

## 2026 Regional Civil Society Forum - Rethinking Sustainable Development amid Wars and Uncertainty in the Arab Region

### Outcome Document



## Introduction

In 2026, the global and regional landscape is increasingly shaped by wars, escalating armed conflicts, persistent instability and injustices, as well as deepening inequalities and accelerating climate crises. These trends are undermining prospects for sustainable and inclusive futures. In fact, with only a few years remaining until 2030, the Agenda for Sustainable Development appears increasingly out of reach. The gap between commitments taken universally under the Agenda and its 17 Goals and their actual implementation at national, regional and global levels is huge, driven by weak political will to advance the structural reforms needed to address the root causes of inequality, injustices and instability, as well as failures in global governance and accountability. At the same time, multilateralism as a framework for collective solutions is facing significant challenges. Its credibility, effectiveness and efficiency are commonly questioned, while ongoing reform efforts have yet to address entrenched global power imbalances.

The Arab region reflects these global crises more deeply and more acutely, shaped by protracted wars and occupation, longstanding structural inequalities, exclusionary economic and political models, climate change, and accumulated policy failures. Rather than isolated crises, these realities reflect interconnected and systemic failures that continue to reproduce inequality, poverty, exclusion, dependency, and vulnerability across the region. Many countries of the region are trapped in structural and systemic, multidimensional crises characterized by rentierism, mounting public debt, economic stagnation, high inflation, shrinking civic space, erosion of the social contract.

Organized online ahead of the 2026 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, the Regional Civil Society Forum on Sustainable Development brought together around 100 civil society representatives from different Arab countries through four complementary panel discussions. These discussions centered on redefining development and reclaiming justice at all levels. Participants underscored the urgent need for a rights-based people-centered development paradigm grounded in social, economic, climate, and gender justice and emphasized the critical role of civil society in advancing it.

The forum emphasized that achieving justice and sustainable development cannot be separated from the imperative of ending wars and violent conflicts. It highlighted the need to elaborate a new development paradigm based on justice and fairness rather than growth alone, focused on opportunities, and wary of the risks of unequal distribution, and grounded in a rights-based, inclusive, and comprehensive approach that places human dignity, equality, and social participation at the center of development policies. It emphasized the importance of strengthening South–South and regional cooperation as a key step toward fostering solidarity, knowledge exchange, and collective regional responses capable of confronting shared structural and geopolitical challenges. The forum further underscored the vital role of a strong and coordinated Arab civil society movement in advancing development advocacy and problem solving. It called for proactive civil society engagement to leverage the current crises as an opportunity to challenge entrenched inequities, rethink dominant development models, and advocate for more inclusive, accountable, and just policies.

## **Multilateralism, Geopolitics and Development in the Region**

The current phase of global governance is marked by growing concerns over the effectiveness and legitimacy of multilateralism. At the heart of these concerns lies an increasing perception of paralysis within the United Nations Security Council, where repeated vetoes and persistent deadlocks over major geopolitical crises have reinforced doubts about its capacity to uphold international peace and security. Similarly, the international financial architecture is facing significant shortcomings. Recent meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank Group have failed to produce the development outcomes that were expected, neither advancing the Sustainable Development Goals nor ensuring the respect for, protection of, and fulfillment of human rights.

In parallel, the Pact for the Future reaffirms the institutional independence of these institutions from the UN system, raising important questions about whether such positioning further weakens their accountability to global development commitments and to the principles and objectives enshrined in the UN Charter. Furthermore, the growing prioritization of crisis management over structural and transformative responses undermines long-term preventive development strategies, while also limiting the effective use of public finance to guarantee the full realization of human rights, including the continuous improvement of living conditions.

These failures in global governance are reflected even more acutely in the Arab region, where geopolitics, wars, occupation, external interventions, and economic dependency continue to undermine governance, development, and regional cooperation. An estimated 45% of the region's population lives in areas affected by conflict or occupation. Protracted

wars and recurrent escalations in countries and territories such as Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Yemen, Western Sahara, and Palestine — particularly in the West Bank and Gaza — have generated large-scale displacement, deep social fragmentation, extensive economic and non-economic loss and damage, and intergenerational crises that are likely to shape the region for decades to come.

In Gaza alone, the number of victims has exceeded 73,000 Palestinians killed and 170,000 injured, alongside the widespread destruction of livelihoods and civilian infrastructure across the territory. Beyond their dire humanitarian consequences, these wars have generated severe economic and institutional impacts, with the cost of conflict and destruction in several countries surpassing national GDP levels, a cost almost often borne by people who had nothing to do with the decision to start the war. When and if the peace process begins anew, the direct victims of the conflict and their political representatives are cut off from it, have little or no say in the negotiations and can hardly convey their needs and concerns. This creates a giant blind spot where corrupt practices flourish, malpractice further entrenches itself by means of political influence trading, and the reconstruction process is regarded as a war prize for the speculators, rather than a much needed phase to rebuild lives and livelihoods. Despite the scale and frequency of such devastating conflicts, the Arab world still cannot create and foster a comprehensive and coordinated strategy for reconstruction, recovery, and long-term peacebuilding.

The region also remains heavily affected by external political and economic dependency, which continues to constrain national policy space and weaken sovereign development planning. Dependence on external financing, aid conditionalities, disadvantageous loan conditions, military alliances, and geopolitical rivalries has contributed to fragmented governance systems and limited the ability of many states to pursue independent, rights-based, and development-oriented policies. Sectarian and confessional lines, rather than becoming softer, deepen and further divide people, a scenario easily exploited by domestic and foreign influencers to perpetuate a state of instability and vulnerability. In parallel, growing military expenditures and securitized approaches to governance increasingly divert resources away from social protection, public services, and productive investment, further deepening inequalities, debt burdens, and social vulnerabilities. The military spending increases, unscrutinised, by orders of magnitude, while vital funding to civil society and key governmental agencies is cut with the rationale that these are wasteful and ineffective, whereas the intent is simply to silence possible watchdogs and contrary voices.

In the Arab region, globally, moving beyond fragmented responses toward an integrated approach that links development, peace, and justice has become an urgent necessity. To this end, populations increasingly expect an international order that is inclusive, representative,

and capable of delivering tangible impact, with a strong, uncensored, undiluted voice for the Arab countries in global fora. Yet, in reality, what we often witness is only limited and symbolic space for civic participation.

While civil society actors are present in relevant global processes, they are often confined to the roles of observers, consultants, or rights advocates, falling short of a genuine partnership in which civil society is recognized as an integral actor in agenda-setting, negotiations, and final decision-making. This marginalization is further exacerbated by structural inequalities within global governance systems, restrictive national legislative frameworks, and shrinking civic space. At the regional level, institutions such as the League of Arab States could theoretically provide an important platform for civic participation; however, political divides and wavering political will among Arab governments have hampered their effectiveness.

It is important to note that while the role of civil society in development is undeniable, no substitute exists for a functioning developmental state capable of guaranteeing fundamental human rights for all without discrimination and delivering public goods effectively. Therefore, the objective should not be to replace the state through NGOs or private actors, but rather to reform and strengthen public institutions so they become more transparent, openly committed, participatory, accountable, and socially responsive.

Adopting a holistic approach to sustainable human development, and taking the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as a key reference framework, civil society actors emphasize that sustainable development is impossible in the absence of peace and under conditions of war and occupation, and therefore call for:

- Place peace, human rights, and accountability at the center of sustainable development by advancing integrated approaches that link development, justice, humanitarian response, reconstruction, and peacebuilding. This requires strengthening international law, ending impunity, ensuring civilian protection, and establishing coordinated regional mechanisms for conflict prevention, recovery, and reconstruction.
- Close the gap between rights implementation and development cooperation by promoting human rights-based and justice-centered economic approaches, while addressing structural obstacles to equitable and sustainable development, including armed conflict, authoritarianism, elite capture, debt burdens, economic dependency, and the unjust global financial system.
- Advocate for a rights-based feminist development narrative that places human dignity, equality, and justice at the center of development processes and public policies.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms across all pillars of the UN system regarding their contribution to sustainable development and the reduction of multidimensional inequalities.

- Ensure that development remains conflict-sensitive and does not reproduce injustices or inequalities, while promoting innovative use of available resources and strengthening partnerships among the five Ps of the 2030 Agenda: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership.
- Recognize the limitations of GDP-centered approaches, which ignore unpaid care work and undervalue the informal economy. Move beyond GDP growth as the primary indicator of progress by prioritizing social and environmental well-being, equality, sustainability, and social cohesion.
- Recall that Article 109 of the UN Charter provides for the possibility of reviewing the Charter, which remains an important — though underutilized — legal avenue for institutional reform.

## **Social Policies for Social Justice**

The ultimate objective of social policies and protection systems should be the advancement of social justice. However, participants noted that social justice itself remains insufficiently defined and embedded within global agendas such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which instead relies on broader, diversionary, and less transformative terminology. The absence of a clear social justice framework has contributed to fragmented approaches to social policies and social protection, disconnected from broader questions of redistribution, equity, structural reform, and developmental transformation.

Across the Arab region, social policies continue to be shaped by fragmented, reactive, and narrowly targeted approaches that fall short of addressing structural inequalities and advancing social justice. Participants viewed the current crisis of social policies and social protection systems as fundamentally linked to broader economic and governance models characterized by austerity-driven reforms, weak public institutions, shrinking civic space, rising informality, and unequal distribution of wealth and resources. While recent crises — including wars, economic collapse, climate-related shocks, and the COVID-19 pandemic — have pushed social protection higher on policy agendas, responses have largely remained centered on temporary safety nets, subsidies, and humanitarian assistance rather than comprehensive, rights-based, and transformative social policies.

Participants stressed that social protection should be understood as one integrated component of broader social policy frameworks rather than as a substitute for them. Effective social policies must encompass universal access to quality public services, including healthcare, education, housing, food security, decent work, care systems, and equitable development planning. Social protection should therefore not function merely as a tool for crisis containment or poverty alleviation, but rather as part of a state-led and transformative social policy framework capable of reducing inequalities, strengthening social cohesion, promoting redistribution, and guaranteeing dignity and fundamental rights

throughout the life cycle.

Many current social policy approaches in the region remain disconnected from broader development and economic strategies. Prevailing economic models continue to prioritize fiscal austerity, short-term stabilization measures, and market-driven reforms over social justice, equitable redistribution, and long-term developmental planning. As a result, social policies often remain corrective rather than transformative, focusing on managing the consequences of crises instead of addressing their structural root causes. Social policies cannot be isolated from wider governance challenges, including shrinking civic space, weak public institutions, limited accountability, and the erosion of the social contract in many countries across the region.

The growing reliance on external financing and debt-based interventions, particularly through international financial institutions, has further constrained the ability of states to formulate sustainable, sovereign, and comprehensive social policy frameworks. Although some countries have increased domestic financing allocations, these resources continue to be directed primarily toward targeted assistance programs rather than universal and inclusive public systems. Participants further stressed the need to strengthen institutional capacities and coordination mechanisms to ensure that social policies and social protection systems are shock-responsive and capable of adapting to conflicts, displacement, economic crises, and climate-related shocks without relying excessively on ad hoc humanitarian interventions.

At the same time, the rapid digitalization of social protection systems and the expansion of unified social registries across the region raise important concerns regarding exclusion, surveillance, data governance, transparency, and accountability, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. While digital tools may improve efficiency and service delivery, digital transformation should not substitute for investments in comprehensive social policy infrastructure, institutional reform, universal public services, and inclusive policymaking processes.

Civil society continues to play a central role in advocating for rights-based, inclusive, and transformative social policies, particularly in contexts marked by wars, weak governance, and social fragmentation. Strengthening coordination among governments, civil society actors, humanitarian organizations, trade unions, and regional institutions remains critical in order to avoid duplication, reduce fragmentation, and support long-term institution-building and policy coherence. Stronger South-South and regional cooperation also represent important avenues for exchanging experiences, advancing alternative policy approaches, and promoting more equitable and resilient development models across the Arab region.

Key recommendations emerging from the discussion include:

- Shifting from fragmented safety nets toward comprehensive, universal, rights-based, and transformative social policy frameworks, within which social protection systems constitute an integrated component. Such frameworks should address structural inequalities, advance social justice, and strengthen resilience and shock responsiveness during wars, economic crises, climate shocks, and displacement, rather than relying solely on temporary and corrective responses.
- Developing sustainable and sovereign financing models for social policies and social protection systems by reducing dependence on external borrowing, strengthening redistributive fiscal policies, and recognizing social spending as an investment in sustainable development, social cohesion, and long-term economic resilience.
- Advancing inclusive and gender-responsive social policies that guarantee universal access to healthcare, education, food security, housing, pensions, disability support, care systems, and decent work, while addressing regional disparities, informality, and the exclusion of marginalized groups, including women, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, and populations affected by conflict and displacement. This includes expanding women's access to contributory social protection schemes, increasing women's labor force participation, and exploring alternative financing mechanisms, such as subsidizing social security contributions for low-income and informal workers, in order to strengthen inclusivity and long-term coverage.
- Strengthening institutional coordination and crisis preparedness through integrated social policy and social protection infrastructure, interministerial cooperation, harmonized approaches between humanitarian and development actors, and shock-responsive mechanisms that can be rapidly scaled during crises and conflicts.
- Advancing digitalization and the development of unified social registries and public data systems in ways that improve efficiency, access, and service delivery, while ensuring strong accountability, transparency, human rights, and data protection safeguards to prevent exclusion, surveillance, discrimination, and misuse of personal data, particularly for vulnerable, marginalized, and conflict-affected populations

## **Challenging Inequality: Toward Economic Justice**

The preamble of the 2030 Agenda describes it as “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in greater freedom.” Furthermore, it recognizes universally that “eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.”

Yet despite these universal commitments, the deepening and widening

inequalities witnessed globally and across the Arab region indicate a persistent gap in implementation, as well as the growing dominance of private finance, declining public investment, limited accountability within global governance structures, and the failure to advance a fair and equitable global trading system. Inequalities in the Arab region are therefore neither accidental nor temporary, but rather structural, multidimensional, and deeply interconnected with prevailing economic, political, financial, and governance models. Current global and regional crises — including wars, austerity measures, debt burdens, climate shocks, corruption, shrinking policy space, and the failure to reform the global financial system through a more just and representative international financial architecture — have further intensified social, economic, and gender inequalities.

Neoliberal economic policies and austerity measures continue to shape development trajectories across the region. Structural adjustment policies, privatization, market liberalization, and fiscal consolidation have weakened the role of the state, reduced investment in public services, and intensified wealth concentration. At the same time, governments continue to cut spending on essential sectors such as health, education, and social protection, while military expenditures and corporate profits remain largely protected. Participants stressed that inequality is not only economic but also political, as wealth concentration increasingly translates into political influence and weakened democratic accountability.

Corruption and illicit financial flows play a central role in undermining sustainable development and domestic resource mobilization. Despite the existence of anti-corruption and anti-money laundering frameworks across the region, enforcement remains weak due to fragmented institutions, limited transparency, weak international cooperation, political interference, and major gaps in access to financial and ownership data. Participants stressed that countries cannot mobilize the resources needed for development while large portions of public wealth continue to be diverted, concealed, or transferred abroad through illicit channels.

The gendered dimensions of inequality remain deeply embedded within prevailing economic and social systems, particularly through the systematic undervaluation and invisibilization of unpaid care work performed primarily by women. Current economic systems continue to rely on women's unpaid labor to compensate for weak public services and inadequate social protection systems, while excluding such work from economic indicators and legal protections. Informality, exclusionary labor systems, unequal redistribution, and discriminatory legal frameworks further intensify inequalities affecting women, migrant workers, agricultural workers, and other marginalized groups. Care work should therefore be recognized as a central pillar of economic and social systems rather than treated as a private or individual responsibility.

Addressing inequalities requires a move beyond GDP-centered and comparable metrics approaches and their narrow growth-based models, by advancing a new development paradigm centered on social justice, human rights, equality, sustainability, redistribution, social cohesion, and human well-being, rather than profit and economic growth alone. Participants emphasized the importance of reclaiming the role of the state, its commitment to backing, also financially, public goods and services, advancing progressive taxation, prioritizing and investing in the care economy, combating corruption and illicit financial flows, and protecting civic and democratic spaces. Sustainable development cannot be achieved without peace, accountability, a state's ability to hold on to its assets, and structural reforms capable of addressing the root causes of inequality and exclusion, while peace itself remains inseparable from the universal respect for human rights.

Key recommendations emerging from the discussion include:

- Advancing productive, redistributive, and rights-based economic policies that enhance productive capacities, generate decent and sustainable employment, and prioritize reducing inequalities through progressive taxation, the taxation of wealth and excess corporate profits, fair wealth redistribution, strengthened public services, and increased public investment in health, education, social protection, and care systems.
- Rejecting austerity-driven reforms and debt-based adjustment policies imposed through neoliberal macroeconomic frameworks that undermine social rights and development outcomes, while promoting alternative macroeconomic approaches centered on social justice, decent work, sustainability, and human well-being rather than narrow economic growth indicators.
- Strengthening transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption frameworks by improving beneficial ownership transparency, combating illicit financial flows and tax evasion, enhancing international cooperation on asset recovery, ensuring the independence of oversight and judicial institutions, empowering anti corruption agencies in their ability to communicate with their peers, exchange information and data across borders in a fast, secure and efficient way, ending impunity for economic crimes, and protecting whistleblowers, investigative journalists, and civil society actors.
- Recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work by investing in public care infrastructure, expanding public care services, strengthening labor protections, and integrating gender-responsive approaches into economic and social policymaking.
- Reclaiming and strengthening the developmental role of the state through democratic governance, inclusive policymaking, policy sovereignty, and the protection of civic space, while advancing alternative development models that place human rights, equality, peace, and ecological sustainability at the center of policy frameworks

## **Climate Justice for sustainable future**

Climate justice goes beyond the technical or environmental dimensions of climate change. It lies at the core of sustainable development, social justice, food and water security, access to resources, stability, and peace. While investing in sustainable and just energy transitions is essential, it is equally important to recognize historical responsibilities and unequal contributions to climate change. Current global climate governance must also be situated within broader power asymmetries shaped by fossil fuel dependency, unequal financial structures, and geopolitical interests. The current global and regional context — marked by war, energy volatility, and economic pressures — is reshaping both climate challenges and policy responses across the Arab region. Every conflict, on top of the socio economic damage, squanders precious and diminishing resources, with the destruction of aquifers, and the further deterioration of dated infrastructure, which further contributes to pollution and energy inefficiency.

Given that the Arab region controls approximately 48% of global oil reserves, around 38% of global natural gas reserves, and nearly 30% of global oil exports, its central role in global energy markets is evident. However, this position exists within a global system characterized by unequal trade relations and asymmetrical patterns of energy dependence. Political and military instability in the region remains a direct driver of volatility in global energy prices and markets. At the same time, the impacts of the energy crisis continue to unfold unevenly across Arab countries. Oil-exporting Gulf economies have benefited financially from rising energy prices, with countries such as Saudi Arabia generating significant revenues during recent energy price surges. Meanwhile, countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Lebanon continue to face mounting pressures associated with dependence on imported energy, rising debt burdens, austerity measures, and increasing climate vulnerability.

The current climate and energy crises reveal deep structural vulnerabilities resulting from heavy dependence on fossil fuel exports, geopolitical stability, and global trade routes. Addressing these challenges requires acknowledging collective but differentiated responsibilities and moving beyond a logic of crisis management toward a new development paradigm and alternative models of production, consumption, and social relations. However, even within international negotiations, including among some Arab states, there has been reluctance to fully support stronger international accountability mechanisms and transformative policy approaches. The global shift from fossil fuels toward green technologies is also generating new forms of conflict, exploitation, extraction, and geopolitical competition. Furthermore, there is a need to move away from systems centered on militarization, as war economies and military technologies continue to divert resources and political attention away from human development, environmental protection, and collective well-being.

In the Arab region, civil society actors working toward sustainable futures and climate justice emphasize that climate justice is a multidimensional issue that exposes structural weaknesses in dominant economic models, particularly dependence on fossil fuels, rent-based economies, and unsustainable development pathways. Despite shrinking civic space, civil society continues to play a critical role in advancing alternative narratives, advocating for accountability, and promoting more just and sustainable policy approaches.

Key recommendations emerging from the discussion include:

- Moving beyond a narrow understanding of just energy transition as merely replacing fossil fuel exports with renewable energy production, and redefining energy security not only as a technical issue but also as a matter of sovereignty, resilience, discreet and well planned use of reserves, social justice, and regional cooperation. This also requires shifting toward more sustainable production and consumption patterns that reduce overdependence on extractive and resource-intensive economic models.
- Recognizing that rising debt burdens, austerity policies, and structural inequalities within the global economic system constitute major obstacles preventing countries in the Global South from pursuing ambitious climate action and renewable energy transitions.
- Enhancing collaboration and collective negotiating positions among Global South countries, such as the Borrowers' Club, as important mechanisms for advocating debt cancellation or restructuring, lower interest rates, and fair climate finance capable of creating fiscal space for investments in renewable energy and climate adaptation.
- In the current context of crisis management, strengthening social protection systems by prioritizing essential services such as free or affordable food, healthcare, and education, rather than reducing public support, while ensuring that public resources are not disproportionately absorbed through generalized subsidies that often benefit large corporations, including those generating significant profits.
- Undertaking fiscal reforms, including increased taxation on highly polluting industries and corporations, in order to generate resources that can be redirected toward strengthening social protection systems and supporting a just and sustainable transition.
- Creating incentives, in the global arena, for companies demonstrably committed to transparency, integrity, accountability and the use of as much green energy as possible
- Establishing and maintaining long-term strategic alliances among civil society actors around structural issues and challenges related to climate justice, moving beyond short-term, ad hoc coordination and project-based information-sharing mechanisms.
- Bridging the gap between local, national, and regional initiatives by building coherent agendas for collective influence and broadening the range of actors involved in climate justice efforts. This requires

going beyond organizations and activists to include local communities, women, youth, indigenous populations, and other directly affected groups, especially if they are considered minorities, recognizing them not only as beneficiaries but also as key actors possessing essential knowledge and experience for developing collective solutions.

