Recommendations: Regional Meeting for CSOs on Sustainable Development

13-14 March 2022 - Beirut

The Regional Sustainable Development Platform organized "The Regional Meeting for CSOs on Sustainable Development" on March 13 and 14 2022 in Beirut; more than 60 representatives of Arab civil society organizations, experts and academics attended the meeting physically and via Zoom. The Regional Sustainable Development Platform is a framework of regional networks monitoring sustainable development action and the extent of states' commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda. It includes the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), the Arab Women Center for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC), the Arab Forum for Disability (AFD), Habitat International Coalition, Arab Network for Democratic Elections, and the Arab branches of Transparency International.

The meeting aims to promote the dialogue between the civil society organizations in the context of the preparations for the Regional Sustainable Development Forum organized by the United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in collaboration with the League of Arab States between March 15 and 17.

The outcomes of this meeting will constitute input for the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development along with the report of the Forum that will be submitted to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development held annually in June by the United Nations' General Assembly in New York in order to review the progress achieved in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The meeting focused on the following topics:

Session 1: COVID-19 and De-development in the Arab Region

The Corona pandemic constitutes a basic excuse to justify the failure to achieve the sustainable development goals, as if development was on the right track until the pandemic hit causing a decline in the achieved prosperity, peace and security. In reality, the pandemic revealed gaps in the economic, social, health and political systems in the region as well as structural challenges that hinder development and its goals. "Coronavirus is the product of this world and its characteristics, especially inequality, one of the most prominent features of the globalized system". The way the world responded to the pandemic affected production and implementation in the economic cycle, but it did not leave an impact on the choices of macroeconomic policies, for example, "when it came down to choosing between peoples' right to life and intellectual property to preserve profits, the latter came first."

The pandemic has caused confusion on the scientific level (implementing health measures at airports one day and lifting them the other) and blatant denial about it. The pandemic has also been used to impose patterns of thinking and mislead people with an excessive amount of information and ideas; three lines of thought are currently being circulated: 1) Maintaining the same economic choices despite their failure, 2) The excessive use of technology despite its shortcomings in terms of quality, its perpetuation of differences and its denial of the importance of direct human interaction in education and work, for example and 3) The authoritarian trend perpetuating repression, restricting freedoms and violating human rights.

One of the biggest obstacles to development in the Arab region is the failure to adopt a comprehensive approach. In fact, "leaving no one behind" on the path of sustainable human development is one of the most important

principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; thus, the Agenda and the participants in the Forum stressed on the obligation to include and integrate marginalized groups. However, in view of the reality of the Arab countries, and based on the ESCWA report on the joint services provided by Arab countries through public and private institutions for people with disabilities and marginalized groups (children, women, ...), the disparity in service provision was evident, as well as the lack of assessment of the level of commitment by these countries and the absence of an integration simulation. It all came as a culmination of decades of bad practices and as a result of the pandemic. The policies, the lack of preparedness and the sectoral planning approach without coordination and a common strategy have led to failure to integrate marginalized groups and absence of a comprehensive approach to respond to peoples' needs in the context of the pandemic. This in turn has not allowed marginalized groups, social groups and poor countries to benefit from the services provided and has increased their suffering.

The most long-standing problem is adhering to non-integrative sectoral planning, which is not a new concept rather, a policy that has been adopted for decades. Many factors show that the Arab region has been shying away from the integration strategy, and adopting misconceptions and social practices that reinforce inequalities in rights, in addition to the absence of official statistics and data on these groups.

Civil society contributed to supporting marginalized groups and saw the burdens increase due to the inadequate social safety nets in most Arab countries, and their reluctance to adopt comprehensive social protection systems based on human rights, although these systems have proven necessary decades ago, and now more than ever due to the pandemic.

What are the proposed solutions and alternatives for overcoming the Coronavirus crisis and allowing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

1. Work at the political level to end wars and conflicts of all kinds, which remain the most challenging obstacle in the face of achieving development in the Arab region.
2. Review the macroeconomic choices in light of the dangerous globalization gaps highlighted by the pandemic in the macroeconomic policy at the national level, and make sure the alternative options align with the 2030 Agenda, the principles guiding it and the human rights' system.
3. Review the national strategies related to the sustainable development goals of the 2030 Agenda, based on moral values and solidarity, and work on strengthening comprehensive social systems, making them available to all and respecting individual freedoms and human rights.
4. Invest efforts to abolish all practices promoting the marginalization of the most vulnerable groups and make it part of the development process not only in times of crises, emergencies and disasters.
5. Adopt a participatory approach that enables civil society to participate and collaborate in establishing development plans.
6. Strengthen the health sector infrastructure, as well as the human and financial resources and means.
7. Enhance digital technology skills in the Arab countries with a focus on e-learning as a complement to interactive education in its various forms.
8. Focus on the psychological well-being (mental health) and work on including it within a diversified rehabilitation program.
9. Address conflicting information and media blackouts, especially on emerging topics such as the coronavirus pandemic.
10. Resist the monopoly of the vaccine industry, ensure equitable distribution and suspend intellectual property rights to enable basic pharmaceutical industries in developing countries.

11. Prioritize health, education and employment, especially in the post-pandemic period.
12. Recycle medical waste and allow the manufacture of environmentally friendly and recyclable equipment.

Session 2: Macroeconomic Failures and Deepening Inequalities

The idea of Arab integration and economic unity saw the light in the late 1940's, before the launch of the European Common Market, but it did not succeed in achieving inclusion and economic integration. The Arab intraregional trade indicator remains weak within the macro trade percentage, even in the Arab Gulf states where integration efforts were the most important in the Arab region. Despite the unequal vertical integration in the relations between Arab countries and the European Union, the United States and other major powers in the global economy, it remains stronger than the horizontal integration between Arab countries. There are additional obstacles hindering the potential success of the first Arab trade integration: 1) infrastructural problems such as energy, ports and means of transportation and 2) political problems stemming from the fact that national policies are put ahead of integrative regional policies. The attempt to follow a path similar to the European Union' path, that started with free exchange and customs, economic and political unions, did not succeed. In fact, no serious regional attempts were made to draw a similar path, knowing that the European experience succeeded for traders but did not work for the rest of the people, some of whom did not benefit from the Union at all, instead they suffered many crises. This is due to the dominance of a neoliberal economic line of thought which revolves around liberalizing the economy, supporting the role of the private sector, reducing taxes on the wealthy, expanding the role of central banks and disrupting the necessary balance between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of growth. Then, the trickle-down effect approach was adopted, which in turn failed, as growth did not achieve the desired effect; it rather increased inequality and concentration of wealth. The austerity policies recommended by the International Monetary Fund in many Arab countries have also contributed to weakening social spending and slowing down work towards the development goals. Countries have shied away partially and temporarily from the excessive austerity policies during the pandemic. However, it remains a temporary and compensatory measure, as there are no clear indicators of post-pandemic macroeconomic trends that contradict the prevailing trend during recent decades. In order to achieve development in countries that grapple with conflicts, it is necessary to establish an Arab and international cooperation that aligns with the 2030 Agenda and the global partnership for development and solidarity.

Suggested Solutions:

1. Work on economic policies that promote a productive and fair economy with high added value and generate decent job opportunities.
2. Adopt redistribution policies through fair tax and comprehensive social protection systems to address the multifaceted inequalities and to correct the growing imbalances in the primary distribution of national income, especially between the declining share of labor and the increasing share of capital.
3. Adopt a transformative and developmental regional exchange approach that goes beyond the market, and gives the government an important role in correcting its disadvantages.
4. Launch initiatives based on the principles of synergy and cooperation.
5. Enhance participatory policy-making at the national, regional and international levels giving the process social, human and environmental dimensions.
6. Promote the role of trade unions and civil society in establishing economic and social policies to represent the interests and rights of the people and balance the interests of companies.

7. Promote the role of the government in establishing economic and social policies especially in vital sectors, after the Coronavirus crisis proved that the private sector is unable to do so.
8. Enhance the transparency of economic, financial and monetary data and make it available for use and review.
9. Commit to financial soundness standards, especially when controlling internal and external government debt.
10. Integrate sustainable development goals into public finances and evaluate expenditure items on all components of the Agenda and associated goals.

Session 3: Democratic Transition and Nation-Building in the Region

The supposed transitional experiences to democracy in the Arab region point to common and similar denominators and suggest the inability to overcome challenges and build a democracy like the rest of the world. This struggle raises questions about the causes of these repeated setbacks and the reactions after every attempt at democratic transition.

The Tunisian experience inspired optimism despite the recent developments that raised questions about the consequences of disrupting political and cultural structures with the complicity of all, post-revolution. A new president was elected; he was not linked to corruption files but did not have any political experience. However, it was soon clear that he aimed at destroying a political system and rebuilding a new one without resorting to an inclusive and real national dialogue. He took measures to freeze the work of institutions such as the Parliament, abolish the Constitution and conduct a referendum to amend it, making the referendum a tool to consolidate dictatorship. He also went into a battle with the Judiciary to impose his unconventional views on how it should function, and he does not believe in the role of political parties and movements. Consequently, the president is seeking to reduce political life to a direct relationship between the president and the people abolishing all mediators, and is requesting international support turning a blind eye to the conditions and standards of the international community related to democracy and good governance, thus erasing all the achievements of the past eleven years. The situation got to this point because of the widespread corruption and the fact that the political parties did not actually have any social or economic programs, since all proposals had to have separate political, social and economic programs. Not to mention the elite that was scattered, lacked awareness and a vision for the future and failed to propose radical solutions; thus, the people now await the hero who will save them and do not seem to care about any measure, even ones that cross red lines.

The Sudanese model is useful and important. It is considered the fourth transitional experience and the challenges it faces are a reflection of the complexities in the region, such as the ethnic and tribal diversity, the army and its role in the political economy, the interlinkage between the army and the colonial countries that is stronger than their national affiliation, the association of armies with businessmen, the creation of parallel militias sometimes within the army itself as a result of arming tribes, as well as ethnic and tribal loyalties. The political parties, despite their diversity, are weak because of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. The success of civil society in overthrowing the regime was undeniable, because despite its weakness, it succeeded in gathering and including all social groups. However, this success was conditional and produced a hybrid military-civilian regime full of complications. The process of change in Sudan tends to be radical, the movements continue till this day, and the masses have succeeded in building resistance committees crossing all barriers and coordinating with each other; and this calls for optimism.

Palestine is a special case because of the occupation, siege and internal division. Palestine's civil society is considered the soft power of change, supporting the revolution, following-up on violations and crimes of the occupation and monitoring the practices of the authority in dealing with freedoms. It has also contributed in promoting participation and advocating important causes, implementing reforms and insuring a peaceful transfer of power and liberation. The occupation accused civil society organizations of supporting terrorism. This accusation is very dangerous and reflects the importance of the role of these organizations in exposing the practices of occupation.

As for Iraq, it has turned into a model of a failed state, as the political system is unable to achieve development, to handle community affairs and to provide services. Poverty rate has risen from 23% (6 million people) in 2007 to 32% (13 million people) in 2022, and youth unemployment has reached 35%; corruption has crossed all limits and the state is rotting. The south of the country is witnessing a major displacement crisis due to the acute shortage of water and general frustration prevails among elites and society as a whole.

After hearing the presentations about the four countries made by their representatives, the participants agreed that Arab countries are certain and aware that democracy is the solution, especially after the harsh experiences the region has gone through, and that the society organizing itself is an essential requirement for a transition to democracy, knowing that civil society plays a strategic role in achieving this goal. The challenges associated with democratic transition are similar in the Arab region, and the path is long and full of historical and social challenges.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

1. Be aware of the importance of reform or political and institutional change, build a state of institutions and law, respect the human rights' system, and consider democracy and development as the basis for building a state and establishing policies.
2. Reform the Judiciary and ensure its independence and autonomy, increasing its internal efficiency, because it is very slow and causes the loss of rights, and hinders accountability.
3. Reform education and rebuild a system of values in terms of human rights, citizenship, solidarity, and put forth science and innovation.
4. Protect the civil space, enhance the participation of civil society in all its categories, and be open to change groups and social movements.
5. Empower women in Arab societies socially and politically, as they play a key role in the democratic transition in the region.
6. Enable transitional justice and repair damages to countries affected by war in Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Sudan and Syria.
7. Establish an Arab humanitarian fund to contribute to alleviating and ending the suffering of the displaced and refugees inside the Arab countries.

Session 4: Solutions for Sustainability in the Arab Region

Green recovery is an unconventional concept and therefore should be adopted through new approaches outside the box. There is a big difference between growth and development and the relationship between them is not linear and simple. Societal recovery requires a comprehensive approach integrating the five dimensions of development- economic, social, environmental, political and cultural- into public strategies and policies.

The Rio +20 Earth Summit adopted the term "green economy" as an attractive and straightforward description of the necessary economic transformation pattern that fulfills the requirements of environmental sustainability,

optimizes the use of natural resources and adapts patterns of production and consumption that tend to exacerbate climate change. One of the objectives behind this decision, was to attract the private sector to the United Nations environmental forums, and encourage them to adopt (socially and) environmentally-responsible production and consumption plans in the private sector, especially in international companies.

The speakers pointed out that the share of carbon emissions in the Arab region does not exceed 10%, thus the Arab countries are not as much causing climate change as they are affected by it, which should make tackling it a priority for them. The big disparity in the emissions between the Arab countries makes mitigating them and using energy efficiently also priorities for the Arab region.

The digital transformation that is taking place in the region is represented by the acceleration in digitization, regulatory legislation, and initiatives undertaken by Arab countries, and others through a partnership between the public and private sectors. A review of some of these initiatives shows positive results and a good impact on the environmental level. However, this transformation has many disadvantages too that stem from its partial nature, and the legislative and political restrictions that most countries have adopted on the use of the digital space, especially with regard to freedom of expression in politics and other aspects of life. There are multiple major challenges associated with digitization in the Arab region related to controlling public discourse and controlling people's data.

Recommendations and Suggestions:

1. Change production and consumption patterns to promote and sustain the use of resources, change behavioral patterns when it comes to using of recycled materials, and recycle waste to give value to renewable resources.
2. Optimize consumption of water and natural resources through the valorization of traditional knowledge.
3. Develop the necessary legislative frameworks and multi-dimensional plans in order for the green transformation approach to consider the economic and social dimensions.
4. Adopt principles and standards for personal data protection in the context of digitization, and establish and implement legislation and regulatory frameworks in this regard.
5. Ensure funding institutions apply the rest of the human rights and international law standards when they select funded green projects and partners.
6. Develop the idea of strategic management based on strategic thinking and planning for the environment, such as increasing green spaces and reducing random construction.
7. Develop a future plan to address the scarcity of potable water in Arab cities threatened by drought.

Session 5: Partnership for Development and Means of Implementation

The participants put forward the idea of partnership for sustainable human development, with the participation of all parties (government, private sector, civil society) for a common ultimate goal which is development, based on the seventeenth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development". They considered the goal is utopian and does not consider the different interests of different parties, but on the other hand, it embodies a vision of the desired relations between the parties concerned with development at the global level. Therefore, working on strengthening the roles of the most vulnerable parties is a requirement for development. Reference was made to the United Nations endeavor to finance development, seeking to create the political and financial space that allows developing countries to finance their development in a sustainable manner. It is worth mentioning that the

international financial system has not contributed in enabling the countries of the South to mobilize resources for development. Rather than addressing the economic structures that allow the outflow of resources from the developing world, the Conference stressed the need to bridge financing gaps for the Sustainable Development Goals.

Regarding development assistance, the practices of official development assistance have been in conflict with the Busan principles since 2011. In 2013, military assistance was included in the development assistance, as well as involvement of the private sector, knowing that there is no clear control over public-private partnerships and projects with the private sector.

The current definition of development assistance also includes immigration costs in developed countries as part of the 0.7%, accounting for the first-year expenses of refugees. And the vicious circle continues, with more wars, more migration, and money going to these sectors that are not considered developmental, instead of focusing on health, education, infrastructure, social protection, alternative economic options, etc.

Citizens cannot focus on monitoring and on their development partners if they are busy providing basic needs such as food, water and financial security.

The Yemen Tragedy:

- Every minute and a half a Yemeni child dies
- 2.3 million people suffer from malnutrition
- 7 years after the onset of war, poverty continues to increase, and 395000 children suffer from severe acute malnutrition
- The United Nations' agencies and other similar agencies were the main actors in this war
- 14 billion dollars went into funding Yemen's humanitarian response plans between 2015 and 2021
- 1 billion and 300 million dollars of pledges, a large part of this funding will be allocated to the food, health and water sectors
- The methods of distributing assistance are not effective and people cannot choose them. Most of this assistance adds to the conflict and prolongs it
- The de facto authorities have access to these supplies and funding and use them for their own interests; they are not distributed fairly

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Recommendations:

1. Emphasize the importance of financing for development, but first and foremost stress the soundness of the policies being applied.
2. Establish a fair, comprehensive and progressive tax system with the aim of sharing wealth in an equitable manner at various levels, including at the global level.
3. Define the role of the private sector in the field of development and the framework of accountability and transparency.
4. Enhance the access to information and data to better enrich the decision-making process, ensure awareness of macroeconomic policies, strengthen fiscal space and support social protection in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and ILO standards.

5. Encourage investments in research and development and green technologies and facilitate access to financing for technology-related investments.
6. Consider human rights principles in establishing global development assistance plans and strategies and apply the Busan Principles.
7. Restructure global, regional and national debts, canceling corrupt and illegitimate country debts, especially countries that grapple with wars, based on international and cross-border responsibility of creditor countries and institutions.
8. Eliminate military assistance from the definition of official development assistance, especially in countries experiencing conflicts.
9. Ensure donors and countries in development assistance committee focus on creating political and economic strategies to efficiently mitigate the conflicts and wars in these countries.
10. Give ownership to people and make them participate in decision-making and implementation.
11. Find solutions to transform humanitarian aid into development assistance by using it differently.

The Arab NGO Network for Development organized a youth forum on development issues within the framework of the "Safir" project, from March 12 to 14 in Beirut, Lebanon; it brought together more than fifty young women and men, that had taken part in a training on advocacy and sustainable development goals involving with about 300 young men and women in eight Arab countries.

The Forum succeeded in creating a space for dialogue between the youth participating in the "Safir" project, civil society organizations and development actors, after completing training activities and framing development priorities for youth in the Arab region and preparing them to participate in the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development.

Throughout the three days of the Forum, young men and women succeeded in identifying development challenges facing their countries and the Arab region, which allowed them to frame priorities at the regional level and to submit recommendations that enhance the participation of youth in the development process. Below are some of the most important recommendations:

- Establish youth advisory councils that ensure their participation in decision-making at the local and national levels, guarantee expanded terms of reference and competencies, and create a monitoring and accountability mechanism. This allows cooperation between youth and other groups of decision-makers such as the government, civil society and the private sector, and promotes the involvement of youth in formulating national strategic plans to convey and translate youth priorities and acknowledge them as actors in public policies and not as a simple tool.
- Ensure fair and equal participation of all youth groups at the national level by adopting a human rights' approach (inclusion policies, geographic considerations, gender, etc..).
- Support micro youth projects and not neglect them, and support equitable and fair decision-making processes to obtain funding for youth projects without bureaucratic procedures.
- Allocate an independent ministry for youth.
- Amend laws for youth representation in councils and legislative positions, such as reduce the age for candidacy, and promote administrative decentralization.
- Build partnerships with civil society institutions and organizations concerned with development issues and promote the involvement of youth in the structures of civil society institutions.
- Create media platforms and youth forums in the Arab region through which young people express their opinions and participate in the decision-making process.
- Promote the social responsibility of the private sector to develop and the support the process of integrating young people into local communities.
- Support and train Arab youth, building their capacities, and educating them about citizenship and about their rights and duties in laws, specifically in the political field.
- Consider the cultural dimension in the process of integrating young people into local communities.
- Promote good governance, as it includes all sectors and fields, and apply mechanisms for accessing information, enabling young people to accurately address urgent issues.
- Provide a comprehensive and equal social protection system for all, which would encourage young people to engage more in public life.