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Arab NGO Network for Development
شبكة المنظمات العربية غير الحكومية للتنمية

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Between Aspirations and Facts

Position paper



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First: Introduction

During the 70th UN General Assembly meeting, World leaders adopted on Friday, September 25, 2015, a new world agenda for sustainable development, succeeding the Millennium Development Goals. Covering the next 15 years, the new agenda endeavors to end poverty and hunger everywhere; reduce inequality within and among countries; promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies for everyone; protect human rights and work on achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls; ensure permanent protection for Earth and its natural resources; and prepare the ground for sustainable, constant and inclusive-for-all economic growth, for comprehensive prosperity, and for providing decent work for all, while taking into consideration various national development levels and capabilities. It set 17 sustainable development goals and 169 targets to underscore the agenda's "aspirational and global" reach.

Reaching this agenda required three years of political and diplomatic negotiations, where governments played the decisive role. In addition, large-scale consultations were held on national, regional and world levels including civil society, the private sector and academia.

The General Assembly, held as a UN summit meeting, was an occasion for celebrating the launching of this "promising" agenda. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said we could feel "proud" for reaching an agreement on this global document. The event was accompanied by a number of developments on national, regional and international levels, organized by UN and partner organizations to celebrate this international achievement.

On the other hand, many CSOs and international campaigns, which followed up the negotiations track, including the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), continue to see the approved plan with caution and a critical eye. This is because of objective reasons we try to highlight in this position paper, which relies to positions developed by ANND in various stages of the consultative track. The paper is also the result of regional consultations organized by ANND during the last three years. It seeks to come up with conclusions about the role of Arab CSOs during the stage following the plan's endorsement.

Second: An Extensive but Incomplete Agenda

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is more than a list of minimum targets and less than a full-fledged development work program. Certainly, it is not a plan either and is not supposed to be so. Important loopholes marred the preparation process and the agenda itself.

Concerning preparation, it is true that the consultation process was far reaching this time, contrary to the case of the Millennium Development Goals. However, the governments had the decisive role within an open-ended diplomatic negotiation mechanism, which did not always respect objective scientific conditions. This led to an outcome comprising a large number of goals and targets, which will be very hard for states and involved parties to transform into comprehensive, uniform and effective development plans. In addition, commitment to the principle of correlation and integration among targets and goals with a consolidated approach will be very hard. Despite larger participation by civil society, academics and activists, their actual influence of content and the process was limited; this made this participation largely nominal.

No true benefit was extracted from the man lessons learned from the implementation process of the Millennium Development Goals during the last 15 years. Effects did not show in the new agenda, threatening to repeat the same fragmented approach in the future.

Finally, although enough time was available, the agenda was published without applying indicators allowing for measuring progress. Statistical commissions are still working on a final selection of indicators; the first batch of indicators due to be applied internationally is expected to be finalized in March 2016. More time will be needed for states to decide on the list of complementary indicators for national application. This is a major loophole since indicators are an important part of the agenda to monitor goals and achievements in practice, not just announce intentions on paper. This may lead to failure to adhere to current commitments made in international human rights conventions.

Third: A Lack of Commitment and Obligation Made Easy

Follow-up and review of the plan's implementation are not specified clearly and do not indicate obligatory commitment. The agenda is confined to a set of guidelines governing voluntary implementation by governments according to national priorities and strategies. The same applies to other parties involved in the agenda, including private and public international parties. This non-obligatory approach is paralleled by obligatory agendas in international trade negotiations, where the interests of international trade partners and corporates have priority over national interests and priorities, and margins for national policymaking are narrowed. This contradiction threatens the applicability of sustainable development goals on the national levels. The plan is void of clear mechanisms for reviewing the commitment of all development partners to its clauses; this revision is supposed to be obligatory and periodic.

Four: A Weak Human Rights Approach

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes important commitments linked to the implementation of many economic, social, political and civil rights. However, when it specifies goals, it neither stems from a comprehensive human rights approach nor relies on international

human rights commitments, although it does so in the general introduction. The rights language is present in the introduction but absent in the goals. This tendency reflects the business sector's emergent influence of governance in UN organizations and international decision-making mechanisms, leading to less use of the rights language in international organizations primarily involved in human rights protection and more focus on specific, less inclusive goals.

Examples of this are many. In reference to poverty measurements, the first goal resorts back to the measurement defining poverty as a daily income less than 1.25 dollars. This same approach underestimates poverty by linking it to income without taking into consideration other basic needs that are part of the rights approach to defining poverty. The plan's eighth goal clearly links employment and decent work to economic growth; this is a neoliberal economic approach far from the rights approach, which considers the right to employment and decent work a human right irrespective of economic conditions. The 16th goal "promote(s) peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development" but ignores "ending occupation" and fails to underscore the right of peoples to self-determination; this goes back on rights commitments in this matter, which is a priority in the Arab region, which witnesses the longest occupation in modern times. Human rights review mechanisms do not have a role in monitoring and implementing the new development plan. Hence, the development plan is not rooted in human rights; in some instances, it amounts to going back on international commitments to human rights. This threatens to restrict development efforts to the plan's goals on the expense of a comprehensive rights approach.

Fifth: The Development Plan and the Development Model

The plan did not introduce changes to the development model, which has been applied for decades and has proven incapable of attaining just and sustainable development. In fact, it even went back on the former development model on several levels. First, the plan exclusively focuses on the so-called three pillars of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental), while the political, institutional aspect, expressed in sustaining peace, security, governance and democracy, is ignored. Furthermore, development's cultural-moral aspect is almost ignored. Political and cultural aspects, both especially very important for our region, in addition to being of global importance, must be given the same standing as the other aspects within development's global conceptual framework.

Second, the agenda said a means for improving international partnership in order to implement the plan itself was the promotion of a fair global multilateral trade system as part of the World Trade Organization (WTO). It argued that the WTO is the best tool for increasing trade's developmental effect. However, the agenda ignores the prospective outcomes of a full liberalization of national markets by lifting all forms of trade barriers.

The agenda promotes a growing role for the business sector, arguing that it contributes to more job-generating growth. It also calls for financing development and the provision of public services through public-private partnerships (PPP). Experiences with PPP failed to guarantee citizens' rights to public services in the absence of legislative and institutional frameworks and transparency and accountability mechanisms allowing for citizens' access to public services in accordance with human rights criteria. In this context, with the business sector's increasing role in development, reaching an international convention imposing "human rights criteria binding to the business sector" is an important step for implementing the post-2015 plan.

Sixth: Reducing the Concept of Partnership for Development

The agenda includes a new concept for "international partnership for development" different from the former one. In the previous millennium goals – specifically in its eighth target, which is related to international partnership – there was a balanced focus on the following matters: First, promote fair trade to help developing nations improve their economic performance and revenues; second, reconsider foreign debts consuming large resources of public budgets; third, enhance development aid in quantity and quality; and fourth, transfer and localize technology to developing nations, redress the lack of medicines for intractable diseases and epidemics, and commit to providing young people with jobs. The aid efficiency track was launched in 2003 for this purpose. On the other hand, in the current sustainable development agenda, the eighth goal dealing with international partnership, as stated in the former millennium goals, disappeared. It was whitewashed in a long list of other specific goals, included under the headline of implementation means, which do not discriminate between international and national parties. The concept switched from "partnership" to "partnerships" with the business sector playing a pivotal role, while the goals of fair trade and decreasing debts being diluted. There is no mention of regulating and monitoring financial policies and capital flows through taxation. A tough battle was fought during the negotiations between Third World states, organizations and other parties keen for the concept of just and sustainable development on one hand, and parties prioritizing economic growth on the other. The conflict was expressed in different dealings with the principle of joint but varying responsibility. Representatives of the business sector and strong states showed tough resistance to including this principle in all development goals, refusing to give enough support for making this principle effective in assessing and directing international policies and relations among development parties to give a just aspect for partnership.

Seventh: The Role of CSOs after the Agenda's Endorsement

Taking into consideration these essential comments about the process, which led to a major retreat in commitments and wording in the final document, allowing for many interpretations and assumptions that may divert the general process away from true goals, we believe the region's involved parties, including governments, involved international parties and CSOs, should

strive to come up with practical proposals to help bring the region out of its political, economic and social crises. Instead of restricting their efforts to explain facts and ask for support, they should learn from former experiences and strive for suitable models to deal with the challenges faced by the region's peoples and governments, which should not limit themselves to implementing the same policies of the last decades.

These parties should make central to their tasks and visions supporting all causes of peace and stability in the region within democratic systems, which respect human rights according to international laws in light of the region's experiences after its popular uprisings.

However, in spite of this critical approach to the agenda, we believe that we, being CSOs, should play an important role after the agenda's endorsement by:

- Stressing that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a whole, including the introduction, reference, targets and goals, implementation and financing methods, follow-up and review. Stressing the absolute rejection of any fragmentation practiced by many parties to the millennium goals, where the list of targets and goals was separated from the Millennium Declaration and the detailed implementation guide, hence contributing to failure,
- Stressing the need to committing to the consolidated approach and integration among targets and goals, and to rejecting sectoral fragmentation, selective choice of certain goals, and separating goals from general development plans, uniformity of policies and development principles,
- Stressing the need to concentrate development targets and goals in accordance with the conditions of each region and country and to integrate them in national plans themselves because the development agenda should be treated as an alien body imposed on national plans. The national track should be used to deal with some loopholes and confusion in the new agenda, resulting from the global preparation and negotiation mechanism,
- Pressing for complementing the new agenda by defining indicators and criteria for monitoring and implementation. The criteria should include the qualitative aspects of goals, instead of being mere quantitative indicators and, hence, without weakening the plan's goals,
- Suggesting mechanisms to monitor the plan's implementation and progress and help in questionability and accountability in case of failure in commitment. Such mechanisms should be in coordination and harmony with other review mechanisms of international human rights commitments. The latter mechanisms are the more comprehensive frameworks and the basic starting point of our work,
- Focusing on monitoring the plan's implementation according to the comprehensive and integral approach, and on questioning all involved parties, especially development part-

ners, including governments, international financial institutions and UN agencies, while focusing on questioning the business sector whose development role increases. Pressing for endorsing questionability mechanisms according to international human rights basics and mechanisms,

- The tenth goal related to reducing inequality within and among countries should be a starting point for calling for a revision of wealth redistribution policies and the implementation of just taxation policies, comprehensive social protection policies, and wage policies boosting citizens' purchasing powers.
- Stressing the 16th goal, calling for democratic governance, hence, focusing on the separation of authorities, bolstering the independence of the judiciary with all its parts (rights, administrative and financial), enhancing the mechanisms of peaceful rotation of authority to allow for questionability and accountability.
- Dealing smartly and creatively with the 17th goal, related to implementation means and mechanisms, because it is crucial for realizing the goals. Making sure that all partner parties are committed to the development process according to the agenda's targets. The goal should be linked to the international partnership goal for more effective cooperation and the honoring of commitments by the Busan Agreement signatories.

Signatories:

- 1- Arab NGO Network for Development
- 2- Gender Centre for Research and Training – Sudan
- 3- Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) – Tunisia
- 4- The Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement – Egypt
- 5- Sudanese Development Call Organization (Nidaa) – Sudan
- 6- NGO Platform of Saida (Tajamoh) – Lebanon



The Arab NGOs Network for Development is an independent, democratic, and civic organization that aims at strengthening civil society and enhancing the values of democracy and respect of Human Rights and sustainable development in the Arab region. It works towards its aim through programs of advocacy and lobbying on regional and national policy-making in three main areas; development, trade, and democracy, while being committed to the international convention on Human Rights, freedom, respect of the individual, respect of diversity, equality of resource division, and the protection of cultural heritage in the Region and the implementing the developmental priorities of the local societies.

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