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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR NEAR EAST

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Biodiversity mainstreaming in the Near East and North Africa

Executive Summary

Agricultural sectors are highly dependent on biodiversity and ecosystem services and biodiversity provides sustainable solutions to multiple challenges faced by agrifood systems. The FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors – approved by the Council in 2019 – and its [2021-2023 Action Plan](#) aims to mainstream biodiversity across agricultural sectors at national, regional and international levels in a structured and coherent manner. In this context, FAO commissioned a regional assessment of the status of mainstreaming biodiversity across agriculture in the NENA region to inform FAO's programme of work. This information note highlights key findings from the assessment.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

1. The Regional Conference is invited to call upon Members to:
 - a) take note of the findings assessment of the status of mainstreaming biodiversity across agriculture in the NENA region; and
 - b) increase efforts to strengthen the consideration of biodiversity in relevant national policies, programs and plans with the support of FAO.

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

**RNE NERC Secretariat
FAO-RNE-NERC@fao.org**

Introduction

1. Biodiversity mainstreaming across the agricultural sectors is the process of embedding biodiversity considerations into all policies, strategies and practices that are adopted by public and private actors who either depend on biodiversity or whose actions have an impact on biodiversity. The purpose of mainstreaming biodiversity in the agriculture sectors is to ensure that biodiversity is conserved and used sustainably.¹
2. Agricultural sectors are highly dependent on biodiversity and ecosystem services and biodiversity provides sustainable solutions to multiple challenges faced by agrifood systems.
3. The FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors – approved by the Council in 2019 – and its 2021-2023 Action Plan aims to mainstream biodiversity across agricultural sectors at national, regional and international levels in a structured and coherent manner, taking into account national priorities, needs, regulations and policies, and country programming. The expected result of the application of the Strategy is to reduce the negative impacts of agricultural practices on biodiversity, to promote sustainable agricultural practices and to conserve, enhance, preserve and restore biodiversity as a whole.
4. The Strategy was deliberated at regional multi-stakeholder dialogues held across regions, including in the Near East and North Africa region (NENA), to build global consensus around its goal, objectives and expected results. Participants at the NENA multi-stakeholder dialogue,² held in Amman, Jordan, in November 2019, requested FAO to undertake a stocktaking exercise on the status of biodiversity mainstreaming across agricultural sectors in the region to identify strengths, weaknesses and gaps in policy, legal and institutional frameworks and in technical capacities to inform planning (at both national and regional levels) and advocacy for biodiversity mainstreaming across agricultural sectors.
5. In line with the foregoing, FAO commissioned in 2020 a regional assessment of the status of biodiversity mainstreaming across agricultural sectors in the NENA region.³ The assessment also examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on biodiversity with a view to assess the impact of post-pandemic recovery measures on biodiversity mainstreaming across/within agricultural sectors.
6. Considering the COVID-19 lockdown situation, the assessment was based on a literature review,⁴ online surveys and virtual interviews of key informants, webinars and virtual focus group discussions (whenever possible). This note aims to inform the 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East on the regional assessment, its outcomes and the actions it is proposing to be taken for mainstreaming biodiversity across agricultural sectors in the region.

I. Main findings of the assessment

7. During the last ten years, a number of projects have dealt with biodiversity mainstreaming across economic sectors, including the agricultural sector. The impact of these projects on biodiversity while improving the livelihood of local communities and territories have been the subject of a number of reviews. These reviews have shown that mainstreaming is a very complex process and influenced by a number of determinants including governance, public policy, regulation, voluntary standards and norms, availability and quality of scientific data, traditional knowledge, economic instruments,

¹ FAO. 2020. FAO Strategy on mainstreaming biodiversity across agricultural sectors. <https://www.fao.org/3/ca7722en/ca7722en.pdf>

² <https://www.fao.org/3/ca7540en/CA7540EN.pdf>

³ FAO. 2021. Regional assessment of the status of mainstreaming biodiversity across agricultural sectors. unpublished

⁴ The review covered relevant global reports and a range of national reports, strategies, legislations, programmes and action plans including through the VNR on achieving the SDGs, NDCs, NAP, NBSAP, NAPCD, country reports submitted for the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA) and others.

markets, inclusiveness, gender, awareness, education, training, communication, monitoring and reporting.

8. The results of the regional assessment of the status of mainstreaming biodiversity across agriculture in the NENA region⁵ showed that NENA countries have made good progress on biodiversity mainstreaming in governance and policy, and to a lesser degree in the areas of inclusiveness and partnership. At the same time, little progress has been made so far on data and knowledge; gender and social equity; and monitoring, reporting and awareness. However, governance models adopted were mainly based on a top-down approach, with national programs often relying on international support and funds. National programmes still lack capacity building, decision-making powers, and sometimes legal support.

9. Good progress has been made over the last two decades (2001-2021) in NENA countries in integrating the diversity of biological resources at the species level (e.g. *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation, and afforestation). However, slow progress has been made so far at the genetic and ecosystem levels.

10. The assessment also showed that the integration of soil biodiversity into national action plans such as the National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAP), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for climate change mitigation and adaptation, the National Action Programme to Combat Desertification (NAPCD) and the Voluntary National Reports (VNRs) on the progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is still lacking, a matter that requires more attention from countries if the status of biodiversity for food and agriculture in the region is to be improved.

11. Only a few examples of biodiversity mainstreaming actions targeting the species and ecosystem levels were stated in the above-mentioned policy documents. However, some projects implemented to combat desertification in different desert areas in the region, such as the Green Dam in Algeria and the Green Wall in Mauritania, have adopted holistic approaches to combat desertification through afforestation, reforestation and rehabilitation of drought-sensitive habitats, thus strengthening the restoration and protection of biodiversity at genetic resources, species and ecosystems levels.

12. Other reported projects that took a holistic approach on mainstreaming biodiversity in agriculture were reported in Jordan (Mainstreaming Biodiversity in the Sylvo-Pastoral and Rangeland Landscapes in the Pockets of Poverty of Jordan), Lebanon (Mainstreaming Biodiversity Management into Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Production Processes), and Morocco (Conservation of biodiversity and mitigation of land degradation through adaptive management of agricultural heritage systems). However, in most of these cases, these projects have a short to medium term duration (three to five years), are managed by ad hoc steering committees that were established purposely for the project and which have limited decision-making powers and depend largely on the project's external funding. There is uncertainty on sustaining the results achieved by these projects when the funding will end and the steering committees complete their mandates.

13. Institutional barriers are the major concern in mainstreaming biodiversity across/within agricultural sectors in the NENA region. Efforts to overcome these barriers have been underway for many years but they focus mainly on vertical governance that often favours a top-down approach with interactions between different levels along public sector decision-making chains. The vertical governance alone can weaken or limit the horizontal governance, which instead emphasizes interactions between public services and non-governmental partners such as the private sector and professional associations. In this regard, governance models based on territorial-oriented public policies entrusted to specialized agencies implemented in Morocco (National Agency for the Development of Oasis and Argan Zones - ANDZOA) seem to be a way to ensure a better balance between vertical and horizontal governance.

⁵ FAO. 2021. Regional assessment of the status of mainstreaming biodiversity across agricultural sectors. unpublished

14. In terms of regulations, biodiversity is often regulated by a range of sectoral laws (e.g. on land, soil, pasture, forest, fish, marine and aquatic resources), but biodiversity issues are still not yet integrated into broader national legal and policy regimes; nor is the value of biodiversity always fully accounted for. In most countries, for example, efforts to implement NBSAPs rely on national sectoral policies and legislations.

15. Analysing NENA countries' NBSAPs, as submitted to the Secretariat of the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), there are 1593 actions referring to agricultural sectors and/or biodiversity mainstreaming determinants. Thirty six percent of these actions refer to agricultural sectors (crops, livestock, forestry, rangeland, fishery and aquaculture), while 43 percent refer to biodiversity mainstreaming determinants (e.g. governance/policies, regulation/standards, inclusiveness, research/innovation, data/knowledge, gender/social equity, management, economics/market, awareness/education and communication, monitoring/reporting). The remaining 21 percent refer to other crosscutting sectors (energy, industry, tourism, eco/agri-tourism, climate change, desertification, pollution, wastewater, etc.).

16. Conservation practices (through *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation) have been the focus of biological resource conservation policies in the NENA region for many years. However, the regional assessment showed some evidence of transition towards strategies that are based on a landscape/seascape approach. The leading countries in transitioning toward a landscape approach are Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

17. Private sector involvement in issues related to biodiversity, such as the management and conservation of genetic resources, is still very low in most NENA countries, although during the study some success stories have been reported by countries. It was also noted that the scientific community is not often involved in mainstreaming biodiversity although its role in providing scientifically based advice for decision-makers, managers and local communities is considered critical.

18. Several NENA countries are actually improving the collection of data on conservation and sustainable use of biological resources in order to strengthen the scientific-based approach. However, one urgent issue raised by the study is the need for improving not only the collection but also the processing and sharing of data. In this context, the use of new technologies and biotechnologies, big-data analysis, artificial intelligence and remote sensing are proving to be an essential way to support the adoption of biodiversity integration approaches based on reliable biophysical and socio-economic data. The upcoming FAO Science and Innovation Strategy will re-enforce this work.

19. Research, education and training were highlighted by the most respondents as critical for biodiversity mainstreaming, but the lack of financial resources and qualified trainers are often cited as the main obstacles. In terms of priorities, respondents agreed on giving collaborative research a high priority to make local communities and biodiversity managers not only beneficiaries but partners. Biodiversity farmers' schools could be very useful in strengthening the link between research and biodiversity management. Additional identified priority areas in research and innovation include climate change, taxonomy, survey/assessment, molecular biology and digital mapping.

20. As for traditional knowledge, except for a few projects initiated within the framework of the FAO Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), no significant progress has been made so far to document and make use of the traditional knowledge, nor have there been concrete proposals made on the matter in the examined national policy documents.

21. Gender issues have been addressed in a number of NENA countries, and the involvement of women has also been reported in the study. Efforts, for instance, to extend women's contribution to the entire agroforestry related value chains including processing, valuing and marketing field products are underway in several countries, their engagement still remain restricted to production and/or collection of agricultural and/or non-wood forest products.

22. The assessment showed critical gaps in technical capacities that need to be addressed in areas such as payments for biodiversity services, surveying and mapping, communication, development of biodiversity business models and management practices.

23. An assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis indicates early reports showing negative impacts of the pandemic on biodiversity resulting from the increase in illegal cutting/harvesting of forests and the increased levels of poaching and trafficking of endangered wildlife species due to reduced levels of staff surveillance and monitoring.⁶ The decrease in migrant remittance⁷ and the increase in unemployment rates and loss of livelihoods, especially in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic as compared with pre-COVID times,⁸ could result in more pressure on natural forest resources to supplement income and thus cause significant impact on biodiversity resources. However, the economic packages and social protection measures taken by some countries to reduce the impact of the pandemic⁹ are likely to impact positively the biodiversity mainstreaming process. For instance, the improved use of Information Technology (IT), that have taken place in several NENA countries during the pandemic, could be used to overcome some of the obstacles to biodiversity mainstreaming such as biodiversity mapping, trading, e-commerce and certification.

24. Although the issue of biodiversity protection is not addressed *per se* in the post COVID-19 recovery plans of most NENA countries, some of the actions currently being implemented are likely to affect the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of biodiversity. For instance, the dynamics of digitalization of the agricultural sector through the creation of online and mobile platforms for the delivery of extension services, social protection delivery, trading, e-commerce, government services, and farmer registration may all have a positive impact on biodiversity. Digital tools for biodiversity mapping have already gained ground in some countries in the region. Yet only a few countries such as Egypt have elaborated a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery plan, with explicit reference to biodiversity and protected areas. Egypt's national post-COVID recovery plan includes, for instance, measures to enhance income generation opportunities for vulnerable communities in rural and protected areas, promote local food markets to shorten the food supply chain and to enhance local competitiveness, preparedness, recovery and resilience.

⁶ <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Covid-19-SFM-impact-Africa.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/29/covid-19-remittance-flows-to-shrink-14-by-202>

⁸ <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8844en/CA8844EN.pdf>

⁹ in particular, cash transfers, in-kind food distribution, unemployment compensation schemes, deferrals of income tax declarations and payments, postponement of loan payments, provision of subsidized interest rate loans, creation of investment funds and state guarantees for new credits, exemptions on utility payments, social security contribution waivers, and price control and price monitoring to avoid price gouging.