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Organización de las
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منظمة
الأغذية والزراعة
للأمم المتحدة



FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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Statement by the Spokesperson of the Civil Society Organizations

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We, 99 men and women from 24 countries and 66 organizations and networks, the members of national and regional social platforms that comprise farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fishers, consumers, workers, NGOs, movements, women, youth and academia, convened the Civil Society Consultation Meeting on 30-31 January 2022 via ZOOM in preparation for the 36th Near East and North Africa Regional Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization (NERC 36) to be held in Iraq on 7-8 February 2022.

At the meeting, which was held in complete openness, we discussed many issues related to the agenda of the Ministerial Conference. Our key recommendations follow.

- The agriculture sector (plant, animal and fisheries) must be a strategic priority for countries and for their economic, social and political security. Rural development must be at the forefront of national and joint regional policies. Food systems that depend on national and regional capacity must be defended within the concept of integrated food sovereignty.
- An integrated view of the structural causes – social, environmental, cultural and economic – that lead to a loss of food security must be adopted, especially regarding precarious social classes.
- There must be action for radical change to unhealthy patterns of food consumption by reviving traditional and diverse nutritious diets that are compatible with the environment and local cultures. This can be achieved by creating short, local, seasonal supply chains while improving local capacity for storage and processing to ensure food safety. Support should also be given to urban agriculture projects.
- Cultivation of staple food crops, such as wheat, should be enhanced. An Arab Fund to support such crops should be established. Agricultural research and marketing studies should be conducted. To increase production, there is a need to invest in modern agricultural technology and develop plans to bring the Arab region's unexploited agricultural land into use. We note that the Arab region is estimated to have a potential 197 million hectares of farmland, yet only 36 percent of it is in use. Budgets should be allocated to support wheat cultivation (subsistence farming), especially for smallholders or landless farmers, through the provision of environmentally friendly seeds, fertilizers and pesticides.
- Farmers - women and men alike - should receive training on the entire date palm value chain, including the selection of high-quality varieties and appropriate irrigation techniques. Grants and concessional loans should be made available.
- Rural populations' economic and social rights should be guaranteed, thereby curtailing these communities' urban migration.

- Farmers should be given financial incentives to foster sustainable agricultural systems. Debt accumulated by smallholder farmers should be rescheduled and they should be exempt from taxes. Farmers should be encouraged to join agricultural associations, trade union frameworks and cooperatives, whose activity may be strengthened by:
 - the operation of collection centres and units for manufacturing, sorting, packaging and storage, the provision of agricultural machinery at a nominal price, and the provision of refrigerated transportation for delivering products to market;
 - providing farmers with advice and training in the area of food safety and quality, supporting them to obtain quality certification, and helping them to access markets; and
 - involving them in preparing national and regional agricultural policies and plans.
- Government policies that protect women's right to land and to production inputs should be developed and put into practice. Women should be trained in the administration of cooperative businesses, project development, market-need analysis, financial management, productivity enhancement and risk management. They should be involved in decision and policy making. Finance in the form of concessional loans should be available to them. Marketing channels should be created while working to support networking between women's cooperatives in the region, to transfer experiences and expertise and integrate the coordination and marketing processes.
- Voluntary work and civic and voluntary agricultural institutions guided by humanitarian, national and patriotic values and principles must be supported financially, organizationally and legislatively.
- Fair wages for female and male agricultural workers must be guaranteed. Their working hours should be standardized and health and safety at work ensured. They should be protected from financial and sexual exploitation, and have the right to social security funds, trade-union activity and legal support.
- The fisheries sector is of great economic, social and nutritional importance. It should be protected through the development of policies and procedures in line with the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Fisheries.
- All sectors should be committed to enhancing and protecting small-scale (traditional) fisheries, which are the source of livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of families in the region. The dominance of giant industrial fishing companies should be countered, especially those working in fishmeal, given that millions of tons of pelagic fish are incinerated to manufacture animal feed.

- Those working in the fisheries sector under conditions of occupation and war should be protected, especially in the Gaza Strip, where fishers suffer from the harsh measures of the Israeli occupation and are prevented from exercising their right to access their fisheries.
- Programmes should be developed that address the effects of climate change on the fisheries sector.
- National, regional and international strategies should be developed that can assess and expand the vital role of the livestock sector in the food, economic and social fields. These strategies should include the creation of a coordinating framework, dissemination of information, adequate infrastructure, feed and high-quality veterinary medicines, supporting adaptation to climate change, and strengthening markets and trade exchanges within the region for this sector and its products.
- Apiculture (beekeeping) in the region should be supported as it plays a role in enhancing agricultural income and production and protecting biodiversity.
- Programmes that promote the use of the latest technology to conserve resources and reduce food waste should be adopted. Foodstuffs that are about to expire should be reduced in price and redistributed to low-income groups. Large food companies should be monitored and fined for wastage and pollution.
- Good governance and social justice in water management should be promoted. National water councils should be set up to bring together government departments and relevant sectors, especially civil society and smallholders. This will ensure integrated planning for water management and enhance the effectiveness of the Arab Water Council.
- Rainwater harvesting projects should be supported and water use efficiency enhanced by means of technology, irrigation, and regional cooperation in joint water projects. It is also necessary to consider ways to tackle the appropriation of regional water resources by the Israeli occupation.
- Renewable energy should be used for desalination and irrigation. Causing any kind of water pollution should be made a criminal offence.
- Indigenous seeds that have proven resilient to the adverse effects of climate change should be protected, fostered, assessed and documented. Mechanisms for cooperation and the integration of research programmes in the region should be developed, and there should be mutual

recognition of registries of plant varieties among countries in the region, exchange of genetic resources, and facilitation of private investment in the development of varieties.

- The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides should be minimized. Organic fertilization and biological and organic control should be encouraged. This will reduce production costs and improve the quality and flavour of agricultural crops.
- Arab agricultural economic integration should be pursued by promoting integrated regional trade between Arab countries to preserve their economic interests and food sovereignty and security in the face of encroachment by major economic powers and the exchange of knowledge. The establishment of joint Arab agricultural investment companies, exempt from taxes and fees, should be encouraged and supported. Full representation of independent civil society networks committed to Arab issues is essential. They must contribute to setting priorities and policies and their oversight role must be enhanced.
- The impact of climate change on productive capacity must be gauged. The risk management system must be enhanced, as should capacity building and information dissemination, especially for smallholder farmers, women and youth.
- Maximum advantage should be taken of climate-change support funds by proposing national and Arab regional projects to be implemented by local institutions, including civil society institutions, without imposing excessive administrative burdens.
- Fruit-tree and forestry projects should be supported. Priority should be given to selecting tree varieties that are nutritionally, medically and economically useful and that can also feed livestock. Plant and tree residues may be used as fertilizers and for domestic energy.
- The Framework for Action for Food Security and Nutrition in Protracted Crises (FFA) should be deployed and action taken to deal with the root and underlying causes of food insecurity during crises, war and occupation. These causes should be determined through participatory national forums that respect the principle of state ownership.
- Arab cooperation that aims at stopping inter-Arab wars and occupations and fostering civic peace should be promoted. Cooperation is also to be encouraged to remove obstacles to access to food and water, develop early warning systems, build resilient local food systems, boost food reserves, and sustainably enhance the capabilities of local grassroots organizations that are highly effective in their humanitarian and development work and peace-building efforts.

- An Arab fund for agricultural development and health and environmental disasters (such as coronavirus) should be set up in coordination with FAO and the World Food Programme to provide development relief aid to impacted rural families.
- The creation of a strategic stockpile of key food commodities, especially grains.
- Land is a finite resource, and the fair distribution of land requires the protection of collective tenure systems, including communal and traditional systems, so that they do not become an underlying factor stoking conflict, or fall victim to conflict.
- Agrarian reform should be endorsed and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT) implemented. Participatory mechanisms for resolving land-related complaints should be guaranteed, and regional frameworks to counter urban sprawl should be developed.
- The culture of agricultural production and environmental preservation should be revitalised through compulsory curricula in schools and universities and support for research in line with regional priorities. Modern agricultural techniques promoted by companies and major countries, such as hydroponics, should not be adopted without studying their effectiveness in supporting food security and their social, environmental and economic impact on the region.