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Arab NGO Network
for Development

شبكة المنظمات العربية
غير الحكومية للتنمية

Regional Civil Society Perspectives and Recommendations for WSSD2



Introduction

Thirty years after the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and plan of action (1995) which called for the eradication of poverty, full and productive employment, and the promotion of social integration, the challenges for achieving social development and social justice remain the same.

The declaration identified the creation of an enabling global, regional, and national environment—economic, political, and legal—as key to achieving social development, yet the current world order, shaped by the collapse of the neoliberal model, rising inequalities, growing unilateralism and militarization, the systemic violation of human rights and international law, and the weakening of the global governance system, has instead become deeply hostile to social and economic justice. This is taking place against a backdrop of growing global warming and environmental degradation, particularly water and food shortages. A large segment of the population suffers from poverty and declining services, a widening technological and digital gap, and rising debt, threatening financial collapses amid unprecedented humanitarian crises with 123.2 million people displaced worldwide¹, the destruction of fragile infrastructure and the basic structure of economies, and the absence of operational frameworks for regional coordination, support, and economic integration.

The Arab region is experiencing its worst conditions in terms of income disparity, unfair distribution of wealth, and deepening and widening inequality, in addition to the continued presence of authoritarianism, the absence of governance, transparency, and limited participation and accountability, the spread of informal and unprotected employment, and ongoing violence, including the Israeli-perpetrated genocide.

High public debt, weak regional economic integration, and the dominance of rent-based economies have deepened financial fragility and social vulnerability. Although some countries have achieved quantitative progress in education and health, these gains remain limited and uneven, failing to translate into inclusive or sustainable social development. Gender inequality, political repression, and the absence of structural reforms continue to block transformation toward a just, democratic, and cohesive Arab region.

Building on sustained civil society engagement, the Arab NGO Network for Development submits a policy paper presenting regional recommendations for the Second World Summit on Social Development (WSSD2), reflecting outcomes of regional consultations, webinars, and analytical papers to ensure that Arab realities are duly considered in shaping the global social development agenda.

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Global Trends Report 2024, June 12, 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/global-trends>

Social Development Challenges: Global Trends and Regional Realities

The Arab region faces a complex set of interrelated social development challenges that are deeply intertwined with both global trends and regional realities. Persistent conflicts, occupation, and political instability not only continue to undermine social development in the Arab region, but also limit opportunities for inclusive participation, democratic governance, and the exercise of fundamental rights. Lasting progress requires national strategies rooted in human rights and international law, supported by genuine political will and regional solidarity, alongside concerted efforts to achieve peace and stability. Ensuring the right to development at both national and international levels is central, as structural inequalities, the absence of accountability, persistent instability, and limited global cooperation continue to impede the Arab region's path toward social progress. At the same time, the principle of social justice—fundamental to meaningful social development—is increasingly sidelined in policy agendas, especially amid neoliberal policy orientations. Beyond the regional challenges, the global economic and financial system perpetuates asymmetries of power, marked by deep inequalities, opaque and unaccountable public finance, widespread tax evasion and unsustainable debt burdens, with global military expenditure alone reaching \$2.7 trillion in 2024², undermining equitable social development and reaffirming the urgent need to reform the global economic system.

As a result, poverty extends far beyond income, affecting the overall living conditions of vulnerable households, including education, health, housing, and nutrition. Addressing poverty at both global and national levels requires a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between economic growth, social justice, and human rights, ensuring that growth serves people rather than profits. This entails reducing inequalities through progressive income redistribution and fiscal policies, fair wages, decent work, and inclusive social policies, while recognizing the intrinsic connection between poverty and inequality. In the MENA region in 2022, it was reported that the top 10 % of income earners capture approximately 56 % of total income, the top 1 % earn roughly 15–24 %, while the bottom 50 % receive only about 10 % of total income, highlighting the stark concentration of wealth and the urgent need for policies to reduce inequality³. Within this framework, social protection systems and anchoring social protection into broader national social development strategies, are pillars for mitigating disparities, providing comprehensive coverage for all—including informal workers, women, refugees, and other vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, Arab countries currently allocate only about 2.5% of GDP to social protection⁴.

2. United Nations, The True Cost of Peace: Rebalancing World Military Spending for a Sustainable Future, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/the-true-cost-of-peace>

3. World Inequality Lab, "Income Inequality in the Middle East: Issue Brief 202206-," World Inequality Database, 2022, <https://wid.world/document/income-inequality-in-the-middle-east-world-inequality-lab-issue-brief-202206->

4. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Social Expenditure Monitor for Arab States, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/20041/file/social-expenditure-monitor-budgets-sdgs-policy-brief-english.pdf>

Education similarly remains a driver of inequality, as it often fails to be affordable or inclusive for marginalized populations, thereby reproducing social and economic disparities across generations. Guaranteeing the right to quality, free, and equitable education is therefore central to breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Equally critical is the right to health, which the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, revealing limited access to medicines and vaccines, and the unequal focus of health research. Vulnerable populations in low-income and conflict-affected countries remain most affected, underscoring the urgency of building resilient, publicly funded, and rights-based health systems that ensure equity and global solidarity.

Challenges to ensuring decent work and full employment in the Arab region are multiple, interconnected, and deeply structural. Despite the growing demand for labor since the Industrial Revolution, full employment has never been prioritized within dominant economic models. Unemployment disproportionately affects specific groups: youth consistently face higher unemployment rates than national averages; women experience higher unemployment than men; persons with disabilities remain significantly underemployed; and university graduates often face greater difficulties entering the labor market than those with lower levels of education, particularly in developing countries. These patterns reflect systemic biases, structural inequalities, and the social and economic priorities embedded in both national and global economic models, rather than individual shortcomings.

Informal and care economies remain undervalued and underprotected, despite their critical role in sustaining societies. Workplace discrimination, limited legal protection, insecure job conditions, and the exploitation of migrant workers—including inadequate safeguards under systems such as *kafala*—further compound these challenges, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reforms that address the structural, social, and economic dimensions of work, and ensure equal protection, decent wages, and dignity for all workers.

Advancing women's rights, gender equality, and broader social inclusion remains a critical challenge in the Arab region, as deeply rooted structural, social, and economic barriers continue to limit women's full participation and empowerment. Persistent inequalities in access to education, employment, and social protection, reinforced by discriminatory societal norms, patriarchal structures and institutional biases, continue to hinder women's empowerment and meaningful participation in decision-making. In conflict-affected and poverty-stricken contexts, women and girls face heightened exclusion and insecurity. The limited integration of gender considerations and the principle of a care-oriented society into broader development, economic and climate strategies perpetuates these inequities, further constraining progress toward genuine equality and inclusive social development, with current trends suggesting that it could take up to 134 years to achieve full gender parity globally⁵, underscore the ineffectiveness of mainstream policies on gender equality.

5. World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/>

Another pressing challenge in the Arab region is environmental degradation, which goes beyond climate change to encompass its root causes, including unsustainable production and consumption patterns and prevailing global economic models. Weak infrastructure, water scarcity, insecure land and housing rights, pollution, and limited climate preparedness exacerbate vulnerabilities, threatening food security, livelihoods, and the well-being of affected populations, with 70% of the region's land affected by desertification⁶. These challenges highlight the urgent need for socially just and rights-based environmental and climate policies.

Policy Recommendations for Advancing Social Development

We call upon all stakeholders to implement measures that promote inclusive development in its political, environmental, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, in order to address the interrelated challenges facing the Arab region and the international community. Genuine development can only be achieved in an environment of peace and stability, and through a development model grounded in human rights, social justice, and gender equality.

On the global level

1. Remain accountable and implement political will to end wars and conflicts of all kinds, acknowledging that just and enduring peace is a prerequisite for development.
2. Adopt and implement an International Convention on the Right to Development, recognizing peoples' right to self-determination, national sovereignty, control over resources, and accountability for violations as essential conditions for sustainable social, economic, and human development.
3. Take concrete steps for global governance reform on the principles of representation and equity, 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.
4. Close the gap between international human rights law, standards, and the implementation of mutual accountability among states and international institutions.
5. Reform and enhance the effectiveness of the United Nations, and reinforce international justice mechanisms such as the ICJ and ICC to ensure compliance with international law and human rights standards.
6. Promote conflict prevention, disarmament, and the reduction of militarization at the global level delimitarizing budgets and reducing the allocations of resources to military spending to foster conditions for sustainable social, economic, and human development.

6. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "World Day to Combat Desertification: Daily Choices Can Save Our Planet," 2021, <https://www.unescwa.org/news/op-ed-world-day-combat-desertification-daily-choices-can-save-our-planet>

7. Reform the global economic and financial institutions and adopt national economic and social policies that prioritize social justice, reduce inequalities in wealth, power, and technological access, ensure transparent and accountable public finance, address debt burdens and structural imbalances, and promote inclusive multilateralism and equitable social development.
8. Revitalize the principles of international cooperation and official development assistance, in line with the Paris Declaration and the Busan Partnership Agenda, thereby upholding the principles of shared but differentiated responsibility and mutual accountability among all stakeholders. It is essential to engage civil society as an active partner in the formulation and implementation of cooperation policies, and to strengthen South–South cooperation—particularly Arab–Arab cooperation—to achieve development rooted in solidarity and equality. The contribution of the private sector to development efforts should also be emphasized, provided it adheres to human rights principles and rights-based accountability.

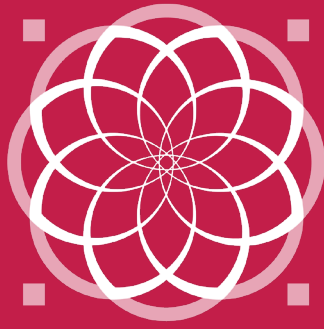
On the regional level

1. Stop wars and genocide through strengthened regional cooperation, ending impunity and ensuring accountability for violations, and shifting away from militarized and securitized policy discourse to right based, human centered development focus.
2. Implement integrated national and regional strategies that strengthen social protection, empower vulnerable groups, advance human rights, and promote transparent, accountable, and participatory governance. This should include the effective implementation of Recommendation No. 202 on Social Protection Floors, through the engagement of relevant stakeholders and the assurance of sustainable financing based on national resources.
3. Address the multiple and interconnected challenges to full employment by ensuring decent work, legal protection, basic job security across sectors, fair wages, equitable opportunities for youth, women, and persons with disabilities, migrant workers and by reforming informal and care economies that remain undervalued and unprotected.
4. Strengthen and reform education as a driver of knowledge, lifelong learning, and human rights by expanding inclusive, quality education for marginalized groups, restoring conflict-affected infrastructure, and linking learning to innovation, digital transformation, and youth employment.
5. Strengthen inclusive health systems by prioritizing the right to health, ensuring prevention, primary care, mental health, and healthy environments, and reforming global rules to guarantee equitable access to medicines and vaccines, especially for vulnerable populations in conflict-affected and low-income countries.
6. Adopt a comprehensive approach that integrates the concept of a care society and a feminist perspective across all policy areas, aiming to transform economic and social systems, address structural drivers of gender inequality, reinforce women's rights and empowerment, and ensure the protection and inclusion of women and girls—particularly in vulnerable contexts—while aligning with international human rights obligations.

7. Adopt a holistic, rights-based approach to environmental sustainability that addresses climate change, desertification, pollution, and unsustainable production and consumption, while strengthening climate resilience, securing land and housing rights, ensuring access to food and water, and supporting vulnerable populations in crisis-affected contexts to address the structural drivers of environmental vulnerability and promote human well-being.

For Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

1. Given the ongoing shrinking of civic space in the Arab region—manifested through restrictions on the freedoms of association, expression, and assembly—it is imperative to prioritize support for an enabling environment for civil society organizations and to strengthen their participation in shaping inclusive, rights-based development frameworks. This requires safeguarding civic space, fostering inclusive community participation and dialogue, ensuring timely access to information and resources, and upholding full commitment to human rights and the rule of law.
2. Strengthen the role of civil society organizations in promoting accountability and democratic governance, and in building strong alliances across sectors, movements, and constituencies as a foundation for coordinated regional and international engagement.
3. Enable civil society organizations to actively participate in global alliances that promote democratic multilateral governance, a peaceful world, social justice, and solidarity, in alignment with the Doha Declaration and the 2030 Agenda.



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