



ICARDA

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Your Excellency, Mr. Edmond Panariti, Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development & Water Administration, Albania

Your Excellences the Ministers

Your Excellency Dr. Mohammed Sadiki, Vice-President CIHEAM

Your Excellency Dr. Cosimo Lacirignola, Secretary General- CIHEAM

Heads and Representatives of International Organizations

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of ICARDA and its Director General, I extend my appreciation to the Albanian Ministry of Agriculture, CIHEAM, FAO and EBRD for inviting ICARDA to this important meeting and for the excellent arrangements made for this High-level forum.

CIHEAM and ICARDA have a long history of cooperation, with a first Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1999 and a long-standing partnership that continues today. In 2015, our organizations have signed a new strategic partnership, which has contributed to the initiation of a new multi-partner action – called the MENA Initiative. It is focused on mobilizing agricultural science and innovation to bring growth and new income streams income to women and youth in the MENA region.

This is an initiative whose time has come. It builds on the wealth of past knowledge and experience from development and research programs – by many national and international partners – to bring tested technologies and policy approaches to countries to help them develop rural areas in the face of climate change.

I am pleased to present to you an overview of the initiative, which is still under development:

“Sustainable and Resilient Rural Futures and Improved Livelihoods in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA Initiative): Transforming rural futures”.

Rationale for MENA Initiative

As you know, the MENA region, faces huge pressures including conflict, social unrest, mass migration, and high levels of unemployment, particularly among youth. Youth employment rates in the region are the highest in the world (24-29% among males, 37-44% among females) to address these problems and help countries improve the situation of people living in marginal areas, the MENA region needs a robust new approach to rural development that prioritizes youth and women. A multi-sector approach is needed to face the climatic and rural development challenges. And more productive agriculture is a key to improving the lives of our young populations, by mobilizing productive and sustainable food production systems to feed a fast growing population.

The poverty situation in many of these dry areas situation is further complicated by climate change, a lack of arable land and, of course, water scarcity. Climate change alone is expected to reduce household income by 7% over next 30-40 years. Water scarcity in MENA is highest in the world, resulting in reduced GDP and land degradation. Desertification continues to intensify – approximately, 48% of the land in Mashreq countries is degraded.

Populations in the MENA region have adapted to harsh climates for thousands of years. But today's unprecedented rate of climate change is testing their ability to cope, as the region becomes hotter and drier with more extreme droughts and flash floods.

The socio-political aspects of this situation are also pressing. Countries that border the Mediterranean basin and are of strategic importance to the European Union because of trade, energy and more recently, national and regional social and political security.

These challenges call for urgent action and the MENA Initiative proposes to mobilize – over a ten-year period – an integrated, people-centred approach that focuses research and development to meet societal needs. Today's thinking asks how to improve education and economic growth to combat marginalization of rural populations, and problems that grow from it, such as migration and unemployment. Agriculture, food and rural development are at the center of this issue – a driving force for national and regional economies. They have strong positive interactions with other economic sectors and profound implications for the regeneration of environment and society.

There is strong evidence that past investment in research and development in the MENA region has achieved substantial results and there are many examples that are ripe for scaling-up. The MENA Initiative plans to put into action, with partner countries, these and a wealth of similar tested approaches.

MENA Initiative and its Approach:

The MENA Initiative brings together a consortium of partners to focus science, innovation and practical know-how on improving food production and natural resource management. This includes national research centers – INRA-Morocco and ARC- Egypt, NCARE- Jordan, LARI-Lebanon, ARESA-Tunisian – and international partners – ICARDA, CIHEAM, GFAR, AARINENA, Agropolis, IFPRI, European Commission, CIRAD, and the South-North Mediterranean Foundation, as well as other partners.

Approaches we will mobilize include scaling-out of tested technologies and agricultural value chain options, testing new agro-ecological health and socio-economic approaches that address climate change adaptation and mitigation. The Initiative's primary focus is on medium-sized towns that have the potential to create agri-business sectors that support agricultural value chains that link marginal areas and populations to markets. The aim is to create farmer-friendly service sectors that stimulate growth and local income generation.

The expected outcomes that the Initiative will bring to marginalized communities are new opportunities for jobs, income creation. The vision is to encourage the creation of multi-sector rural economies that combine agriculture, ICT, energy, water, education and commerce.

The proposed initiative embraces **Four Action Areas:**

1. **Agro-ecological productivity and sustainability** impacting food security, nutrition and health, and sustainable resource use. .
2. **Economic sustainability and growth:** value addition; value chain development; and economic growth opportunities.
3. **Gender and social change:** employment for women and youth: addressing gender-oriented approaches, empowerment and equity issues.
4. **Enabling environment:** conducive policies and institutions

The MENA Initiative is currently in its development and start-up phase. We welcome offers of partnership and support from all policy makers, development actors and investors towards the realization and successful implementation of this initiative.

Thank you once again for organizing this important gathering and for your kind attention.