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Progress in the Implementation of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics in the Near East Region

I. Background and Context

1. To address the weakness in basic data and information availability in developing countries as well as emerging data and information needs, a Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics has been developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in collaboration with the World Bank. The Global Strategy was endorsed in February 2010 by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) and was also strongly supported by the FAO Council and Conference.
2. The Global Strategy is a comprehensive framework for improving, on a sustainable basis, statistics on agriculture, livestock, aquaculture, small-scale fisheries and forestry in developing countries. The strategy also addresses emerging data needs related to food security, nutrition and the environmental impact of agricultural activities. Its accompanying Global Action Plan has a target of supporting 90 countries over the next 5 years, 5 of which in the Near East region.
3. The Global Action Plan is implemented at global, regional and national level and includes technical assistance (TA), training, and research as well as a governance mechanism. At the global level, the programme focuses on setting the technical standards and on strategically coordinating the regional action plans.
4. Resources are provided through the establishment of the Global multi-donor Trust Fund (GTF) managed by FAO acting as the Fund Administrator whilst overall technical guidance at all levels is provided by the Global Office, hosted by the FAO Statistics division. This supports global, regional and national activities.
5. The programme is implemented in all developing regions, namely Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific and Commonwealth of Independent States. Each region

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integrates the global framework considering the regional needs; undertakes country assessments; provides technical assistance and training on a national level and liaises with international, regional and sub-regional offices.

6. Implementation is country-driven with a detailed assessment of countries' agricultural statistics systems as the starting point and basis for the formulation of short-term country proposals (addressing urgent needs) and as the building block for the elaboration of national long-term sectoral strategies.
7. The specific objective of the global Strategy is to enable countries to produce and use the basic data and information needed to inform national policy making and monitoring of international development goals. More specifically the outcome will be realized by:
 - Enabling selected countries to produce and disseminate good quality and timely relevant statistics;
 - Supporting targeted countries in developing a sustainable agricultural statistics system through the coordination and integration of agriculture into the national statistical systems;
 - Providing training to increase the number of people working on agricultural statistics with the appropriate skills to use cost-effective methodologies in data collection, analysis, and presentation.

II. The Challenges of Agricultural Statistics in the Near East Region

8. In many Near East and North African countries the agricultural statistical systems are weak, feeble, uncoordinated, insufficiently resourced and essentially unsustainable; and their outputs are inadequate in terms of quantity, quality and dissemination. At the same time data users at country, regional and international levels need quality data on regular basis, but unfortunately the national statistical offices that produce the data and information lack the capacity to generate the required information on time.
9. The assessment recently conducted (see section 5 of this document) highlighted the following major weaknesses of statistical systems in the Near East region.
 - Outdated legal frameworks with a lack of a national Strategic Plan for agricultural and rural statistics;
 - Inadequate capacity to collect, compile, store, disseminate and use statistics due to under-trained human resource and enumerators;
 - Uncoordinated statistics systems leading to inconsistent and conflicting statistical data from different producers;
 - Lack of standardization and harmonization of concepts, definitions, classification and an understanding of users' needs;
 - Low quality administrative data and delayed release of statistics;
 - Absence of a Commission for Agricultural Statistics in the region (like AFCAS/APCAS..) that harmonizes systems across countries.
10. These weaknesses make it very difficult for countries in the region to overcome existing challenges of data quality and render agricultural statistics activities more demanding. To meet these pressing demands, developing a *Regional Action Plan* to implement the Global Strategy to improve agricultural and rural statistics becomes paramount..

III. Rationale, Areas of Synergies, Stakeholders and Target Beneficiaries

11. Improving agricultural and rural statistics is essential in order to address many structural and emerging issues afflicting the Near East region. Lack of quality and reliable data has over the years been a key bottleneck for the attainment of sustainable results by FAO and other development partners. Hence, the Regional Action Plan will have the objective of strengthening the availability, quality and relevance of food and agriculture data to enable evidenced-based policy actions.
12. A regional action plan is required to improve agricultural statistics capacity at regional level, and to develop a Statistical Quality Framework ensuring greater transparency of data generated by countries. The plan will also serve as a basis for mobilizing resources in support of the implementation of this capacity development programme.
13. The Plan will ensure that national statistical institutions have access to the most recent and advanced methodologies and tools. Furthermore, it will strengthen networking with member countries and partners providing the opportunity for bringing together all stakeholders and for establishing an expert forum to exchange experiences and good practices, and linking agricultural statistics with livelihood resilience, food security and nutritional issues including gender gaps, agriculture and rural development, trade policy will also enhance the quality and completeness of statistical information.
14. The implementation of the *Regional Action Plan* will build on the collaboration and cooperation with regional bodies, regional partners, the global office and donors. Strong collaboration will have to be put in place with Northern African countries covered by the African Action Plan. Northern African countries have already completed the first-stage assessment and Morocco has been one of the 12 priority countries to receive support from African implementing partners in 2013. Exchange of information and know-how with AfDB and UNECA will be of benefit for the countries of the Near-East region.
15. The direct beneficiaries of the project will be the countries in the region, and in particular the national statistical institutions. The other beneficiaries will include all data users and producers in the region and outside the region. The principal potential stakeholders in the implementation of the Plan are regional organizations (ESCWA, AOAD), donors like the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), and the Arab Fund, and regional institutions, including the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), and the Arab Training and Research Institute for Statistics (ATRIS).

IV. Impact, Outcome and Main Outputs of the Strategy

16. The overall objective of developing the *Regional Strategy* to improve agricultural statistics for the Near East is to improve and strengthen the capacity of national agricultural statistical systems to generate, process, analyse, and disseminate accurate and reliable agricultural and rural data, comparable over time and across countries. This will contribute to greater food security, reduced food price volatility and improved income and well-being of rural populations through evidence-based policies. In addition, this will enable the formulation and monitoring of evidence-based policies that are put in place as a result of quality data originating from sound statistical systems which will assist in the achievement of two MDGs that are critical to the region: i) the achievement of MDG 1 - "Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger" and ii) MDG 7 - "Ensure environmental sustainability".
17. The specific outcomes of the regional action plan will be:
 - Substantial increase in the number of countries with the capability to produce a minimum set of core data, provide analysis and disseminate the results to meet the current and emerging statistical demands of national and international stakeholders;
 - Substantial increase in the number of countries able to develop a sustainable agricultural statistics system through the coordination and integration of agriculture in the national statistical systems;

- Increased number of people working on agricultural statistics that have appropriate skills resulting from training and technical assistance.
18. The main outputs of the regional plan, include:
- A regional governance mechanism is set up and is effective (i.e. appropriate structures for coordinating the implementation of the Strategy at regional level are established and operational);
 - Country assessment surveys are implemented and data gaps with regard to the minimum set of core data identified;
 - Strategic Plans for agriculture and rural statistics are integrated into the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics for each country;
 - Technical assistance is provided for improving the institutional, organizational and technical capacity of national agricultural statistical institutions;
 - New cost-effective methodologies in data collection, processing, analysis and dissemination are adopted by countries;
 - Training material adapted to regional needs are produced, including e-learning and used at regional and country level.
 - Systems as CountrySTAT are put in place in each country for easy access and dissemination of national and subnational statistics;

V. Main Elements of the Regional Action Plan

A. Governance

19. The governance component aims at establishing an institutional framework and coordination mechanism for the implementation of the Global Strategy in the Near East region. A Global governance mechanism to coordinate the implementation of the global plan is already in place and a Global Office, hosted by FAO statistics division, was established. At the regional level plans are underway to establish a Regional Steering Committee, as the decision-making body for the implementation of the regional action plan, and a Regional Office, to coordinate the implementation of the Near East Action Plan. This will then be followed by the establishment of National Agricultural Statistics Coordination Committees in each country, led by National Coordinators.

B. Country Assessment

20. RNE has already carried out a comprehensive first stage country assessment at the end of 2012. This assessment helped to identify major weaknesses of statistical systems in the Near East region. On the basis of these results an in-depth country assessment exercise is being carried out.

C. Technical Assistance and Training Plans for Capacity Building

21. Technical assistance will be provided to guide each country in the preparation of a specific national action plan to implement the global strategy under the auspices of the National Strategy to Develop Statistics (NSDS). The national action plan will consider other capacity developmental initiatives already underway to avoid duplication of efforts and coordinate the activities. Statistical standards and technical guidelines will be applied to all aspects of the agricultural statistics system, including the following:
- Develop and strengthen institutional and organizational capacities to integrate agriculture into the national statistical system;
 - Design and implementation of a master sampling frame and an integrated survey programme;
 - Harmonization of data across different sources, including administrative data and integration of data across the economic, social, environmental domains for policy making;

VI. Resource Mobilization

22. Communication, advocacy and resource mobilization will be crucial activities in the next months. ESCWA is in the process of establishing mechanisms for resource mobilization so as to establish a regional fund for Statistics. Resources for implementing the Regional Action Plan will have to be mobilized through the Global multi-donor Trust Fund (GTF) managed by FAO in collaboration with global donors as well as regional donors such as the Islamic Development Bank (IDB).

VII. Immediate Action and Steps

The immediate planned activities include the following:

- Prepare country assessment reports on the level of development and specific needs of the national agricultural statistics systems;
- Present the main findings to partners and stakeholders;
- Organize expert meeting and consultation to develop the regional action plan for the implementation of the Global Strategy;
- Submit the regional action plan for endorsement at the ESCWA Statistical Bureau and then at the Global Strategy Steering Committee;
- Establish the regional steering committee,
- Carry out missions for raising funds from regional and international development partners.