

Thematic Working Group (TWG) on Food Security in the Arab Region Terms of Reference

A. Background and rationale

The food and energy prices spikes of 2007-2008 have put food security at the top of the agenda for policy makers world-wide.

While food and energy prices receded in the second half of 2008, the financial crisis that hit the globe has slashed the purchasing power of millions of poor people and has kept food security a top-agenda especially that many of the factors underlying the volatility in food prices appear here to stay.

Facing these crises, the international community reacted by establishing the UN System High Level Task Force (HLTF) on the Global Food Security Crisis to coordinate UN system and International Financial Institutions efforts to pursue immediate and long term goals aimed tackling food insecurity.

The HLTF developed a Comprehensive Framework for Action (CFA) in July 2008 which emphasizes that food insecurity is a serious global threat which require concerted efforts and common approach that protects the most vulnerable in the **short term and develops sustainable food systems in the long term**. Such approach is also to respond to all dimensions of **food and nutrition security: availability, access and utilization**.

At the regional level, policy-makers are like wise concerned by the food, energy, and financial crises and their impact on food security especially that the vulnerability to market forces that most of these countries have experienced since 2007 has accentuated an already fragile food security situation in region.

The region is a net food importer, importing at least 50 percent of its calories needs. With the ever increasing population numbers, the projections also show that the demand for food in Arab countries will grow substantially to the year 2030 and beyond, while food production within the region is not keeping pace thereby resulting in increased dependence on imported food. The prevailing social and political unrests coupled with re-emerging trends of soaring food prices s have again brought to light the vulnerability of the of the region to market shocks hence food insecurity. Moreover, the Region is the most water scarce region in the world and the situation is not expected to improve due the effects of the of climatic change; it has also limited availability of arable land, prone to recurrent droughts and has the second highest population growth rate in the world resulting in additional pressure on already constrained natural resources.

This is why the question of food security in a region that is structurally incapable of feeding its people continues to be an important dimension in the policies of the member countries. The assistance provided by UN agencies and regional entities to these countries remains crucial while effective coordination mechanisms of such interventions and policies will certainly ensure better delivery.

To better serve member countries and in the spirit of “delivering as one”, Regional Coordination Mechanisms (RCM), convened by the UN Regional Commissions, were established pursuant to ECOSOC Resolution 1998/46 with a mandate **to promote a coordinated approach by the UN agencies and relevant regional organizations to address development issues of concern to their respective regions.**

The RCM for the West Asia region, convened by UNESCWA, agreed in its 12th meeting held in Beirut 13-14 September 2008 that more effective inter-agency coordination and collaboration at the operational level can be achieved through establishing thematic working groups for priority themes identified by RCM for the region.

For the Arab region, the 12th RCM agreed to establish three Thematic Working Groups (TWG), presented here forth with their convening agencies:

- Thematic Working Group on MDGs (Convener: ESCWA)
- Thematic Working Group on Food Security (Convener: FAO)
- Thematic Working Group on Climate Change (Convener: UNEP)

B. Mission of the Thematic Working Group on Food Security

The Thematic Working Group on Food Security in the Arab countries should be a regional forum for sharing analysis and information in the Region and for coordinating actions and interventions undertaken by the different stakeholders. It should lay the principles for the formulation of appropriate policies and strategies and should have the means to monitor progress and to report on their implementation. Emphasis is given to synergy of policies, action and the delivery of results.

C. Objectives of the TWG on Food Security in the Arab Region

The objectives of the TWG on Food Security in the Arab Region:

- ▶ To help countries monitor the relevant food security indicators through partners at the country and regional levels;
- ▶ To provide analysis to the RCM to facilitate coordination for in-country and regional programs to improve food security and to report and address emerging situations;
- ▶ To serve as a manifesto that embraces the full range of policies and actions already underway in response to the food challenge as well as early information on intended projects;
 - To ensure that the UN and regional agencies adopt a coherent and systematic approach to short and long term food security problems to help bolster the governance of food security in a framework of coherence and synergy of policies, strategies and actions at national and regional levels

- to help build longer-term food security and societal resilience.
- ▶ To galvanize the strategic engagement of multiple stakeholders in concerted and sustained efforts to improve food security through partnering at local, national, and regional levels;

D. Functions of the TWG on Food Security in the Arab Region

The TWG on Food Security in the Arab Region will perform the following functions:

Establish a system for monitoring coordination at the country and regional levels and for tracking the overall response to food insecurity (including resource flows) at country level and regional levels. This will be done using software called Food Security Activities Tracking and Management Information System (FS-ATMIS)¹ which is a decision-support tool for food security-related activities and initiatives of governments and development partners.

- ▶ Evaluate policies affecting food security, in particular as regards production, agro-industry, trade, social safety nets and financing;
- ▶ Produce a regional food security strategy paper for addressing the underlying structural problems and emerging issues in the food systems.

E. Membership and Mode of Operation

In view of the multidisciplinary nature of food security, membership is flexible and open to all UN agencies. Close collaboration with the members of the other two Thematic Working Groups, i.e. TWG on MDGs and TWG on Climate Change, is foreseen.

G. Regular meetings

¹ Development of the software for tracking and mapping food security activities at national level has been conducted within the framework of the GIEWS workstation – an interactive tool of FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System. The tool is intended for decision support and is flexible allowing for the modification of criteria according to the users' needs. Its main aim is to help users to identify gaps and redundancies in actions taken to implement national food security strategies, and to take corrective action if needed. It tracks: sectoral and geographical areas of intervention; programmes and project activities; stakeholder involvement; and budget allocations.

It is capable of generating a wide variety of reports that can be prepared for the local, national, regional or global level, subject to the availability of information in the system. The database currently contains information from 2008 for central Asian countries that belong to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

- ▶ The TWG on Food Security in the Arab region will meet at least twice a year at a venue agreed by the members; outcome of these two meetings are intended to inform the RCM meetings held also twice a year.