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Investing in agriculture key to reducing Near East's reliance on food imports – UN official



FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf

7 December 2010 – Countries in the Near East have become increasingly dependent on food imports as their rapid population growth has outpaced agricultural production, a senior United Nations official said today, stressing the need to boost investment in farming in the region.

“On average, cereal yields in the Near East are currently about half the world average, and the gap is widening,” [said](#) Jacques Diouf, the Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)), in an address to the 30th FAO Regional Conference for the Near East in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum.

“It is projected that the deficit in cereals will more than double between 2000 and 2030. This growing food deficit makes the majority of Near Eastern countries more dependent on imports and, therefore, vulnerable to shocks in international and domestic markets,” Mr. Diouf said.

The region also suffers limited water and land resources, a fact that aggravates its vulnerability to food insecurity, he told the meeting, which began on Sunday and is due to end tomorrow.

Per capita availability of renewable water resources in the Near East is currently around 1,050 cubic meters per year, compared to a global annual average of 8,900 cubic meters per person. That amount is projected to drop by half by the year 2050, according to FAO.

“Contrary to the period between the 1970s and 1980s, public expenditures on agriculture in the Near East have been very low in the past few years, particularly in relation to the contribution of agriculture to gross domestic product (GDP),” Mr. Diouf said. “While the share of agriculture in GDP is about 12 per cent for the region, its share in national public expenditure does not exceed 5 per cent.”

He said solutions to food deficits in the region lay in increased investment in agriculture and trade. “Increased intra-regional cooperation, through increased trade and investment, continues to generate a great interest in the Near East,” he said.

Countries falling under FAO’s Near East region represent a diverse mosaic of some 30 States in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa with different levels of endowment in terms of natural resources and socio-economic conditions.

Serious food security concerns exist in conflict zones, notably Afghanistan, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, Mr. Diouf said.

Overall, the number of hungry and undernourished people in the Near East region is currently estimated at 37 million, according to FAO’s latest figures – an increase of 17 million people from 1996 levels, but 5 million fewer hungry people than in 2009.

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