

## SDG 2

---

**End hunger, achieve  
food security and  
improved nutrition  
and promote  
sustainable  
agriculture**

## A. Introduction

The Arab region is not on track to achieve SDG 2, losing ground on targets related to undernourishment and food insecurity, obesity among children and investment in agriculture. While most Arab countries have reoriented their SDG 2 policies over the past decade, making positive shifts towards fiscal, economic and environmental sustainability, policy and implementation gaps persist. People living in pockets of poverty and conflict are paying the highest price, with notable impacts on the health of the most vulnerable, including women and children. Moreover, food security policies have been ineffective at shielding countries from general global shocks and overlapping crises, emphasizing the need to build resilient food systems that capitalize on national and regional capacities.

### What the data say

Data included in this section are from the *ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor*, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).



**Undernourishment** is chronic in the Arab least developed and conflict-affected countries, with rates stagnating at high levels. The prevalence of undernourishment in 2021 was 41.1 and 23.5 per cent for these country groups, respectively, compared to 12 per cent for the region.

**Regional SDG 2 data availability is improving.** Data gaps persist in monitoring agricultural productivity and sustainability, which are crucial policy areas for the region.



In 2021, a third of the Arab population experienced moderate or severe **food insecurity**. In conflict-affected countries, prevalence increased from 39.4 per cent in 2014 to 45.6 per cent in 2021, more than 1.5 times the global average of 29.3 per cent.



Following a steady decrease between 2000 and 2015, the **prevalence of anaemia in non-pregnant women** aged 15 to 49 has been slowly increasing in the region from 32.7 per cent in 2015 to 33.2 per cent in 2019. Anaemia prevalence rates are particularly alarming in the least developed countries, afflicting 45.9 per cent of women in 2019.



**Stunting among children** has declined across the region but remains alarmingly high in the least developed and conflict-affected countries. More than half the region's 10.6 million stunted children reside in least developed countries, where the prevalence of stunting was 31.2 per cent in 2022.



**Government funding for agriculture** relative to its contribution to economic value added has been steadily declining in the region over the past two decades. The agricultural orientation index for government expenditures fell from 0.3 in 2001 to 0.23 in 2021 and is below the world average of 0.45. The index decreased sharply in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, from 2.8 in 2004 to 0.4 in 2021.



**Obesity among children** is on the rise. In 2022, the prevalence of obesity among children under age 5 reached 9.5 per cent, up from 8.8 per cent in 2000. The rate is presently 1.7 times the global average. Childhood obesity is markedly growing in the Mashreq and Gulf Cooperation Council countries, while trending down in the Maghreb and conflict-affected countries.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 2 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please visit the [ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor](#).

## On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 2

- Develop strategies that facilitate the adoption of sustainable climate-resilient farming practices and innovative cultivation techniques to address food insecurity, and invest in supplementary irrigation for rain-fed systems, taking into consideration the impact of climate change.
- Establish efficient extension systems that orient small-scale farmers towards context-based adaptive agricultural practices requiring few inputs and catering to local socioeconomic conditions, especially in the least developed and conflict-affected countries.
- Support small-scale farmers to access microfinance schemes and integrate into domestic and international value chains.
- Reform food subsidies, school feeding and other support programmes to expand nutritious dietary options and adopt regulations constraining the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and young people.
- Establish financing mechanisms, including bonds, that focus on sustainable agriculture to attract impact investors interested in both financial and positive social and environmental returns.
- Diversify trade partners to hedge against price fluctuations and integrate agriculture in preferential trade agreements to improve interregional food trade.
- Develop regional food security data and information and an early warning system to monitor food security across the region and guide national and regional policies.



©Diya/stock.adobe.com

## B. The policy landscape for SDG 2

Arab Governments, like all others, have an obligation to secure food for their populations. Food is a human right and a vital element of the universal “right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being”.<sup>1</sup> While in the region, only **Egypt** has explicitly enshrined the right to food in its Constitution, all countries have policies that support food security in all dimensions.<sup>2,3</sup>

The broad policy thrust for countries continues to be securing food availability and affordable access to nutritious food, driven by the need to shield their populations from food shortages and price hikes. All countries are dependent on food imports, to varying extents, and many struggle to realize sufficient export revenues to sustain these imports. Trade imbalances are an ongoing challenge heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Regardless of climatic conditions and limitations in terms of arable land and water resources, Governments continue to consider local food production a policy priority. Land degradation, water scarcity and climate change impacts such as rainfall variability are markedly growing concerns across the region.

## Food systems transformation: a growing movement to accelerate the SDGs

The Food Systems Summit 2021 and related 2023 stocktaking, held within the framework of the Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025), brought global attention to the sustainability of food systems and their impacts on the health of people, the planet and economies.

By mid-2023, 20 Arab countries had convened national multi-stakeholder dialogues as part of the Summit process. Eleven articulated national pathways with concrete measures to achieve sustainable food systems by 2030.<sup>a</sup> A preliminary analysis of these pathways found a unanimous focus on policy and regulation, better data and human resource capacities as key means of implementation.<sup>b</sup> The extent to which these measures will be implemented has yet to be seen. In **Egypt**, for example, national dialogues developed a vision for a transition to a sustainable food system; establishment of an intergovernmental coordination body to monitor implementation should be a next step.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> All Arab countries except Libya and the State of Palestine. The 11 countries with national pathways are: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, the Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. See [Member State Dialogue Convenors and Pathways](#) in the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub website.

<sup>b</sup> Analysis provided through the [United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub](#).

<sup>c</sup> FAO, CIHEAM and UfM, 2021.

Achieving SDG 2 in the region is closely linked with the reduction of poverty (SDG 1), and, by extension, with job creation and income growth (SDG 8), the achievement of peace (SDG 16) and the facilitation of global trade (SDG 17). Food production is also closely linked to advancements in climate change adaptation (SDG 13), water management (SDG 6), fisheries management (SDG 14) and land restoration (SDG 15).

While the policy mix for achieving SDG 2 varies across countries, depending on national contexts and available resources, several **common trends** can be observed. These transcend income and geographic subgroupings. For more on food security policies related to fisheries and aquaculture, see the chapter on SDG 14.

◆ **Most Arab countries maintain high levels of food trade protection to protect and promote domestic agriculture and reduce reliance on imports, among other objectives.** While a few countries, such as **Jordan** and **Morocco**, cut tariffs on imported food from 2010 to 2019, the average applied tariff for the region over the same period increased markedly,<sup>4</sup> negatively affecting the affordability of a diversified and healthy diet. Most countries impose a high number of non-tariff restrictions, especially sanitary and phytosanitary measures, notably in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, followed by some North African countries. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most Arab countries lowered tariff and non-tariff barriers to food trade, but measures were temporary.

◆ **All countries have some form of public stockholding policy through which they purchase, store and distribute selected strategic crops to smooth seasonal and year-to-year fluctuations.** Public stocks are replenished through imports and the purchase of domestic production. A positive shift in recent years has been towards local purchasing and supplying at market prices rather than fixed ones, as in **Egypt** and **Jordan**.



In addition to increasing food costs and limiting consumer choice, high tariffs on imported food have in some cases lowered the efficiency and competitiveness of local agriculture. They have stifled incentives for local producers to enhance productivity and quality.

In addition to being costly to maintain, stockholding policies based on purchasing domestic production, typically cereals, at guaranteed, above-market prices have in some cases skewed national production towards these products at the expense of others, resulting in less diversified diets.

◆ **Food subsidy programmes, common across the region, are undergoing significant reforms to reduce their fiscal burden.** Despite the political sensitivity of the issue, with access to basic foods at low prices seen as an entitlement, some Gulf Cooperation Council countries, such as **Saudi Arabia**, have phased out food subsidies. Middle-income countries, including **Egypt** and **Jordan**, have shifted from generalized to targeted food subsidies in the form of social protection programmes, using smart card systems. For an in-depth analysis of social protection policies, see the chapter on SDG 1.

◆ **Most countries consider agriculture a key sector for national development. They continue to seek some level of food self-sufficiency in strategic crops by increasing agricultural production.** A positive development in several countries has been greater consideration of the sustainability of scarce natural resources, notably land and water. In the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, this has translated into investments in technology-driven agricultural solutions. In the middle-income countries, more comprehensive agricultural development policies aim at increasing agricultural productivity<sup>5</sup> and rationalizing irrigation water use. Both groups of countries are investing in improved transport, storage and conservation infrastructure, including cold chains, with a focus on reducing pre-market losses. For an in-depth analysis of food loss and waste policy measures, see the chapter on SDG 12.

◆ **Comprehensive, multisectoral nutrition policies are starting to emerge, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council and middle-income countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Qatar.** Traditionally, nutrition has received less attention relative to other food security dimensions. Most countries have focused on preventing micronutrient deficiencies among women and children through mandatory fortification of wheat, milk, salt and other staples. Several countries have enacted policies to encourage breastfeeding, including laws to increase the duration of paid maternity leave and institute baby-friendly workplaces. In addition to mandatory nutritional food labelling, policies and regulations limiting the consumption of unhealthy foods rich in trans-fatty acids, salt and sugar are emerging across the region.

◆ **Most countries have established school feeding programmes, although only around a third have framework national policies.** In 2018, school feeding benefited up to 85 per cent of school-enrolled children in the **United Arab Emirates**, 77 per cent in **Egypt** and 63 per cent in the **Syrian Arab Republic**.<sup>6</sup> Programmes in countries in conflict are heavily supported by international donors. Most middle-income countries have a dedicated national budget line for school feeding. Programmes are typically designed to secure adequate calorie intake from staple foods. In some countries, health policies have modified food offered to students in public schools to support more balanced, low-fat diets. Private schools have yet to follow suit.

In the absence of well-designed, targeted social protection programmes and the right institutions to effectively implement them, eliminating food subsidies could leave vulnerable households unprotected. This could lead to increased food insecurity and social unrest.

Weakly designed food subsidy programmes have unintentionally contributed to obesity by encouraging the consumption of unhealthy, high-calorie foods.

There is a need to unlock the potential of rain-fed agricultural systems. Further high-return investments in small irrigation systems and water harvesting could widen the adoption of supplementary irrigation.

While nutrition policies exist in most countries, they are not always enforced and adequately implemented. Very few countries have adopted policies limiting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children. Better attention must be paid to food labelling, especially fat and sugar content. While early childhood nutrition is crucial for proper child development, this area still lacks concrete actions.

The region has yet to see multifaceted policies that address the underlying determinants of malnutrition.

School feeding programmes in some countries do not cover pre-primary and lower secondary schools. Countries generally also fail to complement these with other school programmes to improve the health of children and adolescents.



## C. Policy trends by subregion

### 1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Gulf Cooperation Council countries are among the most food secure in the region. They have the highest dependency on food imports, with 85 per cent of food being imported, and are highly subject to the vagaries of global markets. Natural climatic conditions and water scarcity, compounded by climate change impacts, limit agricultural production. **Saudi Arabia** is the largest food producer among the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, accounting for over two thirds of total Gulf Cooperation Council production.<sup>7</sup>



◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have established high-level political oversight bodies to ensure the stable procurement of food as a matter of national security.** For example, the **United Arab Emirates** in 2020 established the Emirates Food Security Council. Involving representatives of multiple concerned ministries, the Council sets policy and monitors food security risks.<sup>8</sup> The strategic inventory management and control system for food and consumer goods of **Qatar** is a public-private endeavour launched in 2018 to monitor and control the strategic inventory of food.<sup>9</sup>

◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries continue to invest in agriculture overseas, including through investment subsidies and guarantees, and the establishment of dedicated sovereign funds.** Examples of prominent sovereign funds investing in food production include the Saudi Agricultural and Livestock Investment Company,<sup>10</sup> which is owned by the Public Investment Fund and invests in large-scale agribusiness conglomerates focused on cereal, livestock, dairy and fisheries. In the **United Arab Emirates**, ADQ<sup>11</sup> invests in agribusinesses abroad and in agricultural technology solutions to expand local food production, in line with the country's National Food Security Strategy 2051.<sup>12</sup> The **Qatar** Investment Authority invests in local and international food and agribusiness sectors through a subsidiary, Hassad Food.<sup>13</sup>

Investments in agriculture overseas raise numerous concerns, particularly over land and water grabbing, resource competition, a lack of sustainability and sociocultural and geopolitical complexities. It is unclear if such investments have been effective in ensuring food security in crises. For example, during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian Federation restricted its food exports, including those produced on foreign-owned land. Alternative solutions could include the establishment of a few companies to acquire food globally at the regional (or subregional) level to ensure economies of scale and the ability to compete with the multinationals dominating global food markets. Overseas investments could be perceived as acceptable when no viable alternatives exist. They should be undertaken with a win-win perspective that caters to the needs and development objectives of local populations.

◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are seeking to increase production within environmental limits, leveraging smart agricultural technologies** to help optimize water use and curtail post-harvest losses. This can ensure year-round yields and help in moving Gulf Cooperation Council economies away from oil and gas. Food production using these technologies is still limited and costly, however. Investments in high-tech greenhouses, vertical farms, hydroponics and other water-conserving methods to produce fruits and vegetables have taken place in **Kuwait, Oman** and the **United Arab Emirates**. **Kuwait** and the **United Arab Emirates** are conducting advanced research on drought- and saline-tolerant crop varieties.<sup>14</sup>

◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries stand out in terms of more advanced nutrition policies to reduce the consumption of sugar, salt and saturated fats, including through taxes and legislation aimed at the reformulation of foods and beverages.** By 2020, all Gulf Cooperation Council countries had introduced taxes on soft drinks and other sugar-sweetened beverages (such as a 50 per cent tax on carbonated drinks and 100 per cent tax on energy drinks), resulting in marked decreases in purchases.<sup>15</sup> **Qatar** has adopted comprehensive policy measures on nutrition policy dietary guidelines, food labelling standards, regulations constraining the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children, and media campaigns and counselling on healthy diets and nutrition.<sup>16</sup>

◆ **To guarantee the safety of imported food, Gulf Cooperation Council countries have reformed their food safety laws and adopted advanced food quality control systems while increasing subregional coordination.** The **United Arab Emirates** was among the early regional adopters of food quality assurance systems such as hazard analysis and critical control points, and in 2013 developed a cold chain transportation standard.<sup>17</sup> Subregional bodies active on these issues include the Gulf Standardization Organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council Committee for Food Safety and the Gulf Rapid Alert System for Food.

## 2. Arab middle-income countries

Most Arab middle-income countries have a relatively large agriculture sector. The agriculture, forestry and fishing value added as a percentage of GDP was between 10 and 11 per cent in **Algeria, Egypt, Morocco** and **Tunisia** in 2022.<sup>18</sup> Small farmers contribute a significant share of agricultural production in most of these countries.

Middle-income countries are highly exposed to hydrometeorological hazards, such as floods, heat waves, droughts and wildfires, that threaten food production. The occurrence of such events in the region has tripled, compared to a doubling worldwide.<sup>19</sup> While rain-fed agriculture continues to be the dominant mode of agricultural production, irrigation is a major water user.

◆ **Middle-income countries are seeking to modernize agriculture through policies to diversify production, keeping sustainability and resilience in mind.** Policies aim to increase contributions to economic development and job creation through high-value, export-oriented agriculture, and frameworks that incentivize private sector investments in agribusinesses and food processing. For example, the [Jordan National Food Security Strategy 2021-2030](#) plans to maximize the potential of local food production by adopting improved agricultural practices and modern technologies for increased productivity and efficient use of limited natural resources. The [Morocco Generation Green 2020-2030](#) is oriented towards creating a new generation of young entrepreneurs in agriculture, such as by connecting 2 million farmers to digital platforms that enable the optimization of irrigation and fertilizer use. Since 2009, the Agricultural and Rural Renewal Programme of **Algeria** has helped to incentivize farmers and remove barriers to foreign ownership and equipment imports. This has boosted the production of staple and higher-margin crops and reduced dependence on food imports.<sup>20</sup>

Some middle-income countries demonstrate a positive link between agricultural modernization programmes and integrated rural development as well as the reduction of rural poverty and social exclusion. Such programmes have in other cases failed to incorporate small traditional farmers into profitable value chains and maintained prevailing divides in rural areas. As a result, a dual system has emerged with high-value, export-oriented production on one side and low-yield, traditional small-scale farming on the other. Inclusive dialogue and consensus-building are needed to ensure that policies make the best use of available resources and include diverse perspectives from across societies. Agricultural modernization programmes are more impactful when associated with comprehensive agricultural policies that properly regulate inputs and outputs, and that focus on targeting farming communities at large to achieve optimal outcomes.



◆ **Most middle-income countries continue to support smallholder farmers and cooperatives**, typically with subsidies for agricultural inputs, including seeds, fertilizer, pesticides and animal feed. Small farmers also benefit from extension services promoting improved, yield-boosting techniques and the production of high-value crops for export. For example, **Algeria** increased fertilizer subsidies from 20 to 50 per cent as part of its economic recovery and renewal programme.<sup>21</sup> The Haya Karima (Decent Life) project in **Egypt**, launched in 2021 to reduce rural poverty, has established agricultural service centres and irrigation expansion projects benefiting small farmers.<sup>22</sup>

A rollback in support for small farmers has taken place in some countries, however, contributing to a deterioration in rural livelihoods. Spending on small farmer support remains much less than spending on food subsidies.

Unless properly designed, subsidy policies supporting farmers may result in helping wealthier landowners who do not need assistance.



©littlewolf1989/stock.adobe.com

◆ **Improving irrigation water efficiency is a policy priority in several middle-income countries.** Traditionally, the focus has been on increasing supplies, including through water reuse, and reducing wastage, such as through drip irrigation. Other efforts have emphasized decentralized and inclusive irrigation water management. Some countries have increased irrigation water prices to recover water provision costs and reflect water scarcity and opportunity costs. Further investments are needed in supplementary irrigation for rain-fed systems, considering the impacts of climate change. For example, the National Water Plan 2020-2050 in **Morocco** is a long-term integrated water resource management plan that seeks the rational use of water resources in irrigation.<sup>23</sup> Water users' associations in **Egypt** play a major role in decision-making and have helped optimize the operation of irrigation canals by replacing individual farmer pumping with more efficient collective single-point pumping.<sup>24</sup> The National Plan for Sustainable Agriculture 2022-2025 of **Jordan** includes projects to improve efficiency in irrigation water use.<sup>25</sup>

◆ **Some middle-income countries have begun to strengthen the resilience of agricultural systems against climate disasters by incorporating climate-smart irrigation and other measures in their nationally determined contributions.** There is still a gap, however, in the comprehensiveness of climate resilience strategies and their operationalization through appropriate laws and institutional changes, such as the creation of dedicated authorities. Insufficient access to finance and to investments in climate-smart agriculture remains a barrier. In areas with rain-fed agriculture, farmers are left with limited coping options while confronting multiple vulnerabilities. **Tunisia** is undertaking Water 2050 prospective studies to assess the impacts of climate change on food security, the results of which will inform the development of the National Plan for the Adaptation of Tunisian Agriculture to Climate Change.<sup>26</sup> For an analysis of climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction policies, see the chapters on SDGs 11 and 13.

◆ **Middle-income countries have policies discouraging unhealthy foods, but implementation issues persist. Awareness lags, particularly in relation to children and young people, and due to a lack of appropriate labelling and marketing campaigns.** Maghreb countries have been more successful at curbing obesity among children compared to those in the Mashreq. National policies discouraging the consumption of foods rich in saturated fatty and trans-fatty acids are in place in **Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia**. **Morocco** has a policy limiting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and a strategy

to combat childhood obesity.<sup>27</sup> Both **Morocco** and **Tunisia** have a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages.

### 3. Arab least developed countries

Undernourishment in the Arab least developed countries is a chronic problem, affecting 4 out of every 10 people in 2021. More than 5 million stunted children reside in these countries. The prevalence of stunting among children under age 5 was 31.2 per cent in 2022.

Agriculture is significant to economies and livelihoods in most of the least developed countries. In the **Comoros**, it contributes more than a third of GDP (35.5 per cent) and a third of total employment (34 per cent). In **Somalia**, a clear outlier in the region, agriculture contributed 52 per cent of GDP, 80 per cent of employment and 90 per cent of exports in 2019. At the same time, agricultural lands in the least developed countries are degrading fast due to overgrazing, deforestation and poor agronomic practices, which increases vulnerability to climate change effects.

◆ **Food security policies in the least developed countries are largely driven by humanitarian aid and fall mostly in the realm of social assistance.** They help to meet short-term needs without necessarily resolving structural problems. In **Djibouti**, for instance, access to food is addressed through the distribution of food and coupons, whereas policies to develop the agriculture sector and improve its resilience to successive drought waves are underdeveloped.

◆ **A few of the least developed countries are elaborating comprehensive policies to develop and modernize agriculture by giving greater consideration to agroclimatic conditions and export opportunities.** Where good policies for promoting food security exist, implementation is hampered by poor coordination and limited national capacities. The **Comoros** recently adopted a value chain and rural agricultural entrepreneurship approach to food security, which constitutes one of the pillars of its Comoros Emerging Plan (Plan Comores Emergent 2020-2030). This policy accompanies the first-ever agricultural investment plan.<sup>28</sup> Within the frame of a longer-term vision for poverty reduction, food security and rural development, **Mauritania** adopted a National Plan for Agricultural Development (2015-2025)<sup>29</sup> with a focus on the intensification and diversification of irrigated agriculture to address declining rainfall. Another priority entails building the capacities of the public service and food producers.

### 4. Arab countries in conflict

Instability results in dire food insecurity due to disruptions in supply chains, damaged infrastructure, influxes of refugees and internally displaced persons, and limited capabilities to support them. Refugees and internally displaced persons are at a particularly increased risk of food insecurity as they depend on food aid. Their diets might be monotonous and not meet full micronutrient needs, increasing health problems. The humanitarian crisis in **Yemen** is the world's worst, with unprecedented levels of poverty and hunger.

◆ **Food security policymaking in countries in conflict is difficult and ineffective due to macro conditions, including weak governance, economic collapse, destruction of infrastructure and extremely strained government budgets, among others.** A humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach has yet to be put into practice, where food aid is carefully balanced with other forms of assistance, including nutrition education services, support to sustainable and resilient agricultural production, and institutional development. Nutrition policies that encourage consumption of traditional locally produced food are usually effective in such contexts. While humanitarian relief interventions have been instrumental in curbing food insecurity in the short term, they are ineffective in tackling structural problems, as is the case in **Yemen**.



©akram.alrasny/stock.adobe.com

In **Palestine**, where over a third of the population was in need of food assistance prior to the onset of the war on Gaza in October 2023,<sup>30</sup> food insecurity cannot be seen as external to the conflict. Israel's control over water resources and economic blockages is forcing a dependence on Israeli food imports. In **Iraq**, the State is involved closely in the management of food systems through a multitude of decades-old institutions and programmes that suffer from weak human and financial capacities, leaving the population highly vulnerable to food insecurity.<sup>31</sup>

◆ **Donor-funded projects that focus on building adaptive agricultural capacities in conflict contexts are promising.** Countries could gain from scaling them up at the policy level. In conflict situations where market infrastructure falls apart, the focus must shift towards local production practices necessitating few inputs. While it is hard to innovate and encourage sophisticated technology in conflict situations, some donor-funded projects have

succeeded in enhancing technology use for more resilient food production. In the **Sudan**, women benefited from an innovative World Food Programme hydroponics project that supported food-insecure communities to grow plants without needing soil or excess water. This helped to address basic needs and improve livelihoods.<sup>32</sup>

◆ **Where food security policies exist, they tend to mirror conflict-related imbalances and divisions, and miss opportunities to build social cohesion.** In the **Syrian Arab Republic**, for instance, the official Government in 2020 produced its post-war strategic vision for 2030,<sup>33</sup> connecting a short-term humanitarian perspective and development. The plan makes agriculture a high priority for post-war development, focusing on its potential for boosting economic growth, addressing regional disparities and promoting women's empowerment. It is unclear, however, if and how the plan would address inequalities, which it acknowledges have fuelled the war.

## D. Policies to leave no one behind

Inequalities in access to food mirror inequalities in income: the hungry and malnourished are often the poor. As such, SDG 2 policies that leave no one behind cannot be dissociated from policies targeting the poor.




In the same vein, SDG 2 policies to leave no one behind are closely intertwined with policies targeting rural populations, for a number of reasons. Rural areas have historically been neglected and remain underdeveloped relative to urban settings.<sup>34</sup> Around 34 per cent of the rural population in Arab countries is poor. Poverty can be aggravated when combined with other sources of vulnerability, as is the case for women-headed households, landless smallholder farmers and populations in areas with increased climate vulnerabilities.<sup>35</sup> Rural access to water, sanitation and electricity – all essentials for food production and safe food consumption – lags behind access in urban areas.<sup>36</sup> Vulnerable employment is twice as prevalent in rural areas at 38 per cent compared to 15 per cent in urban areas.<sup>37</sup> All these factors hinder the development of a strong and productive agriculture sector.

The policy examples that follow should be read in conjunction with examples in other chapters that highlight policies supporting poor and rural populations across various aspects of development.



Table 2.1

## Examples of food security policies to leave no one behind

Groups at risk of being left behind	Examples of policies from the region to leave no one behind
 <p><b>Small-scale and traditional farmers</b> often lack the economic and technical means to become part of a modernized agriculture sector and value chains. They are typically more vulnerable to climate change as they mostly practice rain-fed agriculture.</p>	<p>The Green <b>Morocco</b> Plan has an entire pillar aimed at promoting partnerships between smallholder farmers and private sector investors. Smallholders bring land and farming experience while private investors facilitate access to profitable value chains.</p> <p>In 2019, <b>Saudi Arabia</b> initiated a programme to help small farmers switch to organic farming as part of a goal to bolster organic output by 300 per cent by 2030.</p> <p>In 2019, <b>Tunisia</b> operationalized a fund to compensate farmers for damages caused by natural disasters.</p> <p>The Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems designation can help preserve traditional agricultural practices adapted to prevailing climate changes and risks. In 2023, nine designations were registered in five countries: one in <b>Algeria</b>, one in <b>Egypt</b>, three in <b>Morocco</b>, three in <b>Tunisia</b> and one in the <b>United Arab Emirates</b>.<sup>a</sup></p>
 <p><b>Women farmers</b> are at a particular disadvantage due to prevailing discriminatory gender norms. The division of labour in agriculture is unfair to women, who perform the most tedious, labour-intensive tasks.</p>	<p>In <b>Morocco</b>, inheritance laws and customs related to communal lands, termed <i>soulaliyate</i>, have precluded women from owning and controlling these typically agricultural properties. To resolve this situation, <b>Morocco</b> in 2019 adopted law number 62-17 on the management of <i>soulaliyate</i> communal lands. The law grants women and men equal rights in access to this land.<sup>b</sup></p>
 <p><b>Children and women</b> have high malnutrition rates. Deficient policies include food subsidies and school feeding programmes that have promoted high-calorie foods, creating a double burden of undernutrition and obesity, particularly among children and women.</p>	<p>The <b>United Arab Emirates</b> launched a National Nutrition Strategy 2022-2030 and associated multidisciplinary National Programme to Combat Obesity in Children and Adolescents. The Ministry of Health and Prevention launched the Mutabah online system to collect data on obesity and extra weight among school students.<sup>c</sup></p>
 <p><b>Refugees and internally displaced persons</b> are at an increased risk of food insecurity. They are highly dependent on food aid, and their diets may not meet their full nutritional needs. The food security status of refugees depends on existing national policies in host countries.<sup>d</sup></p>	<p><b>Lebanon</b> extended social assistance provided through the National Poverty Targeting Program to include food assistance via an electronic food voucher system being implemented by the World Food Programme (WFP) for a segment of Syrian refugees.<sup>e</sup></p> <p>The Policy Framework on Displacement of <b>Somalia</b> requires authorities and other actors to assist and protect internally displaced persons in emergency situations by addressing their needs for food and supporting their voluntary return with a return package that includes food.<sup>f</sup></p>

<sup>a</sup> See FAO on [Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems in the Near East and North Africa](#).

<sup>b</sup> See Morocco, [Voluntary National Review 2020](#).

<sup>c</sup> United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Health and Prevention, 2022.

<sup>d</sup> ESCWA, Pathfinders and WFP, 2023.

<sup>e</sup> For more on the National Poverty Targeting Program, see [About Us](#).

<sup>f</sup> See the [Policy Framework on Displacement Within Somalia](#).

## E. The financing landscape

Amid fiscal limitations, Arab countries face challenges in balancing priorities between spending to meet daily needs through food imports and stockholding and consumer food subsidies, and making high-return, long-term investments in agricultural development to enhance outputs, including through farmer subsidies.

### 1. Trends in spending on food imports and consumer subsidies

In 2021, **food imports** constituted 12 per cent of the region's total merchandise imports, higher than the world average of 8 per cent.<sup>38</sup> The proportion was highest in the least developed and conflict-affected countries (for example, 34 per cent in **Palestine** and 39 per cent in **Yemen**). In the least developed countries, the value of food imports surpasses that of total merchandise exports, meaning that these countries cannot secure the foreign currency needed to import food. The COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine have sizeably increased food import and production bills.

**Food subsidies** targeting consumers outweigh subsidies to farmers. For example, **Egypt** allocated \$4.19 billion in 2015-2016 for food support, more than 10 times the support to farmers, which amounted to \$368 million.<sup>39</sup> A trend in some countries, notably middle-income countries, is towards rationalizing food subsidies through improved targeting.

Available data on national budget expenditures on **school feeding programmes** show a range between \$1 million and \$90 million (table 2.2). If expenditures are considered against GDP, the financial burden on the Government is clearly higher for countries such as **Djibouti** than for **Egypt** or **Iraq**, for example. Per child cost is highly variable, from as low as \$5 in **Egypt** to \$328 in **Djibouti**, which could signal inefficiencies in internationally supported programmes. In 2020, five Arab countries had state budget lines dedicated to school feeding (**Egypt**, **Iraq**, **Mauritania**, the **Sudan** and **Tunisia**).

**Debt swaps** are being used to finance nutrition programmes. For example, the WFP raised funding to implement nutrition programmes through debt swaps amounting to \$18 million in **Egypt** and \$2 million in **Mauritania**.<sup>40</sup>

**Taxation on unhealthy foods** can generate revenue for nutrition programmes. Taxes on sugar-sweetened drinks, which are generally associated with obesity among children and type 2 diabetes, have been implemented in **Bahrain**, **Morocco**, **Oman**, **Qatar**, **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**.

**Table 2.2**  
National budget expenditures on school feeding programmes

Country	Expenditures (dollars)	Reporting year
<b>Morocco</b>	90,000,000	2013
<b>Egypt</b>	55,368,086	2020
<b>Tunisia</b>	26,551,000	2020
<b>Iraq</b>	17,000,000	2020
<b>Jordan</b>	7,060,000	2013
<b>Sudan</b>	4,943,994	2020
<b>Djibouti</b>	959,350	2013

Source: WFP, 2020.

### 2. Trends in spending on agriculture

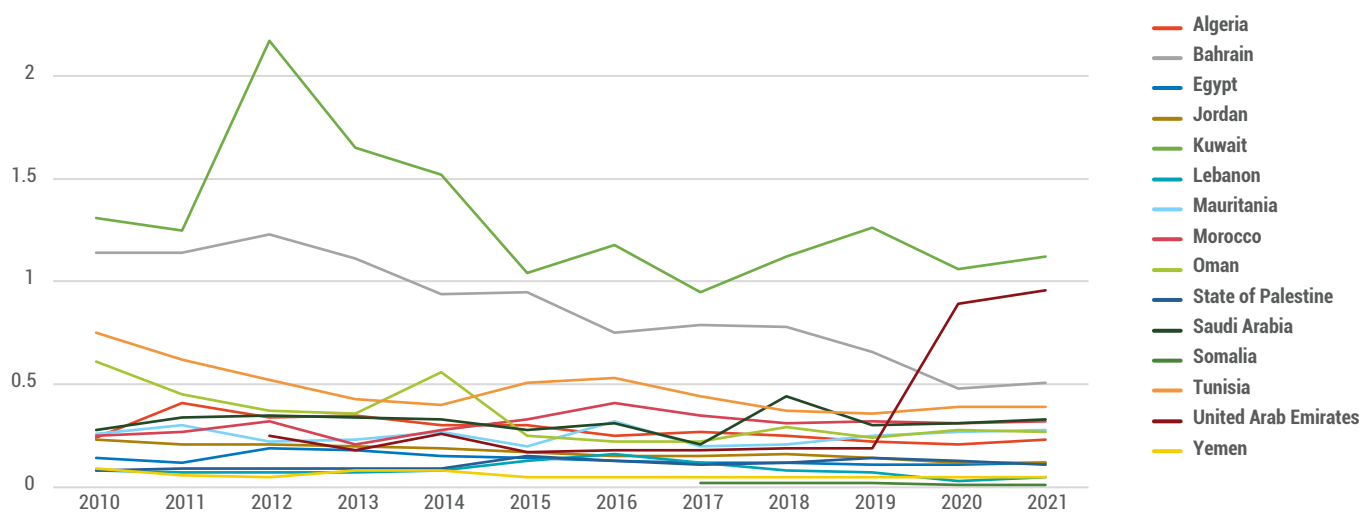
**The role of agriculture in the economies of the region is shrinking.** Since the 1990s, the share of the sector in regional GDP has continued to decline, reaching a mere 5 per cent in 2021. Similarly, **employment in agriculture** has been steadily dropping, accounting for 18 per cent of total employment in 2019, half the 1990 value. Compensatory gains in labour productivity are evident, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Agriculture value added per worker has steadily increased in the region, doubling between 1995 and 2019.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, investments in agriculture are low and not commensurate with the sector's share of the economy. The **agricultural orientation index**, which reflects the share of government expenditure on the sector relative to its contribution to GDP, is indicative (figure 2.1). In 2021, almost all countries in the region with available data had an index value less than or equal to 0.5 (except for **Kuwait** at 1.21, the highest score in the region, and the

**United Arab Emirates** at 0.96). This meant that agriculture was receiving a lower share of government expenditure relative to its contribution to GDP. The lowest value was in **Somalia**, where the contribution of agriculture to GDP is the highest in the region at about 53 per cent. Countries with a low score could in principle benefit from increased spending on agriculture.

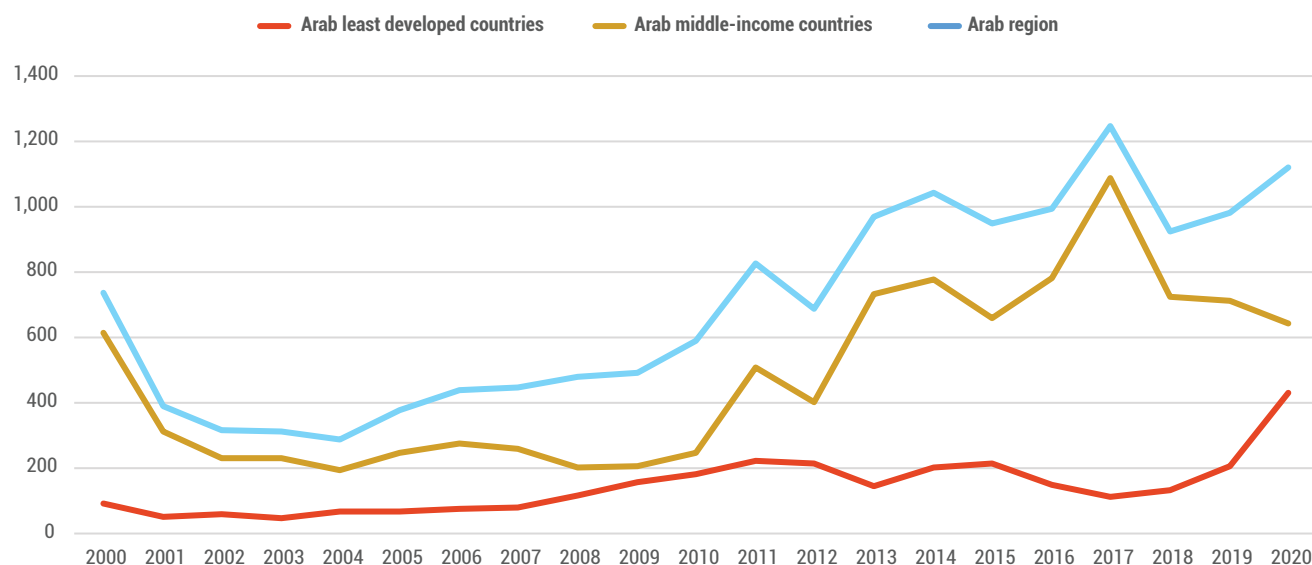
Total official flows into agriculture are generally on the rise. In 2020, the Arab region received \$1.1 billion in official development assistance for agriculture, compared to \$0.7 billion in 2000. Arab middle-income countries are the largest recipients. Support to the least developed countries has picked up since 2017<sup>42</sup> (figure 2.2).

**Figure 2.1**  
Agricultural orientation index scores for government expenditure, 2010 to 2021



Source: United Nations Global SDG Database, accessed on 13 December 2023.

**Figure 2.2**  
Official development assistance provided for agriculture, 2000 to 2020 (Constant dollars, millions)



Source: ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, accessed on 21 August 2023.

Additional investments to enhance agricultural outputs in selected Arab countries could be as high as \$63.2 billion in Iraq, \$45.5 in Algeria and \$43.2 in Morocco (table 2.3).

Several Arab countries are seeking to attract private sector domestic and foreign investments in agriculture and agrifood systems by enhancing the business and regulatory

environment and developing basic infrastructure. **Morocco** is a leading example, starting with its Green Morocco Plan and Generation Green. Over a 10-year period (2008 to 2018), **Morocco** secured an investment of 104 billion dirhams,<sup>43</sup> with 40 per cent from public investment and 60 per cent from private investment. Each dirham of government support generated 2.85 dirhams in private investment.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 2.3**  
SDG 2 costing in selected Arab countries

Country	Additional investments to enhance agricultural outputs (billions of dollars)	Reference document
Iraq	63.2	Iraq Vision 2030
Algeria	45.5	Algeria National Vision 2030
Morocco	43.2	Morocco Generation Green 2020-2030
Egypt	18	Egypt Sustainable Agricultural Development Strategy
Oman	13	Oman Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy towards 2040
Lebanon	5.5	Lebanon Agricultural Strategy
Tunisia	4.8	Tunisia Development Plan
Jordan	0.5	Jordan Economic Growth Plan

Source: ESCWA, Arab Financing for Development Gateway, accessed on 12 February 2023.





## F. Regional dimensions

Strengthening regional cooperation among Arab countries could ease fiscal burdens and sustain food security, particularly during shocks. Some examples include the following.

- **Intraregional trade in food and agricultural inputs:** The region has yet to harness the full potential of regional and bilateral trade arrangements and agreements, which have not yet resulted in any visible increase in regional trade in food and agricultural inputs. Presently, intraregional trade in all goods (including food) represents a mere 10 per cent of total trade. Among the barriers to food trade are food safety considerations, which could be addressed through the adoption and enforcement of common good agricultural standards and practices.<sup>45</sup> The Arab Food Safety Initiative for Trade Facilitation, recently introduced by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization in partnership with numerous national Arab food safety authorities, regional organizations and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), could help in that respect.
- **Regional food security data, information and an early warning system:** An evident data challenge hinders adequate monitoring and tracking of food security policy impacts in the region. Countries could benefit from jointly upscaling monitoring, tracking and reporting on anomalies in food supplies to allow evidence-based adjustments. A dedicated regional network could facilitate exchanges of experiences, lessons learned and evidence to build capacities for anticipatory action against natural hazards and other shocks to food systems.<sup>46</sup> Such a system exists, for example, under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since 2002, the ASEAN Food Security Information System<sup>47</sup> has taken multiple actions to build the capacity of member countries to collect reliable food security statistics and forecast agricultural production; share data and information related to food security required for policy planning and implementation; and enhance collaborative efforts to advance food security.
- **Regional strategic food reserves:** Several countries lack the capacities and financial means to individually sustain strategic food reserves, and could collectively benefit from regional or subregional strategic food reserves with cost-sharing arrangements.<sup>48</sup> ASEAN member countries since 1979 have had an agreement to coordinate their national food stocks to maintain a minimum level of strategic crops (mainly rice) to meet emergency requirements.<sup>49</sup> The successful operation of such a mechanism partly depends on the availability of a regional data and information centre.
- **Regional nutrition coordination mechanisms:** Arab countries could benefit from a regional nutrition coordination mechanism to accelerate actions to address maternal and child undernutrition.

Under the League of Arab States' Subcommittee on Ending Hunger in the Arab Region, the United Nations and regional partners developed the Arab Regional Strategic Framework and Action Plan for Zero Hunger in 2021. It provides state and non-state actors with a common framework for allocating resources, monitoring progress and ensuring accountability. The framework covers seven priority areas for the Arab region, namely: agriculture and water productivity; rural infrastructure and food value chains; social protection programmes; healthier, more affordable and more sustainable diets; resilient agriculture; conflict mitigation; and trade facilitation, import diversification and the functioning of agriculture-related markets. Adoption of the framework is underway.







## References

---

- Algeria Invest (2022). [Food Security: Agricultural Performance Puts Algeria on the Right Track](#). 17 October.
- Al-Jawaldeh, A., and R. Megally (2021). [Impact Evaluation of Soft Drink Taxes as Part of Nutrition Policies in Gulf Cooperation Council Countries](#). F1000Research.
- Banerjee, and others (2014). [Natural disasters in the Middle East and North Africa: a regional overview](#). World Bank Group. Working Paper, No. 81658.
- Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) (2018). [Policy Briefs on Food Security Issues in the Arab Region](#).
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2020). [The National Development Program for Post-War Syria: Syria Strategic Plan 2030](#). May 2020.
- ESCWA, Pathfinders, and World Food Programme (WFP) (2023). [Inequality in the Arab Region: Food Insecurity Fuels Inequality](#).
- Egypt Today (2023). [In Figures: What Did Haya Karima Achieve So Far in Upper Egypt?](#). 20 February.
- Fathallah, H. (2020). [Iraq's Governance Crisis and Food Insecurity](#). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2020). [Priorities for Food and Agriculture in the Near East and North Africa Region 2020-2030](#). Background Paper for the Thirty-fifth FAO Regional Conference for the Near East. Cairo.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2022). [Addressing Food Security Challenges Faced by the Near East and North Africa Region Due to the Ukraine Crisis: Regional Overview](#). Cairo.
- FAO, and others (2020). [Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in the Near East and North Africa 2019 – Rethinking Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition](#).
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2023). [NENA Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition: Trade as an Enabler for Food Security and Nutrition](#).
- FAO, International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM), and Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) (2021). [Food Systems Transformation – Processes and Pathways in the Mediterranean: A Stocktaking Exercise](#). Rome: FAO.
- Gulf Times (2018). [New Inventory Management System Launched](#). 14 June.
- Moroccan National Portal (2019). [Head of Government: 2020-2050 National Water Plan, Roadmap to Face Challenges for Next 30 Years](#). 25 December 2019.
- Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and WFP (2022). [Anticipatory Action in the MENA Region: State of Play and Accelerating Action](#).
- Oxford Business Group (2022). [Agri-tech and Food Security in the GCC: COVID-19 Response Report](#).
- Popovska, B. (2019). [Growing Plants Without Soil in Sudan](#). 22 July. Rome: WFP.
- United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Health and Prevention (2022). [MoHAP to Develop New Plan for the National Programme to Combat Obesity in Children and Adolescents](#). 6 April.
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2022). [West Bank and Gaza – Complex Emergency](#). Fact Sheet #3, fiscal year 2022.
- WFP (2020). [State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020](#). Rome: WFP.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2021). [Debt-for-Food Swaps](#). Debt Swap Task Force.
- World Trade Organization (WTO) (2018). [Trade Policy Review: Report by the Secretariat – Egypt](#).