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Arab NGO Network for Development  
شبكة المنظمات العربية غير الحكومية للتنمية



## Regional Meeting for CSOs on Sustainable Development



Voices from the civil society on the way to AFSD 2021

Date: 26-25 March 2021

The regional civil society meeting on sustainable development in the Arab region “Voices from civil society in preparation for the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development 2021” took place on Zoom on 25 and 26 March 2021 on the eve of the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development organized by ESCWA, in cooperation with the League of Arab States, and in preparation for the High-Level Political Forum.

The meeting was organized by the Civil Society Platform on Sustainable Development, a framework of regional networks monitoring sustainable development action and the extent of states’ commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda. It includes 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, Arab Network for Democratic Elections, and the Arab branches of Transparency International. The meeting was divided into five sessions covering the main themes of Agenda 2030: people, prosperity, partnership, planet, and peace, emphasizing the goals set by the UNGA in 2021: poverty, hunger, equality, decent work, and climate. Between 110 and 220 participants joined the discussions over the two days.

The following general recommendations were drawn from the discussions:

- Firstly, the need to achieve what presidents, opinion leaders, thinkers, and politicians have reiterated on moving to a productive economy by strengthening productive sectors to build strong and capable economies and create decent job opportunities; confront challenges exacerbated by international intervention

and the global economic, financial, and trade system through Arab integration and encouraging production value chains, which entails more political openness, strong public freedoms, and a general culture of tolerance.

- Secondly, the need to enhance scientific research and develop tools for innovation, particularly in the field of clean technology production, and improve the infrastructure to spread digitalization in line with the challenges of the twenty-first century and rapid and remarkable technological development.

In conclusion, the meeting issued the following recommendations:

## **1. Contextual Challenges to Achieving Sustainable Development**

The world faces an unprecedented common threat, a health crisis with disastrous, multi-dimensional economic, social, political and environmental implications. It revealed a moral failure of humanity and poor international cooperation in responding to the crisis. The most blatant aspect of this failure came with vaccine distribution, when countries decided that economic, commercial, and national interests came first at the expense of people’s rights to life and health. It came as a culmination of decades of practices that have destroyed the mechanisms of international solidarity.

In light of the international system’s failure, it is difficult to think about the possibility of achieving development goals and progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, without a radical change in approaches and an actual transformation in methodologies. When looking at climate change milestones and related

development goals, including a 66% reduction in global warming to below 2 degrees Celsius in 2014 (SDG 13), the Paris Agreement, and the 2020 annual commitment to climate finance in the order of \$100 billion, commitments seem far from being achieved.

Even the 2030 Agenda recognizes the continued failure by states to fulfill their obligations to peremptory norms in the international system and law, and therefore: "We must redouble our efforts to resolve or prevent conflict and to support post-conflict countries, including through ensuring that women have a role in peacebuilding and State building. We call for further effective measures and actions to be taken, in conformity with international law, to remove the obstacles to the full realization of the right of self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation, which continue to adversely affect their economic and social development as well as their environment."<sup>1</sup>

The Arab region is not an exception to the global reality. It has been witnessing popular uprisings for more than a decade, mainly as a result of multidimensional inequality, discrimination against women, exclusion of marginalized groups, and inability to access basic needs. The region leads the world in youth unemployment and capital flight. Public freedoms are declining and accountability and governance tools are weak. The epidemic increased the economic, social, environmental, and political burden, revealing social, economic, health, and political inequalities, weak social structures, and the inability of governments to respond to challenges. The

<sup>1</sup> "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," paragraph 35, [A/RES/70/1](#).

epidemic also highlights the question of the role of the state in managing its relationship with citizens and the need to reconsider the issue. However, Arab countries lack the necessary tools to play such an effective role and people are kept vulnerable at various levels. Climate change impacts have been severe in the region as a result of the lack of sustainable and equitable management of natural resources, high temperatures, changing seasonal patterns, changes in agricultural areas, biodiversity loss, and pollution, in addition to the degradation of ecosystems and increased water evaporation and consumption. Meanwhile, the region is expected to lose many of its cities and productive lands by the end of the century due to rising sea levels.

### Recommendations:

- Transitioning to a human rights-based development paradigm and shifting from non-productive rentier economies to real productive and competitive economies, based on value-added sectors to generate adequate and decent jobs, ensure environmental sustainability, and fair opportunities for all, while adopting policies of wealth/income redistribution to reverse inequalities, social polarization, and marginalization. The immediate response to crises requires a reassessment of the care economy for those at the forefront of the struggle, chiefly women and those working in caregiving jobs.
- Reconsidering the role of the state, which organizes and protects citizens' rights and invests in the social sectors to achieve a balance between its role and that of other development actors (the private sector and civil society), ensuring effective accountability mechanisms for all development agencies, based on human rights values and standards,

- transparency, and democratic governance.
- Ongoing discussions on vaccine patents in the WTO, debt debates in the IMF, and sustainable development discussions in regional forums such as the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development and at the global level at the HLPF are crucial in setting directions for international cooperation. Despite facing a shrinking civic space, civil society has a duty to hold governments accountable and engage with and influence regional and global tracks.
  - As for climate change, it is not sufficient to develop alternative projects to address its impacts, which tend to achieve limited progress. There is a need to adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach to address challenges to governance, resource management, and new production and consumption patterns.
  - The crises of climate change, loss of biological diversity, and pollution are self-influencing crises, closely interconnected, and “subject the well-being of current and future generations to an unacceptable risk.” Thus, there is a need for coordination between governments, the private sector, and civil society to put an end to environmental degradation through the rapid transformation of major systems, including energy, water, and food, so that our use of land and oceans is sustainable.

## 2. People Centered Policies

The pandemic revealed deep inequalities and extreme disparities in the capacities of health systems. It unveiled the economic and social crisis of poverty, illiteracy, exposure to food insecurity, and high unemployment rates. Inequality in the region is due to the failure to provide equal opportunities for all as a result of clientelism and crony capitalism, the unfair distribution of resources and their control by political leaders, the absence of accountability and good governance, and the high rates of spending on armaments, more than spending on education, health, manufacturing, or infrastructure. The pandemic was an additional reason for deepening inequality and exclusion of many groups, including basic and informal workers and prisoners who faced harsh conditions and lack of adequate precautions.

The Arab region adopted policies that lead to the exclusion of persons with disabilities and denying them their basic rights. It was evident during the pandemic, as preventive and awareness-raising measures were not inclusive and information about precautions to be taken by persons with disabilities did not materialize. Mechanisms were not put in place to include persons with disabilities in the event of infection or need for transportation to hospitals. Vaccine registration platforms did not include persons with disabilities in some countries. The COVID crisis added to the various forms of social and economic discrimination against women, their weak political participation, and many forms of deprivation of civil rights, revealing the depth of this inequality. VNRs reflected some relative and uneven development in the path of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, but the approaches used in the reports, which reflected the approaches in the public policies

followed, did not actually meet the requirements for an integrated and transformative approach to the issue of gender equality. Thus, “empowerment” is limited to developing women’s capacities in specific areas and is not proposed in terms of enabling them to exercise their human rights in an integrated manner without any discrimination. The challenges cited in the reports are limited and narrow. They avoid, for example, assessing progress in securing equal opportunities and providing decent work conditions, or analyzing actual results for improving parliamentary representation at the legislative level and in practice. This clearly reflects the absence of a comprehensive and transformative approach to achieving gender equality in the Arab region.

### **Recommendations:**

- Adopt participatory and inclusive mechanisms in formulating public policies and plans in partnership with civil society and representatives of marginalized groups; allocate emergency aid to those who need it most as a priority; and implement policies that prevent all forms violence, specifically violence and discrimination against women, and the exclusion of persons with disabilities.
- Develop financial policies and financing for development instruments, as well as mechanisms for monitoring social spending, which will ensure the achievement of sustainable development goals for all without exception.
- Review current strategies to deal with COVID by:
- Including everything necessary to make this information accessible to everyone, specifically for people with disabilities
- Taking measures to ensure that they have access to vaccination, support, and social protection
- Adopting a flexible mechanism, such as a mobile clinic, to reach cases facing difficulty in mobility
- Develop a social protection policy with comprehensive coverage for various social groups, sectors, and regions, to ensure the provision of an integrated basket of rights.
- Create sectoral committees within the ministries to follow up the implementation of the objectives related to gender equality and the empowerment of women.
- Create and approve short and long-term policies and plans aimed at building an inclusive economic system that allows effective participation in the labor market and productive processes for all in accordance with the foundations that ensure the equitable distribution of the country’s resources and capacities, as well as ensuring fair access to opportunities for economic progress and opening horizons of decent work opportunities for all.
- Adopt accessibility standards for buildings, facilities, information, and digital language, as one of the conditions on the basis of which permissions are granted for licensing for buildings, industry, import, production, and services.





### 3. Peace and freedom away from fear

Wars and conflicts in the Arab region have led to more tyranny and the expansion of the use of armed force by local and regional authoritarian groups. It came in parallel with flagrant human rights violations, increasing sectarian discourse, and the expansion of conflict and war economies. The countries of the region are also suffering internally and to varying degrees from political, social, and economic injustice, in addition to the international and regional exclusion and marginalization of many countries. For example, in Yemen, poor development is considered one of the reasons for the emergence of the conflict. The scale of the humanitarian crisis reflects the fragility of previous development policies. On the other hand, the conflict hindered development efforts and erased the impact of the last 20 years of development. In Palestine, the expansionist, oppressive, and divisive policies of the Israeli occupation, in addition to the blockade and control over resources and borders, continue to impede development efforts and increase the level of inequality in Palestinian society, most of which is below the poverty line.

The Arab region hosts the largest number of refugees in the world, most of them located in countries that already suffer from fragility and the absence of governance and social protection. Most refugees reside in poor regions, which increases competition and tension with host communities and with each other.

#### Recommendations :

- Promote citizenship and political participation and developing public institutions to reach a future vision of justice, prosperity, and peace. Carry out necessary political reforms to reduce the politicization of identity and sectarianism, the use of hate speech, and rejection of the other. Work to build comprehensive and inclusive systems for all social components, providing justice for all, including refugees, and abolishing all forms of discrimination.
- Secure humanitarian relief for peoples living under armed conflicts, seeking to resolve conflicts on fair grounds that embrace human rights, reaching immediate ceasefire agreements, and agreeing to provide all political and security conditions to end wars, especially with regard to Yemen, Syria, and Libya.
- Restrict the role of the military and security forces in political decisions, on the one hand, and crony capitalism, on the other, and change the international and regional trend towards political hegemony and force.
- Adopt solidarity economic policies based on decent work, environmental sustainability, fair distribution, and opportunities for participation.
- Focus development programs on establishing a social protection platform and produce in-depth studies and policies related to the rights of persons with disabilities and the marginalized.

## 4. People-centered economic and financial policies

The Arab region suffers from great disparities. Austerity policies, especially those adopted after the Arab Spring and during the COVID-19 pandemic, exasperated them even further. Crises also led to a decrease in the space available for public policy-making and to a shrinking of the tools necessary to ensure the social and financial security of people. Austerity policies often go in the wrong direction when they aim to reduce public spending to control public finances to allow governments and states the ability to pay public debt at the expense of public spending on social sectors. The situation puts ordinary citizens (especially the middle and poor classes) in danger and places on their shoulders the primary burden of paying for and servicing public debt.

Debt is a global problem and is on the increase all over the world, reaching the highest rate of 30% since the 2008 crisis. Developing countries are the most vulnerable in this context, including Arab countries where public debt ratios are high and private sector debts are also on the increase. Debt settlement cannot happen without adopting comprehensive economic and social approaches and reviewing the entire financial and banking systems.

To address disparities, Arab regimes resorted to direct and indirect subsidies. Arab countries are the highest spenders on subsidies globally, especially energy, without a fixed strategy. IFI recommendations called for subsidy reforms and reducing their total value, targeting them towards specific groups.

Arab countries still adopt quantitative rather than qualitative methods when it comes to public

policies related to social issues. Support is impeded by lack of access to the labor market or productive participation in the economy. These policies are also a burden on public budget expenditures and do not provide revenues for the beneficiaries.

### Recommendations:

- Addressing the public debt crisis in the Arab region by restructuring debt, rationalizing public spending, stopping waste, corruption and useless spending, and enhancing transparency.
- Adopting fair tax policies, addressing tax evasion, tax exemptions, and illicit financial flows, applying progressive taxes on income and profits, and broadening the taxpayer base.
- Structural, financial, and economic reform policies and austerity measures should ensure that they do not place additional burdens on the poor and vulnerable classes, especially by responding to crises and working on designing and financing comprehensive social protection systems.
- Review adopted subsidy policies, the sectors that they target, and prioritize supporting productive sectors (agriculture, environmentally friendly industries, food, and crafts industries), and encourage scientific research.
- Involve civil society in adopting and implementing the desired reform strategy, assessing its effects, and formulating and implementing measures related to the provision of basic services (education, health, housing and decent work).
- The crisis is an opportunity to change conditions and requires building negotiation skills and power relations with global and regional debt justice campaigns. The countries of the region must adopt tools and mechanisms to suspend debt payments due to the risk of exposing the region to a debt crisis.

- Austerity is not inevitable, although it is usually portrayed that manner, but there are always different options such as increasing revenues, cutting expenditures, and raising taxes for the wealthiest segments of society.

## 5. Active partnership

For decades, the discourse of limiting the role of the state and strengthening the role of the private sector has been prevalent, confirmed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is expected to become more prevalent in the phasing out of the COVID-19 crisis. Since Arab economies are fragile and even more so now due to the multiple crises, they will be directed towards attracting foreign investment and enhancing the private sector's role to promote economic growth. On the other hand, there are limited accountability mechanisms for the private sector and to frame its role to serve public interest. The COVID vaccine is one example, where governments contributed to funding pharmaceutical companies, but the intellectual property rules that serve the interests and profits of companies prevented developing countries from obtaining the necessary quantities at the expense of people's lives.

Civil society's work is limited by several obstacles related to neoliberal policies that enter into the balance of roles between development partners and lead to narrowing the space available for governments to formulate national policies, some of which are related to the nature of oppressive authoritarian regimes that threaten public freedoms. In addition, occupation and conflicts restrict civil work and undermine the emergence of a true and balanced partnership capable of advancing development paths.





### Recommendations:

- Transition from the private sector's voluntary commitment to human rights standards to legal compliance with these rights and being held accountable in the event of a violation.
- Expanding the role of the business sector requires an expansion of the state's role, to guarantee citizen rights, that is, the state's ability to formulate development policies.
- Ensure an enabling environment for civil society work, providing all the legal and institutional requirements to activate the participation of trade unions, employers, and civil society in a broad sense in public policy-making, with a focus on the importance of regional and international cooperation.
- At the level of civil society, it is required to push towards a renaissance project based on a comprehensive qualitative transformation in the economy, in society, in the environment, in knowledge and culture, in peace and war, in the political system, in relations between Arab countries, and in relations with the world.
- There is a need for a qualitative development of civil society networking mechanisms to achieve a balance between the three sectors: civil society, the public sector, and the private sector.
- Trade unions have to push, through a number of measures, a review of the approved tax policies, and emphasize that aid and incentives for the private sector are linked to the protection of workers' rights and decent work.





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