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Background Documents

In Preparation of the

Regional Forum on Accelerating Food Systems Transformation in the Arab Region

The Sheraton Amman Al Nabil Hotel

Jordan

30-31 October 2024

Disclaimer

The documents compiled in this background paper are intended solely for the purpose of informing participants ahead of the upcoming meeting. They include materials prepared by ESCWA to provide valuable context and reference. Please note that some of the included documents are drafts and have not been finalized, edited, or published. As such, they may be subject to further revisions and should not be cited or referenced outside the context of this meeting without prior permission from the respective authors or agencies.

Regional Meeting on Accelerating Food Systems Transformation in the Arab Region
Amman, Jordan
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Background Document 3

Food Systems Transformation Progress Review

Regional Meeting for the Arab Region

6 March 2024 | Beirut, Lebanon

Summary Report



FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION PROGRESS REVIEW

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SUMMARY REPORT





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BACKGROUND

The first UN Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment (UNFSS+2) was convened in Rome, Italy, in July 2023, building upon the momentum of the 2021 Food Systems Summit. With over 3300 participants from 182 countries, UNFSS+2 reviewed progress on commitments, identified bottlenecks, and advocated for sustainable food systems as critical Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) accelerators.

At UNFSS+2's conclusion, the [Secretary-General launched a Call to Action](#) focusing on embedding food systems strategies in national policies, establishing inclusive governance, investing in research and innovation, promoting business engagement, ensuring all stakeholders' participation, and securing long-term finance for transformation.

As a follow-up to UNFSS+2, to acquaint participants with the six areas of action outlined in the UN Secretary-General's Call to Action and prepare for the UNFSS+4 in 2025, the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub (the Hub) organized a series of Regional Preparatory Meetings from March to April 2024. The Hub and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) organized the first regional meeting on 6 March 2024¹ for the Arab region. This meeting assembled Food Systems National Convenors and other experts from across the region to assess progress in transforming food systems, facilitate regional knowledge sharing, and identify emerging patterns and solutions.

This meeting built upon the discussions held during the [2023 Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting](#) on 13 March 2023 and the UNFSS+2, where Member States shared their perspectives, best practices, lessons learned, and challenges related to food systems transformation (FST). The importance of accelerating FST to achieve the SDGs was emphasized during these dialogues.

The opening segment of the meeting saw the participation of key partners of the Ecosystem of Support in the region. H.E. Mr Abbas Al Hajj Hassan, Minister of Agriculture in Lebanon, underscored the importance of global solidarity and support for local and displaced populations, as well as the need for cohesive legislation and execution.

¹ This event was organized with the support of the Government of Sweden.

H.E. Mr Ibrahim Eldukheri, Director-General of the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD), highlighted the significance of strategic partnerships and enhanced access to technology. Mr Mounir Tabet, Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCWA, pointed out the critical need for investments in rural development, innovation, and the creation of equitable food systems. Ms Nora Ourabah, FAO Representative in Lebanon, reiterated the commitment to strategic collaboration among UN agencies and with countries to facilitate a successful transformation of food systems.

List of countries participating² (in-person and online): Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, State of Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen. In addition to representing civil society, the private sector, academia, and other stakeholders are also involved.

Concept note and agenda: [LINK](#)

Presentations: [LINK](#)

This meeting report summarizes the presentations and discussions held by National Convenors, government representatives, and stakeholders, including facts and figures shared by the Hub, ESCWA, and invited speakers. It is structured to summarise progress, major achievements, challenges, and key takeaways from the meeting.

PROGRESS IN THE REGION AND GOOD PRACTICES

This segment showcases progress and examples of good practices undertaken in countries' journeys toward food systems transformation (FST), as shared by National Convenors and their teams. It highlights the diverse efforts of countries in promoting FST across various topics with attention to the areas indicated in the UN Secretary-General's Call to Action at UNFSS+2. The examples provided below are not exhaustive and provide a summary of the discussion areas. Additional good practices will be incorporated into the Hub's [Database Of Practices In Food System Transformation](#).

Progress on National Pathways and governance mechanisms analysed from the 2023 Voluntary Progress Report to UNFSS+2. See the presentation [here](#).

² Region and country classification in accordance with ESCWA members.



Development and update of National Pathways and policies: Several countries made progress in developing and updating National Pathways, policies, projects, and action plans for food system transformation. 12 out of 20 countries in the Arab region have established national pathways, including the latest addition of Lebanon to the 127 global National Pathways. Seven among them (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen) have reported action plans. Despite various challenges, these countries have demonstrated a commitment to systemic change through collaboration amongst national stakeholders, the UN system, international organizations, and other food system actors.

Stakeholder collaboration and governance mechanisms: Collaboration among stakeholders, including government entities, international organizations, the UN system, civil society, and the private sector, with the support of the Hub, has facilitated the development of common visions and monitoring mechanisms to support holistic approaches to FST. Several countries have continued the multistakeholder consultations and dialogues, while others have established bodies for expanded participation. Countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Sudan have established multistakeholder networks or platforms for a whole-of-society approach. Morocco has initiated dialogues at national and subnational levels to foster adaptability within food systems, engaging stakeholders in inclusive discussions that lead toward developing a comprehensive action plan focusing on enhancing adaptability, including measures like optimizing food production and sustainable resource management. In Egypt, the Minister of Agriculture established a coordination mechanism involving all relevant stakeholders and government sectors to develop a comprehensive plan of action for FST and ensure effective policy implementation and progress monitoring, emphasizing collaboration between government and non-state actors.

Updates on legislative and policy measures for FST: Countries emphasized the importance of incorporating national pathways into legal frameworks to support transformative efforts. This underscores the need for regulatory reforms to align with the evolving needs and priorities of food system transformation (FST) and ensure a whole government approach. In many cases, this action requires the involvement of legislative bodies in the country. For example, in Lebanon, the [launch of the National Pathway in 2024](#) was complemented by a new legal framework on the right to food, with monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs) from 2022 to 2030. Syria's FST umbrella encompasses six pillars under which 65 programs are executed and monitored by KPIs, with technical guidance from FAO reflecting outcomes from the UNFSS+2.

Resilience and adaptability: Despite increasing challenges, countries have demonstrated resilience and adaptability in transforming food systems. They have developed strategies, implemented programs, and emphasized the need for integrated approaches and regional solutions to address structural root causes and preserve national identities.

Addressing climate change in FST: Countries increasingly recognize the link between food security and climate action, highlighting the importance of addressing environmental challenges in food system transformation (FST) efforts and the importance of linking food systems strategies with climate actions. For example, Bahrain has committed to quadrupling tree planting by 2060, promoting renewable energy, reducing emissions by 2034 and increasing green initiatives, reflecting a forward-looking strategy to promote food security and climate resilience. In Iraq, water security in climate-affected areas is a high priority. A key strategy involves promoting climate-resilient agriculture using climate-adapted seeds and introducing modern irrigation systems. Furthermore, two recent Climate Change Conferences of the Parties (COP) were held in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where food systems and agriculture were featured prominently in the agenda. Important outcomes from COP 27 helped connect the global and national agendas, including the Food and Agriculture for a Sustainable Transformation (FAST), Action for Water Adaptation and Resilience (AWARE), Initiative on Climate Action and Nutrition (I-CAN), Global Waste Initiative, and Decent lives for Climate and Resilient Africa. Building on this momentum, COP28 launched the [Emirates Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action](#). This declaration, signed by 159 countries, 17 out of 20 Arab countries, signifies a collective commitment to integrate food into climate plans by 2025. The Food Systems and Agriculture Agenda for COP28 revolves around four pillars: state level, non-state level, innovation, and finance. Through the Emirates Declaration, countries are taking tangible steps to ensure that food systems become central to climate strategies, reinforcing the convergence of global and national agendas for a sustainable future. The National Convenors also recognize the Hub Convergence Initiative as a critical enabler for supporting the objectives of the declaration.

Ecosystem of Support (EoS): International and regional organizations in the region have supported the National Convenors in advancing their National Pathways. Examples include:

- **Engagement with UN system and international organizations:** The design of Lebanon's National Pathway involved collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP) and ESCWA to develop the pillars for FST in Lebanon until 2030, aligning with the UNFSS methodology. Data collected from 51 participants and 32 stakeholder groups informed the approach, which now includes a vision of collective action involving consumers, producers, and farmers, emphasizing food security and nutrition. Countries have benefited from technical support and expertise provided by UN agencies in crafting comprehensive plans of action for food system transformation. The involvement of these agencies has facilitated the development of common visions, monitoring mechanisms, and legal frameworks to support holistic approaches to FST.



- **Engagement with coalitions:** Coalitions have empowered Convenors to work with UN agencies and stakeholders. In Yemen, the global coalitions (Healthy Diets, School Meals, and Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus Coalition) have been influential at the political level and encourage linking and building on existing coordination mechanisms.
- **ESCWA** developed a [comprehensive monitoring framework](#) in 2019, including 28 indicators, to assist policymakers in tracking progress and identifying challenges in food systems.
- **The League of Arab States:** A technical committee toward achieving the SDGs was established in 2018, with a subcommittee on SDG 2 (zero hunger) focused on eliminating food insecurity and malnutrition and enhancing sustainable agriculture practices. The committee includes governments and specialized international and regional institutions.

KEY CHALLENGES IN FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Establishing and advancing National Pathways to accelerate FSTs is different and country-context-specific. Below is a summary of challenges presented by scene-setting speakers, National Convenors, and government representatives.

Summary points of challenges discussed:

- **Peace and stability are prerequisites for transforming food systems and achieving food security and better nutrition.** Currently, the Arab region faces multiple ongoing conflicts, which are the leading cause of food insecurity and malnutrition. Hunger in the Arab States reached its highest value in 2022 since 2000. Undernourished people were 59.8 million in 2022, 75.9 percent higher than in 2000. 173.3 million people, or 37.9 percent of the population, were food insecure and deprived of regular access to sufficient and nutritious food, coupled with the triple burden of malnutrition – undernourishment, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight/obesity. Additionally, the crisis is exacerbating food insecurity and development progress. Between 24 November and 7 December, [90 percent of the population](#) of the Gaza Strip was estimated to face high levels of acute food insecurity. For countries facing conflict, long-term reliance on food aid in several communities compounds the challenge due to its limited nutritional value and negative impact on local cultural diets.



- **Structural impediments hamper the achievement of the SDGs**, including ongoing conflicts, impacts of climate change, and unsupportive policies in some instances. The repercussions of conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza extend beyond loss of life, which ripple through global supply chains and impact the economies of countries in the region. These challenges compound existing issues, such as environmental pollution, loss of arable land, and threats to farmers' livelihoods, exacerbating the vulnerability of food systems and increasing hunger and malnutrition.
- **The crisis magnifies social inequality and underscores the urgent need for robust social protection mechanisms.** In 2021, [poverty affected over one-third of the region's population](#), with a staggering 25 percent inflation rate, three times the global average. The effects of multiple crises, including violent conflict, natural disasters, economic crises, and political unrest, exacerbate disparities in income and access to education. Notably, two out of every five individuals reside in conflict-affected areas in the Arab region. Furthermore, refugees, displaced persons, and individuals with disabilities bear disproportionate burdens, yet there remains a glaring lack of data, statistics, and actionable solutions to address their plight. In 2021, [the UN reported that 28% of individuals aged 2 and above have a disability in Syria](#), with over 1/3 (37 percent) of the population in the northeastern region suffering from some form of disability, doubling the world average of 15 percent. This number is reportedly high not only due to the war but also the lack of healthcare and other services and is likely underestimated, particularly considering the 2023 earthquake.
- **The Arab region faces mounting challenges from increasing temperatures and water stress**, with [13 countries experiencing absolute water scarcity](#). However, climate financing primarily focuses on mitigation efforts over adaptation, with a notable bias toward large, centralized water supply and sanitation systems. Access to climate finance across the region is skewed as four countries receive more than 70 percent of climate cash flow, while the most vulnerable, particularly least developed countries (LDCs), receive disproportionately little support.
- **Financing the food system transformation** requires considering the scale and magnitude of non-concessional debt in many Arab countries, especially LDCs and low-middle-income countries. Heavy debt burden hinders the required financing for food systems.
- **Monitoring mechanisms and quality data are essential for informed decision-making**; many countries rely on figures from as far back as 2016. The outdated data hampers informed and timely decision-making. Furthermore, inconsistent data comparability across countries hampers effective regional assessments and responses.

KEY MESSAGES:

Below are key areas identified for interventions and considerations for stakeholders and the UN system to advance regional food systems transformation.

A systemic approach to food systems: Countries emphasize the need to address food systems holistically, going beyond increasing agriculture productivity and considering their impact on health, the environment, and inequalities. Below are the highlighted thematic considerations for FST in the region:

- **Human rights, people-centred approach:** Upholding human rights and food security requires focusing on people-centered approaches, including social protection, peace promotion, aid provision, investment, innovation, and technology development, among others. It is crucial to leave no one behind.
- **Building peace and security for equitable FST:** In conflict situations, balancing urgent humanitarian assistance with a long-term developmental approach focusing on FST processes requires a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach.
- **Converging food and climate:** Countries in the region welcome the Hub's Convergence Initiative as a critical tool to support countries in transforming their food systems whilst ensuring a positive or neutral impact on the environment and people's lives.
- **Improving nutrition through local foods:** Countries in the region emphasize the need for support in designing food systems that prioritize nutrition outcomes. This entails creating systems that not only focus on increasing food production but also ensuring access to diverse, nutritious foods to reduce malnutrition, obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies. Countries call for a shift to locally viable crops like corn and barley, safeguarding citizens' food sovereignty and preserving national identity.

Capacity building and inclusion for governance and legislation structures: Some countries are front-runners with established institutional structures that are already operational and National Pathways set. In others, awareness of the value of the food system approach is still insufficient to accelerate the transformation. There is a need to build the capacity of policymakers and legislators on the food systems approach, extending beyond food security. There is also a need for further inclusion of civil society and stakeholders, who are already acting on the ground, and to support the scaling up of their initiatives, especially young farmers.

Leveraging and improving science, innovation, and data to set action plans alongside the national pathways and/or to guide national strategies. These plans should be scientific and evidence-based. However, data systems in the region need to be upgraded. Support is needed in the region for up-to-date, user-friendly, and quality data to accompany policy and decision-makers in negotiations and policymaking.

Investment and finance: In countries facing crises, transforming food systems requires tailored strategies to overcome challenges such as limited investment and trade restrictions.



High levels of non-concessional debt in many Arab countries hinder financing efforts, but converting debt into investments can accelerate progress. Climate change compounds issues like water scarcity and soil degradation, and climate financing offers opportunities to address climate and food system challenges. To meet regional needs, discussions should focus on finance mechanisms, including:

- facilitating access to funds for small farmers.
- promoting local and innovative financing solutions.
- supporting youth-led proposals.
- funding new projects aligned with a food system approach.
- developing investment strategies for crisis-affected countries.
- establishing multi-sectorial task forces to improve government-coordinated actions.
- creating an enabling environment for private sector investments while ensuring robust accountability frameworks that positively impact people and the environment.

Regional cooperation, integration, and solidarity: Solutions require solidarity. Regional cooperation and forging partnerships among members and regional institutions, such as the League of Arab States and the UN system, are vital to enhancing self-sufficiency and promoting regional food security. UN agencies and donors are called to support countries in fragile contexts and continue facilitating the connection between countries.

A summary of the discussions held at a regional meeting on 6 March 2024 was presented during a special event on food systems transformation on 7 March 2024 at the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development. Find the summary [here](#).