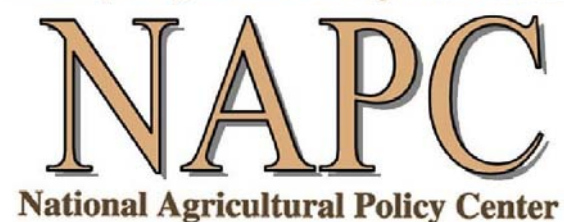


Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform



Policy Brief No 13
**The Main Challenges to the Field-Crop
Farming Area (FS3)**

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The farming system of northern and north-eastern plains (FS3) was one of the six farming systems described in detail in the Syrian Farming Systems Study. This study considers the potential impacts from changes in agricultural policy (e.g. prices, institutional support, marketing, etc) at the household as well as aggregate levels.

The FS3 farming system is the largest one in terms of area (4.7 million hectares), covering one quarter of the national area, almost half of the invested land (2.6 million hectares, about 48% of Syrian territory), and one third of agricultural holders (293 thousand). This farming system is characterized by a high dependence on so-called strategic crops, relatively large holding sizes, and low market access conditions as a result of the vast distribution of this system (particularly for unregulated crops, e.g. vegetables, not strategic crops).

The integration between crop cultivation (where, strategic crops accounts for 61% of the total national strategic crop area in which irrigated wheat accounts 78%, rainfed wheat 74%, rainfed lentil 68%, chickpeas 20%, and sugar beet 46% based on 2002 database) and livestock breeding characterized this system and both are the main source of household incomes. The high reliance on cotton as a cash crop should be reviewed, because the long cropping season for cotton limits the possibilities for intensification of land use. The same is true for sugar beet. Cultivation of such labor-water-intensive crops (cotton, sugar beet) associated with land fragmentation and traditional irrigation methods led to environmental exhaustions (water and soil depletion).

The major constraints to achieve a sustainable growth in agriculture in the state are:

- Fragmentation of land holdings resulted in non-mechanized agricultural production and lower economic investment of lands;
- Land degradation (problem soils); Declining nutrient status of soils and soil health due to traditional crop husbandry activities more specifically relating to irrigation and nutrient application;
- Inadequate treatment for dry land farming (i.e. deep plowing application);
- Continuing marketing problems, (particularly non-strategic crops such as vegetables, cumin, soybean etc);
- Poor capability of the extensions to efficiently transfer modern technology and professional information to producers due to the lack of adequate equipment, particularly transportation means, and the over-commitment of some extension units (e.g. some units have to work with many villages); and
- Lack of agricultural loans (i.e. medium and long-term loans), which means lack of financial support to promote the agricultural investment in those areas.

Recommendations

It is possible to present the major strategies of the government to achieve the objective of sustainable increase in both agricultural and livestock production as follows.

Land-oriented policies:

- Increasing the plant and soil analysis labs allocated at Mantika level in order to enable farmers to perform a periodical analysis.
- Adopting a new policy by the Agricultural Cooperative Bank (ABC) for fertilizer distribution regarding soil test documents presented by the beneficiaries (farmers) to reduce fertilizer overuse.
- Advising farmers to apply only land-leveling operations on the rainfed-land.

Water-oriented policies:

- Rehabilitating the old public network irrigation and increasing its efficiency to reach 75%, and expanding the tubes-pressured irrigation projects;
- Reconsidering the current water distribution mechanisms (area based) using instead the crop/quota policy;
- Triaging the extension cadres to be aware of modern irrigation techniques (installing, operating, and maintaining modern irrigation methods); and
- Establishing water-users associations.

Marketing-oriented policies:

- Establishing specific associations for agricultural production marketing;
- Establishing milk-collection centers in the livestock concentration areas; and
- Subsidizing the price of soybean crop to promote its cultivation since it is consider as an alternative industrial crop (in 2004, the total imported quantity of soybean accounted for 139369 tons, while domestic production accounted only for 3698 tons).

Financial-oriented policies:

- Increasing medium and long-term agricultural loans and promoting agricultural investment in rural areas; and
- Issuing legislation that permits the Agricultural Cooperative Bank (ACB) to accept the inherited agricultural-reform land as collateral for medium and long-term loans.