

A Message from NGOs to the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit in Riyadh 2013

Beirut, January 8, 2013

Under an initiative by the Arab NGO Network for Development, a regional forum under the title “A Regional Meeting for CSOs Involved in Development Policies to Discuss Regional Challenges in Preparation for the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit” was held in Beirut on January 7 and 8, 2013. Participants included 71 representatives of CSOs from 12 Arab countries and representatives of UN agencies. The event was part of ANND’s preparations for the Third Arab Economic and Social Development Summit, which will be held in Riyadh on January 21, 2013.

The Arab Economic and Social Development Summit will be held while the Arab region witnesses quick changes that bring about difficult challenges, leading to unprecedented horizons. Popular revolutionary uprisings, which so far have deposed four regimes, put the regions vis-à-vis new and complex encounters. Developments in Bahrain still require wise redressing of legitimate grievances in a country in dire need for protecting its national unity and accomplishing justice among all society’s components. In Syria, developments have exceeded all expectations since the peaceful movement calling for the Syrians’ legitimate rights in freedom, equality and justice turned into a devastating war.

These quick changes in the region’s most important aspects require a reconsideration of many old concepts, including the notion of the Arab order, national security and Arab solidarity. The region is heading towards political, economic, social and demographic reformation; while the transformation carries dangers and challenges not dissimilar to historic changes elsewhere, it provides valuable chances, including a chance to rid the region’s peoples of fear and passive dealing with public affairs, and paves the way for developing freedom, democracy and social and civil society movements.

Participants believe that profound reforms should be introduced to all regional institutions in order for these institutions to pace with these changes and contribute to their guidance, structure and development. The Arab League is on top of these institutions.

Participants were alarmed by deteriorating security conditions in the region as a whole, as well as armed conflicts in many Arab countries. They gave special attention to the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli occupation’s persisting policies of expansion, settlement and racism, alongside its violations of the rights of Palestinians and other Arabs, which amount to war crimes and threaten regional security, as well as development efforts and democratic transitions. This situation requires a unified Arab stance that is consistent with the aspirations of the

region's peoples and up to the challenges posed by the ongoing occupation. Such a stance should include a call on ending all Arab-Israeli normalization procedures, especially in terms of political, diplomatic and economic levels. It should also include resorting to international forums and organizations to delegitimize the occupation state, implement related international laws and resolutions, and defend the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including self-determination, repatriation of the refugees and the creation of an independent state.

After extensive discussions of all issues of concern to civil society, both longstanding and imminent, in light of the dangerous developments witnessed by many Arab countries during the last two years, and despite the ongoing gap between the Arab League and CSOs and the persistent hindrances to direct communication with the summit, participants encourage CSOs to seriously take part in all available venues related to the summit. They also urge CSOs to consult on challenges and suggested solutions and programs.

Follows a list of issues and recommendations discussed and concluded by the two-day meeting and addressed by participants to Arab leaders and governments on the summit's occasion:

1- On reforming the Arab League and boosting civil society's participation in its procedures:

The Arab League has remained a forum for successive kings and presidents and never become a framework for true participation by executive institutions and agencies. This has weakened its role and the role and efficiency of its organizations and institutions on political and economic levels. Many CSOs have welcomed reforms proposed by the Arab League's secretariat-general, as of 2005, as well as all measures decided in this regard in recent years. Many independent and credible organizations helped open dialogue and cooperation channels with all Arab League bodies, thus breaking the boycott imposed by active NGOs on these bodies. While they support this constructive and reformative approach, participants stress that the Arab League needs to adopt cooperation and partnership forms towards civil society that keep pace with major changes in the region.

Participants emphasized on holding civil society forums in parallel to economic and social development summits, but they see that participation mechanisms are unavailable and still face major hindrances, including the absence of a true political will in this regard. This is apparent in the absence of consultation during the organization of parallel forums, the preparation of their agendas and the selection of speakers, as well as the random selection of participants. Earlier forums did not allow for civil society to communicate directly with summits and their participants. Also, the agenda of the parallel forum is not in line with that of the summit, thus, participation is not well-established.

Recommendations:

- Reconsidering the criteria of establishing relations between the Arab League and civil society; the relations should become truly consultative whereby CSOs act as more than just observers; the relations should be established according to institutionalized criteria, similar to those implemented by the United Nations in its dealings with NGOs.
- Guaranteeing that civil society conveys its vision to all Arab League bodies, including the summit, the council, ministerial councils, the economic and social council, parliament and the international secretariat, and be informed of materials before being debated so it can express its views and comments.
- Admitting the right of civil society to monitor public institutions, oversee public policies, take part in their discussion and follow up their implementation. Civil society proved several times that it is capable of playing this role and has ceased to be an annex to the state's agencies; it is a key player and can act as a full-fledged partner.
- Putting an end to reducing civil society to benevolent and humanitarian interventions; such role is played by capable parts of civil society, which as a whole has other roles to play in political, rights, labor and other areas.
- Developing the tasks and activities of the Arab Human Rights Committee, which was created by Article 45 of the Arab Human Rights Charter as a mechanism for joint Arab action; the committee should be given clear powers, especially in receiving complaints about violations to the human rights included in the Charter; weak population sectors, including the poor, women, children and persons with disabilities, should have efficient access to the committee.
- Calling on the summit to take clear decisions on a mechanism to follow up its resolutions, responsibilities of various involved parties, a follow-up body, follow-up mechanisms and timeframes for regular and extraordinary revisions.

2- On legislative reforms and compatibility with international human rights criteria:

Since human rights are universal, Arab states should quickly ratify international human rights agreements and reform domestic laws to become compatible with these agreements. The Arab states should also develop the compatibility of the 2004 Arab Human Rights Charter with international human rights standards by updating many of its clauses, especially in light of successive revolutionary and popular movements in the region, which partially reflect a growing desire by peoples to safeguard their basic rights and dignity for all citizens.

Noteworthy is the negative effect of reservations by many Arab states to the enjoyment of both sexes of all human rights; the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are the agreements that faced most reservations by these states.

CSOs would like to express their concern about the lack of progress in many countries in terms of revising several discriminatory laws about marriage, family and women's participation in political, economic and social life.

Recommendations:

- Calling on all Arab states to drop reservations, especially to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in line with the Vienna Declaration and Action Plan of the 1993 World Summit for Human Rights (A/CONF.157/23).
- Calling on the creation of independent national human rights organizations and the ascertainment that such organizations are independent and created according to the principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (the Paris Principles); such organizations must be given specific powers to recognize the observance of human rights and deal with complaints quickly and appropriately; weak population groups, including the poor, women, children and persons with disabilities, should be guaranteed efficient access to such national organizations.

3- On the need for Arab governments' participation in defining the post-2015 framework

Participants underscored the need for holding Arab governments accountable to their commitments in the Millennium Declaration and the consequent Millennium Development Goals. They also urge their governments to take part in devising a more ambitious post-2015 framework to tackle structural imbalances in development efforts. Such efforts should not be restricted to eradicating poverty, undernourishment and injustice; they should also respect the basic principles of human rights and social equality and justice, which guarantee to all people the right to participate in devising policies and holding officials accountable.

The post-2015 framework should include the adoption of suitable economic policies that boost productive sectors with economic added value, bolstering national margins in policies, and adopting fair redistribution policies and mechanisms. It also should allow for a suitable environment for civil society to practice its rights of assembly, association, belief, expression and access to information and resources.

Partial sectorial models and interferences adopted in recent decades should be systematically revised and substituted by comprehensive development approaches in which the human being assumes the central position, participates in their achievement and reaps their outcomes. Such approaches should be rights-oriented whereby human rights are treated indivisibly; they should also fully abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as international human rights conventions and agreements.

Recommendations:

- Calling on the Arab League to boost institutionalized cooperation with regional UN organizations to guarantee an efficient and effective Arab participation that reflects the concerns of the region's female and male citizens regarding a post-2015 framework.
- Calling for an open, comprehensive, transparent and unselective dialogue with CSOs in Arab countries whereby all active and influential parties in all sectors and areas participate and present post-2015 proposals.
- Calling for a coherent post-2015 framework that is rooted in international human rights criteria and tied to the sustainable development concept; it should underscore the connection between environmental sustainability and economic and social policies. At the heart of this post-2015 development agenda should be the principles of social justice, solidarity, human dignity, freedom and liberation from all sorts of discrimination, including gender, sexual, religious, racial and cultural discrimination.

4- On economic, trade and social policies

Participants would like to stress that Arab revolutions were not the result only of a lack of true wills to carry out true political reform or only of widespread corruption in state institutions and societies; a key reason was structural flaws in development patterns that have been applied in all countries since the early 1980s. Most such patterns are inspired by the Washington Consensus, which calls for liberalizing economies, markets and prices, shrinking the role of the public sector, limiting the state's interference in running the economy, and liberalizing currencies and public purchases and services.

Arab countries suffer low productivity and little freedom in devising public policies due to conditions imposed by trade agreements; their economies have become generally characterized by consumerism, a fact that increases poverty and unemployment and decreases human development rates. International trade agreements entrench economic liberalization laws with negative effects on the economic, social and cultural rights of many citizens in many countries, including Arab ones, unless circumvented and dealt with the right way.

Uncharted trade liberalization, which does not take into consideration the country's development level, the needs of its productive sectors, the availability of services and the protection of the agricultural sector, forces some sectors to lower their productivity after failing to compete with imports. Production also increases and accumulates (by large companies) in some sectors, especially food production, while small producers are excluded; the result is more unemployment leading to more poverty and undernourishment.

Recommendations:

- Putting an end to circumstantial and superficial handling of current economic and social problems and devising national economic policies and strategies that suit the country's

resources and contribute to supporting productivity and mechanisms of redistribution and decent employment. This requires carrying out studies of expected economic and social benefits and possible negative effects on the trade balance, government revenues and social aspects, especially employment.

- Considering trade an expression of economic, social and development policies seeking human development and social justice according to human rights principles and the sustainability of the environment and natural resources. This way, trade agreements will not be devised according to political considerations only but also to economic, social, cultural, national and regional priorities.
- Due to fallout of the current world economic crisis, the system of trade agreements should be reconsidered on domestic, regional, multiparty and global levels. The system, which gives priority to increasing exports and relying on direct investment, requires reevaluation, especially as export markets and direct investments shrink in light of the current crisis. Growth strategies should focus on inclusive, regional-oriented growth and give priority to domestic production that targets domestic markets.
- Trade-liberalizing policies should take into consideration the level of domestic development, especially since gradual liberalization can help develop domestic sectors. It is imperative to give priority to devising an effective trade policy that is not necessarily oriented to trade liberalization. Industrial, trade and agricultural policies should be selective in approaching the liberalization process. Trade liberalization policies should take into account domestic development levels and should be flexible and predictable.
- The economy should encourage innovation, creativity and the competitive relationship among facilities. It should also rely on the three main sectors – public, private and cooperative – and special attention should be given to the cooperative sector. This requires developing good governance policies in economic administration, as well as supporting nationwide development in parallel with democratic local administration. It also requires devising policies through social dialogue among the main production parties, including consumers.
- Reconsidering Euro-Med Partnership agreements through a deep reevaluation of concluded agreements to limit their negative fallout on national economies and economic and social rights. The conditions for taking part in globalization should also be reconsidered.
- Supporting inter-Arab trade relations and boosting regional economic cooperation while tying it to development processes, the rehabilitation of productive sectors, especially agriculture, industry and tourism, and job generation processes. The social dimension, related to the rights of underprivileged groups, including laborers, small farmers, craftspeople, women and children, should be taken into consideration.

- Launching domestic and regional dialogues on development challenges to reach substitute development modes; all parties should participate, including representatives of the private sector, production forces and all social and consumer groups.
- Admitting the importance and centrality of civil society's role in all stages of the development process – planning, execution and assessment – and the centrality of comprehensive human rights in the development process.
- Calling on governments to reconsider foreign bilateral debts, inherited from authoritarian and corrupt regimes; some such debts must be revoked, restructured or rechanneled to development projects. Funds sneaked out by erstwhile ruling families and revealed by Arab revolutions should be recovered.
- Warning current governments that accumulating additional debts may have negative fallout on sovereignty and future generations.

5- Boosting the private sector's role:

Participants stressed the importance of the private sector's contribution to development efforts. They urged it to be up to its social responsibilities vis-à-vis respecting human rights, honoring the principle of social responsibility and engaging in tackling development challenges on all levels.

Private sector institutions in many Arab countries benefitted from pro-investment legislative and structural measures taken by governments during the last two decades, but the input of these institutions to the development process is still below expectations.

However, governments must encourage the national private sector, facilitate its role in development and the expansion of the job market, boost its competitiveness and advance good governance mechanisms to fend off corruption and its negative fallout on the investment atmosphere.

Recommendations:

- Boosting supervision of economic projects and programs adopted by the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit, improving accessibility to related information, and evaluating social effects.
- Abiding by openness to and dialogue with representatives of the business sector, especially those who work in productive sectors and areas with social effects; seeking an agreement on regional priorities and joint pressure to include such sectors and areas on the agendas of Arab Economic and Social Development Summits and High-Profile Meetings on Social Aspects.

6- On boosting and protecting women's rights:

The continued violence and discrimination against women, in addition to the undermining of their rights in the Arab region, resulted in making women among groups that are mostly harmed and exposed to increasing violations of their rights.

Despite their prominent involvement in recent revolutions, women's participation in leading and decision-making posts remains weak and ineffective. They also suffer deprivation of vocational promotion compared to men. Poverty, too, affects women more than men, while discrimination remains prevalent in laws and practices, especially in economic and social areas. Violence against women in various forms and for many justifications remains rampant.

Recommendations:

- Calling for the formation of a civil state according to a new social contract that guarantees equality for women and respects their rights as part and parcel of human rights; calling for including in Arab constitutions clauses guaranteeing equality for all citizens and banning discrimination for any reason because of sex, religion or race.
- Respecting and abiding by women's rights as stipulated by international human rights agreements and abandoning all reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.
- Giving government budgets democratic and participatory characteristics and developing them towards establishing equality between the two sexes and instituting social justice as a priority; supportive strategies and programs should be devised to help achieve this goal.

7- On respecting the rights of persons with disabilities:

Despite relative improvement, especially in terms of laws, the conditions of persons with disabilities in the Arab region remain bad. Thirty million citizens suffer various disabilities, according to estimates by the World Health Organization and the World Bank, but efforts and budgets targeting this group are still less than they should be.

Recommendations:

- Implementing the international Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and including it in national laws; the same applies to the Arab Decade of Persons with Disabilities, which includes the basic principles for the rights of persons with disabilities in political, civil, economic, social and cultural areas.
- Relying on inclusive policies that change stereotypes about persons with disabilities in all areas, especially education and employment, and provide them with social protection and healthcare, thus boosting their independence and productivity.

8- On policies that boost the participation of the youth

The youth played a key role in Arab revolutionary uprisings; this was a key characteristic of the revolutions and showed how much deprived and underprivileged this important yet marginalized social group had been. Young people constitute more than half of the population in the region, and more than half of them are unemployed, according to regional and international reports. More than 50 million new jobs are needed in 10 years to assimilate new jobseekers, including men and women. This is a key challenge that must be redressed to sustain the human capital and put an end to brain drain in the region in general and in many of its countries in particular.

Recommendations:

- Boosting young people's participation in devising public policies, especially economic and social ones, through effective and permanent institutionalized mechanisms.
- Tying economic policies to the generation of decent jobs and the needs of the labor market; this will allow for assimilating new workhands in the labor market. Also needed is a revision of wage policies to boost young people's consuming abilities, redistribute wealth justly in society, apply policies that rehabilitate and empower young workhands and provide them with social protection, including protection against unemployment.