



EIA

UN ECONOMIC COMMISSION  
FOR WESTERN ASIA

3 MAR 1985

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LIMITED



E/ECWA/XI/CP/9  
3 April 1984

ENGLISH  
ORIGINAL: ARABIC

UNITED NATIONS

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Standing Committee for the Programme

Second session

16-19 April 1984

Baghdad

Item 9(c) of the provisional agenda

THE COMMISSION'S WORK IN THE AREA OF  
FOOD SECURITY

Note by the Executive Secretary

84-0247

## I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. Since its establishment, ECWA has shown special concern for food security issues because of the persistent need of the region to find solutions to decreasing food self-sufficiency and the increasing dependence on importation. The commission has requested the secretariat to implement programmes that would assist in promoting the status of food security in the region.

2. ECWA's food security programmes have developed in accordance with a broadened conception of food security, that includes dealing with any emergencies that cause a deficiency of food supplies, such as production fluctuations and natural catastrophes. This conception has become so broad and intricate that it includes almost all subjects that are related to food such as production, consumption, trade and reserves.

3. The Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recently noted in his report to the Committee on World Food Security that it was high time to review concepts of international food security and he suggested reviewing all food security elements and clearly redefining them to enable FAO to establish a system for the 1980's.

## II. LEGISLATIVE MANDATE

4. The work of the Economic Commission for Western Asia (ECWA) has been carried out in fulfilment of the objectives and terms of reference of the Commission, which were defined in General Assembly resolution 1818(LV) on establishing an economic commission for Western Asia and in fulfilment of Economic and Social Council resolutions 1978/69 and 71; 1982/176; 1983/71 and 77. It has also been in response to the resolutions and recommendations of international organizations, especially FAO and the World Food Council (WFC), which have emphasized the importance and the priority of food security issues (A/37/19, paras. 19-21, and 23-27; A/36/19, paras. 25-28; A/34/19, paras. 25-28; A/33/19, paras. 19-26; A/32/19, paras. 5-10).

5. The United Nations General Assembly emphasized the importance of this issue in its thirty-second session by adopting the Programme of Action to Eradicate Hunger and Malnutrition, contained in the Manila Communique of the World Food Council (A/32/19, part one, para.1). The General Assembly also called upon all governments, specialized agencies, organs and other bodies within and outside the United Nations system dealing with food, agriculture and human nutrition to implement the Programme of Action fully and as a matter of urgency. In addition, FAO has always stressed food security issues and it continues to do so. The Director-General's five-point Plan of Action on Food

Security was unanimously adopted by the Committee on World Food Security and endorsed by the FAO Council during its seventy-seventh session at Rome. It is also worth mentioning that the League of Arab States has given food security special attention through its economic and developmental organizations, especially the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development. Furthermore, the 11th Arab Summit Conference held at Amman from 25-27 November 1980, underlined the importance of food security and appointed an ad hoc committee to follow-up on the matter and on all related projects. ECWA resolution 113(IX) gave the Commission a new incentive to pursue its work in food security, and the Standing Committee for the programme recommended giving this issue first-level priority in the Commission's programme priorities during the biennium 1984-1985 (E/ECWA/CP/4/Rev.1).

### III. TYPE OF ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN

#### A. Research, analysis and related activities

6. The Commission concentrated its activities in the field of food security on undertaking studies covering some countries of the region, as reflected in the annex. The purpose of these studies was to analyse present food production and future potential and the level of consumption and needs, as well as the possibilities for co-operation between the Governments of the region with a view to minimizing the impact of adverse conditions and formulating projects to bolster food security, especially in the least developed countries of the region. To this end a number of missions were undertaken to countries of the region in order to activate some projects related to food security.

#### B. Seminars and Meetings

7. The Commission organized or participated in organizing a number of regional seminars and meetings relating to food security. These seminars and meetings were:

(a) Seminar on the Food Security Problem in the Arab World, 9-12 April 1978, Kuwait. This seminar was co-sponsored by the Arab Institute for Studies and Research, the secretariat of the League of Arab States and the Council for Arab Economic Unity;

(b) Seminar on Planning for Food Security in Jordan, 8-10 December 1981, Amman. This seminar was co-sponsored by the University of Jordan and the Ministry of Agriculture in Jordan;

(c) Expert Group Meeting on constraints in agricultural planning and Resource Mobilization for Food Security Programmes in the ECWA Region, 18-21 December 1983, Baghdad.

8. The Commission also participated in a number of other seminars and meetings relating to food security that were organized by Arab and international organizations.

#### IV. TECHNICAL CO-OPERATION ACTIVITIES

##### A. Technical co-operation with international organizations

9. Technical co-operation was pursued mainly with FAO. Joint missions have been undertaken to Democratic Yemen and Yemen to assist these countries in drawing up food security policies and to study possibilities for co-operation between them. These missions resulted in the formulation of regional and joint projects.

##### B. Technical co-operation with regional organizations

10. Technical co-operation with regional organizations included organizing the joint seminars referred to above. ECWA also participated in a meeting that was called upon by the Council for Arab Economic Unity to study Arab agricultural integration. It also participated in drafting a protocol for an Arab strategic food stock reserve and it implemented a joint project with the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development food security issues in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Finally, ECWA participated in a meeting on the role of dairy products in Arab food security, which was organized by the Arab Federation for Food Industries.

#### V. CO-ORDINATION ASPECTS

11. Co-ordination with FAO was embodied in meetings aiming at formulating and implementing the commissions work programme. This is considered a normal procedure since the Division of Agriculture at ECWA is a joint division of the commission and FAO. As for co-ordination with international and regional organizations, it took the shape of exchanging information on work plans in order to co-ordinate and identify those that could be undertaken jointly.

## VI. END USERS AND DISSEMINATION

12. Various activities of the Joint ECWA/FAO Agriculture Division aim at assisting parties specialized in food security in the countries of the region in formulating sound policies for enhancing food security at all levels. Usually studies and reports are sent to concerned ministries through embassies of the base country for comment. Often, visits to the country concerned are made to discuss with the concerned authorities the contents of the study and the possibility of transforming ideas into implementable projects. Often, reports and publications are also sent for comment to international and regional organizations, unions and funds, and to some universities. These have often enriched the studies with new ideas and with suggestions for their participation in following-up and implementing the proposed ideas. The publications are also presented at seminars for discussion by renowned experts in the field for their recommendations on projects.

## VII. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

13. The Commission's past experience has brought to light some important facts that should be made known to all those working in the field of food security. The first is that food security can only be realized at the regional level. Any discussion of Arab food security will be useless unless regional natural and financial resources are mobilized to realize this objective. This is so because of the distinctive character of the region's agricultural sector owing to the inequitable distribution of the agricultural and financial resources needed for the sector's development. Fourteen countries possess over 75 per cent of the basic agricultural resources, namely water and soil, and have very good future prospects, but they have a combined GDP representing only 24 per cent of total Arab GDP (1981) and their average per capita income is \$700. On the other hand, five countries (major oil-exporting countries) possess 6 per cent of the agricultural resources, and 60 per cent of Arab GDP, providing a per capita income of \$13,000. This disparity is clearly reflected in the ongoing national agricultural development plans. Measured in terms of allocations per capita per year, the full scale ranges from the unbelievable figure of \$ 3,250 in one of the major oil-exporting countries, down to the equally unbelievable figure of only nine dollars. And this last figure, regrettably, relates to the country which has often been considered the future bread-basket of the Arab world.

14. The second fact about food security is that the food crisis that emerged in the early 1970s has taken on serious proportions, especially in the Arab World, despite the efforts exerted to contain it. The food deficit at present concerns all the countries of Western Asia in terms of all consumer food pro-

ducts with the exception of vegetables and fruits. For many reasons consumption of food products has exceeded local production. At one point some countries of the region produced a surplus of foodstuff. The situation has changed in favour of imported foodstuff even in countries with high agricultural resources. The food gap has been widening since the 1970s at an accelerated rate and self-sufficiency indices reveal a notable deterioration. The Arab World's agricultural exports represented 90 per cent of its imports in 1969; it went down to 80 per cent in 1970 and it reached 14 per cent in 1982. The Arab World started importing half of its consumption of cereals (26 million tons), two-thirds of its wheat consumption (18 million tons), 3/4 of its sugar consumption (35 million tons), 1/3 of its meat consumption (13 million tons), and 1/2 of its dairy consumption (76 million tons).

15. As for the value of the per capita share of imported agricultural products, it is considered to be the highest in the world since it amounts to \$170 in the Arab World as a whole, and to \$550 in the six countries of the Gulf Co-operatives States Council. Yet it did not exceed \$16 on the average, in Asia as a whole, and \$10 in Africa. The gap between the value of agriculture exports and imports widened from 6 billion dollars in 1966 to 20 billion dollars in 1982 and this acceleration is expected to continue in the 1980s.

16. This food deficit can only be contained by resorting to importation from different parts of the world and that is dependent on the availability of imported food products from the international market and the ability to cover all importation costs.

17. The availability of sufficient capital to import food products is contingent on the overall economic condition of the country. Hence tackling this problem involves various economic and developmental factors as well as other factors relating to the country's overall security including food security.

18. The condition of dealing with food deficits through importation of food products which are available in international markets is subject to several factors, some of which might be beyond the control of the importing country. The most important factors that might hinder the availability or the flow of food products are discussed below.

19. Natural factors affect the production of imported goods such as droughts, floods etc. Such factors could affect the importing country and hence, lower its level of local production. As a consequence, the ratio of self-sufficiency in terms of the affected product drops and the country is compelled to increase the importation of the product in a specified period of time in order to cover the deficit or satisfy urgent relief

demands. Under these circumstances it is important that there is an emergency stock reserve for meeting any urgent demand for a required period of time while the necessary arrangements are made for importing foodstuffs to cover the deficit.

20. These natural factors could also affect the exporting countries by decreasing their production, thus decreasing the surplus designated for exportation. The impact of that on the importing countries is either an increase in prices or restrictions on the quantity available for export.

21. At the international level this danger can be overcome by agreeing to the necessity of having sufficient international stock reserves of essential products, particularly wheat, to counteract the effect of natural factors that might affect the major food-producing countries. Usually, importing countries take precautions against these factors by signing long-term agreements to guarantee the flow of food products under all circumstances and to give them import priority over other countries.

22. Human factors dictated by the exporting countries usually emanate from a host of political circumstances that result in decisions to exert economic pressure. This may take the form of an economic siege imposed either on the exporting countries to stop them from exporting to the importing countries or on the importing countries. In both cases, the importing country suffers from a shortage of imported food products which can be exacerbated by the length of the siege.

23. A stock reserve of food products within the importing countries could reduce the impact of the halt of importation until things are put in order or until the crop pattern changes so as to substitute importation by locally producing the essential food products instead of producing other products of lesser nutritional value.

24. The third fact concerning food security is related to the strategic food reserve of the Arab countries. The existing gap between consumption and production in Arab countries and the great dependence on importation to bridge this gap has made these States individually or jointly exposed to the factors discussed above. These factors underline the necessity of having a food stock reserve that would protect them from the danger of a food shortage in emergency situations.

25. It is worth mentioning that natural factors have a big effect on the stability of Arab food production. This is attributed to the fact that agriculture in this region is dependent on rainfall to a great extent. Rainfall is unreliable; hence, it causes severe fluctuations in the level of production, which is therefore, difficult to predict. The impact is most evident

in the fluctuating production levels of cereals, which are the crops most dependent on rainfall, especially in the predominantly agricultural countries, with the exception of Egypt. Statistics show that the ratio of cultivated land dependent on rainfall amounts to 78 per cent of the total cultivated land in the Arab countries.

26. To overcome the sudden drop in production that might be caused by natural factors, the Arab countries individually or jointly should have a stock reserve of food products sufficient to overcome the non-expected shortage until a substitute for this product is secured through importation.

27. Likewise, the human factors which can effect the flow of food products to the Arab world are numerous and could occur at any time. This is not surprising in a highly sensitive region like the Arab world and in a world and in a world torn between the interests of the different nations. Famines that have occurred in some Arab countries and that were triggered by internal and external wars are fairly recent in the history of these countries.

28. The strategic location of the Arab region and its possession of oil, which is the main source of energy in the world, makes it a target for interests which, if elevated, could be transformed into an economic siege or sanction that would affect one or all Arab countries. As a result, these countries may not be able to import food products. This threat becomes more imminent because most of the exporting countries to the Arab world are distant countries that have conflicting interests in the Arab region. The exportation of most major food products, such as wheat, is restricted to a few countries. This facilitates the process of taking a uniform position in utilizing foodstuffs as a tool to exert pressure on the importing countries.

29. A strategic food reserves could reduce the effect of a food crisis resulting from a siege or danger in order to allow the Arab countries sufficient time to tackle the problem either by resorting to similar countermeasures to break the siege or by changing the crop pattern so as to compensate for the shortage of principal foodstuffs by producing them locally.

30. The main recommendations one can draw from the above-mentioned findings can be summarized as follow:

(a) Arab food security should first be clearly defined. Does food security mean complete self-sufficiency or does it reside in striking a balance between agricultural exportation and importation?



(b) The magnitude and the nature of efforts required and the possibility of undertaking joint projects should be clearly defined.

(c) Laying organizational foundations for activities related to joint food security is essential. A country's agricultural plans should be co-ordinated in the light of this organizational set-up.

(d) A protocol should be concluded among Arab countries in order to consider the national stock reserves as regional reserves in cases of emergency.

(e) In pursuance of the above recommendations, the Standing Committee for the Programme may wish to arrange for biennial ad hoc intergovernmental meetings to discuss issues related to food security in the region. This falls within the terms of reference of the Committee as stated in resolution 114(X), paragraph 5.

## STATUS OF FOOD SECURITY STUDIES\*

Study	Date of completion	Ad hoc advice	Promotion and consultation at national/regional level	Project and policy development
Short-term possibilities for increasing food production in selected countries of the ECWA region	March 1977	Emphasized the importance of short-term planning for food production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Distributed all ECWA countries and relevant regional organizations</li> <li>- Presented in the seminar on Arab food security held at Kuwait in 1978.</li> </ul>	
A pilot study on food security	March 1977	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Size of wheat stock reserve</li> <li>- Early warning system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Submitted to the Jordanian Government</li> <li>- Presented in the seminar on Arab food security held at Kuwait in 1978</li> </ul>	- Adoption of a stock reserve policy for wheat
Food security aspects of Arab trade in agricultural commodities	Nov. 1977		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All ECWA countries and relevant regional organizations</li> <li>- Presented in the seminar on Arab food security held at Kuwait in 1978</li> </ul>	
A study on planning of food security on the national and regional level	April 1978	- To develop an early warning system at the regional level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All ECWA countries and relevant regional organizations</li> </ul>	A computerized application of an early warning system for wheat at the national and regional level will be done at ECWA HQ starting 1986
Food security issues in the Arab Near East	Nov. 1978		Published as a book	
Food security in the Gulf States and Oman	Sept. 1979		Submitted to the Government of Oman	Reorganization of the agricultural zones and adoption of stock

STATUS OF FOOD SECURITY STUDIES (cont.)

Study	Date of completion	<u>Ad hoc</u> advice	Promotion and consultation at national/regional level	Project and policy development
Food security policy issues in the Yemen subregion	March 1980		Submitted to the Governments of Yemen and Democratic Yemen discussed with the relevant Yemenese organization.	Seven national projects and two subregional ones were developed and documents prepared
Agricultural and food security in Lebanon	June 1980	Specialization in production of some food item	Submitted for a meeting on the future of Lebanon organized by the Green Plan project in Lebanon	Decentralization of the stock reserves for wheat
The position of Jordan with respect to food	Dec. 1981		Presented in a seminar on food security issues in Jordan	
Post-harvest loss and damage in Jordan and ways of reducing it	Dec. 1981		Presented in a seminar on food security issues in Jordan	
Methods of Projecting yield prior to harvesting: early warning and food security	Dec. 1981		Presented in a seminar on food security issues in Jordan	
Methods of determining production over the medium- and long-term in connection with planning for food security	Dec. 1981		Presented in a seminar on food security issues in Jordan	

STATUS OF FOOD SECURITY STUDIES (cont.)

Study	Date of completion	Ad hoc advice	Promotion and consultation at national/regional level	Project and policy development
The ability to provide nutritional requirements in Jordan under emergency conditions	Dec. 1981		Presented in a seminar on food security issues in Jordan	
Food security in the agricultural development plans in Jordan	Dec. 1981		Presented in a seminar on food security issues in Jordan	
Food security issues in Saudi Arabia	Aug. 1983	Future allocation of agricultural resources	Presented in an expert group meeting on planning and food security held at ECWA	
Strategic Arab food reserve	Nov. 1983		Submitted to the Council for Arab Economic Unity for the development of a protocol for regional strategic stock reserves	
Co-ordinated planning: a basis for Arab food security	Dec. 1983		Presented at an expert group meeting on planning and food security held at ECWA	
Constraints in agricultural planning and resource mobilization for food security programmes in Jordan	Dec. 1983		Presented at an expert group meeting on planning and food security held at ECWA	
Food security in the Gulf States (Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar)	July 1981	Investment in agriculture in the Arab region	Submitted to the countries (Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar)	Stock reserve policy adopted in the countries concerned