



Role of CSOs in Implementing Agenda

2030

3–4 July 2017

League of Arab States General Headquarters – Cairo

Final Report and Recommendations

Introduction:

As part of the implementation of the Arab Decade for Civil Society Organizations, adopted by the Council of Arab Social Affairs Ministers through decision 793 in its 35th regular session (December 2015) on the role of CSOs in supporting Arab efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, the League of Arab States' General Secretariat (CSO Directorate), in coordination with the Arab NGO Network for Development and the Economic and Social Council for Western Asia (ESCWA), organized the Arab Conference on the **Role of CSOs in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals 2030**, on the 3rd and 4th of July 2017 at the League of Arab States General Headquarters in Cairo.

The conference included CSOs from the Jordanian Hashemite Kingdom, the Republic of Tunisia, the State of Palestine, the Kingdom of Morocco, the Mauritanian Islamic Republic, and the Republic of Yemen, in addition to ANND members from the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Kuwait, the Egyptian Arab Republic, the Republic of Sudan, the Republic of Lebanon, the State of Libya, and the Republic of Yemen, as well as several Arab experts in the domain of civil work.

The conference is a continuation of ANND's efforts in the post-2015 process, starting in 2013, through participating in several national, regional, and global initiatives to integrate the SDGs in Arab civil society's agenda; publishing several reports on progress in Arab countries; and organizing interactive national dialogues to grab the attention and of various actors regarding pertinent issues and level the ground for them.

The conference aimed at issuing common recommendations, representing the point of view of Arab CSOs, to be recommended at the HLPF in New York, held between the 12th and 19th of July 2017. The conference highlighted the progress made in the SDG implementation process, allowed for the exchange of successful national experiments in this regard, and focused on main challenges faced by the process on the national and regional levels.

The conference began with a welcoming note and approval of the agenda, which focused on the realities of implementing Agenda 2030 for sustainable development in Arab countries. It tackled several themes; from the role of Arab CSOs in implementing sustainable development to the challenges they face, in addition to unpacking the efforts made to achieve sustainable development in the Arab and global contexts. Other themes included discussion of poverty eradication policies and achieving social welfare and gender equality in Arab countries, as well as building a world of peace and security.

First: Role of Arab CSOs and Challenges Faced in the Context of Sustainable Development

The discussions highlighted the importance of the role played by Arab CSOs in the development process and the pertinence of Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, being a transformative, comprehensive, and ambitious. It was approved by the governments of Arab States, which makes it a viable chance to discuss public policies from a developmental and rights-based perspective, contributing to the achievement of SDGs.

In this regard, the experts pointed to the importance of expanding the concept of development to include all dimensions: economic, social, and environmental, with an emphasis on the importance of political, cultural, and civilizational dimensions in any real developmental process. They also emphasized the importance of adopting a rights-based approach and linking the various dimensions, moving away from the theoretical framework to identify approaches that fit national and regional trends. They also pointed out the presence of key and integrated challenges faced by Arab CSOs, the most important of which probably being the lack of dialogue among stakeholders in various Arab countries, as well as not including CSOs in many planning processes, which require the adoption of a holistic approach founded on sustainable human development, human rights, public freedoms, and democracy as a basis to achieve development.

Following are some of the key challenges identified in the discussion and which require intervention on the policy and developmental planning levels in the region:

- Failing to involve developmental partners (such as the private sector, CSOs, Trade Unions, and the media) in some Arab countries in policy-making and developmental planning, which impacts the quality of adopted policies and efficiency of implementation. Despite Agenda 2030's emphasis on the importance of partnerships in achieving sustainable development, the plans adopted by some Arab countries were not based on the required participation.
- Arab political culture, which is mainly characterized by the lack of culture of volunteerism, citizenship, and respect of plurality, in addition to the confusion around the term "civil society" and its scope and practices, with an emphasis that civil society and its components are political and not non-partisan, due to their interest in development, human rights, and improving economic situations.

- Other challenges faced by Arab civil society is the idea that modern civil society was not a natural development of Arab society and that it was imported, which means that it will remain linked to the outside through networking and funding.

Several recommendations were agreed upon in this regard. They are:

- Emphasizing the importance of the concept of partnership on the national and international levels among all stakeholders (governments, civil society, private sector). However, the partnership should be actual and not just formal and based on dialogue among stakeholders, through enhancing the role of institutions and frameworks governing such dialogues, including the League of Arab State's Economic and Social Council, in light of the transformation from a unipolar world to an international system based on multiples regional poles, which is also dependent on conditional funding that suits the donors without taking into consideration the special circumstances of each country in achieving the 2030 SDGs.
- Emphasizing that working on development requires an climate of prosperity and peace. SDG Goal 16 is intended to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development," which requires putting an end to wars and armed conflicts, achieving stability; ending the Israeli occupation through peaceful approaches to conflict resolution and adopting dialogue to address differences and find suitable solutions for all sides; and adopting comprehensive approaches to the root causes of the instability in the region, related to the political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, which directly impact the developmental process.
- The need to address terrorism and its sources and emphasizing that civil society is a true partner in fighting terrorism, since the current environment of CSO work in some Arab countries are restrictive as a result of some practices by a few CSOs. There is a need to address the root causes of terrorism and its repercussions, which delay the developmental process in the region, due to its

impact on the rise of poverty and unemployment levels and the absence of job opportunities, in addition to inequalities and the absence of approaches based on human rights and democracy.

- To achieve sustainable development, there is a need to re-evaluate the role of civil society on the regional level, through the presence of an enabling environment, which provides the legal, organizational, and political conditions that affect the ability of civil society to engage in Agenda 2030, in addition to the need to involve civil society in all stages: planning, policy implementation, programming, follow-up, and review.
- The need to involve trade unions and not emptying them of their contents or neglecting the important role they play in achieving development.
- The need to support the capacities of CSOs, improve their efficiency and ability to achieve developmental work based on the Istanbul Principles, and empower them to play their roles and face challenges.

Second: Arab and International Frameworks for Agenda 2030:

This session focused on international and regional efforts in the process to implement sustainable development. It discussed the Arab Decade for Civil Society Organizations, which is an unprecedented commitment by Arab states in the LAS to involve CSOs in development efforts. On 13/12/2015, Arab Social Affairs ministers meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh adopted the Arab Decade as an important text to enhance the participation of Arab civil society in implementing the SDGs, based on which the LAS announced that the period between 2016 and 2026 will be an Arab Decade for CSOs, under the title, “Supporting CSOs to Achieve SDGs.”

The session also pointed to the efforts of the LAS General Secretariat in amending regulations and standards related to granting observer status to CSOs (In the context of developing the working team charged with advancing LAS’s popular dimension in joint Arab work) to allow them to participate in all events held by the LAS General

Secretariat, including the Arab Parliament and the Human Rights Committee. This was considered a positive development towards allowing CSOs to participate in the process of common Arab work and the path towards development.

The session also pointed to the Arab Week for Sustainable Development, organized by the LAS General Secretariat, in cooperation with the Ministry of Investment and International Cooperation, the World Bank, and the UNDP, under the auspices of President of the Arab Republic of Egypt Abdel Fattah al-Sisi between 14 and 17 May 2017, in the Arab Republic of Egypt. Several issues pertaining to the Arab region were discussed during the week, in the framework of following up the SDG 2030 plan. The themes included: human dignity and quality of life; climate threats; promoting peace, security, and justice; science, technology, and innovation; women's empowerment; children and family protection; and other SDGs. In the week's final statement, participants stressed the importance of activating, building, and expanding partnerships among all development actors, including international and regional organizations, CSOs, the private sector, and governments, in addition to providing the necessary support for an effective implementation of the Arab Sustainable Development Plan.

Also highlighted was the Arab Sustainable Development Forum 2017, held in Rabat between 3 and 5 May 2017, which focused on: Activating the Sustainable Development Plan for the year 2030: Poverty Eradication and Promoting Prosperity in a Changing Arab Region. The forum is held annually by the UN regional system and the LAS, organized by ESCWA and involves all development partners, such as civil society, the private sector, academia, the media, parliamentarians, and the UN.

The session issued the following recommendations:

- Prepare an action plan to implement the Arab Decade for CSOs (2016–2026), adopted in December 2015, with the participation of experts from Arab CSOs and other regional and international experts, aiming to fast-track the activities

and programs of the Arab Decade and stressing the need to involve Arab, regional, and international civil society organizations, unions, networks, and other entities in the activities – since this Decade was adopted specifically to support Arab CSOs working on implementing the SDGs 2030.

- Requesting from the General Secretariat to expedite the finalization of regulations and standards related to granting observer status to CSOs, to facilitate their engagement in the development process.
- Stressing the importance of coordination among development partners to avoid duplication and ensure efficiency in implementing the goals, through exchanging expertise and best practices and working in an integrated manner.
- Working towards establishing a regional mechanism to build consensus on funding issues on the regional level and activating commitments and promises, in through the involvement of the Arab private sector to replace foreign funding, while stressing that it should be committed to social and environmental responsibility and human rights.
- Stressing the importance of regional cooperation in the fields of knowledge and technology, to reduce costs and increase efficiency.
- Augmenting trade cooperation among the countries of the Arab region in a developmental context.

Third: Public Policies to Eradicate Poverty in all its Forms

The session discussed the size of poverty, inequality, actual unemployment, and informal labor produced by the developmental models adopted in some Arab countries, despite some indicators relating to economic growth. Those countries' economies were founded on developmental models based on import and neglected the development of production capacities in value added sectors that could generate jobs, expand the economy, and be based on the SDGs and the peoples' economic and social rights. Priority was given to integration in the global economy through freeing trade, investment, borrowing, privatization, and wholesale lifting of economic constraints.

Reports have shown that these measures did not achieve economic growth in some Arab countries, while poverty, unemployment, and inequality expanded drastically. Markets, on the other hand, did not function in the desired manner.

These trends indicate the need to review domestic and global factors contributing to their promotion, based on the issues tackled by Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, such as achieving full and productive employment; providing decent jobs for all women, children, young people, and people with disabilities; and achieving equal pay for equal work by 2030. In the next 5 years, the Agenda will particularly aim to achieve a tangible decrease in the number of young people without jobs, education, or training and will encourage the formalization of work. The Agenda also calls for respecting worker's rights and providing safe and secure work environments for all workers, including migrant workers, especially women migrant workers and those in precarious jobs.

Arab economies are growing, but not at a rate that can meet the increasing demand for decent jobs. Participants pointed to the 2016 Arab Human Development Report, which mentioned the need to provide 60 million jobs before 2020 to accommodate new entrants to the job market, not to mention improving work conditions, which brings out the question of informal labor. The Arab region is witnessing an increase of informal labor, due to several factors, including "liberalization" policies and neoliberal globalization, the youth bulge, rural migration to cities, and large waves of migration, in addition to the rentier nature of economies in most Arab countries. Added to that, the structure of the international financial system, preferring flows from developing countries to developed countries, is a major factor in the accumulation of public debt and weak investment in the Arab region. This leads to weaknesses on the economic and financial levels in some Arab countries, which reproduce national priorities at the expense of sustainable development.

Participants suggested the following recommendations, which could contribute to eradicating poverty, improving policies, and guaranteeing access to equal opportunities in the job market for all:

- Work towards reforming public institutions, fighting corruption, and activating accountability mechanisms.
- The importance of promoting joint Arab action to face various challenges, such as poverty, inequality, and weak natural resources, particularly in light of armed conflict and instability in some Arab countries.
- The need to encourage regional development policies to support productive activities, based on the needs, resources, and market of each country, and which would contribute to creating decent and sustainable job opportunities.
- Calling on the UN and LAS to continue efforts to support the treatment of the displaced and refugee issues, using an approach that guarantees their rights and dignity, due to the impact of the situation on political, social, and economic stability, which is leading to demographic changes that could impact the social fabric and human development, contributing to rising tensions and impacting development efforts and increasing marginalization.
- Promote redistributive policies, in order to reduce inequalities, through providing universal social protection and fair taxation policies. The development of universal social protection systems is an international obligation. However, these systems should surpass traditional systems of social protection limited to illness, unemployment, old age, disability, and workplace accidents. Countries should allocate a social budget with various types of social remittances and free education and healthcare, which would allow vulnerable social groups to benefit from all social services.
- The need to benefit from the opportunity of the “youth wave” today, before society gets old, as in some advanced countries, which makes the possibility of achieving financial balances in a universal social services system even more difficult.

Fourth: Implementing and Financing Agenda 2030:

Participants pointed to the fact that most tax systems in some Arab countries are characterized by stable and diverse sources of financial revenues, but at lower levels than developing countries or countries in emerging markets. In Arab countries, tax revenues reached an average of 7% of the GDP between 2013 and 2016, which is less than the 17% average for developing markets and other developing countries. Tax systems in the Arab region suffer from the dominance of indirect taxes, reaching an average of 65%. The region also suffers from low tax compliance, due in part to the size of the informal economy, in addition to weak technical and institutional skills needed to register taxpayers and follow-up on collection.

Due to this situation, Arab countries are similar in the limited proportion of tax revenue contribution to public spending in the budget, which increases the need for external aid and raises the size of the public debt, which is accumulating throughout the region, in addition to declining investment. Public debt in Arab countries reached 52% in 2015, noting that its size and servicing costs in most Arab countries represent the most important challenges to achieving sustainable development and whose burden will be borne by future generations.

Despite the role played by ODA in non-oil producing Arab countries to cover gaps in funding, the developmental impact of this type of finances remains weak, due to conditionalities and political considerations, with an increasing focus on humanitarian aid and less on long-term developmental needs.

The participants suggested the following recommendations to provide necessary resources to achieve sustainable development by 2030:

- Establishing or promoting national bodies and forums on sustainable development and emphasizing that they should include broad representation and at a high level to develop development strategies, where civil society is a full and active partner in setting priorities, planning, implementation, and follow-up.
- The need to establish national indicators to monitor progress in implementing the nationally adopted goals and objectives and to promote coordination and cooperation between ministries and inside administrations, as well as achieving overall policy coherence.
- Achieve tax justice to contribute to redistribution, through implementing progressive taxes to address inequalities and focus on collecting direct taxes on income and wealth, instead of indirect taxes related to consumption. It is also important to expand the tax base to guarantee better social justice and allocate resources to benefit the most vulnerable segments in society and achieve balance between taxes on individuals (in the form of income taxes) and taxes on sales on one side, and taxes imposed on companies and major investments, on the other.

Fifth: Achieving Gender Equality and Enhancing the Participation of Women in the Arab Region:

Agenda 2030 is based on achieving sustainable development on the economic, social and environmental levels. It aims to promote peace as a main condition for sustainable development. Various experiences in development show that it is impossible to achieve economic empowerment for all without the empowerment of women and that there is no social development without full gender equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination. Statistics indicate a decrease in women's participation in the job market in general and several studies indicate that the MENA region is one of the least developed in terms of economic participation of women.

The gender gap overlaps with all other gaps representing other aspects of discrimination, such as on the basis of religion, sect, geographical location, class, or other. The more women face these other types of gaps, the worse the situation. For example, poor illiterate women in least developed regions are the most vulnerable at all in an informal labor market.

The following recommendations were suggested in the session:

- The need to elaborate a unified Arab vision on Agenda 2030 from a gender perspective and based on the region's priorities.
- Enhance aspects of independence for women, including economic and political independence, and putting an end to all forms of violations and discrimination, adopting a systematic approach to gender in all aspects of the development agenda.
- The need for Gender Responsive Budgeting, through adopting social and economic policies that respond to the various and different needs of men and women, as an important tool to limit gender inequality.

In conclusion, the participants extended their gratitude to the League of Arab States and its General Secretary, H.E. Mr. Ahmad Aboul Gheit for hosting this event at the LAS headquarters, due to the pioneering and unprecedented role played by the LAS in integrating CSOs from Arab countries with other developmental partners, in order to achieve a real leap in the development process in Arab countries and prosperity for all. Special thanks were extended to the social affairs department, especially the CSO Administration in LAS, for its role in supporting Arab CSOs and allowing them the space for participation, being a forum where they can express their opinions and concerns in a democratic and unrestricted manner for a better future for our Arab societies.