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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

PRIORITIES FOR TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS IN THE ARAB REGION

TUESDAY, 27 JULY 2021

Summary

In preparation for the 2021 Food Systems Summit (FSS), the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in cooperation with the regional office of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD) organized a virtual session on "Priorities for Transforming Food Systems in the Arab Region" on 27 July 2021 virtually via ZOOM as an affiliated session within the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSSS) Pre-Summit sessions.

This meeting provided an integrative and engaging platform that enabled regional stakeholders to share their perspectives, experiences, and issues on transforming Arab food systems to healthier, more inclusive, sustainable, and resource efficient systems. Outcomes of different national and regional Dialogues held prior to the pre-summit were highlighted. Experts called for concerted efforts among the diverse stakeholders, the adoption of innovative technological agricultural approaches, the establishment of an Arab Centre for Food Security, and the empowering youth in process of food system transformations.

The dialogue modality provided experts the opportunity to identify main national and regional challenges and the needed game changers for transforming Arab food systems. After an introductory session on Arab food systems challenges and opportunities, a panel session addressed priorities of the Arab region from the point of view of different stakeholders for improving Arab food systems.

The meeting brought together 102 participants including a wide range of experts from governments, universities, research institutions, chambre of commerce, youth and farmers' organizations, agri-food industries, and United Nations agencies.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD) in collaboration with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) organized a virtual session on "Priorities for Transforming Food Systems in the Arab Region" on 27 July 2021. This session is an affiliated session within the United Nations Food System Pre-Summit, held from 26-28 July 2021.
2. The session highlighted regional pathways and actions, and the role of diverse stakeholders in transforming the Arab food systems. It brought together diverse stakeholders to introduce and discuss the priorities of the Arab region and the immediate actions needed to implement game changers for sustainable transformation of the region's food systems.
3. Owing to COVID-19 restrictions, and as per guidelines from Pre-Summit organizers, the meeting was organized as a 50-minute virtual session using the Zoom platform on Tuesday, 27 July, at 13:30 GMT+2 time. A diverse range of stakeholders were brought together to consolidate regional and national perspectives, experiences and to convene recommendations regarding pathways and potential actions for equitable and sustainable food systems transformation to reach the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs).
4. The dialogue modality allowed for active participation where experts described outcomes of national and regional dialogues convened while other stakeholders addressed priorities based on experiences within their local food systems. The moderator addressed specific questions to be answered by each speaker to convey regionally relevant and appropriate roadmaps. The chat box was used by participants to write own their questions or interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY MESSAGES

5. Participants during the discussions proposed several recommendations to align regional actions based on regional priorities of which:
 - a. Call for support from national and regional agencies and partners to address Food systems related challenges that were exacerbated by COVID-19 and to redesign and implement sustainable and healthy food systems, with specific objectives and outcomes.
 - b. Enhance the intersectoral connectivity through concerted efforts amongst stakeholders to guarantee the shift towards Sustainable Arab Food Systems.
 - c. Enhance intra-regional trade and establish an Arab Centre for Food Security, and Arab Food Security Fund to provide grants and subsidies for countries that are facing food insecurity
 - d. Promote foundational adjustments in production and consumption patterns by harnessing the power of data, science and innovation, and technology and enhancing the science-policy interface to serve evidence-based policies and interventions.
 - e. Increase focuses on rain fed agriculture to expand and improve agricultural productivity.
 - f. Address urgently and efficiently issues related to food safety and food waste and loss.
 - g. Provide incentives to adopting good agricultural practices that may reduce the region's import dependency and improve smallholders' livelihoods, encourage youth and women participation in development trajectories for ensuring inclusivity of most vulnerable.
 - h. Promote the investment in human capital, education, social protection and infrastructure.
 - i. Undertake peace building activities and end war to ensure safe and equitable access to food for all.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

A. OPENING SESSION

6. **Ms. Reem Nejdawi**, Chief of Food and Environment Policies Section, ESCWA, welcomed participants and partners and provided logistical instructions for a smooth session. She further introduced the first speaker H.E. Prof. Ibrahim El Dukheiri, Director General of the AOAD.
7. **H.E. Prof. Ibrahim El Dukheiri**, Director General, AOAD, welcomed participants and highlighted the importance of holding this meeting to support radical transformations in the Arab food systems. He emphasized how imperative it is to shift food systems to achieve sustainable food security. Prof. El Dukheiri also indicated that the Arab region's top priorities are entrenched within the AOAD's agenda, and that institutional support from national agencies and partners is crucial to redesign and implement sustainable and healthy food systems. He concluded by highlighting AOAD and ESCWA's dedication and collaboration in guiding policy decisions towards sustainable food systems transformations along the summit's five action tracks.
8. **Dr. Rami Zurayk**, Professor at the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at the American University of Beirut, presented the paper prepared for the Arab Regional Dialogues on transforming food systems held in March 2021. He indicated that prevailing conflicts, wars, natural disasters, low agricultural productivity due to scarcity of natural resources, and low adoption of modern technology have hindered the region from achieving sustainability of their food systems. Uncontrolled food safety practices and the high cost of healthy diets primarily in conflict affected countries were also mentioned as major hinderances and challenges faced by many million people on the region. Dr. Zurayk later discussed potential game changers that resulted from regional dialogues on Food systems

B. PANEL SESSION: ADDRESSING PRIORITIES OF THE ARAB REGION

9. **Dr. Kamil Shideed**, member of the High-Level Panel of Experts on food security and nutrition, moderated the session on "Addressing Priorities of the Arab Region". He thanked ESCWA, FAO, and AOAD for organizing the meeting with a diversified panel of experts and introduced the dialogue's modality where he will be questioning experts to extract their insights and lessons learned for transforming food systems.
10. **Ms. Nawal Al Hamad**, Deputy director general of the Public Authority for food and nutrition in Kuwait was questioned on **what immediate actions are needed to implement priority game changers in Kuwait Based on Kuwait's national dialogue?** She indicated that the Public Authority for Food and Nutrition in Kuwait held till today two national dialogues: the first covered policies and legislation for sustainable food systems, and the second focused on nutrition for school aged children. These resulted in the preparation of a report entitled "towards sustainable food system in Kuwait". Ms. Al Hamad later listed major challenges faced by Kuwait food systems such as water scarcity, population growth, and import dependency. she then indicated that there is a need for proper legislations to tackle these complex challenges to achieve local sustainable food systems which could be done through adopting renewable energy, enhancing use of science and data, exploring new technological methods to preserve biodiversity, and managing of food loss and waste. She expressed the need to inform school aged children about healthy diets while building capacities of teachers and spreading awareness among parents on this specific issue.

11. **Mr. Tareq Hassan**, Head of the Arab Youth Sustainable Development Network (AYSDN) responded to the following question “**In times of conflict, what immediate actions are needed to enhance the role of youth in transforming food systems in the Arab region?**”. He emphasized the crucial role of youth as agents of change, and that they must take a leading role in reshaping fair and equitable food systems in the Arab region. Policy and decision makers should provide an enabling environment for youth to engage in development trajectories for sustainable local and regional food systems, and to mobilize needed resources accordingly. Mr. Hassan accentuated the need of young people to participate in climate action and awareness raising about it in collaboration with the private sector. He recommended holding trainings and capacity building sessions for women and youth to reshape food production and transform food systems.
12. **Ms. May Serhal**, Union of Arab Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, replied to the question on “**What immediate actions in the Arab Region are needed to enhance regional agriculture and trade?**”. She listed the challenges impeding regional progress including import dependency, food loss and waste, water scarcity, land deterioration, overfishing, and lack of institutional framework on shared water resources, all of which are contributors to considerable losses within countries’ gross domestic product. Ms. Serhal further discussed game changers needed to address the region’s challenges such as encouraging youth capacities and entrepreneurship, leading rally competitions as networking opportunities for youth and the Arab Chambers, overcoming nepotism, and improving technology development and deployment. She concluded by stressing on the importance of cooperation amongst all stakeholders to achieve progress and to shift production and consumption methods within a sustainable, safe, and healthy framework.
13. **Mr. Fadi Jabr**, General Secretary of the Arab Federation for food industries, tackled the following question “**What immediate actions are needed in the Arab Region to enhance food processing industries?**”. Mr Jabr provided a list of recommendations that included: conducting a comprehensive and disaggregated field survey of the Arab food industries; establishing modern and qualified storage units and spaces for raw materials and packaging materials; aligning the food industries’ strategies with the SDGs and the Paris agreement to curb natural resource exploitation and tackle climate change; developing a regional strategic plan designed and implemented by all Arab countries to deliver healthy, safe, culturally appropriate and affordable food; organizing a dialogue between decision makers, food producers and consumers to agree on what constitutes a suitable sustainable diet, and to analyze the true cost of food and food price index; endorsing innovation through technological advances, building a model for small and medium bakeries that covers the safety of the bread production value chain and their bread dissemination activities within the food environment; developing suitable food transportation methods taking into consideration food and environmental safety; building capacities for workers along the food value chain; dissemination of the culture of re-using instead of recycling; highlighting the key role of the community to achieve sustainable development, as food production as a standalone element is not enough to ensure food security.
14. **Ms. Jehad Al Fadhel**, Member of the Shura Council of Bahrain, and Chairman of the Parliamentarian Network for food and nutrition security in Africa and the Arab World, provided information on **immediate actions needed to implement priority game changers in the region, based on the Arab regional dialogue that took place in March 2021**. Ms. Al Fadhel reiterated the challenges undermining the region such as high food import dependency, water scarcity and

lack of arable and suitable land for agriculture. She indicated the need to expand green and agricultural areas through digitalization and technological advancement. She also mentioned that the Parliamentary Network for food and nutrition security in Africa and the Arab World signed a protocol of collaboration with the Arab parliament to increase food security levels. This collaboration will thus be circulating a proposed guiding law for ensuring strategic stock of food commodities. Ms. Jehad emphasized the importance of establishing an Arab Centre for Food Security, and an Arab Food Security Fund to provide needed grants and subsidies for countries in difficulties or experiencing food insecurity.

15. **Ms Fatima Al Hassan**, the secretary general for the food security technical secretariat in Sudan, provided information, **based on Sudan's national dialogue, on the needed immediate actions to implement local changes**. She stressed on the need of gamechangers for all 5 identified action tracks through strengthening food safety practices, implementing supplementary feeding and school feeding programs, and using technology to optimize bio fortification. She emphasized the need to reduce food loss and waste by half, as well as importance of building capacities especially for women in agriculture to enable vulnerable groups to adopt climate change adaptation strategies and engage in building resilience through income generating activities.

C. ARAB INITIATIVE FOR ENSURING FOOD SECURITY AND IMPROVING ARAB FOOD SYSTEMS

16. **Dr. Waheed Mojahed**, AOAD advisor, **presented briefly the Arab Initiative for ensuring Food security**. He highlighted that food security is an overarching element across the SDGs, and that food system transformation is not an easy process, as it is deeply rooted in food culture, tradition, and habits. Dr. Mojahed introduced the motives, pillars and components of the Arab Food Security Program which were developed to tackle regional challenges. He indicated that the program aims at attracting investments to implement sustainable change within the whole food system, endorsing the sustainable use and management of natural resources, boosting rain fed agriculture, and increasing public private partnerships while encouraging concerted efforts among ministries and stakeholders. The main programs focus on rain fed agriculture, expanding and improving agricultural productivity, and decreasing the food production and food consumption gap. Dr. Mojahed concluded by detailing the contents and the expected outcomes of the program.
17. **Dr. Kamil Shideed**, thanked all experts in the session for their energy and enthusiasm to transforming Arab local and regional food systems. However, he noted that attaining a more sustainable and productive food system will require true commitment and dedication of member countries, youth and civil societies. He reiterated on the regional rampant challenges such as the implications of conflict and fragility on food and nutrition security, food loss and waste, the dominance of smallholder farmer and fragmentation of farmland, and the dominance of informal markets. He also indicated the lack of investment in hygiene infrastructure, high poverty and unemployment rates among youth, and unequal geographical and gender-based inequalities to access to natural resources. Dr. Shideed concluded with a set of recommendations, including the need to combine innovation with regional food system transformations, enforcing agency along the food supply chain, enhancing the science-policy interface to serve evidence-based policies and interventions. He also pointed out the need for the adoption of readily available technologies and practices, investing in education, health, data, and social protection, and addressing the issue of transboundary water resources and rainfed farming.

D. CLOSING SESSION

18. **Ms. Reem Nejdawi** concluded the session by reiterating on the importance of implementing radical changes in our production and consumption patterns by looking holistically at all the components of the food system with all its activities, operations, and stakeholders. She emphasized on the need for regional solidarity, mobilization of resources, and encouraging innovation through concerted efforts. Building synergies and concerted roadmaps is crucial for the implementation of sustainable shifts. Ms. Nejdawi recalled the role of ESCWA in supporting Arab food security programs along with AOAD which includes following up on the outcome of the UN FSS to provide capacity development for stakeholders and provide appropriate platforms for collaboration and dissemination of valuable information and practices.
19. **Mr. Serge Nakouzi**, the Deputy regional representative of FAO-RNE, reflected on the commonly reported themes in food system related dialogues in the Arab Region. He cited the importance of partnerships and cooperation across the spectrum of stakeholders, the need for a pragmatic agenda to achieve inclusive and resilient food systems, and the significance of a shared vision and well-defined goals and outcomes. He concluded with a set of recommendations, such as: mitigating the impact of climate change and water shortage issues through climate smart agriculture, enhancing intra-regional trade, harmonizing related standards and regulations particularly on food safety, utilizing intraregional cooperation and adoption of technology in agriculture to increase productivity and efficiency of food systems, and incentivizing at both production and consumption levels the adoption of healthy and nutritious food patterns to tackle the triple burden of malnutrition.

ORGANIZATION

A. DATE AND VENUE

20. The meeting was held virtually via Zoom platform on 27 July 2021. The recording of the event is available on the following link:

https://fao.zoom.us/rec/share/mLZzEWB2RxMlpBdgW0nM-rDP7dmrHO6HMZQsEZ4Reeq6z1kqZYrBJPhGrLdb1_Mj.Pdynsiw-oh88peU1

B. PARTICIPANTS

21. A diverse group of stakeholders attended the virtual meeting. They represented Arab member States, academia, regional, sub regional and national organizations, private sector, youth and farmers' groups, Union of Arab Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, and several civil society organizations, and international experts. The full list of participants is provided in Annex 2.

ANNEX 1: AGENDA OF THE DIALOGUE

13:30- 13:40	<p>Welcoming Notes and Identifying Arab Region Priorities</p> <p>Welcome note (3 min) H.E. Prof. Ibrahim El Dukheiri, Director General, AOAD</p> <p>Transforming Food Systems in Arab Region: Outcomes of Regional Dialogue (5 min) Mr. Rami Zurayk, Professor, American University of Beirut, Lebanon</p>
13:40- 14:10	<p>Panel Session: Addressing Priorities of the Arab Region</p> <p>Moderator: Dr. Kamel Shideed, Member of the Steering Committee of the HLPE, and former assistant Director General of ICARDA.</p> <p>Ms. Nawal Al Hamed, Deputy Director General, Public Authority for Food and Nutrition, Kuwait</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the Kuwait National Dialogue what immediate actions are needed to Implement Kuwait priority game changers? <p>Ms. Fatima Eltahir Alhassan, Secretary General of the Food Security Technical Secretariat, Sudan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the Sudan National Dialogue, what immediate actions are needed to implement priority game changers? <p>Mr. Tareq Hassan, Head of the Arab Youth Sustainable Development Network</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In times of conflict, what immediate actions are needed to enhance the role of youth in transforming food systems? <p>Ms. May Serhal, Union of Arab Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What immediate actions in the Arab region are needed to enhance agriculture and trade in the region? <p>Mr. Fadi Jabr, General Secretary, Arab Federation for Food Industries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What immediate actions in the Arab region are needed to enhance the food processing industries? <p>Ms. Jehad Abdullah Alfathel, Member of Shoora Council of Bahrain, Deputy Chairman, Parliamentarian Network for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa and Arab World</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the Arab Regional Dialogue, what immediate actions are needed to implement priority game changers in the Arab region?
14:10- 14:15	<p>Arab Initiative for ensuring food security and improving arab food systems</p> <p>Arab food security program Mr. Waheed Mogahed, Advisor for AOAD</p>
14:15- 14:20	<p>Closing remarks</p> <p>Regional Cooperation for transforming food systems in Arab region Ms. Reem Nejdawi, Chief, Food and Environment Policies Section, UN- ESCWA Mr. Serge Nakouzi, Deputy Regional Representative for FAO-RNE</p>

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