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Food and Agriculture  
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Продовольственная и  
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Organización de las  
Naciones Unidas para la  
Alimentación y la Agricultura

منظمة  
الأغذية والزراعة  
للأمم المتحدة

## EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON AGRICULTURE

### FORTY-THIRD SESSION

**Budapest, Hungary, 27–28 September 2023**

### **Food systems transformation in Europe and Central Asia – Information on FAO's work in the region**

#### **I. Food system transformation in Europe and Central Asia**

1. With mounting multiple crises impacting food security, the global community faces a critical juncture to transform food systems and make them inclusive, efficient and sustainable for people and the planet (Reardon *et al.*, 2019). Food systems transformation in the Europe and Central Asia region is of utmost importance to address the multitude of challenges it faces, including malnutrition and obesity, climate change and extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, population growth, urbanization, and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. With less than a decade remaining, food systems transformation pathways are considered as accelerators to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2. The United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) in 2021<sup>1</sup> saw robust participation from Europe and Central Asia countries and, as shown by the follow-up actions and discussions during the UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment,<sup>2</sup> tangible results in the Europe and Central Asia region were achieved. These include increased attention to and awareness of food systems transformation; regional, national and subnational discussions and dialogues; and the development of national pathways<sup>3</sup> and strategic thinking. There is a deeper understanding of the key issues to be addressed when working on food systems transformation, considering the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

3. The UNFSS and follow-up processes have shown that, despite the differences among food systems and stages of development of countries in the Europe and Central Asia region, a set of **common pressures** requires urgent attention:

- a growing malnutrition burden, with rapid increases in overweight and obesity – alongside, in certain countries, pockets of stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies (FAO *et al.*, 2023);

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the United Nations Food Systems Summit, please visit <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the United Nations Food Systems Stocktaking Moment, please visit <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/fs-stocktaking-moment/>.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on national pathways, please visit <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/member-state-dialogue/dialogues-and-pathways/en>.

- rural-to-urban migration and a rural-urban social divide, both of which threaten the livelihoods of the small-scale actors who dominate production;
- increasing resource stress as a result of overexploitation, unsustainable farming practices and the changing climate, including increasing and severe climate weather extremes; and
- shocks and conflicts that impact food supply chains and cause ripple effects throughout the whole food system, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, resulting in a widespread food, energy and finance crisis.

4. A stocktake of the UNFSS national pathways conducted by FAO in cooperation with Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, has identified six overarching priorities for the Europe and Central Asia region (FAO, 2023) that broadly reflect these pressures:

1. managing resources sustainably and responsibly;
2. improving food safety and quality;
3. empowering and enabling small-scale producers;
4. delivering nutrition security;
5. empowering women and attracting young talent; and
6. mitigating and adapting to climate change.

5. More recently, further insights on regional key messages are available from the 28 March regional preparatory meeting for the Food Systems Stocktaking Moment for Europe and Central Asia.<sup>4</sup>

6. Lastly, the UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment (24–26 July 2023) provided an opportunity to assess the progress made in transforming food systems and identify successes and challenges in implementing national pathways.<sup>5</sup>

## II. FAO support for food systems transformation in Europe and Central Asia

7. To continue building on the momentum created by the UNFSS, a strong governmental response to implement adequate food policy and adopt a food systems approach based on established priorities is needed. The high attention to food systems provides an excellent opportunity for FAO to support Members in many elements of food systems.

8. In response to countries' needs, FAO is supporting food systems transformation at the country level in Europe and Central Asia, working with relevant national and local stakeholders, and at the regional level, cooperating with other United Nations agencies and stakeholders through the regional United Nations Issue-based Coalition for Sustainable Food Systems in Europe and Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there is close coordination with the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub in Rome, including most recent provision of logistic support to countries and information to attend the UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment.

9. Regarding work at the country level – particularly within the framework of the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31<sup>7</sup> – FAO pays attention to the interconnectivity among economic sectors and the trade-offs that increasing productivity and production to achieve healthy diets for all will generate regarding soil

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<sup>4</sup> To read information from the Europe and Central Asia Regional Preparatory Meeting of the United Nations Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment, please visit <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/fs-stocktaking-moment/regional-preparatory-meetings/europe-and-central-asia-regional-preparatory-meeting/en>.

<sup>5</sup> See the report of progress made, including by ECA countries, [https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/stocktaking-moment/un-secretary-general/unfss2-secretary-general-report.pdf?sfvrsn=560b6fa6\\_19](https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/stocktaking-moment/un-secretary-general/unfss2-secretary-general-report.pdf?sfvrsn=560b6fa6_19)

<sup>6</sup> The Issue-based Coalition for Sustainable Food Systems, established in 2020, is an institutional mechanism of the United Nations Regional Collaboration Platform, as part of the United Nations reform. FAO is co-chairing the Issue-based Coalition for Sustainable Food Systems and provides the secretariat. The co-chairs are FAO, the World Health Organization and UNICEF. Members include the World Food Programme, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the World Meteorological Organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Office for Project Services. For more information, please visit <https://uneurocentralasia.org/en/implications-war-ukraine-sustainable-food-systems>.

<sup>7</sup> The FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31 is available at <http://www.fao.org/3/ne577en/ne577en.pdf>.

and water use, energy consumption, biodiversity protection and greenhouse gas emissions, so that policies can be put in place to minimize these trade-offs. This is supported by the regional priorities: i) formulating effective policies, promoting innovation and digitalization, and facilitating rural livelihoods, with emphasis on smallholders, women and youth; ii) food system transformation promoting nutrition-sensitive value chains and healthy diets through the alignment of trade, food safety, and sanitary and phytosanitary policies, facilitating One Health; iii) promoting sustainable natural resources management and facilitating resilience in agriculture, forestry and other land use sectors, including mitigating and adapting to climate change; and iv) addressing food insecurity and reducing all forms of malnutrition.<sup>8</sup> There is a strong focus on environmental sustainability and the consideration of social dimensions, including gender, youth, and addressing inequalities and economic questions.

10. Working with countries on these four key priority areas, FAO actively promotes the holistic food systems approach, highlighting the interconnections and synergies that exist when working on different core aspects of the food system. Some examples include work on One Health, understanding the contribution of food production to greenhouse gas emissions, food prices and affordability, agrifood policy, and trade decisions. As countries embarked on implementing their UNFSS national pathways, FAO has provided country-level support, including: promoting the development of the agritourism sector in Albania to diversify income sources for rural communities and foster sustainable rural development; supporting subnational dialogues in Serbia and the development of digital agriculture tools to enhance agricultural productivity, efficiency and sustainability; and sharing experiences in Tajikistan from other countries on holistic food systems.

11. Moreover, to further support evidence-based programme development for food systems transformation, FAO has conducted comprehensive food system assessments in 17 countries, including the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation countries in collaboration with its Regional Cooperation Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. Assessments have been conducted or are ongoing in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Montenegro.

12. Food systems can be affected by shocks and regional dynamics, and policymakers need to keep abreast of impacts. To this end, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia and the consequences of the war in Ukraine on food systems have been analysed.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the regional work and collaboration with other United Nations agencies, the Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems actively supports United Nations Resident Coordinators and United Nations Country Teams on the food systems transformative agenda through knowledge sharing and policy advice, bringing together diverse angles and perspectives for food systems transformation in Europe and Central Asia, key to accelerating the achievement of the SDGs. The United Nations Country Teams, supported by the Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems, play an important role in facilitating the collaboration of different government entities and stakeholders and in overcoming sectoral barriers.

13. The Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems is a key link for the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub to the regional United Nations agencies engaged in food systems work in the Europe and Central Asia region.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information, please read Priorities for FAO in the Europe and Central Asia region under the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31, available at <https://www.fao.org/3/ni190en/ni190en.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> The SDG Emergency Fund supported analytical work in Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova and Tajikistan.

Some key results of the Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems are:

- In 2022, in collaboration with Chatham House, two webinars were conducted on: the importance of holistic policy planning and a “food systems” approach and how the war in Ukraine is affecting food systems in Europe and Central Asia. These provided an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning among United Nations Country Teams and for the sharing of perspectives and resources from members of the Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems.<sup>10</sup>
- The initiative of the Food Systems Talks<sup>11</sup> was launched in 2021 to focus on specific topics relevant to food systems transformation. Recent talks have addressed the issue of the circular economy of food and feeding Europe in a changing climate.
- In 2023, the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub and the Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems co-organized the aforementioned regional preparatory meeting for the Food Systems Stocktaking Moment for Europe and Central Asia.<sup>12</sup>

### III. Keeping working on food systems

14. While countries in Europe and Central Asia have embraced the need for holistic food systems transformation, assistance and practical tools are needed for country-level implementation of the food systems pathways and commitments. Regional exchanges on good practice solutions and cooperation to address transboundary and transnational challenges are seen as valuable by many countries. The UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment was an important event at which countries discussed progress, exchanged experiences and renewed commitments. The voluntary progress reports provided a granular picture of the future ambition for food systems and an improved baseline for measuring progress and impact. As countries refocus their efforts to achieve the ambition of the 2030 Agenda, FAO will support countries in building on the results of the UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment to address their own goals for transforming food systems. The goal of engaging people – including women, youth and the vulnerable – and the importance of investment opportunities and greater cooperation with the private sector were restressed at the UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment.

15. A stronger food systems lens can be applied to projects and efforts on data collection and analysis, making the food systems approach more visible and resulting in policy decisions and actions at national and local levels. FAO will also promote a focus on sustainable food systems in common country analysis, Country Programming Frameworks and the new generation of United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks to be developed in the region.

16. For the 2023–2024 biennium, a regional FAO project on transforming agrifood systems in Europe and Central Asia will build capacities and knowledge on holistic food systems transformation, facilitate the exchange of experiences and best practices through regional workshops promoting the use of Committee on World Food Security guidelines and policy recommendations (including the Committee on World Food Security Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition), and discuss regional issues such as true cost accounting. Evidence will be generated on policy coherence and trade-offs in practice and on the role and specificities of urban environments as key entry points for transformation and SDG localization.

17. Moreover, it is imperative for countries to continue working on food systems transformation in alignment with other global agendas. Following the UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment, a number of

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<sup>10</sup> Based on the outcomes of the webinar and other similar discussions and country experiences, a note was drafted highlighting the most significant changes in food systems being observed due to the war in Ukraine, combined with the pandemic and climate change. The note, titled “Reforming the resilience of sustainable food systems,” is yet to be published. A digital repository of regional key United Nations agencies’ messages, available evidence, data analysis, tools and policy recommendations is available.

<sup>11</sup> All episodes of the Food Systems Talks are available at <https://www.youtube.com/@issuebasedcoalitiononsusta2508/videos>.

<sup>12</sup> More information on this meeting is available online at <https://uneuropecentralasia.org/en/events/eca-regional-preparatory-meeting-2023-food-systems-stocktaking-moment>.

milestones pave the way towards 2030 and provide an opportunity for Members to highlight the importance of food systems as a key lever for broader sustainable development and poverty alleviation, food security and the climate agenda. The SDG Summit provides an opportunity to elevate the importance of sustainable and resilient food systems to achieve the SDGs and allows for greater acceleration to the next Stocktaking Moment in 2025 (United Nations, 2023). the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference<sup>13</sup> represents a platform to address the interlinkages between climate change and food systems, recognizing the urgent need to mitigate climate impacts and build adaptive capacities within agricultural practices.

18. Similar potential exists to draw attention to policy coherence and multisectoral collaboration at the Climate Ambition Summit this year, the Summit of the Future, and the Nutrition for Growth Summit in 2024, as well as annual High-Level Political Forum and Financing for Development conferences. Moreover, the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development 2024 will offer countries a precious opportunity to convene and review the progress made on SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 13, SDG 16 and SDG 17.

19. UNFSS +4 in 2025 will offer an opportunity for the global community to reconvene and assess the progress made in transforming food systems for sustainable development.

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<sup>13</sup> More information on the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference, to be held 30 November to 12 December 2023 in Expo City Dubai, is available at <https://www.cop28.com/en/>.