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## NETWORK ON AGRO-FOOD TECHNOLOGIES

A VIRTUAL ESCWA/CAMPANIA RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

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## CONTENT

<b>I. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>II. DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>III. IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>IV. PROJECT STAGES.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>V. COOPERATING INSTITUTIONS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>VI. OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>VII. FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND PROJECT SITE .....</b>	<b>7</b>

*The present document outlines salient features of a project intended to promote networking in scientific research and technology development with emphasis on the agro-food sector.*

*Activities undertaken within the framework of this project could be initiated through a separate agreement between concerned institutions in the ESCWA countries and their counterparts in the Region of Campania under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and The Ministry for Universities and Research of the Campania Region, Naples, Italy, as well as other parties wishing to become founding members of the Network.*

*While this document deals with agro-food processing and packaging technologies, it could constitute a model for similar proposals targeting capacity building through technology transfer and networking in other fields, among the public and private institutions concerned with development and dissemination of new technologies in the production sectors.*

*With the above in mind, the present document leaves out specific modalities of cooperation and financial commitment to be elaborated by interested parties.*

## **I. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION**

Modern agro-food technologies play an important part in achieving food security and sustainable development. They also contribute to employment creation and ensure that the agro-food industry complies with environmental standards and attains higher competitiveness and profitability.

Cooperation between enterprises and technology institutions in the ESCWA countries and regions in Europe is even more compelling with the ever dwindling resources that governments and donors are providing for industrial development and the need to make the best of internal resources and modern technologies.

The complex and varied challenges posed by the development of the agro-food industry, in essence a relatively new and employment-generating field in many ESCWA countries, are also important reasons for instituting collaborative approaches to technology acquisition and dissemination. It is through such technology inputs that efficient use of resources may be made and constraints overcome.

Benefits attained through improving modern technology inputs to the agro-food industry in the ESCWA countries will exceed their boundaries, limiting migration of unskilled and semiskilled labour and allowing wider opportunities for productive trade and exchange of expertise between these countries and their European neighbours.

The Campania Region has established credentials in a variety of agro-food segments. Additionally, the region has highly regarded science and technology institutions with recognized contributions in the field. On the other hand, ESCWA counterpart institutions, in academia as well as industry, possess potential capabilities in terms of manpower as well as scope for market development and technology dissemination, with immense socioeconomic benefits.

## **II. DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES**

The network on agro-food technologies, hereinafter referred to as the Network, will seek to support multidisciplinary and multi-institutional approaches as bases for effective promotion of the agro-food sector in both the Campania Region and ESCWA countries.

The Network will promote cooperation and resource sharing in the acquisition and dissemination of modern technologies among member institutions, including academia, centres of applied research and private enterprises. Utilizing practical and cost-effective modalities and without compromising the independence and profitability of the Network's partners, the proposed portal will strive to achieve the following development objectives:

- Capacity building for the design of collaborative schemes in agro-food research and development;
- Dissemination of information on current agro-food product and process technologies, related trends and research and development needs;
- Networking concerned institutions to facilitate the creation of virtual research and development communities;
- Paving the way towards the establishment of virtual centers of excellence to service priority areas for partner institutions in both ESCWA countries involved as well as the Campania Region.

### III. IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES

The Network is essentially aimed at collaborative efforts directed towards identifying and solving problems, due to the multitude of activities, products, farming systems as well as differences in level of development faced by ESCWA countries and their counterparts in the Campania Region. Seeking the acquisition and dissemination of modern and sustainable capabilities in the network members' respective agro-food academic and research institutions, thereby contributing to enterprise growth and development.

Through collaborative arrangements, the Network will service a wide range of sites targeting related Campania and ESCWA research and development activity. It will also be designed to allow implementation of conferences, awareness campaigns and other forms of interactions directed at specialists and members of the public. The Network will also undertake activities aimed at the delivery of education and training of relevance to agro-food research, management and evaluation of quality standards as well as training of researchers and technicians in selected priority areas.

The Network's work programmes, to be developed in consultation with all partners and approved by its steering committee and implemented by its management committee, see 9 below, will highlight issues of common interest including new and emerging technologies and their applications in agro-food product and process development. Items of common interest will also be addressed with regard to safety and quality standards, storage and packaging.

Information and communications technologies (ICTS) will be used to facilitate the Network's activities and conserve resources. ICTs will be used as cost-effective means to complement rather than replace traditional means of coordination, information delivery, education and training. Thus, ICTs would be used to enhance information systems, including databases that support specific projects as well as specific and generic information packages. The Network will strive to become:

- A one-stop interactive shop for the acquisition and exchange of generic pre-competitive information as well as joint development of specific information packages;
- A gateway to a wide spectrum of sources of information;
- A forum for interactions aimed at identifying and resolving issues of common interest to its members.

With the above in mind, a Network portal will be designed to host a variety of databases and electronic publications in areas of agro-food science and technology of special relevance to academic and enterprise development.

The portal will also host information and facilities that allow secure and effective networking and cooperation among scientists and technologists in the Arab countries as well as between Arab scientists and technologists, on the one hand, and their counterparts working in the developed countries, on the other. The Portal will be linked to satellite facilities on the Internet and will maintain mirror utilities in selected ESCWA countries.

#### **IV. PROJECT STAGES**

The Network will be launched and developed through the following activities (with possible overlaps as dictated by specific priorities and resource availability):

- Finalization of conceptual design;
- Convening of a small expert panel to discuss policy, operational strategy and action plans as well as issues relating to management and commitments by partners;
- Conducting a feasibility study and business plan;
- Undertaking substantive and administrative activities aimed at specific objectives, including:
  - (a) management, upkeep and periodic performance evaluation methodologies;
  - (b) sharing in research activities and their outcomes;
  - (c) future Network development and expansion.
- Identifying and purchasing equipment, software and securing staffing needs for two pilot sites.
- Establishing partnerships and concluding related contractual arrangements for future expansion.

#### **V. COOPERATING INSTITUTIONS**

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in Beirut, Lebanon, and the Ministry for Universities and Research of the Campania Region are the founding institutions of the Network.

Chambers of Industry and Commerce, enterprises, non-governmental organizations, university departments and research and development centres concerned with capacity building in agro-food technologies in Selected ESCWA member countries will become members upon application and ratification by the steering committee.

#### **VI. OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES**

The Network is to be owned by its partners. Its activities are to be implemented by the members themselves in a cooperative and coordinated manner building on indigenous capabilities in partner institutions.

The above will in turn require that:

- partners commit resources to implementing the Network and its programmes, at least during the formative phase of the Network's activities;
- implement as fully as possible results achieved through the Network's efforts in their respective development policies and work programmes.

The Network's activities and performance will be overseen by a steering committee. The Council will ensure that the Network's programmes and projects address the priority issues and needs articulated by member institutions as stipulated at its inception and approved

amendments, during later stages of operation. Needs and priorities will be translated into action plans by a Management committee.

## **VII. FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND PROJECT SITE**

The estimated initial budget for setting up the Network is US\$120,000. However, it is envisaged that the Network will become a self-sustaining independent inter-regional entity in one year following its establishment. With this in mind the Network will seek to:

- become self-sustaining in order to finance core functions, such as technical advice, information exchange and overall network activities coordination and secretarial services;
- generate revenue by providing services against payments;
- develop programmes and projects for collaborative assistance of donors and development agencies;
- forge partnerships with other institutions and work with them on areas of common interests.

The Network will have its main offices in both Naples and Beirut. However, it may also possess branches/chapters in selected ESCWA countries.