



# Food security and social justice: the need for a nexus approach



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The present policy brief builds on the findings of an online webinar organized by ESCWA and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy, held on 20 October 2021.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted food supply chains, hurt large- and small-scale producers, and stymied the activities of individual and community farmers. Global responses, including the recent Food Systems Summit, have highlighted the need to reform food systems. They have also underscored the importance of human rights and equity in guaranteeing the right to food and food justice for community farmers, small individual producers, particularly women farmers, fisher folk and peasants.

Food system inefficiencies in the Arab region are rooted in unequal access to scarce resources, structural barriers to unfettered participation of small-scale producers and exclusionary policies. Addressing food insecurity without



tackling issues of access, imbalance of power relations in food value chains and specific vulnerabilities to exclusion and discrimination, risks aggravating existing inequalities. This can only be done through a commitment to upholding the right to food, food justice and food sovereignty (R2F-FJ-FS) nexus.

The right to food is a fundamental human right that emphasizes the right of people to feed themselves in dignity. Food justice is concerned with universal, just and equitable food systems that address structural barriers to healthy and sustainable food for all. Food sovereignty is a people-centred approach acknowledging that food system powers remain with farmers for whom farming is both a way of life and a means of producing food,<sup>1</sup> thus shifting from the commodification of food to valuing indigenous knowledge and practice. These three elements are at the heart of policies to ensure food security.

## Social justice and food security in the Arab region

Food justice and food sovereignty require land ownership and control of resources that determine the agency of farmers, and their ability to influence decisions pertaining to their livelihood. In the Arab region, this issue is characterized by severe structural inequalities, since almost 85 per cent of land holdings are farmed by smallholders,<sup>2</sup> who contribute about 80 per cent of total agricultural production. However, family farms own a meagre 25 per cent of arable land. This implies that most farmers are labourers or tenant farmers who do not have ownership guarantees and protection against uncertainties, or even the right to make decisions that impact the lands they farm.

Women dominate small-scale food production in the Arab region. They are a cornerstone of sustainable food systems, yet they suffer from distinctive disadvantages. Women farmers are often heads of households and sole bread-earners, and hence become triple-burdened in their susceptibility to sudden shocks, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While women represent 53 per cent of agricultural labour in Egypt and 60 per cent of paid agro-workers in Morocco, and rural women represent 90 per cent of seasonal olive grove workers, in Tunisia, female landholders represent only around 5 per cent of all landholders.<sup>3</sup> They are often excluded from fully participating in decisions regarding the lands they farm, the production they generate and the income they receive, which is seriously impacting their ability to exercise food sovereignty.



**85%** of land holdings are farmed by smallholders who contribute about 80% of total agricultural production.



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**60%** of paid agro-workers in Morocco

**90%** of seasonal olive grove workers in Tunisia

They constitute only around **5%** of all landholders.

Rural poverty hampers access to land and agricultural resources, and thus the realization of the right to food. Nearly 70 per cent of the poor in the Arab region reside in rural areas, and are often farmers, agricultural labourers or small-scale producers – vulnerable individuals characterized by high reliance on already-scarce natural resources. To guarantee unrestrained participation in food systems and ensure food sovereignty, it is necessary to mitigate the impact of poverty by providing adequate support to small producers, ensuring access to needed resources, and investing in affordable and production-enhancing agrotechnology, among others.

At least 14 Arab countries have seen pioneering innovation in agrotechnology through a variety of startups and technology-driven farming, which draw on existing traditions and practices and preserve traditional and indigenous products. Gulf Cooperation Council countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates, have successfully invested in soilless, aquaponic and indoor farming, with non-intrusive soil recovery techniques. These budding initiatives need to be embraced and supported as they are future guarantors of the right to food and food justice, and will significantly reduce the cost of production and heavy reliance on water and other depleting natural resources. These technologies need to be made affordable to the average user, and should be accompanied by additional simple techniques such as water harvesting and low scale water recycling. Replicating the experience of Egypt in water management, and adopting already available simpler technologies and a stronger market orientation could also make a huge difference.

The right to food and food sovereignty require sustainable income and resource generation to take hold. The highest informal employment is in the agriculture sector, which makes it more vulnerable to shocks, poverty and insecurity. Informal labourers face difficulties in accessing credit or other types of formal assistance, do not benefit from social security and are not offered contributory social insurance schemes. Other than a few school feeding programmes that target rural schools, most rural populations have difficulty accessing social services and, if they rely solely on agriculture, they are generally unable to benefit from social insurance.

Legal frameworks and flawed programme design prevent the extension of protection schemes to poor farmers. In addition, agricultural workers are usually excluded from social protection systems, including contributory schemes. In Lebanon, for example, farmers are not part of the Labour Law. In Algeria and Tunisia, only 5 per cent and 8 per cent of farmers, respectively, are covered by agricultural insurance. Challenging legal barriers in the agricultural sector in the Sudan and Yemen are widespread, and lead to the exclusion of workers. There can be no serious discussion on implementing the R2F-FJ-FS nexus without fundamental changes to existing rigid legal frameworks, institutional limitations to social



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protection schemes and ineffective agricultural cooperatives that not only deprive farmers of their rights but also stifle innovation.

Nonetheless, a few hopeful cases emerge from the Arab region. Egypt was the first Arab country to integrate the principle of food sovereignty in its constitution in 2014. It then adopted a new Social Insurance and Pension Law,<sup>4</sup> which extends coverage to seasonal workers, housekeepers, small-scale agricultural tenants and property owners. Morocco insures up to 90 per cent of small farmers (owners of less than 3 hectares) through a subsidization of premiums. In 2002, Tunisia<sup>5</sup> introduced a special social insurance scheme that included previously uncovered groups, such as agricultural workers, small-scale fisher folks and independent farmers working on small lands. Recently, Tunisia also allowed rural women working in informal sectors to access social insurance benefits.

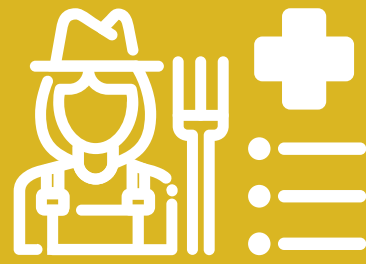
Following the COVID-19 pandemic and in the context of building-back-better programmes, it is high time to rethink food justice, food sovereignty and the right to food in the Arab region. The prevailing models of food production and consumption perpetuate inequality and discrimination, especially towards the most disadvantaged and excluded groups, and exert additional stress on scarce resources. Revaluing small-scale farmers and producers and adopting a people-centred approach are key to such systemic rethinking.

## Policy responses

Policy responses must commit to improving livelihoods, empowering communities, building food system resilience and investing in innovation and knowledge production. To do so, the R2F-FJ-FS nexus is a major entry point for decision makers considering how to remove structural, social and legal barriers to the full empowerment of marginalized groups. Recognizing the role played by rural farmers, especially women, migrants and seasonal workers, requires a shift in mindset and an adoption of a new paradigm that puts people first and ensures that no one is left behind.

### The following is a set of specific policy recommendations:

- ◆◆ **Address regulatory and institutional deficiencies** by enacting national legislation to promote the R2F-FJ-FS nexus, so as to ensure that no legal, social or cultural barriers hinder the full inclusion of local farmers, fisher folks, peasants and other excluded groups, especially women and young people. Any legislation must uphold people's right to healthy food, protect nature's biodiversity, ensure intergenerational justice, leave no one behind, invest in innovative farming technology and protect the harmony of the ecosystem and ensure its sustainability. Legislation should also review entitlements to land holding and ownership, and enshrine the R2F-FJ-FS nexus.



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◆ **Reform exclusionary land policies** to better acknowledge the role of small producers, and ensure their inclusion in the process. This would promote dignity within food systems, ensure that food sovereignty is upheld and expand the role of local authorities in promoting agricultural cooperatives, local water committees and community farming. Improving opportunities for representation and political participation of family producers could develop the considerable potential of land farming in the Arab region, boost social protection in rural areas, combat poverty and lead to more sustainable environmental policies. Local authorities, in collaboration with landowner associations, could instil a system of landholding whereby poor and marginalized farmers, including women, migrants, seasonal labourers and peasants, have fair and just access to land.



◆ **Invest in and shift to agroecology, water saving techniques and a green energy transition**, while ensuring full participation of relevant stakeholders at the local and community levels. This should be backed by an integrated gender approach that results in real agricultural empowerment for women. Agroecology, if well implemented, is a healthy and sustainable way to increase agricultural yields, reduce environmental impacts and regenerate biodiversity. It is also a mechanism for potentially reinforcing social cohesion, reducing inequality by redressing power asymmetries in production and supply chains and strengthening local communities while valuing their lore and praxis in sustainable farming and social wellbeing. Above all, it is bound to reduce competition over dwindling resources. In the Arab region, the transformation to agroecology is crucial to addressing water and arable land scarcity.



◆ **Overhaul agriculture social protection mechanisms** to be more inclusive of previously marginalized groups, and to include innovative mechanisms. Many Arab countries are increasing coverage to new beneficiaries, and restructuring social insurance systems to attain inclusive social protection, which is ensured in rural communities through both non-contributory and social insurance programmes. Non-contributory schemes, including social assistance, could potentially have a significant impact on the livelihood of individuals and families by providing food security, health care and income security. Social insurance plays a vital role in ensuring higher levels of protection, allowing rural communities to manage risk more efficiently, while preventing impoverishment. Moreover, agricultural insurance protects agricultural producers/farmers and communities by allowing them to cope with risks associated with crop failure, difficulties with livestock and natural disasters.



◆ **Develop effective plans to mitigate sudden risks and disasters and recover from their impact** through innovative programmes. This should be accompanied by rigorous training programmes for farmers along with an early warning system. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of developing early warning systems and enhancing the role of community-based organizations, many of which operate in remote areas. Community-based organizations, local cooperatives and civil society can play an active role in this regard, especially in training and warning systems. There is a need to enhance the knowledge and capacity of extension workers to support local actors and enhance their resilience to shocks, including natural (climate change, floods) and man-made shocks.



◆ **Develop and implement a blended approach** that mainstreams gender in agricultural plans and strategies, recognizes the central role that women and vulnerable groups play in agricultural value chains, and builds their capacity to reinforce their production capability and lift them out of poverty. Ensuring that women have equal access to land, technology, financial services, education and markets in rural areas could boost agricultural production and improve food security.







## Endnotes

1. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Food sovereignty systems, 2014.
2. FOA and others, Study on Small-Scale Family Farming in the Near East and North Africa Region, 2017.
3. FOA, The gender gap in land rights, 2018.
4. The new unified law will replace current laws No. 79 of 108 ,1975 of 50 ,1976 of 1978, and 112 of 1980.
5. Since establishing a specific scheme for agricultural workers in 1981, Tunisia has been progressively expanding its social insurance coverage. In 1982, it created a separate scheme for self-employed workers in agriculture. In 2002, the social insurance landscape was further complemented with a scheme for uncovered groups (ESCWA, Social Protection Reform in Arab Countries, 2019).



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