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Background paper

2017 Arab Forum for Sustainable Development

Advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing Arab region



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Regional dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Both the implementation and the follow-up and review architecture of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have three distinctive layers: national, regional and global. The importance of dialogue and review at the regional level was strongly recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Regional follow-up and review processes supported by the regional commissions, other regional organizations and United Nations system entities can provide important inputs to countries of the region as well as to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) linking and bringing together the national and global levels.

The purpose of regional follow-up and review processes is to accelerate progress towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at country level but also to address issues and challenges, which cannot be dealt with by countries acting alone. Regional reviews can also provide with a critical overview of progress and major policy issues in each region. The regional forums for sustainable development have an important role and can help bring together existing review mechanisms, provide aggregated inputs to the HLPF and offer a platform for peer and thematic reviews at the regional level.

Arab Forum for Sustainable Development (AFSD)

The Arab Forum for Sustainable Development is the main component of the regional architecture for supporting implementation and follow-up and review of the Agenda in the Arab region. The Forum is a high-level regional platform for dialogue and coordination of mechanisms for the implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. While it is very much anchored in the specific needs and context of the region, it is equally linked to the global level by helping to shape and convey the vision, messages and position of the region.

To date, important progress has been achieved in the Arab region on the implementation and follow-up and review architecture, including through the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development convened by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). It is envisioned that the regional follow-up and review process will largely consist of information sharing, discussion and peer learning and assessments of progress and policies allow for discussions on overall trends, gaps, lessons learned, best practices, and issues specific to the region — whether they relate to specific goals, means of implementation, the thematic review or others — and boost regional cooperation and partnerships.

Year 2017 will mark the fourth annual forum for sustainable development for the Arab region. The 2017 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development builds on the success of the three previous sessions of the Forum, held in Amman in 2014, in Manama in 2015 and again in Amman in 2016, and the leadership role of ESCWA and its partners in promoting regional dialogue and consensus-building during Arab preparations for implementing and reviewing progress towards the sustainable development agenda.

In the Arab region, ESCWA, in line with its multiple mandates in relation to the implementation and follow-up of the Agenda¹, in partnership with the members of the Regional Coordination Mechanism and other regional organizations, and in cooperation with the host Government of the Kingdom of Morocco, will organize the 2017 AFSD.

The 2017 session will mark the first time the Forum will be organized in line with the terms of reference stipulated in the Doha Declaration on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development². Through the declaration, ESCWA member States expressed their renewed commitment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, to intensify efforts to develop institutional frameworks to lead, mobilize resources, build capacity, determine the roles of various partners and identify mechanisms to benefit more from national and

¹ Transforming our world (A/RES/70/1), *Para 80 and 81*; Follow-up and review of Agenda 2030 (A/RES/70/684), *Para 10*; Twenty-Eighth ESCWA Ministerial Session, 2014, *314 (XXVIII)*; ESCWA Executive Committee, 2015 (adopted the ESCWA Strategy for Sustainable Development); 2016 Doha Declaration on the Implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

² https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/events/files/report_of_the_twenty-ninth_session.pdf.

international expertise, so as to ensure the success of the implementation process over the next 15 years. Yet, the Declaration also stressed the significant challenges facing the implementation of the Agenda in the region in view of the Israeli occupation, wars and conflicts, terrorism and foreign intervention in the internal affairs of Arab States.

The GA resolution 70/299 has identified annual themes and a set of goals to be reviewed in-depth for each of the years of the four-year cycle of the HLPF. As such, the 2017 AFSD thematically aligned with the HLPF should allow the region to arrange its activities and focus in a line with the global reporting framework.

The theme of the 2017 HLPF is ‘Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world.’ The sets of Sustainable Development Goals to be reviewed in depth in 2017 shall be: Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 14. Since Goal 17 is being reviewed annually, this goal should also be paid due attention in the proceedings of the AFSD.

Theme of the 2017 AFSD: Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing Arab region

Persistence of poverty in the Arab region

Since the introduction of the 2030 Agenda, Member States of ESCWA have started taking ownership of implementing the Agenda despite their particularly daunting development and security predicament. Yet, Arab countries are adamant about seizing the opportunities provided by the Agenda to galvanize regional and global support to achieve much needed progress in their societies and economies. Central to this drive is the realization that a new approach to achieving development is needed, one that looks at challenges comprehensively and addresses them in a holistic and multi-layered manner.

The SDGs provide an ambitious blueprint for global development that includes a focus on education, the environment, women's rights, sustainable water, and many other issues critical for the region. While all of these issues are of utmost importance, it will become increasingly problematic to progress these goals without a renewed emphasis on poverty eradication, a precondition to achieving prosperity and sustainable development.

Since 2011, the region has been through an unprecedented surge of violence. Currently, 7 out of 22 Arab countries are experiencing conflict and instability of varying intensity levels. So far, about 26 million people have been forcibly displaced and the region has by far the highest ratio of refugees-to-population in the world. The collapse of basic public services such as health, education, water and sanitation services is putting Arab countries at risk of creating a ‘lost generation’ and reversing the development gains that they had achieved over the past decades.

This predicament is also impacting poverty eradication efforts in countries of the region. Poverty eradication, in all its forms and manifestations, is the number one developmental goal of both the MDGs and SDGs. Over the past two decades, global efforts have been successful as the number of people living in poverty declined by more than half, from more than 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015. Despite such progress, the Arab world continues to lag behind in its efforts to combat poverty. Countries currently in conflict pose the greatest challenge to poverty eradication efforts as countries entangled in conflicts have to push aside developmental concerns and efforts in the quest for truce, peace and security and addressing basic humanitarian needs. Further, rapid population growth in some countries and a youth bulge have contributed to low per capita income growth and widespread vulnerability.

In fact, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), between 2010 and 2012, the percentage of the population in the region making less than \$1.25 a day increased from 4.1 percent to 7.4 percent.³

³ The Arab Millennium Development Goals Report, 2015. http://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbas/doc/MDGS%20publications/Arab_MDGR_2013_English.pdf.

Previously, countries in the region had made progress in reducing poverty, but high levels of political unrest had reversed many of these improvements. Poverty situation in some countries of the region are so grim that migration and flight are the only recourse as economic, social, demographic, and environmental vulnerabilities keep worsening.

Indeed, while the world is striving to realize the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda, the Arab region is struggling with conflict and its repercussions. It is witnessing the longest occupation in modern history, with almost 50 years of Israeli occupation of Palestine. In Palestine, a lack of employment opportunities due to restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation continues to drive rising levels of poverty. Hopes for sustainable development sustained another setback in 2014 and early 2015. The Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip sent the Palestinian economy into its first recession since 2006. The contraction of the Palestinian per capita GDP by 3.3 per cent and the extremely high unemployment rates subject large sections of the Palestinian population to mass poverty and food insecurity.⁴

Yemen's poverty rate has gone up from 42 percent of the population in 2009⁵ to an even more alarming 54.4 percent in 2011.⁶ In June 2014, armed conflict between the government and militias spread across much of the country, existing infrastructure and facilities were damaged and people suffered serious hardships, likely to result in a rise in these already high poverty rates. About half of Yemen's population of about 26.8 million is living in areas directly affected by the conflict. Severe food insecurity affects 7.6 million people, and an estimated 2 million are malnourished, including 1.3 million children, of whom 320,000 are suffering from severe acute malnutrition.⁷ Many ongoing projects were halted and new projects postponed due to the ongoing conflict affecting the country since 2011. Implementation of the 4th Socio Economic Development Plan for Poverty Reduction 2011-2015 is seriously disrupted by the crisis of 2011.

In Syria, we are also witnessing aggravated poverty levels. By 2015, 83.4 per cent of Syrians lived below the upper poverty line, having to survive in abject poverty where they are unable to meet their basic food needs, with the abject poor in conflict zones and besieged areas facing hunger, malnutrition and starvation.⁸ In Iraq, the mass displacement from ISIL controlled areas such as Mosul, the decline in global oil prices and higher unemployment rates have meant that the poverty rate in the country has also most certainly increased.

In Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country, years of political upheaval have taken a toll on growth and economy. Increased unemployment, decline in tourist arrivals, dwindling foreign currency reserves and a devalued currency have meant that Egypt is now seeing 27.8 per cent of its population below the national poverty line (almost 23 million people).⁹ With poverty rate at 15.5 per cent in Tunisia, one in every six Tunisians lives below the poverty line.¹⁰

Towards Prosperity in the Arab region

Countries in the region, especially countries in conflict and countries emerging from conflict face a myriad of systemic and interconnected political and developmental challenges. The 2030 Agenda recognizes, in its pertinence to the Arab region, that economic growth alone is not sufficient to ensure that all human beings

⁴ Report on UNCTAD assistance to the Palestinian people: Developments in the economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. http://unctad.org/meetings/en/SessionalDocuments/tdb62d3_en.pdf.

⁵ Assessing Development Strategies to Achieve the MDGs in Yemen. http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/capacity/output_studies/roa87_study_yem.pdf.

⁶ World Bank. file:///C:/Users/125829/Downloads/TPSD%202012-2014%20Full%20Yemen%20.pdf.

⁷ World Bank, Yemen Overview. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/yemen/overview>.

⁸ ESCWA calculation? (Chart for the 2nd Committee presentation – who gave it to us?).

⁹ UNDP country profile.

¹⁰ UNDP country profile.

can enjoy prosperous lives. Growth must be approached holistically, with attention to social inclusion as well as to the environmental imperative to protect the planet from degradation so that it can support the needs of the present and preserve it for posterity. The hallmark of the 2030 agenda is the integrated nature of all the SDGs, and prosperity is a topic that illustrates very clearly the need for an integrated approach to development.

Economic growth is a critical element for reducing poverty and for ensuring that no one is left behind. Sustained growth is required, particularly in the poorest countries of the region including the Arab LDCs and conflict affected countries, to catch up with decent living standards and to enable people live a life of dignity. A critical conduit on the path from growth to prosperity relates to the capacity of growth to generate productive employment and decent work. This is critical in order to leave no one behind. The AFSD will discuss issues such as reviving economic growth to reduce poverty through a package of inclusive and equitable policies and programmes and to create the appropriate environment for promoting productive sectors. Economic objectives like productivity, the upgrading of technology and innovation, and expanding employment and entrepreneurship will be achieved only with simultaneous progress in gender equality, education and reduced inequality. Greater resource efficiency in consumption and production in the region is also critical, to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation.

Social considerations need to be taken into account for building prosperous societies. A central developmental concern is ensuring that efforts to improve the quality of life are far-reaching, broad and inclusive. To achieve this, it is important to understand, account for and include the most affected groups such as women, young people, older persons, refugees and migrants and persons with disabilities in all developmental efforts. It is also widely recognized that exclusion from development efforts can have linkages, if not direct correlation, to radicalization, emergence and re-emergence of conflicts and violence. The needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups need to be mainstreamed into developmental efforts so that no one is left out and everyone is engaged in building our shared future. In this context, the Forum will discuss how proactive efforts to involve these groups can be made and provide space for promoting dialogue with and among them, and encourage its participants to deepen these efforts.

Decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation is a cornerstone element for sustainable development. In that regard, sustainable consumption and production provides a systemic approach to achieving sustainable growth and managing the related trade-offs. The 2030 Agenda highlights the need to ensure sustainable consumption and production, including through the implementation of the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns, and encourages all countries to take action, with developed countries taking the lead, taking into account the development and capabilities of developing countries.

Most importantly, in the efforts to build prosperous societies in the Arab region, peace and stability play a crucial role. The nexus between peace and development has gained significant importance in the global debate, including in the context of the elaboration of the 2030 Agenda. Assessment of the Millennium Development Goals has shown that progress on the development front cannot be achieved if peace and stability are not ensured and sustained, and vice versa. As the Secretary-General said in his report entitled “A life of dignity for all”, peace is an enabler of development, in as much as it is a key outcome of our global development efforts.

In this regard, the Forum will aim to stimulate discussion on ways to foster economic growth while improving environmental sustainability and social inclusion while creating prosperous societies and ensuring that no one is left behind. It will present different perspectives on the way in which economic growth relates to prosperity and sustainability, including sustainable consumption and production, reflecting the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.