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## **Arab Countries Take a New Direction for National Food Security**

*Improved wheat technology “packages” show the way*

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The Ministries of Agriculture of Arab countries opt for agricultural research as a strategic investment for enhancing their food security based on the successes of a large-scale wheat productivity improvement project implemented across 10 Arab countries. The outcomes from the Arab Food Security Project, carried out by a partnership of national agricultural research systems (NARS) with ICARDA, a member of the CGIAR Consortium, were demonstrative of the larger impacts improved technologies can wield on the food security status. The countries have suggested increased investments from their benefactors of Arab Funds and international donors to harness these technologies for larger gains.

The Arab Food Security Project reached more than 25,000 smallholder farmers in its first phase and is now set to scale out the interventions to new identified regions and provinces in line with the national food security strategy of each of the beneficiary countries – Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.

“The impacts from the project are the result of technology packages based on proven research results. We all need the modernization of extension system and must empower it by providing modern and new tools,” said Adel El-Beltagy, Egypt’s Minister of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, at a meeting held in Kuwait last week (November 11-12, 2014) to hear on the outcomes of the project and discuss the larger strategy on food security for the Arab region. The meeting was attended by the Ministers of Agriculture from Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Yemen, Palestine and Lebanon, heads of all the NARS, ICARDA and its scientists coordinating the project in the 10 countries, and Arab and international donors.

In a **landmark policy-level outcome for the Arab region**, the gathered decision-makers at the Kuwait meeting opted to forge a regional partnership on food security, investing in agricultural research to improve their domestic productivity. The region is heavily dependent on food imports given its severely scarce natural resources – a trend that is increasing at an alarming rate, with growing populations.

The improved wheat technology packages disseminated under the Arab Food Security initiative made a clear case as they led to an average increase in yield by 28% across all farmers’ fields in the 10 countries. Amongst several [large-scale outcomes](#), the innovation of mechanized raised bed

planting for smallholders is potentially a game changer for irrigated production systems in drylands. The results on farmers' fields in Egypt show an average of 25% saving in irrigation water, 30% increase in wheat yield, and 74% improvement in water use efficiency. The initiative is funded by the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), the primary donor of the initiative, along with Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, Islamic Development Bank and OPEC Fund for International Development.

“Sudan is in real need for such an initiative as the achieved yield increases in the country are supporting our strong political will and policy in strengthening Arab food security through Sudan,” stated Engineer Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamid, the Minister of Agriculture of Sudan.

“The forward looking leadership demonstrated by the Ministries of Agriculture from Arab countries comes at a critical time. It underscores the importance of investing in agricultural research for food security, particularly in these challenging times of climate change, increasing mouths to feed, and instability from conflicts,” stated Mahmoud Solh, the Director General of ICARDA. According to Dr. Solh, the extreme food insecurity and high unemployment undeniably served as a [trigger for the string of upheavals](http://www.arabspatial.org) in the Arab region ([www.arabspatial.org](http://www.arabspatial.org)).

While Arab countries have largest per capita consumption of wheat in the world (~165 kg/person/year), they are also the largest food importers in the world, putting them at serious risk to global events like the food crisis of 2008. In 2010, the region imported 65.8 million tons of cereals compared to Asia's 58.8 million tons – that despite the huge difference in their populations. Further, water – a basic necessity for agriculture – is severely scarce in the Arab countries. The global average for per capita water availability is 8,900 m<sup>3</sup> as opposed to only 1,100 m<sup>3</sup> in the Arab region. This is estimated to drop further down to 550 m<sup>3</sup> by 2050 – a disastrous scenario for sustaining the region's growing population.

“The food crisis of 2008 has given a new dimension to the food security as the rich countries realized that financial ability is alone not sufficient to ensure food security when food was simply not available in the international markets,” pointed out Akif Al-Zuabbi, Minister of Agriculture of Jordan.

The Arab food security regional partnership will work toward better coordination among Arab countries, sharing knowledge, and leveraging improved technologies for their common goal of reduced dependence on food imports, management of natural resources and better rural livelihoods.

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## About Arab Food Security Project

ICARDA, a member of the CGIAR Consortium, launched the initiative in 2011, starting initially in Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, and later adding Jordan, Algeria, Iraq, and Palestine.

The [initiative](#) brought integrated technologies to both improve and stabilize wheat productivity as the Arab countries are seeing increasing crop failures from climate change. The technology packages combined improved wheat varieties (higher yield and drought-tolerant) with agronomic practices such as conservation agriculture and efficient use of scarce water resources at both country and farmer levels through adaptive research. These packages were tailored to suit the irrigated and rainfed (with and without supplemental irrigation) production systems common in the targeted dryland countries in the North Africa and West Asia region.

The project's strength came from strong integration of research and extension, which facilitated rapid dissemination and scaling of tested technologies. Another unique component, [Young Agricultural Scientists Program](#) has been helping bridge the skills gap nationally – a major constraint for sustainable agriculture development in Arab countries. [Learn more](#)

## About ICARDA

The International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) is the global agricultural research center working with countries in the world's dry areas, supporting them for the sustainable productivity of their agricultural production systems; increased income for smallholder farmers living on dry lands and in fragile ecosystems; and nutrition and national food security strategies.

With partners in more than 40 countries, ICARDA produces science-based solutions that include new crop varieties (barley, wheat, durum wheat, lentil, faba bean, kabuli chickpea, pasture and forage legumes); improved practices for farming and natural resources management; and socio-economic and policy options to support countries to improve their food security. ICARDA works closely with national agricultural research programs and other partners worldwide – in Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. [www.icarda.org](http://www.icarda.org)