

*SEMINARIO: Food Security in the
MENA Region: civil society
participation and partnership*



Food security in MENA Region: the agricultural sector and access and use of water

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INTRODUCTION

The Middle East region is known as a highly diversified region in the world in terms of ecology, political structures and stability, and economic diversity.

Health and nutritional status of this region are determined by all these factors. Resource issues that impact on the quality of daily life for people in the region are primarily centered in food supply and education, and the availability and utilization of effective preventive and curative health services, sanitation, and safe clean water.

Topping the list are those which manifest themselves as problems of food security, mainly **AGRICULTURE and WATER RESOURCES**.

Therefore, I will focus in this writing/ presentation, and as a general director of a Lebanese NGO giving greater importance to agriculture and rural development, on the agricultural sector and its relation with the food security in Lebanon and the MENA region

- 1. State of the matter: related to food security especially with regard to agricultural production and access and distribution of water resources in the region**

According to the country study, entitled “**Poverty, growth and income distribution in Lebanon**”, published by the International Poverty Centre – United Nations Development Program, **28%** of the Lebanese population can be considered poor and **8%** can be considered extremely poor, which means that 300,000 individuals in Lebanon are unable to meet their most basic food and non food needs.

The poor are heavily concentrated among the unemployed, and among the unskilled workers especially in **agriculture** and construction sectors.

Agriculture, one of the main pillars of the Lebanese economic growth, is threatened to no longer being a major source of it.

Farmers are leaving their rural communities in hopes of finding a job in large cities which is becoming a major reason for food insecurity.

Lebanese farmers are smallholder-farmers, locked in a cycle of low productivity, high production cost, lack of assets and services and weak market power. The **problems** they are facing are diverse and huge, affecting all of them directly or indirectly, food security; I will list some of them as below:

- A-** Lebanese farmers are defined as smallholder farmers as they are holdings of less than 1 hectare of land, noting that lands dedicated for agriculture in Lebanon are suffering from fragmentation, which limits introduction of improvements
- B-** Smallholder farmers are victims of rising of input prices for example, the price of fuel, fertilizers... This Rise in input costs often simply cancel out any gains for farmers.
- C-** In some rural areas Poor farmers, lack the knowhow and stick often to inherited knowledge, which can largely affect their production cost (high) and also the quality and quantity of production (low or no income).In addition, most of the time they are not able to demand services adequately since they are not organized in farmer groups.
- D-** Extension service providers are almost only NGOs; their intervention remains limited due to their restricted financial capacities and limited geographical distribution. Growers often rely on the advice of sales personnel of private companies for pesticides and fertilizers, having their marketing target surmounting the benefit of the farmers
- E-** Repeated planting of the same crop in different areas at the same period in absence of any planning at national level
- F-** The Agricultural sector is affected by subsidized imports that undercut domestic producers and are a disincentive for them to invest in production
- G-** In Addition, farmers are facing a number of newer challenges: **climate change, land degradation** and **groundwater depletion**, while food demand is growing.
- H-** Absence of agricultural policies and strategies and tiny role of concerned ministries in term of planning and organizing

2. The causes of food security and its consequences

At a more micro-level, food insecurity in parts of the MENA region often results from social conditions including political instability, war and civil strife, macroeconomic imbalances and trade dislocations, environmental degradation, poverty, population growth, gender inequality, inadequate education and poor health. By and large, these are the root causes of food insecurity in the region today.

Since **Food security** is in general defined as access of people to sufficient and good quality of foods for a healthy and productive life, many causes can be associated to food security in Lebanon, and especially the agricultural sector.

Lebanon's agriculture sector accounts for 5% of gross domestic product (GDP) and employs an estimated 8% of the country's labor force. About **70% of Lebanon's food needs are satisfied by imports and the diversity of imported food items is quite remarkable**. Although Lebanon's agriculture sector has the potential to be one of the most productive in the region, it is underdeveloped and poorly managed. **Only 55% of the productive areas are exploited**, often in an inefficient and wasteful manner.

The agriculture sector suffers from **lack of funding**, receiving less than 1% of the state budget. **Private-sector finance and bank loans to agriculture are limited**.

Agro-food transformation/food processing considered as a major part of Lebanon's agriculture and agro-food industry, is developed but requires rebuilding and assistance.

The local distribution market suffers from the absence of government quality control, a lack of marketing regulations, and competition from lower-priced products from border and neighboring countries. The retail market is dominated by large supermarkets and local medium sized outlets.

3. The actors involved , with special emphasis on the role of the NGOs

World markets play an important role in food security and impact the livelihood and well being of people both through the prices of food ultimately purchased by consumers, and the conditions of agricultural producers in developing economies.

In addition to global market forces, food security is impacted by stakeholder's at all different levels, from international organizations to central governments, local-level governments and community organizations.

At the national level there are a large number of actors involved and deeply influencing food security: different central line **Ministries**, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Health, as well as Local Government Authorities, **Public and private institutions** dedicated to agricultural and food processing , **Research centers**, Certified laboratories , ...

As well, In Lebanon, a great role is played by the local NGOs, striving funds to support and empower local communities especially those marginalized and located in the

rural and poorest areas in the country, working in agriculture and food processing sectors which are closely related to food security.

RENE MOAWAD FOUNDATION (RMF) INTERVENTION

As most of the Lebanese NGOs working in Lebanon, RMF had a great role at national level.

One of the main objectives of RMF was to achieve Economic Development through Agriculture Development.

Agriculture is one of the main economic sectors in all the rural areas. About 40% of our population depends either directly or indirectly on income from this sector, even though it has become less competitive in recent years, due to the high costs of production and the low valorization of agricultural products on the markets, without targeting the lack of real Agriculture Policy, since the Lebanese Government does not give enough attention to this vital sector.

Major crops in Lebanon include vegetables, (tomatoes, potatoes), **fruits** (citrus fruit, bananas, grapes, **apples**), **olives**, tobacco, cereals (mainly wheat). The major agriculture industries are wine, **olive oil** and table olives, **dairy milk production**, canned products especially pulses (chickpeas and beans) and **livestock production**.

Accordingly, RMF gave greater emphasis to:

- 1) Animal sector, Forage production and Dairy Processing**
- 2) Fruits Production especially Apples**
- 3) Olives and Olive Oil Sector**
- 4) Agro food Industry and Women empowerment**
- 5) Hydroponic Plantation, as a new technique in agriculture**

RMF intervention in those 5 above mentioned sectors encompassed the whole agricultural production and processing cycles, through : Capacity buildings and technical support of farmers, Extension services, Establishment of Pilot Projects, Introduction of new technologies, Creation of Cooperatives and empowerment of already existing ones, creation of Marketing networks at national and international levels ...

Development Projects conducted under the framework of these cited topics, had positively affected the food security issues at national level, through the following:

- Self efficiency in term of quantity for some of these products (apples, olive oil, forages, dairy product) had limited imports , and the local production became sufficient for the local consumption

- Quality of products is improved , respecting the international norms for food safety and standardization , allowing international market access
- New implemented techniques , especially relating to intensive plantation and maximum exploitation of land use, allowed overcoming the difficulties encountered due to the fragmentation of lands , one of the most important obstacle faced in agriculture in Lebanon

Besides these activities, RMF is a member in the National Alliance for the fight against hunger and poverty in Lebanon, with the main objective reducing poverty and hunger and insure food security.

4. Presentation of some concrete solutions to achieve access to food to families under favorable conditions

How to support ways for the development of local and national agricultural economies based on local production and processing, and the creation of local marketing networks in order to allow the construction

Despite the challenges encountered, Lebanese smallholder farmers have huge potential to meet not only their own food needs but also make a major contribution to the overall enhanced levels of food production that will be necessary. But a number of significant changes and interventions are required.

- 1) A massive reinvestment in agriculture is needed:
 - Encouragement of a much greater role for the private sector is essential, Banks, for example, could be better encouraged to provide key financial services to farmers promoting sustainable agriculture, such as low-cost credit services or affordable weather insurance.
 - Government and donors need to significantly re-balance their current funds towards a much greater support for sustainable agriculture, especially tackling food security issues. (Government subsidies and extension programs)
- 2) A reorientation of the agricultural systems towards modes of production that are highly productive, highly sustainable and that contribute to the progressive realization of the human right to adequate food.
- 3) Collaboration between Ministries, Agricultural research establishments, Extension services providers, NGOs, Institutions, International donors...
- 4) Laws and regulations should be issued by the government to protect local market from cheap imports
- 5) Effective national competition policies are required to ensure that a small number of companies do not dominate markets

- 6) Initiatives that enable the creation of, and access to, markets that return fair prices for small-scale producers, and global trade policies that safeguard the position of domestic producers in national food systems
- 7) Find new solution to substitute the electrical energy by solar and bio energy , reducing thus the production cost (Especially Fuel consumption) and the environmental pollution

CONCLUSION

Food security is the most essential matter that should be seriously addressed before talking about Democracy, Human Rights, Governance and policies... as it directly and deeply touches humanitarian dignity.

To address Food security issue in the best possible approach, coordination and collaboration between concerned entities at national level, and largely between the countries in the MENA region is very essential.

Coordination in implementation of Development projects should be assumed, Creation of Agricultural calendars should be respected by the different countries to avoid competition and stagnation of produces in the same period of the year, while insuring self sufficiency and improving exchanges along with mutual benefit.

On personal level, I think that the crucial cause of the Arabian waves of revolution is directly correlated to the food insecurity in these countries.