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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

ARAB STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE ON FOOD SYSTEMS TOWARDS THE ARAB REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS DIALOGUE"

ONLINE VIRTUAL MEETING, 11 MARCH 2021

Summary

In preparation for the Arab Regional Food Systems Dialogue to be held as a special event on 29 March 2021 during the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development (AFSD) 2021, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in collaboration with the Regional Office for the Near East (RNE) of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) organized, on March 11, 2021, the Arab Stakeholders Dialogue on Food Systems virtually via ZOOM. The meeting brought together about 55 participants including a wide range of stakeholders from universities, ministries, research institutions, unions, industries, and United Nations agencies.

The Dialogue's objective was to provide an integrative and engaging platform to enable key stakeholders including civil organizations, private sector, ministries, research institutions, unions and others to share their role, perspectives, experiences, and solutions on ensuring that the region's food systems is healthy, inclusive and sustainable, in addition to enhancing their resilience within the COVID-19 context. The Arab Stakeholder Dialogue output will be used as one input to the regional views, perspectives, and experiences. It will be also presented as input to the food Systems Summit (FSS) in September 2021.

The Arab Stakeholder Dialogue was divided into two parts. Part I presented the background information about the food system summit and context for the Arab region, while Part II used an interactive discussion platform including MURAL and open discussions to allow participants to identify game changing solutions.

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Introduction

- 1. The United Nations Secretary-General called for the Food Systems Summit (FSS) to be convened in September 2021 with a broad vision to launch actions, solutions and strategies and identify pathways to accelerate progress towards more sustainable, inclusive and healthy food systems that are resilient to shocks like the COVID-19. Food systems, the way the world produces and consumes food, need a revolutionary transformation to deliver on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- 2. In preparation for the 2021 FSS, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in cooperation with regional offices of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), World Health organization (WHO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD) are organizing the Virtual Arab Regional Food Systems' Dialogue that is taking place on 29 March 2021 as a special event during the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development (AFSD) 2021. The Arab Regional Dialogue aims to consolidate regional views, perspectives, and experiences of diverse stakeholders from the countries. A Regional Outcome document to reflect those discussions will be presented to the FSS.
- 3. In view of this event and as a preparation for the Arab Regional Food Systems Dialogue, ESCWA in cooperation with FAO organized the Arab Stakeholders Dialogue on Food Systems. Owing to COVID-19 restrictions, the dialogue was organized as a 90-minute online meeting using the Zoom platform on Thursday, 11 March, from 11.00 am-12:30 pm Beirut time. Regional and national stakeholders, as well as resource persons from FAO and ESCWA were brought together to highlight the summit objectives, identify game changing actions based on experiences and needs of the stakeholders, and encourage initiation of national dialogues.
- 4. The dialogue modality allowed for active participation of stakeholders using a combination of tools including an interactive online platform "MURAL" where participants could write their game changing actions directly and time was allocated for oral discussions in relation to the actions.

I.CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

- 5. Stakeholders need to work together for implementation of game changers, and everyone has a responsibility to shift food systems and change the rules of the game to achieve food security and nutrition for all.
- 6. The output of the Arab Stakeholder Dialogue will be used as input to the Arab Regional Dialogue on Food Systems to be held on March 29, 2021.
- 7. Four issues of relevance to the region were identified along the five action tracks of the Food systems summit namely: transitioning to healthy foods, optimized sustainable production, advancing equitable livelihoods, and responding to risks and hazards.
- 8. The game changing actions identified across each of the four issues that were discussed, and voted upon as priority based on experiences are as follows: (other actions/solutions are available in the discussion section and all the proposals of participants are available in Annex 1)

- (a) For Transitioning to Healthy Food, participants recommended the below:
 - i. Use innovative methods for food production (research preproduction)
 - ii. Harmonize regulations within the region to improve exchange of commodities
 - iii. Provide a special platform for marketing sustainable agriculture products
- (b) For Advancing Equitable Livelihoods, participants recommended the following:
 - i. Enhance accessibility of farmers to technology mainly small farmers
 - ii. Invest in solar energy and renewable energies in general in rural areas
 - iii. Enforce land registration systems to help financial access
- (c) In the area of Optimizing Sustainable Production, participants recommended the following:
 - i. The use of modern technologies in agriculture, water harvesting, and supplementary irrigation are important factors in sustainable production
 - ii. Awareness and capacity building in the use of modern technologies
- (d) Responding to Risks, the main recommendations were:
 - i. Adopt the triple nexus approach (HDP) in a participative manner during crisis contexts (humanitarian, development and peace)
 - ii. Resolve the underlying causes of vulnerability to risks and drivers of crises

II.SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

A. OPENING SESSION

- 9. **Ms. Reem Nejdawi**, Chief of Food and Environment Policies Section, ESCWA, welcomed participants and informed them that this dialogue aims to provide an engaging platform for all to share experiences and perspectives through identifying game changing actions and key recommendations to move towards healthier, sustainable, and inclusive food systems. Ms. Nejdawi indicated that this meeting comes as part of a series of Dialogues being organized for the Arab region and that will feed into the Arab Regional Dialogue on Food System which will generate a regional outcome document to be submitted to the FSS in September 2021. She also highlighted the challenges faced in Arab region including malnutrition, obesity, anaemia, scarcity of natural resources, climate change, import dependency, food loss and waste, and conflicts that were further exacerbated by COVID-19 and reinforced the need to build better. M. Nejdawi concluded by indicating that ESCWA is adamant that continuous collaborative hard work will eventually help change ways the Arab region produces and consumes food allowing us to move towards sustainable patterns.
- 10. **Mr. Jean Marc Faurès,** Regional Program Leader, Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO-RNE, thanked all participants for joining this central dialogue. He acknowledged the importance of discussing food systems and the importance of the ongoing cooperation between ESCWA and FAO to organize dialogues for the region and stressed on the continued commitment of FAO at all levels to work towards transforming food systems.
- 11. **Ms. Julie Abouarab,** Associate Coordination Officer at ESCWA, reviewed with participants the set objective of the dialogue and methodology to be followed to consolidate the ideas of the participants to improve the Arab region food systems. The "Mural" platform will thus be

used to review key and relevant facts, discuss and propose actions needed, and identify actors responsible for implementing these actions. Ms. Abouarab stressed on the need to be creative in proposing game changing actions that should be scalable, actionable, and sustainable while being mindful of gender and geographic equity.

B. PART I: BRIEF ON THE 2021 FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT AND ITS FIVE ACTION TRACKS

- 12. **Mr. Jean Marc Faurès,** presented the world Food Systems Summit indicating that transforming the ways we consume and produce food has tremendous impact on achieving SDG goals. He described the summit as a solutions' summit and stressed on the fact that it is a dialogue for all people to participate as everyone has a role in impacting the way food is consumed and produced. He then introduced the three types of dialogues being convened including the member state summit dialogues, global summit dialogues, and independent summit dialogues.
- 13. **Mr. Jean Marc Faurès** also reviewed the selected five action tracks that cover all dimensions of food systems, ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all; shifting to sustainable consumption pattern, boosting nature-positive production at sufficient scale, advancing equitable livelihoods and value distribution, and building resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses. He reiterated on the importance of coming up with actionable plans as this dialogue will feed into the Arab regional Dialogue on Food systems. Mr. Faurès ended by providing an overview of the main drivers affecting food security within the context of the Arab region, such as conflicts, water scarcity, and climate change.

Figure 1: The five action tracks identified by summit



C. PART II: BUILDING SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

- 19. **Ms. Julie Abouarab**, ESCWA, started the session by outlining the four priority issues to the Arab Region, and go along with the five action tracks, namely: *Transitioning to Healthy Food*, *Advancing Equitable Livelihoods*, *Optimizing Sustainable Production*, and *Responding to Risks* and Hazards (Fig 2). She then briefed the participants on the expected outcome from this session which is to ultimately have a set of game changing actions and solutions with identified implementers and beneficiaries of those actions.
- 20. **Ms. Maya Atie,** ESCWA consultant, provided a quick tutorial on how to access the Mural application link that was used and demonstrated to participants how to navigate through it (add/remove sticky notes, vote, zoom in/out). She also facilitated the discussion for building solutions together in the four identified sections, each related to one of the four identified issues.

- 21. Participants then started navigating through the application and proposing game changing actions based on their experiences and perceived priorities of the region. The participants were also able to classify those action by type by colour coding their proposals to identify those related to regulation, research and technology, awareness, financial, infrastructure, and capacity building actions. Afterwards, they voted to identify the most relevant and impactful action from the proposed list and then identify the stakeholders concerned with implementing proposed and immediate beneficiaries.
- 22. On the first priority issues regarding the **Transitioning to Healthy Foods**, key challenges and facts in the region were presented. In the Arab region 116 million people are food insecure, 43 million undernourished, 115 million obese. There exist high levels of child stunting (22%), wasting (8.2%) & women anaemia (35.5%). Subsidies and policies favour nutrient-poor consumption and levels of food loss and waste reach 210 kg/capita/year. The key intervention areas identified for this issue included addressing obesity and malnutrition and reducing food loss and waste.
- 23. Ms. Maya Atie then facilitated the discussion and identified with participants game changing actions, and later enabled them to vote on the three actions they consider most relevant to region. The following actions were proposed based on type of action: (results as provided by participants are available in Annex 1)
 - Financial:
 - 1. Provide incentives for healthy consumption and buying healthy food
 - Research and technology:
 - 1. Use innovative methods for food production (research preproduction) (Most voted on)
 - 2. Enhance marketing strategies (Identification of food groups for vulnerable groups)
 - Infrastructure:
 - 1. Promote and establishing decentralized local markets, in partnership with small farmers, to ensure access to healthy food in light of crises
 - Awareness and capacity building:
 - 1. Train young men and women to be involved in sustainable land and agriculture.
 - 2. Organize workshops on the benefits of organic farming and limiting use of chemicals
 - 3. Promote incubators to increase technical expertise and scientific information
 - 4. Increase awareness on post-harvest losses
 - 5. Raise awareness on nutrition and promote the education on nutrition
 - Regulation:
 - 1. Harmonize regulations within the region to improve exchange of commodities (2nd most voted on)
 - 2. Provide a special platform for marketing sustainable agriculture products (3rd most voted on)
 - 3. Consider access to healthy food a basic right whereby states need to ensure safe and affordable access to healthy food
 - 4. Enhance coordination with all stakeholders to focus efforts on improving situation

- 24. In the open discussion that followed, **Ms. Razan Zuayter**, Arab Network for Food Sovereignty (ANFS), indicated that access to healthy and sufficient food at all time is a right and requires intervention from governments. She added that promoting and establishing decentralized local markets, in partnership with small farmers, enables the access to healthy food in times of crisis. This was demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic that witnessed difficulties in transporting food between rural and urban areas. Ms. Zuayter also stressed on the need for enhancing national reserves.
- 25. **Mr. Hammou Laamrani**, League of Arab States (LAS), then commented on the need to differentiate between stakeholders and to add to the list of proposed actors the "consumers". He also indicated the need to identify women, and youth as part of consumers, producers, retailers, and farmers.
- 26. **Ms. Tahra Elobeid**, Human Nutrition Department at Qatar University, stressed on the important role of the national private sector and that has a direct impact on the local markets. She stressed on importance of having the private sector more involved in enhancing food security, thus balancing between expectation and reality.
- 27. On the Second priority issue related to **Advancing Equitable Livelihoods**, Ms. Julie Abouarab presented the key challenges and facts in the region. She indicated that 29 per cent of the population in the Arab region, are poor of which 70 per cent of poor live in rural areas. Of the total employment share, 16 per cent work in agriculture. Women and youth unemployment rates are 20 and 26.5 per cent respectively. In general, the region has limited access to infrastructure and services in rural areas where agriculture contributes to 7 per cent of the regional GDP. The suggested key intervention areas for this issue include promoting decent work for all, reducing inequitable access to resources.
- 28. Participants with Ms. Maya Atie facilitating the discussion identified game changing actions and voted on the three actions they consider most relevant to region. The following actions were proposed based on type of action: (results as provided by participants are available in Annex 1)
 - Research and technology:
 - 1. Enhance accessibility of farmers to technology mainly small farmers (most voted on)
 - 2. Support and promote agro-processing in rural areas
 - 3. Invest in solar energy and renewable energies especially in rural areas (2nd most voted on)
 - Awareness:
 - 1. Increase awareness on the role of women in food systems and agriculture sector
 - 2. Raise awareness on water consumption challenges by responsible ministries
 - Regulation
 - 1. Enforce land registration systems to help financial access (3rd most voted on)
 - 2. Protect local food systems from dumping
 - General
 - 1. Promote entrepreneurship and innovation for youth and women to improve job creation, increase income and improving livelihood in rural areas
 - 2. Enhance land management systems that protect access to land
 - 3. Promote use of efficient water management systems that are accessible to small farmers

- 29. **Mr Hammou Laamrani**, suggested in the discussion that followed to provide participants in upcoming events with background information so that they can prepare their input.
- 30. In the third section of the interactive dialogue, **Ms. Julie Abouarab** presented the related key challenges and facts related to **Optimized Sustainable Production**. The Arab region is water scarce where renewable water resources per person is 600 m3/year, that is 10 per cent of the world average. Total cropland is 5 per cent of arable land, that is 0.15 ha of arable land/person (20 per cent of world average), and 90 per cent of region is arid or hyper arid land. Soil productivity is reduced by 30-35 per cent of potential productivity due to overexploitation and two thirds of farmers practice relatively low yield, rainfed and pastoral agriculture. The suggested key intervention areas include integrated management of scarce resources and increasing productivity with technology and investments.
- 31. **Ms. Maya Atie** along with participants identified and prioritized related game changing actions. Stakeholders identified the following actions based on action type (results as provided by participants are available in Annex 1)
 - Financial:
 - 1. Increase budget (public and private) provided for research on agriculture production
 - Research and Technology:
 - 1. Enhance reliance on agricultural and industrial incubators
 - 2. Invest in agricultural extension programs and staff
 - 3. Better assess and understand limitations of existing natural resources to better respond to these challenges
 - 4. Encourage innovation in the field of green biotech crops
 - 5. Study potential of transforming desert plants to edible foods
 - Regulation
 - 1. Protect agricultural lands and reviewing national policies for land use
 - 2. Support agriculture and ecology and limiting the use of chemicals
 - 3. Promote agricultural research and improve access of producers to it
 - 4. Increase interest in agricultural research and extension
 - Capacity Building:
 - 1. Use of on modern technologies in irrigation to conserve water resources
 - 2. The use of modern technologies in agriculture, water harvesting, and supplementary irrigation are important factors in sustainable production (most voted on)
 - 3. Use of drought resistant crops in pilots and scaling up its use in arid areas
 - 4. Awareness and capacity building in the use of modern and appropriate technologies (2nd most voted on)
- 32. **Mr. Tareq Abdellatif**, Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development (AAAID) highlighted the need for the transfer of technology to better empower small farmers and the important role of civil organizations and unions in this respect.
- 33. **Mr. Raed Hattar,** Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD), elaborated on the issue of identifying any type of stakeholder as all proposed actions require collaboration and cooperation between all stakeholders and ultimately benefits them all. In terms of technology transfer, Mr. Hattar suggested to better empower entrepreneurs to come up with new initiatives, piloting them, recording their work modality and benefits so that farmers are encouraged to scale them up.

- 34. **Ms. Razan Zuayter**, ANFS, reaffirmed the need for farmers to be partners in identifying research projects being undertaken in the agriculture sector and also indicated the need that the regional and local strategic and plans for improving food security and sovereignty after which priorities may be clearly identified.
- 35. **Mr. Hammou Laamarani,** LAS, added that the governments are the primary stakeholders to many of the actions related to enhancing productivity as any sustainable production process requires relevant policies and clear mandates otherwise, they will not be implemented.
- 36. **Mr. Khalil Jawasreh**, AOAD, reconfirmed the idea related to the role of governments as they are responsible for providing the needed infrastructure that enables stakeholder make use of needed technologies for sustainable production processes.
- 37. In addressing the fourth priority issue related to responding to risks and hazards, key facts included the notion that while the Arab region houses 5 per cent of the world population it imports more than one third of all global sheep meat and 63 per cent of its consumed wheat. Accordingly, there are increased risks associated with unpredictability of food supply levels and potential price volatility in times of crisis. Further, climate change is impacting the region with forecasted rise in sea levels and expected coastal areas flooding that may impact about 20 million people. Conflicts, wars, and occupation have also forced millions to become refugees or internally displaced. As a result of all those challenges, the proposed key intervention areas revolved around reducing vulnerabilities to import dependencies and building resilience to risks and hazards.
- 38. Participants identified game changing actions related to the issue of responding to risks with **Ms. Maya Atie** and prioritized actions most relevant to region. The following actions were identified and classified according to the action type: (results as provided by participants are available in Annex 1)
 - Financial:
 - 1. Need for more agricultural insurance institutions
 - Research and technology:
 - 1. Improve knowledge sharing and exchange of experiences between governments and organizations
 - Regulation:
 - 1. Adopt the triple nexus approach (Humanitarian/ Development/ Peace- HDP) in a participative manner during crisis contexts (2nd most voted on)
 - 2. Resolve the underlying causes of vulnerability to risks and drivers of crises (most voted on)
 - 1. Provide social safety nets and risk prevention mechanisms
 - 2. Adopt emergency policies, plans, and programs
 - Awareness:
 - 1. Enhance risk-based decision making among populations
 - Capacity Building:
 - 1. Enhancing capacities to cope with risks and Hazards as during these times challenges should be faced together and everyone should contribute
 - 2. Engage women in agriculture and food production

- 39. **Mr. Hammou Laamrani**, LAS, referenced the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report 2020-2021 that identified risks related to food systems and their impact on world economy. He further highlighted the fact that most Arab countries have national plans to respond to risks and that the dialogue needs to be in accordance with national plans related to food and water security responding to risks and shocks.
- 40. **Ms. Marian Al Jaajaa**, Arab Group for Protection of Nature (APN quoted the UN secretary general stating that in times of conflict we need to link between humanitarian response, sustainable production and maintaining peace. There is a need to manage the root causes of vulnerabilities and invest in stopping conflicts and wars based on human rights. She also outlined that humanitarian aid need to be focused and promote locate food systems and that governments are required to make sure that the aid received considers national priorities that protect the most vulnerable people. She referenced the report of the United Nations Committee on Food Security (CFS) "Framework for action for food security and nutrition in protracted crises" and indicated that APN and ANFS published a report to track the implications of this framework in the Arab Region¹.
- 41. **Mr. Raed Hattar,** AOAD, added that national plans including emergency plans are available but due to instability in the region these plans are not being implemented. In relation to food security, having reserves is essential to respond to risks such as COVID-19. These reserves should be distributed across the country and are not supposed to be stored only in one area to reduce risks giving the example of Beirut port explosion

D. CLOSING SESSION

- 42. **Ms. Reem Nejdawi**, ESCWA thanked the participants for their active participation and their valuable feedback throughout the dialogue. She also announced that ESCWA and AOAD are launching a land degradation video challenge with the support of the UN Office of Information and Communications Technology in celebration for the desertification and drought day 2021 "Restoring Degraded Land in the Arab Region: A Youth Challenge". She solicited active engagement and dissemination with the respective youth networks. Further Ms. Nejdawi reiterated that ESCWA and FAO are ready to support the region to organize national and independent dialogues to better inform the FSS in September with national and regional perspectives.
- 43. **Mr. Jean Marc Faurès**, FAO thanked everyone for this interactive and open dialogue on food systems where a mixture of writing and open discussion was used to identify game changers. He further noted that it is challenging to address major issues in small amount of time.

III. ORGANIZATION

A. DATE AND VENUE

44. The meeting was held virtually via Zoom on 11 March 2021. The dialogue modality allowed for active participation of stakeholders using a combination of tools including an interactive online platform "MURAL" where participants were invited to write their proposals live while

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¹ http://www.csm4cfs.org/14260/

broadcasting and later time was allocated for discussions to go through participants comments and remarks on those actions.

45. The recoding of the event is available on the following link with Access Passcode: Arab@1234:

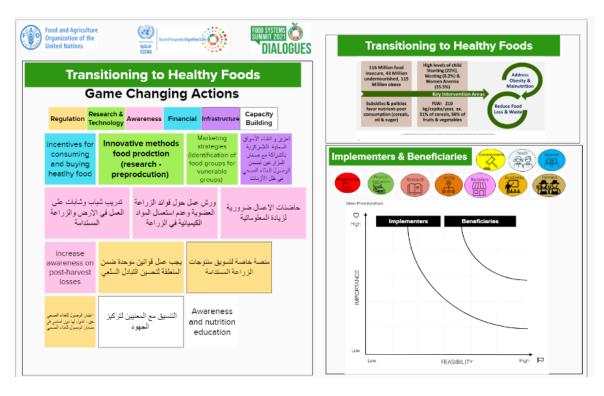
https://fao.zoom.us/rec/share/9wGu3ahLXDIWbQIBzPHxz-t52YP0CWkjbN4K8dpL3XWC0TUW5PrQ8K0_p1JVScMd.V6ipD5mxg9yac_iR

B. PARTICIPANTS

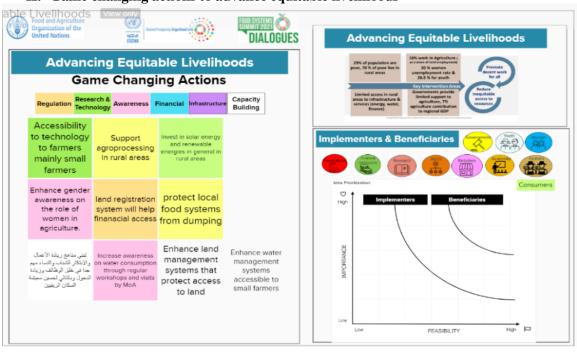
- 46. Key stakeholders including regional organizations, academia, private sector, civil organizations, research institutions, union, federations and others were invited to the dialogue to share their expertise, views, perspectives and to propose solutions on making the region's food systems healthier, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient.
- 47. The full list of participants is provided in Annex 3.

ANNEX I: RESULTS OF BUILDING SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

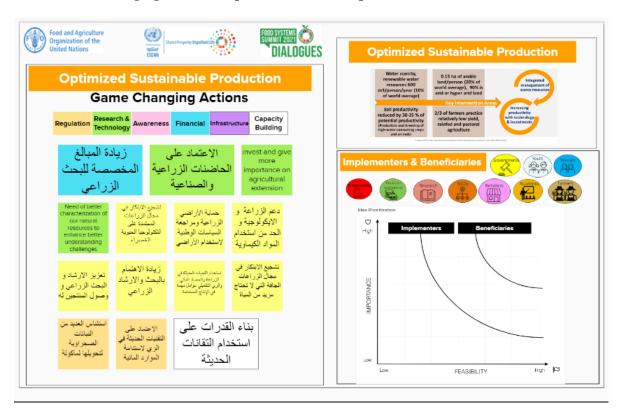
I. Game changing actions to transition towards healthy foods



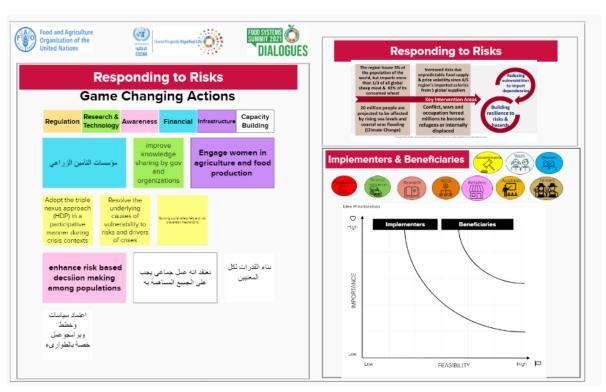
II. Game changing actions to advance equitable livelihoods



III. Game changing actions to optimize sustainable production



IV. Game changing actions to respond to risks



ANNEX 2: AGENDA OF THE DIALOGUE

	Thursday, 11 March 2021
11:00 - 11:05	WELCOMING REMARKS
	Ms. Reem Nejdawi, ESCWA
	Mr. Jean Marc Faures, FAO
11:05 - 11:10	OBJECTIVE OF DIALOGUE AND AGENDA
	Ms. Julie Abouarab, ESCWA
11:10 - 11:20	BRIEF ON THE 2021 FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT AND ITS FIVE ACTION TRACKS
	Mr. Jean Marc Faures, FAO
11:20 - 12:20	BUILDING SOLUTIONS TOGETHER
	Interactive discussion using MURAL application, and identification of actions
	Facilitators:
	Ms. Maya Atie, ESCWA
	Ms. Julie Abouarab, ESCWA
	Issue 1: Transitioning to Healthy Food
	Issue 2: Advancing Equitable Livelihoods
	Issue 3: Optimizing Sustainable Production
	Issue 4: Responding to Risks
	, , ,
12:20 – 12:30	CLOSING REMARKS
	Ms. Reem Nejdawi, ESCWA
	- Restoring degraded land in the Arab Region: A Youth Challenge
	- Next Step: Arab Regional Food Systems Dialogue (March 29, 2021) and Food
	Systems Summit in September 2021

ANNEX 3: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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