Regional Meeting for Civil Society on Sustainable Development

12th-13th of April 2025 Beirut, Lebanon

Outcome Document

Introduction

From 2024 to 2025, one more year towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development timeline, we have been expecting more commitments to outcomes of the Summit of the Future, such as the Pact for the Future that covers a broad range of themes, including peace and security, sustainable development, climate change, digital cooperation, human rights, gender, youth and future generations, and the transformation of global governance. Yet in practice, as of 2025, we witness a regression in the commitments toward justice, peace, and equality.

International law and the human rights norms and principles are not respected; they remain ineffective, with increasing discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization. The increasing assaults and crimes witnessed by the international community around the world—and particularly in our region—have become our daily struggle and reality. They clearly indicate that we have been going rather backwards towards commitments made by the international community. Inequalities and injustices between and within countries increase with the centralization of capital power among the few, leaving the majority behind. In 2024, the number of billionaires rose to 2,769, up from 2,565 in 2023. Their combined wealth surged from $13 trillion to $15 trillion in just 12 months, indicating that they are investing in—or benefiting from—crises to grow their wealth.

The development challenges we face are intensifying, exacerbated by entrenched political corruption. High impunity and high vulnerability due to lack of rule of law, lack of independence of the judiciary, and the absence of legal assistance should be addressed. Nevertheless, given the weak governance structures that enhance mutual accountability, inclusivity, and transparency, our efforts do not yield concrete results.
Since 2015—and even earlier—within the broader efforts to achieve sustainable development, the structural and systemic challenges we face have been well documented. The role of development actors, including civil society, is also widely recognized. At this critical moment, the only viable solution is to protect humanity by reviving hope.

The transformative action we call for must be grounded in the implementation of internationally agreed norms and principles, drawing on the lessons learned from past failures. The monopolistic concentration of power—fueling inequality, extremism, and organized control—can only be countered through collective voices, solidarity, and South-South cooperation.

Respect for diversity and the inclusion of all people, without any form of discrimination, must be at the heart of our efforts. Achieving this demands collaboration and sustained solidarity.

Organized ahead of the 2025 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, the Regional Civil Society Forum on Sustainable Development brought together around 75 civil society representatives from different arab countries. The participants elaborated and adopted a set of five key themes to be echoed in related advocacy forums throughout 2025. These include the High-Level Political Forum; the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4), scheduled for 30 June to 3 July 2025; the Social Summit, taking place from 4 to 6 November 2025; and the 30th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP30), to be held from 10 to 21 November 2025.

The forum emphasized the urgent need to mobilize civil society at the regional level and to strengthen its role in advocacy efforts—particularly in promoting an alternative development paradigm. This paradigm challenges the prevailing international order, which is characterized by power imbalances, systemic inequalities, and intensifying proxy wars. In contrast, it calls for a just, people-centered, and peace-driven global framework.

1- Geopolitical Context: Multilateralism, Human Rights and Peace

The terrain of global governance has shifted. This shift, acknowledged by UN Secretary-General António Guterres and echoed by numerous Member States, is acutely felt by developing countries. The institutions and tools once established to uphold peace and security now appear outdated and insufficient. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in particular, faces widespread criticism over the use of veto power and its permanent membership structure.

Meanwhile, the international financial architecture—designed, built, and maintained to serve the interests of a powerful few—has failed to address the mounting global economic crises. Rather than promoting justice and equality, it exacerbates inequalities, deepens indebtedness, and undermines the rights and well-being of the majority.

Some member states have proposed reforms to address these systemic challenges. Leaders such as the Prime Minister of Barbados have emphasized the urgent need for small developing countries to have a seat at the decision-making table. Similarly, the President of Finland has proposed doubling the number of UNSC members and organizing representation by region to ensure a more balanced and inclusive structure. Calls to abolish the veto power, which is generally regarded as a hindrance to just and efficient global governance, especially with regard to peace and security, are among the proposals that question the current power structures.

A further setback to multilateralism came in March 2025, when the U.S. government openly rejected the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This marked a significant departure from previous commitments, reflecting the current administration's shifting priorities and its unwillingness to finance or support key UN-led development initiatives. This stance further weakens the UN's role in shaping global development and financial policies.

The advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued in 2024 confirmed that Israel has violated fundamental principles of international law. The Court declared Israel's presence in the occupied Palestinian territories illegal and identified violations including the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, the prohibition on the acquisition of territory by force, and obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. The ICJ also confirmed that Israel's actions in Gaza may amount to acts of genocide.

As a result, all states—including Arab states—have clear obligations under the UN Charter, ICJ jurisprudence, international law on state responsibility, international human rights law, and international humanitarian law. These obligations include:

- Non-recognition of the unlawful situation.
- Cooperation to end Israel's grave violations.
- Coordinated individual, joint, domestic, and extraterritorial action to address and remedy the consequences of these violations.

States must refrain from providing any assistance—directly or indirectly—that sustains the unlawful occupation. They must also take active measures to remove obstacles imposed by Israel's illegal presence that hinder the Palestinian people's exercise of their right to self-determination.

According to the ICJ, the September 2024 resolution of the UN General Assembly, UN experts, and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the State of Israel must take action to stop trade and investment ties with Israel that support the illegal occupation.

Lessons from history support this position. The UN General Assembly cautioned during South Africa's apartheid era that upholding regular ties with a state that was committing grave transgressions of international law:

1- encourages and facilitates such a regime's disregard for international opinion;

2- increases the likelihood of violence and conflict; and

3- undermines the UN's attempts to find a solution.

These worldwide disparities are at the core of the current global order. Especially in the Arab world, the rhetoric of "security and stability" is frequently used as a weapon to prolong war, conflict, and insecurity. This ongoing atmosphere of instability is best illustrated by the ongoing conflicts in Yemen, Sudan, Gaza, and other places.

Devastating forced displacement throughout the Arab world is mostly caused by conflict, occupation, and war, depriving over 45 million people of the remedies guaranteed by international law—many of them for decades. Those responsible for these serious transgressions, both domestically and internationally, are still at large.

"Effective measures and actions will be taken, in conformity with international law, to remove the obstacles to the full realization of the right of self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation," as stated in the 2030 Agenda, has not been fulfilled. This pledge is not linked to the main implementation framework because it does not have a corresponding goal, target, or indicator.

In these circumstances, pursuing sustainable development is all but impossible. Spending on the military continues to take up enormous amounts of resources that could be used to meet human needs. Identity-based divisions, such as those bolstered by religious classifications on national ID cards, exacerbate social divisions and impede reconciliation in conflict areas like Syria. Controversial debates about refugees add to European tensions.

These interconnected crises underscore the urgent need for more effective cooperation among authorities, both regionally and globally—a level of cooperation that remains grossly insufficient.

The current international system continues to reflect the inequalities embedded in its post-colonial foundation. Although developing countries once attempted to reimagine global governance through a unified, South-South discourse rooted in solidarity, this ambition has been eroded by growing competition and fragmentation. Unilateral decisions continue to obstruct the right to development, while no coordinated response has emerged to challenge them. In light of these realities, we call for

- Closing the gap between international human rights law, standards, and the implementation of mutual accountability among states and international institutions.

- Reforming global governance to ensure equitable representation of the Global South in key political, economic, and financial decision-making bodies—and to challenge the concentration of power that serves only capital and profit.

- Strengthening civil society engagement through advocacy, indigenous research, and knowledge production, positioning civil society as an empowered development actor linking national, regional, and international efforts.

- Launching a serious regional initiative—similar to efforts seen in the Great Lakes and the Balkans—to address cumulative displacements. This should include full reparations and the restitution of homes, lands, and properties, in cooperation with the international community. This is essential for achieving sustainable development and realizing fundamental human rights.

2- Financing for Development

"Money doesn't grow on trees" is a common phrase invoked to justify limited financing for development. It is frequently repeated in discussions around resource mobilization for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By 2025, and within the framework of international financial architecture, we recognize the economic war waged by the wealthy and powerful, and Funding and financing became a main battlefield. The conditionalities imposed on countries and austerity measures prevail while official development assistance steadily declines. In this context, regional specificities such as clientelism, illicit financial flows, dumping policies, and public debt further compound the challenges, representing major obstacles to the development of solid and sustainable financial infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the Arab region faces unprecedented public debt levels, reaching $1.55 trillion in 2023, with several countries experiencing debt-to-GDP ratios exceeding 90% (UNESCWA). On the revenue side, taxes in the region are low by international standards, and the region suffers from large tax leakages: $8.9 billion in public revenues were lost due to corporate tax abuse, while more than $50 billion in tax revenues were lost between 1980 and 2020 due to tax competition (UNESCWA 2022). Tax policies are not considered as a tool for redistributive policies, but with a focus at the consumption level primarily without differentiating socio-economic inequalities. The primacy of human-centered development must be reaffirmed as a guiding principle in policy and planning at all levels. Inclusive social dialogue is urgently needed, engaging all marginalized voices.

Crucially, financial and fiscal policies are not merely technical instruments — they are deeply political. Decisions around taxation, spending, and debt reflect political choices and power structures that determine who pays, who benefits, and who is left behind. Recognizing their political nature is essential to democratizing economic governance and ensuring these systems serve people, not just profits. Yet, reality shows that the international financial infrastructure is mainly composed of unilateral policies, which does not foster concrete dialogue.

On the other hand, as private capital increasingly shapes development priorities, civil society must remain actively engaged in monitoring, influencing, and shaping related decision-making processes. It is imperative that civil society not only track these trends but also assert its role as a key stakeholder, ensuring that private sector engagement aligns with principles of accountability, transparency, and the fulfillment of human rights. This requires moving beyond tick-box consultations with civil society, engaging and empowering them.

- At the regional level, put at the heart of financing for development discussion the need for respecting "national policy space" of the developing countries and their sovereign right to development.

- Critically assess the growing role of the private sector in financing for development with a particular focus on its implications on achieving sustainable development and human rights.

- Enhance civil society efforts in advocacy for financing for development, putting the need for political reform, governance, and accountability at the forefront of the discussion and calling for empowered civil society engagement in relevant mechanisms established.

- Strengthen inclusive social dialogue as a critical tool for building broad-based social consensus to address rising inequalities and socio-economic injustices

- Advocate for public spending reform, ensuring that resources are allocated more wisely and strategically to promote sustainable economic growth and long-term development.

- Building a genuine regional community that leverages our shared strengths, enhances cooperation, and reduces dependence on external powers.

3- Inclusive Sustainable Development

Amid interrelated multiple crises, we face globally and in the region from inequality and conflict under corporate capture and global governance failures, it is evident that the struggle for social rights is inseparable from broader economic justice. Yet it is important to highlight that social rights are not mere entitlements to services or by-products of economic growth—they are fundamental human rights to be respected, protected, and fulfilled. In our efforts, as civil society, since the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, we have advanced on the recognition of social rights as essential tools of justice through decades of activism, research, and coalition building. Today, thirty years later and ahead of the Second World Social Summit, we stand better equipped to reclaim that space and to confront the entrenched systems that continue to undermine social justice.

Nevertheless, our moment is not one that enables us to speak about any inclusive recovery, but rather we are witnessing a realignment — a restructuring of global and national priorities that risks entrenching existing inequalities and consolidating power in the hands of a few, instead of advancing justice and equity. The global economic order, built on historical colonial legacies, has only deepened inequality. Corporate power has expanded without any accountability, dominating critical areas like pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and technology. Food security, the right to health, and other social rights have been destroyed and regressed by war, by privatization, and by austerity measures, and the existing capacity has been systematically eroded by rigid intellectual property regimes, trade rules, and financial constraints.

Social protection is a core component in the broader struggle for social justice. What began as a response to poverty through safety nets and cash transfer mechanisms — has evolved significantly, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought social protection to the forefront of the development agenda. However, it has often been addressed in isolation, disconnected from other development goals and without fully embracing the social justice dimension. It is essential to move beyond a fragmented approach. Social protection should not be viewed separately, but as an integral part of broader social and economic policies.

In this context, civil society should take action towards recalling that top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches in policymaking have consistently failed to address local realities and have often reinforced marginalization.

- Promoting a human-centered development approach grounded in grassroots power by advocating for inclusive, participatory, and context-specific policy processes. This involves working constructively with national governments to bring grassroots experiences and alternative models into official policy spaces.

- Building strong alliances across sectors, movements, and constituencies at the national level is key to laying the foundation for coordinated regional and international engagement. Cross-border solidarity is essential to advancing systemic change and amplifying the voices of the Global South in multilateral platforms.

- Integrate social protection reform into broader public policy frameworks, especially macroeconomic and social policies. Reject fragmented and technocratic approaches by situating social protection within its full social, economic, and political context.

- Strengthen national and cross-sectoral civil society networks to build a robust counterforce capable of engaging with other actors and their agendas. Ensure the active participation of civil society organizations, especially unions, networks, and directly affected groups, in social dialogue. Advocate for institutionalizing this dialogue with conditions that guarantee equality and parity among all stakeholders.

- Engaging in constructive and assertive interaction with international organizations that support a rights-based approach to comprehensive social protection systems, including social protection floors, and working toward forming a shared strategy or at least a common position to confront attempts to reduce social protection systems to mere poverty-reduction safety nets. Also, strengthen the commitment of these supportive international actors to uphold the rights-based approach and avoid compromising on core principles or conceding to dominant paradigms.

4- Governance and Partnership

Sustainable development is not only impossible without tackling corruption—it is fundamentally undermined by structural and political corruption that serves elite interests at the expense of marginalized communities. Transparency and anti-corruption must be treated not as technical add-ons, but as core political priorities, integrated into inclusive and systemic reforms from the local to the global level. These must become national priorities, integrated into inclusive and comprehensive reforms from the local level upward.

Yet, at the global level and regional level, there is a noticeable lack of clear strategies or policies prioritizing the fight against corruption and related preventive measures. In this context and taking into consideration our

regional realities-war reality- reconstruction phase raises urgent questions about oversight, funding transparency, and who will and can monitor the process. Given that estimated costs stand around $11 billion in Lebanon and $53 billion in Gaza, access to information, transparency in the process, innovative tools of digitalization, and inclusive civil society processes should be established and strengthened.

Marginalized communities—especially those most impacted by conflict and economic exclusion—are systematically excluded from decision-making processes and denied access to information. Moreover, many current institutions are shaped by colonial legacies that normalized exploitation and erased women's voices. However, viewing corruption through a woman's lens surfaces overlooked realities. It's not just about stolen funds—it's about everyday injustice: sexual harassment, exclusion from leadership, and biased systems that deny protection and accountability. For women, corruption is deeply linked to violence, marginalization, and systemic neglect.

Whereas the international community often opts for short-term stability over long-term accountability, cross-pillar collaboration across peace, security, human rights, and development is eroding, replaced with fragmented, siloed approaches. In their voluntary reporting states, opt for simple ad hoc initiatives as their achievements and success. In relation, diverse UN agencies established with clear adherence to the UN Charter claim technical neutrality despite their obligations to uphold them as central to achieving social justice. Thus, partnerships established and engagement with civil society in these forums remain only symbolic—manipulative or tokenistic—lacking meaningful participation and allowing genuine democratic oversight. The popularization of "nexus" approaches—linking peace, humanitarian aid, development, or energy-food-water security—allows for such distraction and diverts attention from accountability, long-term transformation, and genuine partnership with development actors.

- Recognize structural and political corruption as key barriers to sustainable development, and integrate anti-corruption and transparency measures as central political priorities—embedded in all reform processes from local to global levels, especially in post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

- Establish inclusive, transparent, and accountable oversight mechanisms for reconstruction and development financing, ensuring access to information, the use of digital transparency tools, and meaningful participation of civil society—particularly from affected and marginalized communities.

- Integrate gendered and historical perspectives into anti-corruption strategies to address how systemic injustice and colonial legacies disproportionately impact women and marginalized communities.

- Adopt a feminist and intersectional approach that goes beyond transparency to transform power structures, center lived experiences, and ensure inclusive, rights-based justice.

- Address digital gap in parallel with the fight against corruption and enhancing transparency and for the empowered engagement of civil society

5- Climate Justice

The climate crisis is rooted in the dominant civilizational model and the market-driven global economy. Despite decades of efforts under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), global temperatures have already surpassed the 1.5°C limit set by the Paris Agreement—25 years ahead of projections. At the same time, fossil fuel production has not declined; instead, it continues to grow and is projected to expand throughout the century.

As emissions rise, historical responsibility remains a contentious issue at COP negotiations. Developed countries increasingly shift the focus to the current emissions of large “developing” nations such as China, which industrialized later. However, a genuine recognition of historical accountability must extend beyond emissions measurements. It must oppose the replication of the neoliberal and industrial models that initially sparked the crisis.

Under these models, mitigation strategies are inherently industrial, involving raw materials, technology, and capital that are frequently taken from the Global South and exported before being resold at a higher price. With the implementation of "offsets" through land appropriation and dispossession in the South, carbon itself turns into a tradable commodity. This process traps the Global South, which includes a large portion of the Arab world, in a cycle of colonialism and unequal trade.

Market-driven competition for essential materials drives up the cost of adaptation and mitigation for developing nations, increasing their debt load and reliance on climate finance. Instead of being viewed as a kind of compensation, the transfer of technology and energy has sparked militarization, land grabs, and trade wars.

Given these dynamics, demands at COPs need to be intensified, and the Arab bloc needs to strategically place itself within this conversation. Growing regional climate justice advocacy that is grounded in intersectionality and social justice should be the source of its legitimacy and clout.

The regional response must move beyond narrow frameworks of mitigation and adaptation and embrace a broader intersection with social and economic justice. Civil society and trade unions are well placed to materialize this intersection from the bottom up. This requires shifting away from development models inherited from the West and promoted by international organizations and financial institutions.

Adaptation strategies in the Arab region should focus on securing sovereignty and equitable access to essential resources—particularly water and food—amidst climate change and market pressures. As droughts become more frequent and severe, it is imperative to decommodify water and recognize it as a public good. Water sovereignty means ensuring community control over local sources and implementing sustainable management practices that respect ecological limits.

Similarly, food sovereignty demands a move away from export-oriented, irrigation-intensive agriculture. The region must prioritize rainfed staple crops that match local climatic conditions and are informed by traditional ecological knowledge. These practices offer resilient, context-specific solutions to sustain food systems in a warming world.

Civil society must lead bottom-up climate action by integrating diverse knowledge and linking climate justice with broader social movements. This includes:

- Escalating demands and negotiations for climate justice with Arab governments and global actors. This should stress the need for a development approach to energy transition and adaptation that advances economic sovereignty, especially over water, food, and land.

- Reinforcing the intersection of social and economic justice by expanding civil society networks to include trade unions, rural and agrarian communities, and grassroots organizations. These groups are central to building a movement for a just transition.

- Developing a regional knowledge base for climate justice. This includes:
  - Monitoring inequalities in access and allocation of resources like water.
  - Critically examining the sources and conditions of financing for mitigation and adaptation projects.
  - Establishing a regional platform to monitor climate finance and debt, serving as an early warning system for projects driven by privatization or extractivism.

- Fostering inclusive social dialogue, not limited to civil society, but extending to all segments of the population, especially those most vulnerable to climate impacts. Climate discourse must avoid oversimplification and remain accessible by anchoring climate justice in the historical, social, and economic realities of communities across the region.

- Establishing a parallel process to COP within the Arab region. This platform should promote just climate action rooted in local contexts and influence Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and national climate strategies. It should prioritize: community participation, rights protection and addressing structural inequalities in climate policy formulation and implementation.

In conclusion, the participants adopted these proposals to serve as a foundation and tool for dialogue at various levels:

- At the level of civil society, including unions, social movements, and grassroots initiatives;

- With stakeholders, such as experts, human rights defenders, representatives of the private sector, and local authorities,

- As well as with governments, policymakers, and legislators; And finally, with international partners, including governments, international institutions and organizations, and development agencies.

These dialogues aim to foster a shared understanding, broaden participation, and ensure that future policies are more just, inclusive, and responsive to the needs and rights of the people.