

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COUNCIL**

Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/CL5.SDGS/2020/WG.1/Re
port
18 January 2021
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Report

**Arab Regional Parliamentary Forum on the 2030 Agenda:
The impact of COVID-19 on SDG
implementation and role of parliaments
Online, 26 November 2020**

Summary

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), organised on 26 November 2020, as an online event, the Regional Parliamentary Forum on the 2030 Agenda in the Arab region, under the theme of impact of Covid-19 on the implementation of the sustainable development goals (SDG) and the role of parliaments.

The main objective of the Forum was to provide a platform for informing parliamentarians of progress in implementing the SDGs and arriving at a set of recommendations for transformative change in the region. The forum convened in three sessions. Participants were briefed on the highlights of the Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 and the role of parliamentarians in responding to crises, and engaged in an interactive discussion on ways of strengthening the role of parliament in responding to crises and achieving the SDGs within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The forum provided an opportunity for participants to share knowledge on common challenges and strategies that could contribute to the realization of the SDGs by 2030.

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Introduction

1. The world is now in the throes of a health crisis weighing heavily on various socio-economic aspects of life and uncovering stark asymmetries and structural imbalances in societies and economies. In the Arab region, the COVID-19 pandemic poses additional challenges to an already faltering progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the aftereffects are expected to be felt for years to come. As was shown by the Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020, work on the implementation of the SDGs in the region has not advanced at the requisite pace despite progress on some fronts even before the pandemic .
2. Parliamentarians have a crucial role to play in ensuring that policies and measures adopted to contain the pandemic and respond to its socioeconomic impact are responsive to the needs and priorities of their constituents and protect the most vulnerable. They are also responsible for overseeing the work of the executive government and scrutinising the use of public finances, particularly during crises; not only to legislate as the need arises, but also to ensure that the democratic values of governance are upheld and the rights of people are protected. Parliaments across the Arab region have responded to the pandemic in various ways. In addition to adopting innovative solutions to ensure the wellbeing of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff, and sustain operations, such as by holding virtual sessions and adopting tele-working, parliaments have passed laws to address repercussions of the pandemic, amended emergency laws, and called upon governments to support the worst- affected groups, while some also established ad hoc committees to help combat the pandemic.
3. Within this context, ESCWA and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), organised as an online event on 26 November 2020 the “Arab Regional Parliamentary Forum on the 2030 Agenda: The impact of COVID-19 on SDG implementation and the role of parliaments”. The 2020 Parliamentary Forum builds on joint efforts targeting parliamentarians in the region and reflecting effective partnership; namely, the Regional Seminar for Parliamentarians on the 2030 Agenda¹ and the annual Arab Region Parliamentary Forum on the 2030 Agenda.²
4. This year, the Forum provided a platform for informing parliamentarians of progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030 and for arriving at a set of recommendations for transformative change in the region. It also offered an opportunity for dialogue and knowledge sharing on common challenges and possible strategies that could contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030, focussing, in particular, on the role of parliaments in crisis management, and concluded with a set of recommendations on future steps to ensure that the pandemic response and recovery efforts are inclusive and consistent with the SDGs.

I. Outcomes of the Arab Regional Parliamentary Forum on the 2030 Agenda

5. The Forum concluded with the following key recommendations and messages:
 - (a) The coronavirus crisis should not be used to justify delays and shortcomings in development work; rather, due to it, fragility in governments and societies can no longer be ignored;
 - (b) The coronavirus virus crisis has highlighted flaws and fragilities in various development policies, as well as the gap that often exists between executive and legislative powers. Not only during crises but also in their aftermath, parliaments have a crucial role in addressing these flaws and fragilities by redefining priorities: (1) focusing on key sectors, such as health and education, and prioritising human

¹ Organised by ESCWA, UNDP and the Islamic Development Bank Group in Beirut on 8-9 November 2017, Website link: <https://www.unescwa.org/events/committee>.

² Organised by ESCWA, UNDP and the Islamic Development Bank Group in collaboration with the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Beirut on 24-25 January 2019. Website link: <https://www.unescwa.org/events/2019-arab-parliamentary-forum-2030-agenda>.

security in the broader sense, and (2) appraising and monitoring budgets to ensure appropriate allocation of resources;

(c) The crisis has also exposed the absence or weakness of policy integration and coordination, an issue identified by the Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 as one of the main obstacles to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Hence, parliamentary work needs to factor considerations of integration and coordination into law-making and budget control processes, linking the different dimensions of sustainable development;

(d) The importance of the role of parliament in drawing attention to external factors that exacerbate the impact of crises in countries suffering from war, blockade, occupation, or conflict;

(e) The need for parliament to play a diplomatic role by urging adherence to global and regional agreements that some countries, especially donors, may move away from; parliamentary diplomacy can contribute to mobilising efforts aimed at ensuring that commitments are met;

(f) The oversight role of Parliament in enhancing the effectiveness of policies and ensuring the appropriateness of resource allocation is all the more important in view of both, the scarcity of financial resources in some countries and the succession of crises;

(g) The importance of proactive crisis planning, not only for the current health crisis, but also for environmental, economic and other crises, particularly in a region that is vulnerable to complex simultaneous crises, such as the Arab region;

(h) The importance of availability of information and data to the various bodies concerned, while in the Arab region, lack of accurate, up-to-date information and data is endemic. Controlling and managing crises would be reinforced by efforts to provide and share information and data speedily, regularly and accurately. Prevalent levels of vulnerability, exacerbated by the crises, cannot be addressed by half solutions, half resources and disjointed strategies;

(i) The crisis has demonstrated the importance of flexibility in facilitating the work of parliaments, and organising meetings and committees, through internal working systems that are amendable to allow parliamentarians to respond more quickly in managing crises.

II. Topics for discussion

6. The meeting was organised in three sessions with presentations, along with a general discussion of the most prominent issues.

A. Session I: Introductory

7. The session was moderated by Mr. Hassan Krayem, Governance Advisor, UNDP, and began with a presentation on the highlights of the Arab Sustainable Development Report (ASDR-2020) by Ms. Maisaa Youssef, ASDR Lead Author, ESCWA. She noted the key finding of the report, which is that the region would not achieve the SDGs without a development renaissance and a radical shift in approach to policy design, implementation and evaluation. She then listed the six entry points advocated by the report for achieving the desired transformations: enhancing integrated policy processes; transforming structures of Arab economies to boost productivity; adopting a human-rights approach to development; ending occupation, conflicts and disputes in the region; reviewing the role of education and learning, particularly the poor quality of education and the limited spending on R&D; and urging the global community to fulfil its commitment to providing support to developing countries. Ms. Youssef concluded by underscoring the importance of regional and parliamentary action in urging governments to adhere to the 2030 Agenda with its integrated approach.

8. Next Ms. Sara Salman, Regional Advisor on Population Affairs, ESCWA, gave a presentation on the role of parliaments in responding to crises. She highlighted the role of parliament at various stages of a crisis, including scrutinising and endorsing plans for crisis avoidance, management, response, and recovery. She then addressed the role of parliamentarians in evaluating/verifying the adequacy of adopted laws, as well as their responsibility for steering public budgets, which is additionally important in crises, to ensure that the resources allocated for response are commensurate with the needs and priorities of citizens, and for

monitoring the disbursement of potential funds and donations from abroad to ensure that they are used effectively and to reduce possible waste and corruption. Ms. Salman then presented a series of parliamentary experiences from the region and beyond to exemplify how parliaments deal with challenges such as: the need for swift action, difficulty in communicating with voters, and limited human and material resources.

9. Mr. Avinash Bikha, Project Officer at the IPU Centre for Innovation in Parliament presented the regional and international findings of IPU surveys on the response of parliaments to crises, including the 2020 survey for the upcoming World e-Parliament Report, showcasing the innovative tools adopted. He elaborated on the extent to which technology, in response to the pandemic, has been adopted by parliaments in virtual sessions of both committees and plenary. He elaborated on the challenges met by parliaments especially concerning the rules and regulations for voting - which in many parliaments needed to be adapted to accommodate some form of remote voting. Mr. Bikha highlighted that the adoption of remote working and meeting technologies in some cases resulted in improved performance. Technologies, he explained, also opened new ways for parliaments to be more transparent. He cited the case of the Moroccan House of Representatives that for the first time live streamed committee hearings, which was now easier due to the remote meeting technology. Looking at future and to what extent the innovations may be retained by parliaments, Mr. Bikha cited data from the World e-Parliament Report, that included the Parliaments of Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Qatar, which all indicated that remote working practices - especially for committees - are likely to be retained after the pandemic.

B. Session II: Open discussion with Arab parliamentarians on means for enhancing the role of parliament in crisis response

10. The session was moderated by Mr. Karam Karam, Regional Advisor on Governance, ESCWA. It took the form of an open discussion by participants, focused on the following questions: (a) What challenges did parliamentarians face in responding to the COVID-19 crisis? (b) What reforms are required to overcome these challenges?

11. Mr. Abdullah Salameh, member of the Saudi Shura Council, made an intervention on the mechanisms adopted by countries to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic in a way that serves the people, noting the role of parliament in making laws, drafting plans and monitoring implementation. He noted that the availability of communication infrastructures contributed to the continuation of parliamentary meetings and voting during the pandemic period. Mr. Salameh also highlighted the role of parliamentary diplomacy in promoting the implementation of international agreements.

12. Mr. Muthanna Nader Amin, MP, Iraq, highlighted the difficulties faced by the parliament in Iraq due to the pandemic, adding that the pandemic coincided with the crisis of falling oil prices and a return to borrowing. The difficulties encountered included inability to meet, have a quorum and vote, even remotely. He also referred to certain measures, such as the establishment of a special unit for response to the pandemic, and stressed the importance of cooperation between legislative and executive authorities in dealing with the crisis, as well as the importance of enhancing oversight over government work. Mr. Amin also noted the impact of the pandemic on education, health and the economy.

13. Ms. Fatima Khamis, member of the Syrian People's Assembly, referred to the various economic and social impacts of the pandemic, and wondered whether it would be feasible to talk about development in the context of crises and the siege and sanctions imposed on the Syrian Arab Republic. Ms. Khamis also indicated that the Assembly had collaborated with the government and civil society to address the impact of the crisis, including through undertaking economic initiatives.

14. Ms. Saida Ait Bouali, MP, Morocco, made an intervention on acts of solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis and the challenges faced by MPs in working remotely. She pointed out that the crisis entailed thinking of innovative measures. In this context, a national fund was formed to deal with the crisis. Ms.

Bouali noted that legislative work was dominated by decree making and budget resolutions and that the parliament sustained its work through the crisis.

15. Dr. Inaya Ezzedine, MP, Lebanon, explained the difficulties encountered by the Parliament during the crisis due to the weak communication infrastructure and technological capabilities. Yet, the Parliament held sessions on disbursement of budgets, tax exemptions and allocation of funds to address the economic and social crisis in Lebanon that coincided with the pandemic. Dr. Ezzedine also stressed the importance of translating the concept of parliamentary action as to feed directly into the core of the SDGs.

16. Mr. Ziauddin Blhabri, member of the National Assembly of Algeria, made an intervention on the steps taken by Algeria during the pandemic to assess by sector the financial impact and the impact on employment, as well as the measures taken to adhere to health guidelines and the economic mobilisation to maintain employment. He also noted the need for reprioritising the SDGs to give precedence to the health sector and to a human-centred focus, and for rethinking economic and social systems while working on the SDGs.

17. Ms. Hala Abu Ali, MP, Egypt, made an intervention on what the pandemic had exposed in the health sector and the difficulties that faced parliaments in managing sudden crises. She noted the speed with which the Egyptian parliament responded by effectively adapting electronic platforms to its work needs.

C. Session III: Open discussion with Arab parliamentarians on role of parliament in achieving the SDGs within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

18. The session was moderated by Mr. Rami Ahmed, Special Envoy on SDGs, IsDB. He opened by referring to the 2020 Arab Sustainable Development Report, which provided an analysis of the conditions of the Arab region and its faltering work towards sustainable development and pointed out that the pandemic has aggravated the situation. The session took the form of an open discussion by the participants to the following questions: (a) What are the most pressing priorities and opportunities for parliamentary action in your country to achieve the SDGs in the context of recovery from COVID-19? (b) What changes are needed to strengthen the role of parliament in achieving the SDGs within the context of the crisis? (c) How can parliaments help turn the crisis into an opportunity for delivering on sustainable development?

19. Mr. Ali Al Sawi, an expert in parliamentary affairs and a professor at the University of Cairo, started the discussion by focusing on the requirements of parliamentary work, most important of which is the issue of funding that executive governments on the one hand push to increase and parliaments on the other to rationalize and monitor. He also stressed the importance of information and data availability to support the work of parliamentarians and shed light on a number of challenges to decision making, including the details that go into executive regulations, the relationship between parliament and the executive government and the availability of funds. He emphasized the need to avoid blaming the COVID-19 pandemic for the delay in the development process.

20. Mr. Talal Al-Qudabi, member of the Saudi Shura Council, made an intervention on the importance of pre-planning for crisis management, through the development of proactive plans, not only for the current health crisis but also for all types of crises. He also reaffirmed the importance of provision of information and data by qualified staff to facilitate parliamentary work and improve its efficiency.

21. Mr. Abdul Hamid Mohammed Al-Naqri, member of the Syrian People's Assembly, reiterated the importance of the 2030 Agenda in achieving the well-being of peoples, but pointed out that recurrent crises undermine the possibility of achieving the goals by 2030. He indicated that the Assembly oversaw the work of the executive in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, which established a committee to address the effects of the pandemic and allocated funds for this purpose. He pointed that the Syrian Arab Republic was not only facing a health crisis but also terrorism, an economic crisis, and the debilitating impacts of the blockade and the sanctions.

22. Mr. Abdoulaye Bouano, member of the Moroccan Parliament, made an intervention on the impact of the pandemic and how the Kingdom of Morocco dealt with it, taking advantage of the opportunities it

created; for example, the crisis impelled a rethinking of the social protection system and its coverage. He also explained the work of the Parliament's Finance Committee during the pandemic and the establishment of a special committee within parliament to monitor the state budget and went over some budget laws that enable Moroccan parliamentarians to scrutinise spending.

23. Mr. Abdullah Salameh, member of the Saudi Shura Council, summarised priorities as: improving efficiency of the education system by eliminating redundancy, rationalising financial investments, and ensuring the continued flow of imports during crises.

24. Ms. Hala Abu Ali, member of the Egyptian Parliament, emphasised the role of parliamentarians in monitoring state budgets and the need for the process to be participatory. She pointed out that the Egyptian Parliament established a subcommittee to its budget committee to ensure that the state budget is conducive to the achievement of the SDGs and is linked to performance indicators.

25. Ms. Wafa bin Mustafa, President of the Coalition of Women MPs from Arab Countries to Combat Violence Against Women and a former MP, stressed the importance of having government plans co-developed with MPs, as happened in Jordan, where the planning process for the SDGs included members of both chambers of the Parliament. She added that there is in the Arab region a need to rearrange priorities, specifically in health, education and e-infrastructure, and concluded by stressing the importance of revitalising the work towards Goal 17 and building genuine international partnerships.

26. Ms. Saida Bou Ali, member of the Moroccan Parliament, addressed the challenges posed by the pandemic, such as the increase in violence against women. She referred to the work of the Equality Commission, which monitors gender equality in the budget. To take advantage of opportunities arising out of the pandemic, she advocated reconsidering and improving the conditions and mechanisms of the labour sector and establishing investment funds to promote employment and support entrepreneurs. Ms. Bou Ali further urged that the private sector, civil society and the government work all together to deal with the pandemic.

27. Dr. Inaya Ezzedine, member of the Lebanese Parliament, then highlighted the gaps uncovered by the pandemic in existing institutional structures and the importance of continuing to adopt the 2030 Agenda as a framework for sustainable development. She further spoke of the political difficulties currently faced by Lebanon, including the failure to form a government. Dr. Ezzedine stressed the importance of availability of data and information, advanced infrastructure and the role of SDG 16 in governance.

28. Mr. Abdelhamid Souiri, member of the Moroccan House of Counsellors, emphasised that the current situation requires concerted efforts. He noted that the Parliament had paid increasing attention to the SDGs by introducing some of their implications into its own work, in addition to addressing related issues, such as equality and social justice, and the adoption of the 2030 Agenda.

29. Mr. Azmi Shuaibi, Adviser to the Palestinian anti-corruption NGO, and a former parliamentarian in Palestine, made an intervention on the situation in Palestine, pointing out that there are two governments while parliament is inoperative having been dissolved. He then noted efforts made by civil-society organisations to urge government to work intensively on the SDGs and improve budgetary transparency. However, such efforts are hampered by emergency laws. Mr. Shuaibi also pointed out that the pandemic exacerbated the marginalisation of certain groups, such as rural populations and the poor; thus, exposing the fragility of the social protection system and highlighting the need to review health insurance schemes.

III. Organisation of work

A. Venue and date

30. The Forum was organised by the 2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination Cluster of ESCWA, in partnership with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), and took place on 26 November 2020, as a virtual online event.

B. Opening session

31. The Forum was opened by Ms. Rola Dashti, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCWA. In her opening remarks, Ms. Dashti noted the troubling impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Arab region, including exacerbation of poverty and unemployment, economic contraction, worsening access to services and education, crumbling social safety nets, and increased domestic violence, adding that the pandemic has exposed serious gaps in countries, communities, institutions and structures; hence the need for transformational structural change in line with the 2030 Agenda. She also pointed out that parliamentarians have a crucial role to play in ensuring that policies and measures adopted to contain the pandemic and respond to its socioeconomic impact are responsive to the needs and priorities of their constituents and protect the most vulnerable, concluding by stressing the need for leveraging the opportunity to rebuild better and lay solid foundations based on lessons learned from past experiences.

32. Mr. Martin Chungong, Secretary General of IPU, delivered a speech in which he stressed the need to bolster actions to advance the realization of the SDGs despite the challenging times we are going through. He affirmed that parliaments should be in a position to influence policies and budgets to ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic responses and recovery strategies incorporate the SDG framework in its entirety. Parliaments should monitor policy implementation and ensure that the needs and concerns of the whole of society are given due consideration, with no one left behind, he added. He concluded his speech by saying that going back to business as usual cannot be an option. Parliaments should be at the heart of the national and global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

33. Mr. Khaled Abdel Shafi, Regional Hub Director, Regional Bureau of Arab States, UNDP, followed. He referred to the multiple and recurrent crises that the Arab region had faced before the pandemic, including armed conflicts, that have set development back in some countries. The pandemic exacerbated these crises and posed additional challenges, while coinciding with lower oil prices due to lower global demand. Mr. Abdel Shafi then pointed out that the Human Development Index, has, for the first time since its launch in 1990, declined by 6 per cent with significant impacts on marginalised groups, such as women, children, refugees, and migrant workers, concluding by stressing the need for working differently in the decade to 2030 to achieve the SDGs in the region.

34. Mr. Rami Ahmed, Special Envoy for SDGs and Adviser to the President of the IsDB Group, pointed to the role of parliamentarians in policymaking and monitoring progress on the SDGs as indicated in the 2030 Agenda. He noted the need for building the capacity of parliamentarians in the Arab region for that role, as well as the need for providing guidance and manuals to parliaments on the 2030 Agenda. He concluded by raising a number of questions on obstacles faced by Arab parliaments, including capacity gaps, for example, in aligning budgets with the 2030 Agenda.

C. Participants

35. The meeting was attended by 31 participants from 10 countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as by 28 participants from the co-organising institutions. Women accounted for 42 per cent of participants.

D. Programme of work

36. Summary of the Programme of Work:

- (a) Welcoming remarks;
- (b) Session I - Scene Setting;
- (c) Session II - Tour de table: Open discussion with Arab parliamentarians on means for strengthening the role of parliament in crisis response;
- (d) Session III - Tour de table: Open discussion with Arab parliamentarians on the role of parliament in achieving the SDGs within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- (e) Wrap-up.

E. Documents

37. The list of documents is available at: <https://www.unescwa.org/events/2020-arab-parliamentary-forum-2030-agenda>.

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³ The Annex is published as received without editing

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