

Regional Meeting for Civil Society on Sustainable Development

On the Way to the Summit of the Future

Beirut, March 4, 2024



Outcome Document

Introduction

"A safer world – and a bigger pie – for all", is the objective of the UN Summit of the Future that will take place next September in New York. It is all evident now that the agenda 2030 and none of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals will be met. Worldwide, wars, inequality, poverty, hunger, and diseases are increasing, women suffer more violence and discrimination, and children suffer from starvation and wars, as seen in Gaza. Simultaneously, climate change, the destruction of nature, and the exploitation of the world's resources by corporations are causing severe consequences such as biodiversity erosion and climate disruption.

Thus, we are not closer to a safer world and Justice between North and South for developing countries and their people. Despite extensive efforts to monitor the implementation of these goals through specific indicators and targets, the annual presentation of "achievements" during the High-Level Political Forum has failed to paint a positive picture.

In the Arab region, people face challenges in achieving sustainable development, due to ongoing struggles war, conflict, humanitarian crises, and systemic human rights violations. In addition, states did not adopt the development model in accordance with the interconnectedness and intersection of the five dimensions of the sustainable development agenda, which are the political, economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions.

The initiatives adopted at the national level often lack locally owned, inclusive, and holistic human sustainable development agendas. Instead, the current development process and

approaches contribute to maintaining the status quo, rather than raising injustices and resisting inequalities.

Organized in anticipation of the UN ESCWA Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, the Regional Meeting for Civil Society on Sustainable Development gathered over 80 civil society representatives. During the meeting, which was held on March 4, 2024, in Beirut, key sustainable development challenges were addressed, and a set of recommendations were adopted to guide efforts in overcoming these challenges.

a. Reforming the Multilateral System and Global Governance

"We the peoples" welcomes one that opens the UN Charter. However, in the current landscape, despite binding treaties and voluntary commitments towards development, there's a noticeable lack of trust in the global governance system that has been established. The "We the peoples" approach has shifted, now encompassing promoting partnerships with businesses, corporations, and global financial architecture actors, often prioritizing their profits over people's rights.

The call for reforming and transforming the global governance system is much needed, grounded in a fair and universally agreed normative framework. Nevertheless, the reform of global governance goes beyond having more developing countries' voices on the board, it fundamentally involves placing interconnected and interrelated human rights and social justice at the center of the system, ensuring their primacy, and establishing mechanisms for accountability in fulfilling them. We need to be able to hold governments and international organizations accountable when they impose policies that may result in significant human rights violations, especially right of development, and increasing inequalities.

In line with the UN SG suggestions to reform the UN, Today's global challenges require revitalized international cooperation that protects human rights and enhances sustainable human development. It ought to be effective, representative, and inclusive, and the Security Council should be reformed to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities, and abolish the veto.

In this regard, civil society organizations call on all development actors to enhance efforts to:

- Take concrete steps for the global governance reform process on the principles of representation, and equity. Address the under-representation of the Global South in the decision-making bodies of political, economic, and financial institutions. Additionally free the United Nations from the influence of superpowers and large corporations.
- Enhance the internal mechanisms of the United Nations, particularly by reconsidering the Security Council's veto power that can disrupt solutions and decisions.
- Emphasize the integration of the sustainable human development narrative, grounded in the right of development, at the core of decision-making processes.
- Reconsider the rules and structures of global financial architecture, its institutions, and their roles in exacerbating human rights violations through promoted policy conditionalities. Ensure a comprehensive shift in commitments related to financing for development, encompassing debt cancellation and renegotiation, and propose the establishment of an international convention on taxes under the United Nations auspices to prevent illicit financial outflows from capital-starved countries.
- Prioritize adherence to human rights, which is a system of values and higher standards that must constitute a guiding and binding framework for economic, social and political activity. Emphasize the continuous development of this system to make it universal and adaptable to evolving global developments.

b. Peace as a Prerequisite for Sustainable Development

The global system has failed to address the perennial issues of peace and security, which is necessitating the establishment of a “New Agenda for Peace”, which outlines a vision for multilateral efforts for peace and security, based on international law, and recognizing the interlinked nature of many of the challenges we face.

However, the current situation in the region, considering Gaza, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia starkly demonstrates that the aspirations for freedom and peace of millions in the Arab region are sidelined due to veto power wielded by a handful of countries.

Particularly concerning the war on Gaza, we continue to witness a silence that enabled war. This silence is observed not only at the political level but also within a significant portion of the media and academia. It stifles the voices of human rights groups calling for sustainable peace and ceasefire. Meanwhile, Global South countries' efforts to support a permanent ceasefire and a peace process are also being neglected. From defending justice to addressing the violations of humanitarian and human rights laws the Palestinian question is a litmus test of commitment to sustainable development in the region, that for now, we seem to fail.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to address the root causes of conflicts, injustices, and inequalities, which are evident at multidimensional levels.

In light of the wars, the Arab region is hosting millions of international migrants and Arab countries were the origin of millions of refugees and displaced people. In addition to the growth of discriminatory rhetoric, there are no plans for safe return and the minimum protections are not available. Acknowledging the interdependence of international peace and security, sustainable human development, and human rights at both regional and global levels is crucial. This requires a shift away from the militarization and securitization of the development approach, along with:

- Recognize people's right to development and self-determination.
- Demilitarize budgets and reduce the allocation of resources to military spending by fulfilling the obligation to use the maximum available resources to enhance Human Security and for the progressive realization of economic, social, and cultural rights.
- Shift the focus from merely sustaining humanitarian assistance for immediate needs in the region to a more comprehensive approach. Prioritize bringing about long-term peace and justice.
- Develop national prevention strategies to address the different drivers and enablers of violence and conflict in societies.

Strengthen national infrastructures for peace, promoting new social contracts that reinforce State institutions. This should include promoting and strengthening the rule of law, social cohesion, transitional justice, and anti-corruption mechanisms.

- Advocate for the separation and peaceful transfer of powers, which enhance accountability mechanisms and end impunity, and ensure greater tolerance and solidarity.

c. Social Protection and Addressing Injustices-inequalities.

National policies in the Arab region are characterized by their focus on social protection systems in isolation from other policies, especially macroeconomic and social policies. It adheres to neoliberal economic trends that generate global and national inequality, leading to the continuous and expanding impoverishment and marginalization of vulnerable social groups.

Also, most countries in the region still consider social protection to be a component of anti-poverty strategies and believe that social protection systems should be allocated almost exclusively to support poor, vulnerable, and marginalized groups. Accordingly, they place a strong emphasis on the “social safety nets”, which are provided through cash transfers or in-kind assistance and which are not part of the social protection system, but they come to address a defect caused by the economic system itself. The dual nature of social protection programs is also a major challenge. On the one hand, these programs attempt to address imbalances in income distribution, such as poverty and inequality, which are caused by economic activity. On the other hand, protection programs themselves are considered a product of economic activity in the country.

This perception is contrary to the approach of civil society organizations, which emphasizes the right to development for all. An effective social protection system with universal coverage is a human right and would have a series of impacts, starting with mitigating the effects of poverty, protecting from falling into poverty, enhancing human capacities, participation, and gender equality, bridging social and regional gaps, and contributing to economic and political stability.

This prompts us to think about strategies that alter the balance of power in society, beyond just economic efficiency. While emphasizing that the support systems for some products adopted by countries are not part of the social protection systems, and they come to address a defect caused by the economic system itself. This requires to:

- Develop social protection policies within a broader integrated and inclusive framework of economic and social strategies. This should aim to reduce inequality and combat poverty, starting with a fair tax system. Prioritize providing public utility services, social services, and the right to decent work opportunities. Pursue economic policies that distribute and redistribute fairly income and wealth and invest in public goods rather than adopting austerity measures.
- Develop measures for sustainable and equitable social protection financing such as introducing progressive taxation, enhancing transparency in the process of setting budgets and expenditures.
- Adopt universal rights-based social protection systems covering the entire population without exception. Start with filling the current gaps and including excluded groups, especially people with disability and informal workers in the agricultural sector, especially female agricultural workers, among others.

d. Accountability and Partnership for Sustainable Development

In the Arab region, vulnerable groups' participation and leadership in the Arab States region have historically been obfuscated, and weak accountability frameworks constitute a significant challenge, together with a restrictive enabling environment and violations of fundamental freedoms; including freedom of expression, assembly and association, access to resources. And, today, civic space in the Arab region faces another kind of restriction, represented by pressure on institutions and frameworks that support Gaza.

In addition to that, the influence of non-state actors also varies depending on the effectiveness of the government and its monopoly on legal violence. In the cultural and media field, the trend towards populism flatness and entertainment, the expansion of hate speech on social media, and the use of traditional

formations and extremist religious interpretations to besiege the shift towards a system based on citizenship, human rights, and the “modern democratic civil state” are expanding.

In the same context, there is a serious gap in effective accountability mechanisms that could accompany the role of the private sector in the Arab countries, including in its expanding active partnerships with the State and involvement in processes related to development goals. Starting to effectively redress this gap requires adapting accountability mechanisms to each country’s economic, social, and governance contexts, including considering the nature of the private sector and its interactions with the State.

In addition, technology was not used effectively to enhance participation, and it's crucial to recognize that the ongoing digital transition is predominantly led by those who hold power and benefit from digital capitalism.

We Consider that the effective implementation of Agenda 2030 depends on the enabling democratic environment for participation as clearly expressed in the means of implementation and good governance namely in SDG 16 and SDG 17 together with access to timely and adequate information and data that enables monitoring and enhances accountability, and this requires:

- Build democratic systems based on the principle of separation of powers and independence of the judiciary to foster an enabling environment for active civil society and citizens’ participation in the prevention of and fight against corruption.
- Engage proactively and constructively with civil society on national strategies, actions, and plans, including participatory budgeting, and plans based on needs assessments, supporting civil society coalitions, and engaging in regular dialogue with policy actors.
- Advance and strengthen the national legislative frameworks that clarify the duties of private entities and the mechanisms available for victims of business misconduct to pursue remedy and justice.
- Ensure active engagement of youth and future generations in all policy processes to address intergenerational development challenges.

- Prioritize education policies as a strategic direction in achieving sustainable human development. Improve the quality, inclusiveness, and accessibility of education for all. developing curricula, and providing an educational environment that encourages critical thinking and developing life skills. In addition, education should be linked to the needs of the labor market enabling young people to acquire the skills necessary to participate effectively in the labor market and achieve a sustainable and prosperous future.
- Shed light on ongoing digital transition processes led predominantly by those in power and benefiting from digital capitalism. Address the resulting digital divide and ensure digital justice, particularly for those lacking knowledge, financial resources, and human capital, especially in the Global South.
- Address the question of technology transfer by removing technology from the monopoly of companies and adjusting laws protecting intellectual property and WTO regulations. Shift towards making technology the property of everyone, allowing localization and decentralized production for universal access.
- Advocate for a paradigm shift from stockholder to stakeholder to right holder.

e. Global Commitments and Future Imperatives on Climate Change for the Arab Region

Global efforts have fallen short in containing climate warming, raising concerns about the planet's habitability due to rising temperatures and extreme weather events. Urgent principles transcending borders are needed to manage climate disasters, mitigate risks of instability, and address disputes related to territorial and maritime claims.

Climate change poses a significant challenge, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable. Recent environmental events in the Arab region underscore the pressing need for principles that transcend borders in managing climate disasters, mitigating risks of instability, and addressing disputes related to territorial and maritime claims.

Wars and conflicts, notably in Gaza or Ukraine, obstruct the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. This hindrance is expected to lead major countries, both in size and emissions, to backtrack on their pledges to reduce emissions. The diversion of funds towards militarization, security, and humanitarian interventions, coupled with the failure of developed and industrialized countries to fulfill their commitment to finance the climate fund with one hundred billion dollars annually since 2020, casts doubt on the likelihood of fulfillment this year. Civil society organizations call on all development actors to intensify efforts to:

- Recognize environmental rights at the national levels through constitutions and laws, incorporating human rights approaches in designing environmental policies. Consider equality, non-discrimination, commercial enterprises' responsibilities, and the impact of armed conflicts on environmental rights.
- Develop sustainable development strategies encompassing plans to mitigate climate disasters. Adjust energy and transportation policies to support and develop public and shared transport, building systems that rely on less energy and promote saving and rationalizing consumption across all sectors.
- Enhance efforts to hold historically responsible entities accountable for emissions, with a focus on reviewing dominant market economy and competition policies and reversing privatization efforts that harm global ecosystems.
- Ensure structural and material reforms in various climate finance systems. Vigilantly monitor domestic financing in Arab countries and measure the impact of these funds.
- Initiate work and promote low-energy green economies, moving beyond energy transformation and steering away from the promotion of nuclear energy as a purportedly safe alternative.
- Integrate a gender perspective into environmental policies and address gender inequality arising from environmental projects.
- Review population and agriculture policies, along with population distribution. Ensure integrated and balanced development policies between rural and urban areas to alleviate concentration in cities, responsible for 70% of global emissions.

