The Regional Civil Society Forum on Sustainable Development in the Arab Region
12-13 March 2023 - Beirut, Lebanon

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

At the midpoint in its implementation it is evident that the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thus the universal commitments to achieve a sustainable, prosperous and peaceful world for everyone, have been challenged with systemic and structural challenges at political, socio-economic, cultural and environmental levels. Stepping into the second half of the global timeline, "progress" continues to be contested while degeneration seems to be more accurate, at least in some of the core human components of Agenda 2030 such as the fight against poverty and inequality, and the promotion of adequate healthcare, quality education, peace, justice, strong institutions and partnerships; as indeed the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022 states that Agenda 2030 is in "grave jeopardy due to multiple, cascading and intersecting crises (…) creating spin-off crises in food and nutrition, health, education, the environment, and peace and security."

Many causes are indeed behind this degeneration. While the mainstream discourse puts forward Covid-19 pandemic as a main reason that has stalled progress in achieving the SDGs, UN Secretary-General António Guterres states[#] that "even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many people around the globe understood that inequality was undermining their life chances and opportunities. They saw a world out of balance. They felt left behind." Indeed, the pandemic only brought to the surface the systemic and structural failures, including the diminishing role of the state, weak governance, macroeconomic and socio-economic policies that exacerbated inequalities and the lack of redistribution policies and universal social protection schemes to protect the rights and the dignity of those most in need.

In this context, during the 2022 High Level for Political Forum the world leaders called for a renewed global commitment to sustainable development to achieve a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery. Nevertheless, rather than a mere fast-track progress and accelerating the implementation of the SDGs, a sole focus on achieving mere SDGs and their indicators would be misleading and will not be different from the goals-oriented approach adopted during the MDGs implementation. Addressing the structural challenges and transforming policies not for resilience and recovery but for reform putting people's needs and rights at the very center remains at the heart of achieving sustainable development.

Regional context

The contextual challenges in the Arab region continue to worsen as a result of the geopolitical and global contexts, more particularly the war in Ukraine, the regressed democracies and restricted civic space in the Arab countries, in addition to increased climate threats and natural disasters. The armed conflicts and humanitarian crises in Syria, Yemen and Libya and the historical case of Palestine under the Israeli occupation continue to bring together perpetual violence, extremism and instability that impede development efforts. Political instability adds a burden on the existing weak public institutions where

corruption prevails and rule of law lacks, further curtailing the human rights record and citizens' participation in both political and development processes.

These sustainable development challenges signal the urgent need for a new social contract addressing the issue of the state and its nature promoting human rights, secularism, and separation of powers. The economic and social aspects in this contract are the priority. In the region years long promoted rentier policies, the lack of productive economies together with the lack of fair redistribution and universal social protection, embedded corruption, intensifies inequalities at national and intra-regional levels. On the other hand, the lack of social cohesion and inclusive policy approaches results in the systemic exclusion of vulnerable groups from political, social, cultural, and economic processes and brings together violence and unrest. Yet the quest for sustainable peace in the region is further challenged as not only do we lack political will but it is evident that arms-trade and private sector profits are preferred by the international and regional actors for the sake of people's increasing humanitarian needs and dependence on humanitarian assistance. Moreover, there is immense need for official development support and assistance given the national and regional circumstances. As such, the Financing for Development (FfD) process needs to be promoted as a concept in the global South overall, including in the Arab region, in a way to propose alternative fair, just and equitable solutions for financing without accumulating unsustainable levels of debt for instance.

Given the aforementioned facts and challenges, a more participatory decision-making process with increased accountability and involvement of civil society is needed for adopting nationally owned comprehensive sustainable development policies and plans. This in turn could lead to a transition towards a fairer economic model that accounts for the environment and the most vulnerable, hence an improved socio-economic situation and ultimately increase the chances of achieving and/or advancing on the SDGs.

Forum's objectives

In 2018, a group of regional networks came together to organize and form the Civil Society Platform on Sustainable Development, grouping the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), the Arab Women Center for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC), the Arab Forum for Disability (AFD), Habitat International Coalition (HIC), Arab Network for Democratic Elections (ANDE), and the Arab branches of Transparency International (TI). Since then, the platform has organized yearly meetings ahead of the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development (AFSD) to discuss key development challenges and priorities in the Arab region and come up with concrete recommendations shared with ESCWA and annexed to AFSD's reporting to the High Level Political Forum as Arab CSOs' inputs.

With the contextual challenges and key issues at stake, this year, the regional forum will bring together civil society representatives from the Arab region for a two-day interactive discussion between 12 and 13 March 2023 in Beirut, Lebanon. The regional meeting aims at:

1. Providing a space for civil society in the region to exchange views and expertise about the progress on Agenda 2030.

2. Developing clear recommendations that address the root causes of under-development

3. Creating a space for exchange on national experiences by civil society groups, including representatives of vulnerable groups.

The two-day event will host seven panel discussions, each elaborating on a certain thematic focus of Agenda 2030 and its 5Ps (People, Prosperity, Peace, Planet and Partnerships) and cultural dimension. Participants will engage in working group sessions each day to come up with concrete recommendations around the priorities discussed that are: process and engagement on Agenda 2030 monitoring, peace and development nexus, social cohesion, structural economic problems, Agenda 2030 implementation and Ffd, diversified economies, industrialization and employment, and finally climate finance.

AGENDA

12 March 2023 - Zoom Link

09:00-9:30	**Registration**

09:30-10:30 **Setting the scene: Geopolitical issues and regional context**
- What are the implications of global issues (COP27, Ukraine crisis, Syria conflict, post-Covid recovery) on regional policy processes?
- What are the political aspirations for transformative change in the region? Can Agenda 2030 respond to them?
- Are political participation and engagement enablers for transformative changes in the region? Which actors have access to resources and policy making?

10:30-11:30 **Process and engagement on Agenda 2030 monitoring**
- Building on SDG implementation at the regional level and lessons learnt from national VNRs, what actions are critically needed?
- Looking at VNRs and national processes on the Agenda 2030 implementation, what are the lessons learnt on the role of different actors?
- At the level of governance, transparency and accountability what are the lessons learnt from the first half of Agenda 2030 implementation? What are the recommendations ahead?

CSO best practice presentation

11:30-12:00 **Coffee Break**

12:00-13:30 **Peace and development nexus elaborated**
- What are the short term and long term impacts of the Ukraine war to Food security in the region?
- What are the key challenges for achievement of Agenda 2030 and SDGs in confict-affected settings in the region? Can ODA be a tool?
- What are the ramifications of the earthquake in Syria? What are the failures of humanitarian support?

13:30-14:30 **Lunch break**

14:30-16:00 **Promoting Social Cohesion and Leaving No One Behind**
- What do we witness with regard to inclusive reform and policy-making in the region?

- What are the reflections on resilience building approaches and post-COVID recovery policies and gender inequalities?
- What are the key concerns youth have in terms of achieving sustainable development? What are their key priorities and key demands with regard to intergenerational responsibilities?

CSO best practice presentation

16:00-17:00	The group will be divided into groups with selected themes and based on specialisation of the participants. Each group will be given set of questions for focused discussions (sample questions-not exhaustive)

- How has the global and regional context impacted the implementation of Agenda 2030 in the first half of implementation?
- What are key lessons learnt for revising policies in the second half?
- Which issues require critical attention? (guiding themes from the discussions above)
- How can civil society contribute better for achieving sustainable development in the upcoming phase?
- How is the monitoring process and partnerships towards achieving Agenda 2030?What are common recommendations for the way forward?

13 March 2023 - Zoom Link

09:00-11:00	**Structural issues hindering economic development**

- How can the region shift from a rentier economic model to regional integration?
- How can we address inequality in light of fiscal spending trends in the region? What do country examples show us?
- How far is the region from social justice looking at health systems? What are the lessons learnt in post-COVID recovery phase?
- Can e-commerce be a tool for recovery for the region? What are the main concerns in this regard

11:00-11:30	**Coffee Break**

11:30-13:00	**Means of implementation and financing for development**

- How does the global financial system impact the situation in the region? What are the main concerns for financing for development?

	● How do the reforms promoted by IFIs impact achieving sustainable development? ● Where does the region stand in terms of indebtedness? How can we create a domestic constituency on debt? What role can civil society play? ● What are your recommendations?
1300-14.00	**Lunch Break**
14:00-15:30	**Putting People and the planet at the center of sustainable development** ● What are the main concerns with regard to sustainable, green and clean energy in the region and water? ● What is the status of climate finance in the region? ● What role does the development banks play in this regard? ● What are the main concerns on access to climate financing?
15:30-15:45	**Coffee Break**
15:45-16:45	The group will be divided into groups with selected themes and will be given set of questions for focused discussions ● How has the global and regional context impacted the implementation of Agenda 2030 in the first half of implementation? ● What are key lessons learnt for revising policies in the second half? ● Which issues remain at critical attention? ● How can civil society contribute better for achieving sustainable development in the upcoming phase? ● How is the monitoring process and partnerships towards achieving Agenda 2030?What are common recommendations for the way forward?
16:45-17:00	The closure session will include outcomes to be presented from both WGs+ outcome document