



Institutional Coordination and Policy Coherence for Achieving Water and Food Security in the Arab Region

Midterm review for the period 2019-2015

(Executive Summary)

The Arab Region is currently facing one of the most pressing development challenges of our time: securing water and food in the face of severe water scarcity, growing populations, and climate change. Nineteen out of twenty-two Arab countries already experience severe water stress, with thirteen facing an absolute scarcity of less than 500 cubic meters per capita annually. At the same time, the region imports more than half of its staple food, a dependence that is widening as demand grows and natural resource constraints intensify. With agriculture consuming up to 80 percent of available freshwater resources, the interlinkages between water and food systems are profound. Urgent action is required to accelerate efforts towards achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, this makes the imperative for integrated policy approaches, including the transformation of food systems both urgent and unavoidable.

Recognizing this, Arab Ministers of Water and Agriculture came together in 2019 to adopt the Cairo Declaration, establishing a framework to enhance coordination and coherence between the two sectors. The High-Level Joint Technical Committee (HLJTC) was established to translate this vision into action, supported by a Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS), composed of the technical secretariat of the Arab Ministerial Water Council and Arab Organization for Agricultural Development, with technical and financial support from FAO and ESCWA. Since then, progress has been made in strengthening regional dialogue, defining cross-sectoral priorities such as water allocation for agriculture, non-conventional water use, climate resilience, data systems, and piloting initiatives in selected countries. Endorsement of an Action Plan in 2022 represented a significant milestone, signaling collective political commitment to operationalizing the Cairo Declaration.

Despite these achievements, the process still faces essential challenges that limit its impact on the ground. Country-level implementation lags behind regional commitments, with systemic constraints that could be reduced if strong follow-up mechanisms and more consistent reporting practices are adopted. Data availability remains uneven, and the lack of a harmonized organization at national level has hindered sustained engagement. Financing and resource mobilization have also proven difficult, with limited budgetary allocation to support regional and country-level action. Finally, the absence of region-wide architecture to guide and consolidate national monitoring practices has slowed the translation of regional initiatives into measurable outcomes.

This report takes stock of progress so far and outlines the way forward to transform the water-agriculture nexus process into a driver of regional and national change. The key message is clear: success depends on strengthening country-level engagement,



institutionalizing monitoring and reporting, and aligning financial, technical, and political resources with the ambitions set out in the Cairo Declaration.

To ensure stronger and more consistent engagement from member states, the report recommends the adoption of a Country Engagement Protocol. This should include formal nomination of representatives (focal points) from the Ministries of Water and Ministries of Agriculture, ideally from planning and strategy units, with terms of reference to ensure continuity and expertise. These representatives should lead national teams, coordinate country-level pilots, and report annually to the HLJTC. At the regional level, a community of practice and structured knowledge exchange platforms should be established, supported by a dedicated knowledge hub to host data, policy briefs, and case studies.

Strengthening the Joint Technical Secretariat is also essential. The Secretariat should be equipped with dedicated staff, including a coordinator and a monitoring and evaluation specialist, to oversee the implementation of the adopted resolutions, organize meetings, track progress, and ensure systematic follow-up with countries. Partner organizations, such as FAO and ESCWA, should continue to provide technical assistance while planning a progressive devolution process to countries and LAS. However, sustainability will need to build on strengthening LAS and AOAD's ongoing commitments, complemented by co-financing with countries, regional and international partners. Updated Terms of Reference for the HLJTC, TJS, and countries' representatives should be adopted to clarify roles and responsibilities.

Monitoring and accountability are critical for credibility. The report recommends the immediate establishment of a baseline through a regional survey, followed by annual national reports compiled into a yearly regional report. This report should become a standing item on HLJTC agendas, enabling peer review and shared accountability. A five-year programme of work (2025–2030) is proposed, aligned with the Arab Strategies for Water Security and for Sustainable Agricultural Development, as well as with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The process will continue to address key cross-cutting issues, including water allocation for agriculture, non-conventional water resources, data systems, as well as climate resilience and adaptation in agriculture, while strategically extending to other topics like groundwater governance, disaster risk management, food system resilience, artificial intelligence or climate finance, among others. It will continue to focus on the elements of agrifood system transformation that directly affect water management¹.

It is important that the process remains evidence-based and become more country-owned: drawing on national expertise and regional knowledge exchange; combining desk studies with country-led contributions; engaging national experts through consultations; and

¹ Some of the issues of concern include improving crop and livestock water productivity, promoting resilient varieties and agronomic practices, strengthening soil health and salinity management, reducing post-harvest losses, and supporting farmer-led innovation and value chain development.



producing clear policy briefs for ministerial endorsement, backed by a monitoring package (baseline, country reports, annual regional brief) and measurable indicators. Technical topics will be framed to stay policy-relevant by highlighting cross-sector linkages, practical implementation pathways, and—where appropriate—financing options.

Financing and investment alignment remain a priority. The majority of resources will come from national budgets. Moreover, some countries in the region benefit from donor-funded programmes; therefore, Ministries of Water and Agriculture should ensure the alignment and coherence of their respective programmes and allocate specific funding for joint initiatives that integrate the water-food nexus. Engagement of development partners and donors at both regional and national levels is essential for some Arab countries, as is creating enabling conditions for private sector investment. The initial idea of establishing a Joint Working Group on Resource Mobilization was a positive step forward. The working group should be strengthened, with agreed governance and clear terms of reference and deliverables.

A more inclusive process is also recommended. Civil society, producer organizations, women, youth, and the private sector should be systematically engaged, whether through observer participation in HLJTC meetings, pre-meeting consultations, or thematic dialogues. Broadening participation will increase the legitimacy and relevance of the process, while also mobilizing additional knowledge and resources.

Looking ahead, sustainability requires embedding the water-food nexus into the core of regional and national strategies. The HLJTC and Joint Ministerial Meetings should establish stronger linkages with existing regional strategies and ensure that resolutions are systematically reflected in national plans and policies. Mechanisms for risk management should also be strengthened, with measures to mitigate political disengagement, funding shortfalls, and high turnover of country representatives.

In conclusion, the intergovernmental process initiated with the Cairo Declaration represents a historic step towards integrated water and food security policies and governance in the Arab region. The foundation has been laid, and the achievements since 2019 demonstrate both the potential and the political will to act. What is now required is a decisive shift from process to impact: embedding policy coherence at the national level, ensuring measurable results, and mobilizing resources for implementation. With strengthened governance, robust monitoring, inclusive participation, and targeted investments, the Arab region can move from commitment to action, building resilient water and food systems that safeguard livelihoods, support economic development, and contribute to regional stability.

This report, therefore, calls upon Arab policymakers to reaffirm their commitment, endorse the proposed recommendations, and champion the integration of water and food security agendas. The years leading up to 2030 present a narrow yet critical window to secure sustainability, resilience, and prosperity for future generations across the Arab world.