

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

Each year, ahead of the official Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, civil society representatives from the Arab region come together to assess the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as well as exchange and mobilize on the structural and systemic challenges, persistent failures, and widening gaps that continue to hinder the achievement of truly transformative sustainable development in the region.

This reflection has never been an isolated, region-only exercise nor it has never been more urgently needed. In 2026, at a moment when “questions are on choices not on resources” and as daily lived experiences expose the delusions of the prevailing world order, we experience chronic and deepening crises; gross and systemic human rights violations around the world. Violent power grasps and imbalances deepens instability and injustices; shortterm-geopolitical interests weaken already reform-needy global governance structures.

Within this context, questioning about the international pathways and their capacity of offering real, transformative alternatives is impossible to ignore. The multilateral system itself is under severe strain, while the Arab region faces mounting pressures that risk deeper fragmentation. The choice before us is stark: either we succeed in safeguarding unity and addressing profound social and economic challenges, or we slide further into erosion and instability within an increasingly elusive and uncertain context. At the same time, this moment places new responsibilities on the civil society: to move beyond reactive and resilience building efforts towards more proactive and strategic engagement; to lead democratic transformation; and to use solidarity and joint platforms to assess accountability and responsibility at all levels-political, social, cultural, environmental, and economic- of all development actors; states, donors, international financial institutions, private sector and civil society itself.



In view of this, a closer examination of the Arab regional landscape shows that many countries of the Region are trapped in structural and systemic, multidimensional crises—characterized by rentierism, mounting public debt, and economic stagnation—undermining social justice, widening inequalities, and eroding the social contract. Interconnected and systemic challenges remain to be addressed, with an inclusive approach that meaningfully engages youth, elderly, women, workers, migrants, refugees, and other marginalized groups; especially considering:

- more than 40% of the Arab region's population now lives below or near the poverty line, while some countries suffer from poverty rates exceeding 50% of the population, even reaching 75-80% of the population in some countries experiencing comprehensive crises. This is accompanied by a widening inequality gap, where limited segments of society capture the largest share of income and wealth, while the middle class erodes and its purchasing power declines due to inflation, subsidy removal, and declining real wages.
- Public debt ratios in several Arab countries exceeded 90% of GDP, while in some they surpassed the 100% threshold, directly impacting public policies and the capacity for social spending.
- Youth unemployment rates in several Arab countries exceed 25%, reaching more than 35% in some—among the highest levels globally. This phenomenon is not limited to the absence of job opportunities alone, but also reflects deep imbalances in adopted economic models and their failure to generate decent and sustainable employment opportunities, as well as disconnect between education and training policies and the needs of the economy and society.
- More than 60% of the Arab world's population lives in countries suffering from acute water shortage, with expectations indicating that per capita water share will decline to less than 500 cubic meters annually in an increasing number of countries—well below the water poverty line. This reality has led to a direct threat to food security, as most Arab countries depend on importing more than 50% of their food needs, while climate disruptions and rising global food prices have further deepened the vulnerability of poor and marginalized populations.
- Arab countries host and generate more than 40% of the world's total refugees and forcibly displaced persons, with estimates indicating the presence of more than 50 million people including refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless individuals in the region.

Against this backdrop, and acknowledging the importance of creating a space for civil society to challenge dominant paradigms and narratives, expose structural injustices and development challenges, and advocate for rights-based alternative visions to advance sustainable human development, the Regional Civil Society Forum 2026 will be organized online on 28 April, 30 April, 5 May, and 7 May, with dedicated themes and discussions(see below). The panels will examine key structural issues and develop a set of policy recommendations aimed at rethinking sustainable development amid wars and uncertainty in the Arab region. Furthermore, the meeting will serve as a preparatory platform toward the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, the High-Level Political Forum 2026.

Panel I: Redefining Sustainable Human Development

Date: 28 April 2026

Time: 15:00-17.00

Held as the first session of Pre-AFSD panels, the panel will look at geopolitics and explore how gaps and failures in the multilateral system, alongside conflicts and wars, have constrained sustainable development in the Arab region. Participants will discuss the key structural components needed in a revised multilateral system that responds to the region's multilayered crises and enables meaningful participation.

Panel II: Reclaiming Social Justice

Date: 30 April 2026

Time: 15:00-17:00

This session will examine the structural limitations of existing social protection systems in the region and the extent to which they fail to ensure equity and inclusion. It will draw lessons from recent crises to identify pathways toward more resilient, comprehensive, and rights-based social policies that move beyond emergency responses. Participants will also reflect on the reconstruction and rebuilding phase in the region, with a focus on strengthening transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance.



Panel III: Restoring Economic Justice

Date: 5 May 2026

Time: 15:00-17:00

This session aims to critically examine the key structural drivers of multidimensional inequalities and economic injustice in the region, including governance gaps, unequal economic models, and global financial constraints. It will explore transformative feminist and gender-responsive economic narratives that challenge existing systems and promote inclusion. Participants will consider mechanisms to ensure that International Financial Institutions and development actors effectively contribute to post-war recovery and equitable development outcomes.

Panel IV: Revisiting Climate Justice

Date: 7 May 2026

Time: 15:00-17:00

This session will examine how current geopolitical dynamics, war, and oil and energy market volatility are reshaping climate action pathways in the Arab region, while exposing deep structural dependencies on fossil fuels and global inequalities. It will explore how climate justice can be advanced in contexts marked by conflict, economic inequality, and environmental vulnerability, with a focus on entitlements to reparations and justice for affected communities.

