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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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The impact of COVID-19 in the Near East and North Africa Region and FAO's Response Plan

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region's economy have revealed some limitations of today's models of development. They have also shown the centrality of food and agriculture for well-being, and the need to rapidly move from today's situation to one where everybody in the region has reliable access to safe, affordable and nutritious food, produced and traded in an efficient, inclusive and sustainable way.

This document presents the state of knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic situation in the NENA region and its impact on agriculture and food systems, with particular attention to countries in crisis. It reviews the way countries have responded to the crisis in its first months, and how the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has supported countries in responding to COVID-19. Based on the Regional Consultative Technical Meeting (RCTM) that took place in July 2020, it proposes the elements of a response plan to address common challenges and build back better, more sustainable, inclusive and resilient food systems to address the pandemic's impacts and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Suggested actions by the Regional Conference

The following recommendations are made to the Regional Conference:

- Members to take note of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme developed by FAO, and endorse the FAO's Regional Response Plan and its Priority Areas for Action;
- Members to consider creating a regional solidarity trust fund to combat COVID-19 and build more resilient food systems across the region;
- Members to request FAO to further develop a plan of action based on the proposed priorities, mobilize resources for its implementation and further strengthen regional platforms to better support cooperation and regional integration.

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

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I. Introduction

1. The Near East and North Africa (NENA) region is at a crossroads. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the region's economy have revealed some limitations of today's models of development. They have also shown the centrality of food for well-being, and the need to rapidly move from today's situation to one where everybody in the region has access to safe, affordable and nutritious food produced and traded in an efficient, inclusive and sustainable way.

2. This document reviews the state of knowledge of the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in the NENA region and its impact on agriculture and food systems, in particular trade and value chains. It looks at the special case of the several countries in crisis for which COVID-19 represents an additional challenge on top of an already critical situation. It also reviews the way countries have responded to the crisis in its first months, and highlights efforts made by FAO to support countries in this critical moment. Finally, it calls for a radical transformation of the region's food systems and proposes the elements of a response plan to address common challenges and opportunities towards building back better, more sustainable, inclusive and resilient food systems to address the pandemic's impacts and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

II. Impact on the global economy and food availability

3. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy are unprecedented and their future developments are highly uncertain. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in April 2020 projected global growth to contract by 3 percent, which is a larger GDP decline than experienced during the 2008–2009 financial crisis. In June, the IMF revised its projection downwards to -4.9 percent. The negative impact of the pandemic on the economic activity and on extreme poverty has been greater than expected, while recovery is projected to be slower due to continual physical distancing, disruptions of supply chains due to lockdown in the first half of 2020, and lower productivity, as businesses adapt to new safety and hygiene practices and to changes in demand.

4. In spite of uncertainties posed by the pandemic, FAO's forecasts for the 2020/21 season point to a comfortable global cereal supply and demand situation. Early prospects for global cereal production in 2020 surpass the previous year's record by 2.6 percent. FAO projects lower prices in the short run due to a steady supply of commodities and reduced demand, driven by lower economic growth, and the drop in oil prices. The average crude oil price is projected to drop from USD 64/barrel in 2019 to USD 37/barrel in 2020 and USD 40/barrel in 2021.

5. The FAO Food Price Index (FFPI) averaged 94.2 points in July 2020, up 1.1 points (1.2 percent) from June. Rising for the second consecutive month, the July value is nearly 1 point (1 percent) above its level in the corresponding month last year. Similar to June, further increases in the prices of vegetable oils, dairy products and sugar outweighed lower prices in the meat markets amid overall steady value of the cereal price index.

III. Impact on agriculture and food security in the NENA region

6. The Near East and North Africa is a region of strong contrasts. The countries are very diverse in their capacities, resources and needs. The region includes some of the wealthiest countries in the world, a large share of middle-income countries, as well as some Least Developed Countries. In some countries agriculture represents a large share of employment, in others it is practically absent. COVID-19 is affecting all the countries of the region, but in different ways.

7. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA, 2020)², the region's economy is expected to contract by 5.7 percent, with the economies of some conflict countries projected to shrink by as much as 13 percent, amounting to an overall loss of USD 152 billion.

² ESCWA (2020) Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region: An Opportunity to Build Back Better. ESCWA. Beirut.

The capacity of middle-income countries in the region to ensure access to basic needs and to offer stimulus packages has been severely limited by a serious drop in revenues from tourism, remittances, trade and other general economic activities. The World Bank estimates that remittances to the Middle East and North Africa region are projected to fall by 19.6 percent to USD 47 billion in 2020, following the 2.6 percent growth seen in 2019³. The anticipated decline is attributable to the global slowdown, as well as to the impact of lower oil prices in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The impacts of these shocks are already being felt by all countries and communities in the region with some groups likely to be especially hard hit. Vulnerable groups include the rural poor, the youth and migrants. For countries outside the Gulf, youth unemployment is already high, ranging from 22-47 percent of the youth labour force. The NENA region hosts 40.6 million international migrants (which is around 15 percent of international migrants worldwide), as well as an additional 10 million refugees and 14 million internally displaced persons.

8. The number of poor people in the region is estimated to rise by 14.3 million people, swelling to more than 115 million overall (ESCWA, 2020). For countries with data the percentage of rural poor is on average 1.7 times greater than for urban populations.

9. The COVID-19 crisis may aggravate the vulnerabilities of the region to trade risks in terms of both food imports and exports if disruptions occur in global supply chains. NENA countries are net food importers with low self-sufficiency rates for most staple commodities. However, many countries also produce and export significant amounts of higher-value and perishable fruits, vegetables, fishery, dairy and livestock products on which incomes, food security and hard currency to finance imports depend. Lower demand for NENA food exports can have far-reaching impacts on domestic agro-food sectors that are already grappling with rising costs of production due to disrupted labour, inputs and logistics markets, and lower purchasing power among domestic consumers.

10. The uncertainties the region is facing on both the supply and demand sides raise concerns regarding ensuring reliable access to basic foods, exacerbated by higher unemployment, lower household income and limited access to social protection, due to measures for limiting the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, the region's rapid population growth (projected to grow 1.5 percent annually over the next decade) combined with limited production capacity will drive higher food imports in the long run.

11. Overall, NENA countries have learned from the 2007–2008 food crisis and from the 2011 social unrests and have taken measures to reduce their vulnerability to possible food shortages and food insecurity by enhancing food reserves, investing in infrastructure, and expanding domestic production. Nevertheless, four countries in the region – Lebanon, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen – remain particularly at risk considering the fragile situation in which they are, Lebanon and the Sudan for the economic crisis which they currently face, and the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen because of conflicts.

IV. Countries in crisis: a double burden

12. The NENA region is the one most affected by conflicts worldwide. Conflicts and political instability associated to social unrests have been the main drivers behind an increasing trend of food insecurity and malnutrition in the region since 2013. In 2019, the NENA region had three of the world's top ten most food insecure countries (the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen), which contributed over 20 percent of the global humanitarian caseload. The region accounts for about 36 percent of the world's refugees and 25 percent of people internally displaced by conflict and violence.

13. For the last three years, the crisis in Yemen has been classified as the world's gravest food crisis. About 16 million people (53 percent of the population) are facing acute food insecurity, including over

³ World Bank (2020) World Bank Predicts Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History. PRESS RELEASE NO: 2020/175/SPJ. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history>

5 million at IPC⁴ 4 (emergency), a step away from famine. About 7.4 million people (25 percent of the population) are malnourished and more than 3.3 million people are displaced. In the Sudan, about 6 million people (14 percent) are severely food insecure. In the Syrian Arab Republic, about 9.3 million people are food insecure and in need of urgent assistance⁵.

14. Even before COVID-19, most of the countries affected by crises were struggling with remarkable risks. From water scarcity in Iraq, Libya, Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen to Desert Locust and Fall Armyworm in Yemen and the Sudan, to floods in Yemen, to economic and fiscal crises in Lebanon and the Sudan - to name just a few. Some of these countries are also the most affected by climate change and weather extremes.

15. These countries need special attention and a holistic approach to addressing multiple risks in a way that allows building resilient livelihoods and food systems. Such an approach should embrace the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus and ensure social, economic and environmental sustainability. In Lebanon, for instance, FAO is adopting an HDP nexus through 1) the creation of job opportunities for the host communities and for the Syrian refugees; 2) financial support to vulnerable farmers through matching grants to invest in on-farm infrastructure; 3) providing technical and business support to add value to these investments; and 4) building capacities at different levels for successful implementation of the Green Plan.

16. The focus on addressing immediate needs should be complemented with work to accelerate recovery and lay the foundation for long-term inclusive development. In Yemen, for instance, FAO reached over 6 million people with its emergency interventions. Simultaneously, FAO's work on value chains development, water resources management and livestock development is contributing to building more resilient rural communities and strengthening human and institutional capacities, which are central elements in a strategy to support the country's long-term development. FAO's Hand in Hand initiative in Yemen aims at promoting the HDP nexus through the development of an agricultural strategy and investment plan taking into account the economic, social and environmental context.

V. Actions initiated by countries to address COVID-19

17. The governments of the region moved quickly at the onset of the pandemic to put containment measures in place, while at the same time shielding the food/agriculture sector from restrictions affecting the rest of the economy. By many measures, NENA countries succeeded in keeping food systems alive. With some exceptions, global and local food availability is stable, trade disruptions have been quickly addressed, food prices are reasonably stable, and production near similar levels to before COVID-19. The agri-food sector has shown its centrality to many of the region's economies and its role as a driver for their recovery.

18. Most NENA countries responded by introducing economic stimulus packages aimed at injecting liquidity through fiscal and monetary policies for ensuring access to basic needs and services, and for supporting the economy. The most common responses targeting consumers and producers have been: social protection measures, 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. Distribution of production inputs and subsidies are being used in some cases, particularly to support smallholder producers.

19. Importantly, NENA governments acted quickly to protect the affected populations. Social protection programmes were extended and new measures created, and in some cases, widened to include

⁴ The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Acute Food Insecurity (IPC AFI) provides strategically relevant information to decision-makers that focuses on short-term objectives to prevent, mitigate or decrease severe food insecurity that threatens lives or livelihoods.

⁵ Source: FAO. 2020. Syrian Arab Republic Revised humanitarian response Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) May–December 2020

informal workers, especially in agriculture, and workers in some of the hardest hit sectors such as tourism and services, as well as refugees. A surge of digitalization is occurring, with cases of countries deploying online and mobile platforms for social protection delivery, as well as for trading, e-commerce, government services, and farmer registration.

20. Risks to food security remain, however, if economic recession is prolonged or the COVID-19 situation deteriorates. Daily confirmed COVID-19 cases are rising in parts of the region as of mid-August and containment measures and closures are being reintroduced. Many countries face limited fiscal space to sustain the economic stimulus and social protection measures, and to support the economic recovery in parallel.

VI. Actions undertaken by FAO since the beginning of the crisis

21. FAO reacted immediately to appease fears among Members and international markets of major disruptions on trade, local supply chains, and a new food crisis. Global early warning bulletins indicated that the prospect for world food supply was comfortable and that there was no reason to panic. The Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS), set up after the 2007–2008 food crisis, played its role in providing transparent information on the status of agricultural markets.

22. FAO has developed a special tool in order to measure the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity, based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)⁶, and has disseminated the methodology to countries through webinars and virtual meetings. For instance, a webinar was provided for the statisticians of the GCC countries in April 2020.

23. From the onset of the pandemic, the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE) provided a range of support to FAO Country Offices with regard to the immediate and longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on agriculture and food security. The support includes the immediate allocation of resources to conduct rapid and longer-term assessments at country level, prepare policy briefs⁷, organize webinars to guide countries on potential measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture and food security, and mobilize internal and donor resources to monitor the situation and implement the responses. FAO established a regional task force to manage assessments, design potential responses, and coordinate different COVID-19-related activities.

24. FAO has supported Members to develop their crisis management platforms. In Tunisia for instance, it supported the establishment of a Crisis Management Team (Ministerial decision no 1464) and response plan for the Ministry of Agriculture; in the Sudan, FAO advised and advocated for an interministerial committee and has provided staff to facilitate its work; in Iraq, FAO has been instrumental in advising the development of the national food security strategy with a component to address COVID-19.

25. FAO deployed its Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) resources to help assess the short- and longer-term impacts of the crisis and to respond effectively to needs. Twelve COVID-19-related TCP projects have been approved: eight are impact assessments (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia), four focus on digital innovation (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia), one on an awareness campaign (Egypt), and one on support to fishers heavily affected by COVID-19 (Mauritania). FAO Offices in Oman, Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen have used existing resources to conduct assessments and work with national authorities and partners at country level to monitor the situation locally.

26. FAO has also contributed to the humanitarian response efforts by engaging with global humanitarian response mechanisms aiming to develop COVID-response at country level in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. FAO activities in the Syrian Arab Republic, for example, include feed distribution, cash transfers and inputs distribution for home

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/in-action/voices-of-the-hungry/using-fies/en/#covid>

⁷ COVID-19 and the impact on food security in the Near East and North Africa: How to respond? Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8778en/CA8778EN.pdf>

gardens and agriculture, and awareness-raising of good practices to prevent COVID-19 transmission in the livestock supply chain.

27. FAO has done everything possible to ensure that it continues having high levels of field programme delivery during the crisis. It has been reviewing all its ongoing projects in collaboration with donors and partners to redesign strategies and interventions in order to respond to COVID-19 needs. Donors in general have shown a good level of flexibility.

28. Lastly, FAO has implemented an array of tools to support policy analyses and assess the impact of COVID-19 across the globe. The dedicated website (<http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/en/>) provides information on policy measures countries are putting in place; suggested policy responses; monthly trend-analysis of basic food commodities' prices; policy briefs; real-time data on the impact of COVID-19 on food chains and prices; and planting and harvesting times.

VII. Building back better: towards more resilient, sustainable, inclusive and healthier food systems

29. The COVID-19 crisis is an alarm bell. On one side, it has illustrated the centrality of food and agriculture for people's lives and livelihoods. On the other side, it has shown that our food systems are not sustainable and lack the resilience needed to ensure food security and nutrition for all in all situations. Dependence on food imports is now a characteristic of the region and will only increase as the population continues to grow beyond what the region's resources can offer, and several countries are still vulnerable in the face of food import dependency. The double burden of malnutrition characterizes the NENA region as we observe both increasing numbers of hungry people due to the numerous crises affecting the region, and the highest rates of obesity and overweight after North America. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, hunger continued to increase in the region. In 2016-18, close to 10.2 million people were exposed to severe levels of food insecurity in the Arab region. According to *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020*⁸, the pandemic may add 132 million people to the total number of undernourished in the world in 2020.

30. On the social side, it is important to accelerate socio-economic programmes in rural areas to help move towards more inclusive food systems, by combining social interventions with interventions aimed at increasing agricultural productivity. FAO is currently adopting this approach with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in Lebanon and Tunisia. In Palestine, the food security and nutrition investment plan has one large area focusing on socio-economic inclusion, and a similar approach is under discussion for Yemen through the FAO Hand in Hand initiative.

31. Building back better will also require a much more careful review of the sustainability of the region's food systems. With the highest level of water scarcity in the world, widespread degradation of soil resources, and as one of the regions most affected by climate change, the region will need to adapt its models of agricultural development, focusing on productivity, resilience and sustainable agricultural practices. This also includes the adoption of a One Health approach to plant/animal pests and diseases and the prevention of future zoonotic pandemics.

32. There are a number of opportunities for agricultural growth in the region. They include a large share of young population, a good educational level, and the proximity with European markets. They need to be harnessed in order for the region to maximize the benefits from such transformation.

33. Better regional integration and intraregional trade, currently largely underdeveloped, can be leveraged to improve the food demand–supply balance and promote the production and consumption of high-quality food. Increased private sector investments; elimination of trade barriers; enhancement of capacities in setting uniform sanitary and phytosanitary, quality and safety standards across the region;

⁸ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2020. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets*. Rome, FAO. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca9692en>

and efficient implementation of policies to facilitate trade would have a significant impact on food security, on improved nutrition and on the overall economic development in the region.

34. Finally, the ongoing digital revolution has a strong impact on all aspects of the economy and its pace has recently accelerated as measures to contain the COVID-19 crisis have prevented more classical ways of operating. It will significantly contribute to improve the collection, analysis and sharing of trade- and market-related information across the region, boost commerce, transform extension and advisory services, and bring producers and consumers closer to each other.

VIII. A regional programme to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in the NENA region

A. The FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme

35. FAO has developed a comprehensive and holistic COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme to provide an agile and coordinated response to address challenges to food and agriculture sectors posed by the pandemic. This programme is designed to proactively and sustainably address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. In line with the UN approach to “build back better,” and in pursuit of the SDGs, it aims to mitigate the immediate impacts of the pandemic while strengthening the long-term resilience of food systems and livelihoods. Through extensive analyses, consultations with decentralized offices and bilateral discussions with resource partners, FAO identified seven key priority areas of work needed to ensure rapid and continued support to the most vulnerable while anticipating the secondary repercussions of the virus.

36. While the programme is global in nature, its implementation and priority setting happen at regional, subregional and country levels. FAO’s COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme has been conceived in close coordination with FAO’s decentralized offices and technical divisions, adopting a corporate approach to programme delivery that provides concrete technical and policy support assistance to the Members. The seven key priority areas are:

1. ***Global Humanitarian Response Plan: Addressing the impacts of COVID-19 and safeguarding livelihoods in food crisis contexts***
2. ***Data for Decision-making: Ensuring quality data and analysis for effective policy support to food-systems and Zero Hunger***
3. ***Economic Inclusion and Social Protection to Reduce Poverty: Pro-poor COVID-19 responses for an inclusive post-pandemic economic recovery***
4. ***Trade and Food Safety Standards: Facilitating and accelerating food and agricultural trade during COVID-19 and beyond***
5. ***Boosting Smallholder Resilience for Recovery: Protecting the most vulnerable, promoting economic recovery and enhancing risk management capacities***
6. ***Preventing the Next Zoonotic Pandemic: Strengthening the One Health approach to avert animal-origin pandemics***
7. ***Food Systems Transformation: Building back better during response and recovery***

37. In order for the Organization to support countries based on expressed needs and demands, seven multidisciplinary Working Groups have been created around these priority areas. The Working Groups assist the countries by helping them to identify and articulate their needs and to provide technical and policy support as well as support for the mobilization of expertise and resources.

B. A Regional Response Plan for the Near East and North Africa

38. The countries of the NENA region share a series of commonalities that distinguish them from the rest of the world. They include a heavy dependency on imports for food supply, extreme water scarcity, the impact of climate change and land degradation, and a record number of countries in crisis or in conflict, leading to an increase in the number of people suffering from hunger. Translating the FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme into regional priorities means identifying those

areas of work that most correspond to the needs and capabilities of the region from three interconnected time frames:

- Short term (S): Provide immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis
- Medium term (M): Support recovery
- Longer term (L): Build back better

39. A series of consultations with countries took place during the month of July 2020 to identify country priorities. The consultations included four sessions of the Second Regional Consultative Technical Meeting, and two Regional Technical Dialogues. The response plan presented below in Table 1 is the result of these consultations. It identifies 12 priority action areas that cut across the seven priorities. These priorities represent a package of actions that need to be implemented in a coordinated way at country and regional level.

Table 1: Elements of the Regional Response Plan

FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme: Key Priority Areas	Regional priority action areas for the Near East and North Africa	Time frame
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global Humanitarian Response Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian Response Plan for the NENA Region 	S
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data for decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data, analysis and policy support 	SML
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Inclusion and Social Protection to reduce poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social protection and safety nets, targeting farmers and rural poor • Promoting rural youth employment and women's economic empowerment 	SML SML
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade and food safety standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing trade resilience and food safety standards 	M
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boosting smallholder resilience for recovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies for building the resilience of agricultural-based livelihoods • Digital innovation for smallholder producers • Supporting producers' organizations and agricultural services 	M SM M
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preventing the Next Zoonotic Pandemic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopting a One Health approach to plant/animal pests and diseases and preventing future zoonotic pandemics 	M
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food systems transformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing competitive and inclusive value chains and agribusiness • Building sustainable production systems • Promoting healthier diets during and after the pandemic 	ML L ML

C. Elements of the Regional COVID-19 Response Plan

1. **Humanitarian Response Plan for the NENA Region:** Seven countries of the region (Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen) are covered by the Global Humanitarian Response Plan which focuses on rolling out data and analysis; ensuring availability of and stabilizing access to food for the most acutely food-insecure populations; ensuring continuity of the critical food supply chain for the most vulnerable populations; and ensuring food supply chain actors are not at risk of virus transmission.

2. **Data, analysis and policy support:** Build inclusive evidence for decision-making, including conducting rapid appraisals to monitor the impact of COVID-19; increasing support to collection of food insecurity data and inclusion of the FIES-Survey Module in relevant survey instruments; supporting increased production of data for monitoring of SDGs; supporting countries in developing and using innovative methods for data collection and generation, and producing georeferenced data for disaggregated agriculture and food security statistics, and strengthening policy support on food and nutrition security, sustainable agriculture, poverty reduction, employment and economic development to the countries of the region.
3. **Social protection and safety nets, targeting farmers and rural poor:** Ensuring access to shock-responsive and gender-sensitive social protection for all (including rural populations, the informal sector and migrants) during and after the pandemic, including cash transfers.
4. **Promoting rural youth employment and women's economic empowerment:** Mitigating the effects of COVID-19 by fostering youth employment in rural areas, gender equality, women's empowerment; building youth and rural women's capacity to be productive agents through socio-economic inclusion programmes, innovative business models, access to land and productive resources, and targeted public support.
5. **Enhancing trade resilience and food safety standards:** Integrating trade as a key part of national food security and nutrition strategies and adopting trade policies that are responsive to the needs of the agriculture sector, developing trade policy assessments, regional multi-stakeholder trade platforms and designing programmes to support export and intra-regional trade; supporting countries in the region in achieving harmonized standards for food safety, sanitary and phytosanitary measures as a means to facilitate agri-food trade.
6. **Developing strategies for building the resilience of agricultural-based livelihoods:** Developing capacity for multi-hazard early warning and risk management: Enabling environment for the management of systemic multiple hazard risks (linking epidemics, climate, disaster, conflict and food chain threats), including through strengthening disaster and climate risk governance mechanisms, and strengthening early warning systems linked to anticipatory actions, preparedness, emergency, recovery and development; mainstream disaster risk management in agriculture and adopt strategies that address the root causes of vulnerability and exposure in a manner that support the strategic shift from managing disasters to managing multiple risks in a holistic and coherent manner.
7. **Digital innovation for smallholder producers:** Supporting smallholder productivity and modernizing food systems and markets; promoting digital extension and rural advisory systems, improving smallholder access to E-commerce platforms and applications to enhance producers' access to markets; improving access to innovative E- finance; supporting producers to meet the increasingly stringent exports standards of food products.
8. **Supporting producers' organizations and rural services:** Developing farmers' registries, supporting collective action at the producer level by strengthening the role of producers' associations and cooperatives to be inclusive of women and men, and strengthening access to financial services, including crop and livestock insurance schemes.
9. **Adopting a One Health approach to plant/animal pests and diseases and preventing future zoonotic pandemics:** Strengthening national and regional capacities and coordination for preparedness and response, preventing, detecting and responding to pandemics with a One Health approach at the animal-human-ecosystem interface. Developing national/regional plans to combat emerging plant/animal and zoonotic diseases and antimicrobial resistance to address transboundary animal and plant pests and diseases, including desert locust.
10. **Developing competitive and inclusive value chains and agribusiness:** Prioritizing the agri-food sector as a driver for economic-wide recovery, adjusting agri-food business models during and after the COVID-19 crisis, developing private sector collaboration, accelerate administrative reforms that facilitate agro-food Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), with particular attention to connecting the large informal sector to higher-value, integrated value chains and by leveraging innovation and digital technologies to support access to inputs and services and reduce food losses and waste.
11. **Building sustainable production systems:** Addressing water scarcity and climate change, restoring land and protecting biodiversity and promoting nature-based solutions, engaging the

agriculture sectors in a constructive dialogue with environment on approaches that ensure both productivity and long-term sustainability of agricultural practices including cross-sectoral coordination and policy coherence between water and agriculture, investing in climate smart agriculture, water accounting and effective water governance mechanisms, further developing regional partnership platform on water-related issues to facilitate exchange of experiences, coordinated implementation of programmes and promote future joint planning.

12. **Promoting healthier diets during and after the pandemic:** Improving nutrition education, ensuring that safe and healthy food is accessible and affordable to all.

IX. Linkage with the FAO Regional Priorities

40. Document NERC/20/2 entitled “Results and priorities for FAO in the Near East and North Africa Region”, which had been prepared prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, outlines FAO’s results in the region as well as the regional priorities that are reflected in FAO’s planning for the ensuing biennium and beyond, in conformity with the established Governing Bodies process. Deliberations by the Regional Conference of these results and priorities will inform the review of the Strategic Framework and Medium Term Plan (MTP) 2022-25, to be submitted to the FAO Conference in July 2021. The established priorities seek to assist the countries of the region to transform their food systems with a view to achieving the SDGs.

41. The Regional COVID-19 Response Plan and the priority action areas presented therein must be considered in the broader context of this food systems transformation agenda. The response plan reaffirms both the validity of the established regional priorities and the necessity to move towards more sustainable food systems. It also highlights the need to strengthen the preparedness, resilience and response capacity of the region’s food systems to COVID-19 and future shocks.

X. Joining forces to achieve impact

42. Such a transformational programme requires a new approach in analysing and evaluating the region’s food systems. First, countries need to recognize the centrality of food and agriculture for human well-being and sustainable development. Farmers, herders and fishers, must be allowed to better contribute to the overall economy and produce healthy food in a safe and sustainable way. Urban consumers have an increasing role to play. Through their behaviour, they can reward producers for providing them with healthier and nutritious food, and governments must acknowledge the importance of smallholders and agriculture sectors by investing in agriculture at least as much as the sector’s contribution to their economy.

43. A spirit of cooperation must be instituted among NENA countries, making intraregional cooperation a central element of the region’s development, taking advantage of the multiple benefits that the region can draw from its diversity, accelerating the exchange of knowledge, resources and technologies. With renewed political will, commitment and a shared vision, the region has the potential to break the deadlock in which it has stood for too long and rapidly advance on the road towards achieving the SDGs.

44. At global level, the *COVID-19 Food Coalition* may play an overarching role in leveraging high-level political and financial support to combat the impact of COVID-19 and prepare for future recovery. The COVID-19 Food Coalition is a multistakeholder, multisectoral mechanism launched by the Government of the Republic of Italy and led by FAO aiming to activate and mobilize support for a unified global action to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic. The Food Coalition aims to mobilize both resources and technical expertise around the seven key priority areas of the COVID-19 response and recovery programme, to promote advocacy initiatives to prevent the health crisis from becoming a food crisis, and to establish a space for dialogue among diverse stakeholders.

45. At regional level, the Regional Consultative Technical Meeting of July 2020 has called on countries to consider the establishment of a Regional Emergency Fund governed and managed by the

countries of the region to strengthen solidarity in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a fund would be able to accelerate recovery and build back healthier, more inclusive and more sustainable food systems in order to achieve the SDGs.

46. Regional platforms should also be developed or strengthened to better support cooperation and regional integration. They are the right tool for enhanced exchange of knowledge, best practices and joint action for many areas of work that cut across boundaries, such as transboundary pests and diseases, and intraregional trade. The FAO Regional Knowledge Platform on Water and Agriculture is a successful example of one such collaboration mechanism.

47. At country level, partnership is of the essence. Several examples from the region have shown that the response to COVID-19 requires contribution and collaboration from all, from government to civil society and private sector, as well as a coordinated response from development partners. The United Nations have set out a COVID-19 social and economic recovery plan to which United Nations Agencies and programmes contribute. In the countries of the region, FAO has joined forces with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Rome-based Agencies, the World Bank, and several bilateral donors (depending on the country) to provide governments with coordinated support in monitoring, assessing and responding to the impacts of COVID-19. As an example of partnership, FAO has recently joined forces with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UNDP and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) to offer joint services to countries in supporting the response and resilient recovery by micro, small and medium enterprises.