

IDENTIFICATION OF TOPICS FOR THE FORTY-SECOND SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON AGRICULTURE

(prepared by the ECA Secretariat)

Background

The next session of the European Commission on Agriculture (ECA) has been planned to be held in 2021, in Budapest, Hungary.

The Assessment of ECA¹ conducted in 2017, with respect to the agendas and the formats of the ECA, made the following recommendations:

- Each ECA session should focus on one technical theme, of interest to the entire membership, to be tackled from different perspectives, e.g. on-going initiatives, innovation, technologies, policies, management capacity development needs and opportunities, etc.;
- Whenever relevant and appropriate, the ECA theme should align with the biennial theme selected by the FAO Conference, addressing it from the perspective of ECA mandate, to avoid duplication of debates; the fine-tuning of the theme would require a robust consultation process with all institutional owners of the ECA;
- The ECA sessions should bring additional knowledge and information while enabling active participation of delegates and observers. Possible formats would be: plenary discussions supported by key-note presentations on the main theme of the ECA session, working groups, dialogues with expert panels, case-study discussions on national experiences.

The FAO Conference, at its forty-first session, approved the theme on “*Promoting healthy diets and preventing all forms of malnutrition*” for Governing Body sessions to be held during the 2020-21 biennium². The Excom is requested to note that one of the main topics for the 32nd Regional Conference for Europe (ERC) (2-4 November 2020) was “Sustainable food systems and healthy diets in Europe and Central Asia”.

The main technical theme for the ECA Session determines the technical items on the agenda and discussions of the Commission. According to Rule V.1 of the Rules of Procedure of ECA, the Director-General, in agreement with the Chairperson of the Commission, after having examined all proposals of the Executive Committee, shall prepare a provisional agenda for each session.

ECA and ERC considered a range of topics in recent years. The list of main topics covered by the governing bodies is presented in Annex 1.

REU technical officers discussed the issue of the main technical theme for the 42nd ECA Session, and recommended three proposals for the theme. The proposals are presented in Annex 2.

¹ Assessment of the European Commission on Agriculture. Full Report: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bt620e.pdf>

² 41st FAO Conference Report: <http://www.fao.org/3/na421en/na421en.pdf>

The ExCom is invited to:

- note the topics that were on the agendas of ECA and ERC Sessions in recent years, as presented in Annex 1;
- note that the FAO biennial theme for 2020-2021 is “Promoting healthy diets and preventing all forms of malnutrition” and that one of the main topics for the 32nd ERC was “Sustainable food systems and healthy diets in Europe and Central Asia”;
- review the proposals for the main technical theme of the 42nd ECA Session submitted by REU, presented in Annex 2;
- consider whether ExCom Members would wish to make additional proposals for the main technical theme of the 42nd Session of ECA;
- assign priorities to the proposed topics for the main technical theme of the 42nd ECA Session, noting that the topic with the highest priority (priority 1) will be the ExCom’s recommendation to the Director-General for the main technical theme for the Session.

Annex 1

LIST OF MAIN TOPICS COVERED AT PREVIOUS ECA AND ERC SESSIONS**European Commission on Agriculture (ECA)****41st ECA** – Budapest, Hungary, 1-2 October 2019 ([ECA/41/19/REPORT](#)):

1. Plant health in Europe and Central Asia - relevance, trends and developments
2. Plant pests and diseases in the context of climate change and climate variability, food security and biodiversity risks
3. Impact of global trade and human mobility on the health of agricultural crops and forests in Europe and Central Asia

40th ECA – Budapest, Hungary, 27-28 September 2017 ([ECA/40/17/REPORT](#)):

1. The effect of climate change on animal diseases, trade and food security in the REU region
2. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR): the loss of a major defence to the emerging challenge?
3. Disease occurrence tracking, strategic response to TADs and informed decision making

39th ECA – Budapest, Hungary, 22-23 September 2015 ([ECA/39/15/REPORT](#)):

1. Innovation in family farming in Europe and Central Asia
2. Combating land degradation for food security and provision of soil ecosystem services in Europe and Central Asia – International Year of Soil 2015
3. Gender-sensitive analysis of social protection programs for rural residents
4. Addressing social and economic burden of malnutrition through nutrition-sensitive agricultural and food policies in the region of Europe and Central Asia

Regional Conference for Europe (ERC)**32nd ERC** - 2-4 November 2020 ([ERC/20/REP](#)):

1. Sustainable food systems and healthy diets in Europe and Central Asia
2. Solutions for Youth, Employment and Developing Rural Areas in relation to the United Nations Decade of Family Farming

31st ERC - Voronezh, Russian Federation, 16–18 May 2018 ([ERC/18/REP](#)):

1. Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems in Europe and Central Asia in a Changing Climate
2. E-agriculture: the Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for the Development of Sustainable and Inclusive Food Systems and Trade Integration

30th ERC - Antalya, Turkey, 4–6 May 2016 ([ERC/16/REP](#)):

1. The Sustainable Development Goals and their implications for agriculture and rural development in Europe and Central Asia region
2. Pulses for improving balanced nutrition and healthy food systems in Europe and Central Asia - International Year of Pulses 2016

29th ERC - Bucharest, Romania, 1–4 April 2014 ([ERC/14/REP](#)):

1. Food Losses and Waste in Europe and Central Asia
2. International Year of Family Farming (IYFF) in Europe and Central Asia

28th ERC - Baku, Azerbaijan, 16–20 April 2012 ([ERC/12/REP](#)):

1. Policies for Food Security in the Region: Challenges and Perspectives – Food outlook towards 2050

27th ERC - Yerevan, Armenia, 13–14 May 2010 ([ERC/10/REP](#)):

1. Policy response to challenges in agriculture and rural development in the Europe and Central Asia Region: sharing experience and enhancing cooperation in the Region

26th ERC - Innsbruck, Austria, 26–27 June 2008 ([ERC/08/REP](#)):

1. FAO and adaptation to climate change in the European region
2. Promotion of traditional regional agricultural and food products: A further step towards sustainable rural development

25th ERC - Riga, Latvia, 8–9 June 2006 ([ERC/06/REP](#)):

1. Contribution of rural development in meeting the World Food Summit (WFS)/Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the Region
2. The view of the European Region on the role of FAO as provider of global public goods
3. Strengthening Regional Cooperation and assisting countries in controlling Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in Europe, including CIS countries

24th ERC - Montpellier, France, 5–7 May 2004 ([ERC/04/REP](#)):

1. Food Safety and Quality in Europe: Aspects concerning in particular quality, nutritional balance, the importance of agricultural land and cultural heritage (“terroirs”)
2. Agricultural Research: its role and contribution to sustainable rural development
3. Major European Programmes, Initiatives and Fora on Agricultural Research
4. Review of the State of Food and Agriculture in the Region: Focus on Rural Poverty

Annex 2

**PROPOSALS FOR THE MAIN TECHNICAL THEME
OF THE FORTY-SECOND SESSION OF ECA****1. Water for food and agriculture in the Europe and Central Asia region**

Agriculture relies on freshwater from different sources, such as rivers and lakes. Rainfed agriculture and much of livestock production depend on water from limited rainfall. Moreover, water-related ecosystems also sustain livelihoods, food security and nutrition³. There is certainly no life without water, and our region is no exception in this respect.

Several countries in Europe and Central Asia have been severely impacted by water scarcity and droughts for decades now, which among others impacts agriculture, especially in terms of water availability and sources of water for irrigation.

Water used to be centrally managed and distributed in the USSR during soviet time, and most irrigation infrastructure was constructed during that period. The age of the irrigation infrastructure (e.g. channels) and lack of good maintenance (e.g. high water loss from channels) adds up to the negative impacts of water scarcity situation. Lack of proper drainage and periodical droughts lead to water logging and high salinity – a major challenge in the region for both large scale (e.g. many farmland of Kazakhstan) and small scale (e.g. many farms in Uzbekistan) farmlands. These were further affected by adverse impact of climate change. All these factors lead to land degradation, abandoning of many arable lands and crop losses across the region.

Potential micro-level solutions are promoting more salt-tolerant and drought resistance cash crops rather than high water demand crops such as cotton, in addition to modernization of irrigation infrastructure (e.g. investment in drip irrigation). However, in order to have a sustainable micro-level solution, there is a need for a solid regional water governance structure in place. This functioning regional water governance structure in agriculture will assist in a local, national and regional behavioral change through the development and implementation of norms, principles, rules, incentives, informative tools and infrastructure, while taking common interests into account, and coordinating among different levels (regional, national, stakeholder/local, farmers/field).

2. Short value chains in an integrated rural development approach and as a key element of sustainable food systems

Agriculture and food sectors are historically and culturally significant in the ECA region. Significant progress has been made to improve productivity and food supplies, increase agri-food trade in volume and value for both exports and imports, and to eliminate hunger. Despite the many achievements, untapped potential exists in the agri-food sector. In addition, concerns persist about the sustainability and effectiveness of the food system due to undernutrition, increasing overweight and obesity, low degree of involvement of small producers in economic growth, food loss and waste, and erosion of natural resources, including loss of biodiversity. Responsible investments are needed to build resilient, efficient value chains to ensure safe, nutritious, and diverse diets are accessible to all.

Countries in the region still have a large share of their populations living in rural areas, and national food and nutrition security depends to a large extent on rural small holdings, the vast majority of which are family farms. Unlocking the untapped potential requires multiple interventions to enable smallholders and small family farms to access markets and participate in value chains. Notably, collective territorial actions based on community level needs and opportunities, including facilitating

³ <http://www.fao.org/3/cb1441en/CB1441EN.pdf>

cooperation and connectivity between small farms and local businesses, enhance the functionality of short value chains, boost small-holders agricultural productivity, and ultimately strengthen rural livelihoods.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to reaffirm the importance of short value chains, local food systems, sustainable production and functioning markets, which can lead to a range of outcomes including improved access to nutritious foods, dynamic rural communities, trade and markets, fair and decent employment opportunities for all including youth and women, improved livelihoods, and economic development, use of One Health and circular economy approaches and protection of the environment and biodiversity.

Domestic policies should be designed and implemented to support short value chain development, in line with the agriculture and rural development strategies. Food systems transformation requires all three dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental, social) to be considered and therefore, integrated, participatory and inclusive local planning processes should be established to facilitate progress by defining the development goals for the specific community building on local needs and opportunities. All actors should be involved (small-holders, family farmers, small and medium enterprises, traders, service providers, consumers) and need to have adequate access to services, technologies, finance and credit, knowledge and information, and digital solutions to develop inclusive short value chains ensuring that disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are not left behind.

3. Harnessing innovation and digitalization for food systems

Food systems are in need of transformative change in order to address challenges such as ensuring food security and nutrition, contributing to inclusive growth, and managing natural resources sustainably. This requires attention across the entire food system, including in agricultural production, food chain operations, trade and distribution patterns, management of food safety, animal health and plant health risks, and consumer education programmes adapted to the needs and priorities of various social groups.

Innovation and digitalization are part of the transformation of the food systems, they can be essential for boosting smallholders' livelihoods, improving food security and nutrition, and building resilience to climate change in the region. The 32nd Regional Conference for Europe (November 2020), encouraged Members in the region to scale up new technologies, including digital ones and biotechnologies; and highlighted that innovation also encompassed innovation of policies and business models for agri-food systems.

Innovation in agriculture cuts across all dimensions of the production cycle and along the entire value chain - from crop, forestry, fishery or livestock production to the management of inputs to market access. Innovation is more than technology, going beyond apps, drones or farm machinery. Innovation in agriculture involves different social, organizational or institutional processes, ranging from access to markets, credit or extension services to marketing produce in a new way.

The ECA Session in 2021 would address innovation as a main topic and specifically discuss in detail the following dimensions: innovations in policies, innovation in business models for agri-food systems and data management.