and improve livelihoods for everyone, everywhere. These objectives, with their encompassed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are unlikely to be met unless ecosystem degradation is stopped, and ecosystem restoration is undertaken globally at an immense scale.
3. In March 2019, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2021–2030 as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration with the main target of preventing, halting and reversing degraded, damaged and destroyed ecosystems worldwide. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) were designated as lead agencies for the Decade implementation.
4. The UN Decade is a global call to action to draw together political support, scientific research and financial muscle to massively scale up restoration. It also acts as a framework for action to “revitalize” existing environment-related international agreements and commitments. Effective restoration simultaneously supports achievement of the biodiversity, climate and land-degradation neutrality goals of the Rio Conventions – The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – and related global initiatives.
5. Ecosystem restoration is defined as “the process of halting and reversing degradation, resulting in improved ecosystem services and recovered biodiversity. Ecosystem restoration encompasses a wide continuum of practices, depending on local conditions and societal choice.”¹ Restorative activities should concurrently address the direct and indirect causes of ecosystem degradation and fragmentation, the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem goods and services, and the threat of climate change.

II. Overall goal and Objectives of the Decade

6. The UN Decade vision is “a world where – for the health and well-being of all life on Earth and that of future generations – the relationship between humans and nature has been restored, where the area of healthy ecosystems is increasing, and where ecosystem loss, fragmentation and degradation has been ended.”
7. The Decade aims at;
 - creating new momentum and enhancing global, regional, national and local commitments and actions to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems globally;
 - scaling up ecosystem restoration efforts;
 - increasing awareness and understanding of the multiple benefits of ecosystem restoration and applying this knowledge in education systems and within public and private sector decision-making; and

¹ <https://www.fao.org/3/cb6591en/cb6591en.pdf>

- building synergies between agriculture, urban development, ecosystem conservation and restoration initiatives, and climate change adaptation.

8. A global strategy was developed through wide consultations to guide the Decade implementation. The purpose of the strategy is to: i) catalyse a new approach to national development, with ecosystem restoration being central to development planning and investment; ii) promote broad and representative participation within restoration initiatives, including among indigenous peoples, farmers, grassroots organizations and traditional leadership; and iii) inspire stakeholders across the world to take actions to make the UN Decade a success, through both small- and large-scale restoration activities.

III. What to restore

9. Ecosystem restoration can be implemented in all types of degraded ecosystems, landscapes and seascapes, including urban, production, cultural, semi-natural and natural systems. Ecosystem restoration encompasses a wide range of activities, employed singly or collectively, which aim to repair degraded ecosystems of all kinds.

10. These include: i) reduction of negative environmental and societal impacts such as pollution and unsustainable resource use and management; ii) removal of contaminants, pollutants and other threats, often known as environmental remediation; iii) rehabilitation of ecosystem functions and services in highly modified areas such as former mining sites and degraded production systems; and iv) ecological restoration, which aims to halt degradation and assists in recovering an ecosystem to the status it would have been on if degradation had not occurred.

11. For activities to be considered ecosystem restoration, they must result in net gain for biodiversity, ecosystem health and integrity, and human well-being, including sustainable production of goods and services. Such activities should be seen as shared responsibility among public and private sector and stakeholders at local, national and international levels.

IV. UN Decade and COVID-19 recovery pathways

12. Activities undertaken under the UN Decade are foreseen to generate a new restoration economy that comprises investments in ecosystem restoration at the scale of hundreds of millions of hectares. Such restoration may create millions of new jobs, yield substantial economic returns on investment and assist the world to recover from the economic damage inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been documented that investments in large-scale ecosystem restoration generates more livelihoods per dollar spent than other sectors whilst also yielding attractive long-term economic returns.²

13. It is envisaged that by the end of 2030, the Decade will create a platform for societies globally to put their relationships with nature on a new trajectory that will include: nature being respected across society; ecosystem restoration taking place over hundreds of millions of hectares and generating millions of new livelihoods; and global supply chains and consumption patterns being shifted to protect, sustainably manage and restore nature.

V. Restoration needs in Near East and North Africa region

² <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/31813/ERDStrat.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

14. Ecosystems in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region already face a wide array of serious stresses, including water scarcity, aridity and land degradation. The region's arable lands are under continuous degradation caused by soil erosion, salinity and pollution while rangelands and forests are subjected to mounting pressure from overgrazing, deforestation and unsustainable management and uses. Fisheries in the region are often associated with the unsustainable use and depletion of marine resources. Furthermore, climatic extremes - particularly drought, flash floods and sand and dust storms, in addition to conflicts, aggravate vulnerabilities of the ecosystems and weaken their role in sustaining livelihoods in the region. This degradation trend, if not addressed, will reduce the ability of the region's ecosystems to provide the range of goods and services which are essential to the livelihoods and well-being of the people and to the integrity of their environment.

15. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration provides a unique opportunity to consolidate efforts of all related stakeholders to halt ecosystem degradation and enhance restoration. Degraded ecosystems in the region including agricultural areas, rangeland, forests, marine and aquatic resources, coastal areas, and wetlands can be targeted for improvement through large-scale restoration programmes. Actions include, among others, increasing organic carbon in agricultural soils, restoration of degraded landscapes including forests and rangelands, recovery of overfished stocks, remediation of polluted sites and protection of biodiversity resources. Ecosystems restoration and related approaches can also form part of the solution to adapting to climate change.

16. In the NENA region, there is need for political will, enabling environments and a clear plan of action that will be developed in a participatory way with the relevant stakeholders and will ensure the Decade implementation. FAO and UNEP regional offices are developing a joint programme of actions to halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems in the region. A community of practice is being established that includes representatives from the different ministries with related ecosystem subsectors, civil society organizations and the private sector in order to build synergies between agriculture, ecosystem conservation and restoration interventions.

17. Achieving the UN Decade targets in NENA countries will contribute to accomplishing multiple SDGs goals, as well as realizing Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets, the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan and the National Action Programme to Combat Desertification.