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# UN-LAS STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

## FOR THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL & ENVIRONMENTAL CLUSTERS 2013 – 2017

### I. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations and the League of Arab States are longtime partners in development in the Arab region both by mandate and by practice. Relations between the two organizations date back to November 1950 when LAS was invited as an intergovernmental Observer to the General Assembly. Since then, the UN and LAS have signed two cooperation agreements; first in 1960 and later in 1989. At the same time, specialized agencies and other organizations of the United Nations system also entered into cooperation agreements with LAS.

Following the High-Level Meeting of the UN Security Council on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2012 on Peace and Security in the Middle East that underscored the necessity of strengthening cooperation between the two organizations across a broad agenda of mutual concerns, the leaders of both organizations exchanged letters in an effort to outline the way forward to consolidate, develop and further the existing ties. In his letter, LAS Secretary General Nabil Al-Arabi called for a review of existing mechanisms of cooperation and the development of recommendations and proposals to update and strengthen them. In his reply, UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon announced the creation of cluster reviews to *“allow a comprehensive assessment of the existing activities and mechanisms of cooperation with a view to coming up with practical proposals.”*

*“Requests the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to strengthen cooperation and coordination between the United Nations and other organizations and agencies of the United Nations system and the League of Arab States and its specialized organizations in order to enhance their capacity to serve the mutual interests and objectives of the two organizations in the political, economic, social, humanitarian, cultural, administrative and technical fields;”*

- GA Resolution A/RES/67/11

With the current changes sweeping the Arab region, **there is an opportunity for both organizations to organize their cooperation along lines that are clear, strategic, and responsive to current challenges.** This is particularly important in the areas of economic, social, and environmental development where multiple actors and initiatives must be coordinated and focused to ensure effectiveness and high impact.

This brief paper is the result of consultations between regional UN organizations and representatives of the LAS, and builds on the priority activities identified at the General Coordination Meeting in Vienna in July 2012 as well as the discussions held at the 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) on 15 March 2013 at ESCWA in Beirut. The paper reviews progress to date on key activities identified in the Matrix of Activities and highlights the strategic priority focus areas for collaborative UN work. It also identifies the key mechanisms for coordination in the economic, social, and environmental pillars.

## II. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR 2013 – 2017

### *a. Priorities Outlined by the Arab Economic and Social Summit*

Arab leaders at the Third Arab Economic and Social Summit held in Riyadh in January 2013 renewed their commitment to economic and social development in the region and pledged to work to implement the decisions of the Summit and those that came before it. In their final declaration<sup>1</sup>, Arab leaders called for increasing by 50% the capital of common Arab Financial Institutions to support economic and social development efforts; strengthening inter-Arab trade and investment; implementing the MDGs, with special attention to Least Developed Countries; Improving the level of health services and disease control; enhancing the quality of education and scientific research; creating an enabling environment for the participation of youth and women; engaging with civil society organizations as partners in development; safeguarding the environment and promoting sustainable development; ensuring water and food security; and promoting sustainable and renewable energy use.

The Summit Declaration provides a reliable marker of the medium to long-term objectives of economic and social development as expressed by the Arab region's leaders. Taken together with global commitments, UN mandates and on-going efforts, they serve as a foundation for defining the strategic priorities of LAS-UN collaborative work.

United Nations support to the outcomes of the Summit as well as support and engagement in the preparation of the next Arab Economic and Social Summit planned to be held in 2015 in Tunisia should be strategic, targeted and results based.

### *b. Economic Priorities*

Addressing the challenges surrounding the transition of the Arab region towards higher, inclusive, employment-led and sustainable economic growth patterns is an overarching area of strengthened collaboration between the UN System and the LAS.

In supporting this transformational process, collaborative efforts will be critical **for reassessing economic policies and the quality of growth** in the region, looking beyond wealth creation. This will involve deepening research and dialogue on public expenditure, fiscal, monetary, exchange rate, trade and investment and other sector policies and the adjustments needed to make these more responsive to short term and long term aspirations of men and women of the region, especially those of the poor and vulnerable. This will also entail working towards the establishment of **more transparent and accountable policy-making processes**.

Special emphasis will be on identifying and supporting policies and capacity development programs to **foster entrepreneurship and productive job creation for young men and women**. The promotion of **green entrepreneurship/employment opportunities** would deserve special attention, alongside efforts to sensitize and promote regional and dialogue on the "Green Economy" concept, consistent with Rio+20 outcomes with a view to the implementation of Green Economy initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lasportal.org/wps/wcm/connect/c9935e004e4618d782b5aa5cbcbca77a/22-1-2013.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>

Against the spectrum of recurrent food crises due to water scarcity, natural disasters and climate change, or conflicts, **the promotion of food security and sustainable agriculture** will also remain among the top priorities for joint UN-LAS collaboration within the framework of the Joint Action Plan on Agricultural Development and food security in Africa and the Arab Region

Considering the gains that Arab countries can make through adopting regional approaches to economic transformation challenges, in particular the much needed diversification of economic structures (expanding manufacturing and exports of non-oil commodities), UN agencies and the LAS should also actively **engage in supporting regional economic integration processes, and creating enabling environments for increased trade and investment relationships among countries in the region**. The UN will apply **macroeconomic modeling** to quantify the economic costs and benefits of regional integration both at the national and regional levels. However as economic integration is, first and foremost, predicated on improving regional infrastructure systems in both quantitative and qualitative terms the UN will support the LAS efforts in drawing and finalizing **regional transport strategies**. Activation of the Aid for Trade Initiative will receive special attention.

To better inform joint policy-oriented and programmatic action, special efforts will also be made to **streamline and harmonize statistical data between LAS Member states and UN agencies**.

### *c. Social Priorities*

Social priorities form an important area of collaborative work between the UN System and LAS. This is due to the social and cultural challenges facing the region today, as well as the mandate of a large number of UN organizations to support policy and capacity building for social development.

**Accelerating the implementation of the MDGs** is an area of strategic priority for all UN agencies and LAS. With less than 1,000 days left achieve the MDGs, UN agencies have rallied their efforts to support member countries accelerate progress, especially in least developed countries. At the same time, the UN and LAS have been working together to create platforms for dialogue and inclusive consultations on the **Post-2015 Development Agenda**, seeking to solicit the perspective of governments, civil society, and the private sector on “the world we want”. These consultations at the national, regional and cyber-level will continue to be important, as the 2015 deadline looms nearer. At the same time, it will be critical for the UN and LAS to work together to coordinate and ensure **synergy and coherence with the Rio+20 Outcomes** and the work underway to define the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



**Poverty, inequality, and exclusion** are key challenges to be addressed collectively, with a particular focus on creating **new social contracts** that define rules of engagement between citizens, state and institutions of power and that promote greater social cohesion. In this regard, building lasting strategic **partnerships with civil society organizations** and stakeholders will be an important enabler of change. An effort will be made to support **data collection to better monitor poverty and inequality indicators** in order to formulate an effective regional poverty reduction strategy. **Population and demographic changes** in the Arab region carry their own set of challenges and opportunities for development. The UN

system is committed to working with LAS in preparing for the International Conference on Population and Development @20 and in identifying policies and programmes that mainstream population and development. In this regard, **migration** and development issues will feature prominently as UN agencies and LAS focus efforts on the High Level Dialogue and beyond.

With a share of 48% of the unemployed<sup>2</sup>, a generation of **Arab youth** finds that it has limited opportunities and options for self-actualization, fulfillment, and prosperity. Collaboration between the different UN agencies and LAS will be important to identify policies and programmes to empower youth and to create new opportunities for employment and participation. Special attention will be focused on the welfare of **children**, especially those who are made vulnerable by conditions of poverty, exclusion, and conflict. **Gender equality and the empowerment of women** are also strategic priorities that are to be addressed through collaborative programming and capacity building initiatives that aim at enhancing women's economic and political participation, and promoting women and girl's human rights.

**Access to quality education** is another strategic priority for the Arab region, ensuring access of all vulnerable groups to an education that prepares them for a productive life and employment. In addition, promoting investments in scientific research and technology has been highlighted as an enabler of development and progress. **Access to basic quality healthcare** is another priority that has been highlighted given its importance to human development and quality of life. This also includes the development of an **Arab HIV/AIDS Strategy**.

In view of the uprisings and transformations in several countries of the Arab region, the protection of **human rights and freedom of expression** has taken on a new level of urgency. In this regard, UN and LAS should support Governments to ensure a rights based approach to development. In addition, UN and LAS should cooperate to identify strategic entry points that create spaces for dialogue and expression and that promote the emergence of a vibrant media and civil society.

#### ***d. Environmental Priorities***

The strategic environmental priorities for the short to medium-term can be broadly drawn from the decisions of CAMRE and will build upon the work identified under the current matrix. Ensuring that the environmental component of sustainable development is clearly incorporated into the **Rio+20 follow-up, the SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda**, is a clear priority as we move towards 2015. The further development of the work on green investment opportunities and the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production will be a vehicle to achieve this. Engaging with non-traditional partners, drawing particularly from economic and social sectors in the discussions around the SDGs will go a long way to ensuring that the SDG discussions in the region are inclusive and truly reflect the amalgamation of the 3 pillars of sustainable development and move away from the current situation where environment is seen as an add-on. This might require building on the discussions and the recommendations of the Riyadh Arab Economic and Social Summit to establish an **Arab Sustainable Development Council** to ensure environmental sustainability is given adequate attention by the highest decision making body at the regional level. **Environmental governance and**

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<sup>2</sup> International Labor Organization (ILO), Global Employment Trends for Youth October 2008, Geneva 2008, Table A8, p.54

**institutional arrangements** in the region are very important priorities to empower environment related institutions be integrated in and contribute to truly sustainable socio-economic development that is comprehensive, equitable and sustains environmental resources within their natural boundaries.

Linked to the Rio+20 follow up and development of the SDGs is the need for good quality **data and information for decision-making**, and the inclusion of all parts of society in this process. The ongoing work on the development of data portals and information networks is then crucial, but alongside this is the need to ensure that the users have the capacity for analysis and are empowered to take part in the decision-making process, in line with **Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration** of 1992 on access to environmental information and justice.

The **obligations of countries under signed and ratified MEAs** will remain a priority and UN system support to this work via the related Technical Task Teams under the League of Arab States (on biodiversity, land and water; chemicals and wastes; and climate change) will position the countries to meet these obligations and ensure that their national policies and legislation support these obligations.

**Climate change** presents a specific case and should also become a strategic priority for the coming years. There is already a good body of work on the potential impacts of climate change in the region and where the vulnerabilities lie, and networks are established to respond, but national adaptation strategies need to be further developed, with a particular focus on issues relating to land, water and food security, with strong opportunities for the development of regional cooperation initiatives relating to this as well as in other areas relating to the management of **transboundary resource management** (shared watersheds, sand and dust storms etc.).

The Arab region has an abundance of options for promoting **Green Economy** as an approach for more sustainable production where natural resources are preserved while renewables are enhanced and encouraged at the strategic level. Current national level initiatives are leading the way, but lack strategic adoption at the regional level to **promote cross-boundary cooperation**. This includes initiatives such as the use of wind and solar sources for energy, integrated water resources management, sustainable management of forests and rangelands, investment in green technologies, utilization of available land resources to ensure food-water-energy security which can all support the provision of a wider market for job creation for the youth and women of the region. In the face of growing demand and consumption, **energy efficiency** emerges as an important imperative for coordinated regional work.

A final area of strategic focus can be in terms of inter-linkages between environment and other issues. **Health and environment** are intrinsically linked, and many of the challenges brought about by climate change and sand and dust storms have health implications. This provides a strategic opportunity for LAS and UN system organisations and agencies to join together to address these challenges in line with the recent discussions of CAMRE at their Special Session in Cairo (17-18 April 2013). **Environmental education** is also a strategic area to ensure that the future generations have an understanding and empathy for the environment from an early age and its protection becomes part of their everyday life.

### III. MATRIX OF ACTIVITIES UPDATE

One of the key outcomes of the General Cooperation Meeting between LAS and the UN and their specialized organizations held in Vienna between 10 and 12 July 2012 was agreement on a Matrix of Activities within the Framework of the UN-LAS Collaboration. The matrix, which is the result of deliberations in working groups describes concrete projects of cooperation that the UN and LAS commit to implement over the next several years and determines objectives, participating UN and LAS agencies, and timelines.

In March and April 2013, the co-conveners of the economic, social and environmental cluster collected and consolidated updates on the status of implementation of the activities in the matrix (see Annex I). Feedback was received from most UN agencies<sup>3</sup> and the relevant departments in LAS. The updates revealed that progress was made on several activities, while more remains to be done to meet all the commitments made in Vienna.

#### *a. Economic and Environment Issues*

In the area of Economic and Environmental related issues, progress has been made on coordinated support with CAMRE and JCEDAR to the follow-up on Rio+20 Conference, including through the preparation of the Regional Implementation Meeting (RIM) in May 2013, as well as support to the Technical Tasks Teams of LAS in technical support to member states in meeting obligations under Multilateral Environmental Agreements. Cooperation is also well advanced in the development of an Arab Water Security Strategy and Action Plan as well as in the area of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), with support provided for the IWRM project on climate change impact assessment related to water sector and socio-economic vulnerability (RICCAR). High level support was also provided in the preparation for the Conference of the Parties (COP) 18 to the UNFCCC, organized in Doha in November/December 2012. Progress has also been made in the preparation of a draft Framework of Action to guide the implementation of the Arab Strategy for Disaster Reduction, and a proposal for a regional framework and programme on sand and dust storms, including a funding mechanism has been prepared and is being discussed at the highest levels. Support has also been provided for the preparation of resources such as the Arab Atlas on the Changing Environment, a report on the implementation of chemical and waste multilateral agreements, and a CD on sustainable development indicators, while fund raising is underway to support the preparation of the Second Environment Outlook for the Arab Region. Capacity building activities have also been successfully organized including a workshop on access to genetic resources, and training on nationally appropriate mitigation action plans.

According to the matrix, some gaps in implementing the activities remain, and in particular, in undertaking activities related to sustainable agricultural investment, a joint annual meeting on food security, and joint training in the field of agriculture, trade and investment in the context of the Joint Action Plan on Agricultural Development and food security in Africa and the Arab Region. No progress

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<sup>3</sup> ESCWA, ECA, ILO, ITU, OCHA, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, UNHABITAT, UNIDO, UNISDR, UNU-INWEH, UN Women, WHO

was reported on cooperation in nano technology, the organization of an international forum on empowering Arab youth through ICT, and the establishment of a database on market demand for employment. It is unclear whether there has been progress in implementing the activities related to the use of atomic energy and nuclear power.

#### ***b. Social, Cultural, and Human Rights Issues***

Similar to the activities within the economic and environment issues matrix, progress in the area of social, cultural and human rights issues, has been generally positive, with some gaps requiring further follow-up. In this regard, cooperation on issues of migration and displacement has led to the establishment of an inter-agency working group on migration ahead of the High Level Dialogue, the organization of a regional conference on the implications of the brain drain on health determinants, and a draft report on migratory flows. Close cooperation is also taking place in coordination of an Arab voice at global and regional fora to review the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the post-2015 agenda, the SDGs, as well as ICPD 20. The fourth MDG Report is under review and preparation is underway for the Regional Conference on Population and Development. Successful cooperation has also been reported in the area of child issues and child rights, including the issuing of an advocacy tool and guidelines and the organization of training workshops. The area of women and gender issues has also seen effective collaboration in the preparation of new workplans and projects, as well as enhancing women's political and economic participation and combating violence against women. In the health sector, UN agencies have been partnering with LAS to improve health indicators and to combat HIV/AIDS, especially in least developed countries. In the education sector, some progress has been made towards the launch of the Arabic Global Monitoring Report on Education for All. Progress has also been made in joint work on security sector reform, citizen engagement, and identifying new governance indicators. On the humanitarian front, LAS and UN agencies have been working to enhance the exchange of information and improve emergency preparedness in the region through monitoring and early warning.

The gaps in implementation as revealed by the matrix include joint collaboration on human rights and rule of law, including the organization of a high level meeting on the protection and promotion of human rights, the development of a strategy to improve human rights, and capacity building programmes on human rights. It is also unclear whether progress has been made in cooperation on youth issues and in particular in the planning of a regional report on Arab youth, and the preparation of a new programme on empowerment and capacity building of young Arabs. Gaps in progress also remain in the implementation of activities related to the implementation of the science and technology research strategy, training on eradicating illiteracy, adult use of ICT, and programmes for people with special needs.

#### ***c. Lessons from the Matrix of Activities***

The Matrix of Activities serves as a joint workplan documenting and guiding some of the key activities between LAS and UN Agencies. The Matrix is also an important tool to enhance information sharing and promote greater transparency of development activities being undertaken by the different parties.

However, two key weaknesses of the Matrix remain. First, the Matrix does not always indicate who is the lead UN agency for each activity, and in many cases does not include a timeline. This may result in a situation where accountability for the delivery of activities and outputs is unclear or vague. Second, the Matrix remains a static tool that is difficult to modify and update. The most recent effort to update the Matrix proved to be a lengthy and complicated process. Updates, comments and observations are not easily integrated into the matrix, and despite several reminders, some agencies did not review and update their progress, rendering the accuracy of the updated matrix in doubt.

#### IV. MECHANISMS FOR COORDINATION

##### *a. Mandated Regular Meetings*

**General coordination meetings** are held between representatives of the UN System and LAS once every two years (even years), and joint **inter-agency sectoral meetings** are also convened on a biennial basis to address priority areas of major importance to the development of the Arab region (odd years).

##### *b. Focal Point System*

As a system, the United Nations uses different mechanisms to coordinate its joint work with the League of Arab States. Each UN Agency has assigned a **focal point or unit responsible for coordination** with LAS. This focal point normally has responsibility for overall management and monitoring of progress on activities with LAS. In addition, most UN agencies also have thematic focal points who liaise with the relevant technical departments in LAS on substantive matters. LAS uses a similar system of focal points, where central coordination with UN agencies is managed by the Secretariat, while focal points and officials in the technical departments liaise with their counterparts in the implementation of activities and programmes.

##### *c. The Regional Coordination Mechanism as Platform*

At the regional level, the **Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM)** has been identified as a **platform for UN – LAS coordination on economic, social, and environmental issues**. The meetings of the RCM, which are normally held twice a year, include regional directors of all UN agencies working in the Arab region, as well as senior representatives of the League of Arab States. During the 18<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the RCM on 15 March 2013, members agreed to include a standing item on UN – LAS coordination on the agenda of every meeting providing an opportunity to institutionalize modalities of consultation. The RCM also confirmed the importance of focusing special attention to support LAS's specialized Arab Ministerial Councils and capacity building for LAS and its specialized bodies.

#### ***d. Co-Conveners of the Economic, Social and Environment Cluster***

As with the political and humanitarian clusters, the economic, social, and environment cluster is co-convened by ESCWA and UNDP. The role of the co-conveners is to coordinate input of the different UN agencies and LAS on strategic priority issues, and to consolidate common positions relating to the relationship with LAS. The co-conveners use the RCM as a sounding board for consultations, as well as email interactions and ad-hoc meetings. In the overall area of environment, UNEP is a lead partner in identifying environmental priorities and assessing progress.

### **V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION**

The United Nations and the League of Arab States have been long time partners in the promotion of economic and social development and environmental sustainability. UN agencies, funds and programmes have well established work programmes, each within their own mandate to collaborate with LAS and to support institutional capacity building at the national and regional levels. The ground is shifting in the Arab region today, bringing forth an opportunity for both organizations to arrange their cooperation along lines that are strategic, clear and responsive to current challenges.

*LAS Priorities for development have been outlined by the successive Arab Economic and Social Summits. Taken together with global commitments, UN mandates and on-going efforts, they serve as a foundation for defining the strategic priorities of UN-LAS collaborative work:*

Recommendation 1: The UN and LAS to jointly support efforts to increase technical support and funding for inclusive and sustainable economic and social development efforts with a focus on the quality of growth and productive job creation for young men and women;

Recommendation 2: The UN and LAS to focus efforts in the short and medium term on accelerating MDG progress with a focus on eradicating poverty, and combating inequality especially gender inequality, and exclusion, and improving the quality of basic services They will also collaborate to identify regional priorities for the post-2015 development agenda through inclusive consultations, and ensure synergy with the Rio+20 Outcomes and the Sustainable Development Goals;

Recommendation 3: The UN and LAS to actively support regional economic integration processes, and the creation of enabling environments for increased trade and investment relationships among countries in the region, including in the agricultural sector, with special consideration for employment creation, food security and the sustainable management of natural resources;

Recommendation 4: The UN and LAS will step-up collaborative programming and capacity building initiatives that aim at enhancing women's economic and political empowerment, and the promotion of women and girl's human rights.

Recommendation 5: The UN and LAS to promote the principles of human rights and freedom of expression and cooperate to identify strategic entry points that create spaces for dialogue and promote the emergence of a vibrant civil society and media;

Recommendation 6: Consider the establishment of an Arab Sustainable Development Council to ensure environmental sustainability is given adequate attention by the highest decision making body at the regional level;

Recommendation 7: The UN and LAS will re-double efforts to streamline and harmonize statistical data.

*Strengthened mechanisms for collaboration between the UN and LAS are needed to ensure effective coordination of programmes and initiatives:*

Recommendation 8: The UN and LAS will work closely in the preparations for the 2014 UN-LAS General Coordination Meeting by helping to define the agenda and priorities for discussion at that meeting. UN agencies also pledge to support the preparations for the 2015 Economic and Social Summit;

Recommendation 9: The Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) constitutes a platform for strategic policy coordination on economic, social and environmental issues and a forum to discuss regional priorities and capacity needs;

Recommendation 10: UN agencies and LAS will regularly update and use the matrix of activities agreed at the general coordination meeting in Vienna in July 2012 as a framework for joint work and a tool to monitor progress and accountability.