

INTRODUCTION

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets which we are announcing today demonstrate the scale and ambition of this new universal Agenda. They seek to build on the Millennium Development Goals and complete what they did not achieve. They seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.

"Preamble to Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"

Arab Governments joined the global community in committing to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with all its ambition and in all its complexity. Since 2015, efforts to embrace the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are on the increase across the region. Governments are changing the institutional setup for implementation, aligning national priorities with the SDGs, and launching voluntary national reviews.

Moreover, people across the region, including women, young people, public servants, academics and civil society organizations, are engaged in changing their societies, demanding and working for a better Arab world: calling for political change, justice, greater inclusion, broader social protection, better quality health care, education and jobs, and peace.

There is an increasing recognition, among Governments and peoples, that more needs to be done to protect the environment, address climate change, and ensure the sustainable use of natural resources.

The ambition of the 2030 Agenda is great. So is the scale of the commitment witnessed in the region, and the challenges facing achievement.

Five years into the 2030 Agenda, the region is home to some of the worst humanitarian crises worldwide. War has destroyed countries and communities, turned millions into refugees, and displaced many more. Unemployment is the highest in the world, including the highest rates of unemployment globally for women and young people. Women and girls continue to be marginalized across social, political and economic arenas. The region has one of the highest rates of water scarcity globally, impacting food security and rural livelihoods and increasing urbanization. The impact of climate change is disproportionately borne by Arab countries. Civic space is shrinking, arbitrary detention is a major concern, and corruption levels are high. Economies are stagnating, and poverty and inequality are on the rise. The occupation of Palestine continues and the rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to sustainable development, are routinely violated.

The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 addresses the major concern that the region is not on track to achieve the 2030 Agenda. In line with the global

diagnosis on SDG achievement, the region has yet to usher in a transformative shift in development.

Focus of the Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020

The report offers a situation analysis of the 17 SDGs in the Arab region and captures the enormity of the challenges facing Arab countries. As such, it supports the efforts of Governments and stakeholders by assessing gaps, highlighting obstacles, and identifying critical entry points.

Analysis of the official SDG indicators, where data is available, offers a regional snapshot of uneven and worrying rates of achievement. In many key indicators, the region will not reach the SDG targets by 2030, and lags behind other regions on the global stage.

Indicators, however, can only tell a partial story.

The 2030 Agenda calls for transformative change. The 17 SDGs are not meant to achieve progress in 17 different sectors or dimensions of development. According to the 2030 Agenda, the 17 SDGs "seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality for all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental".

This transformative change demands paradigm shifts. Mobilizing domestic and external resources is a pressing challenge in the Arab region, and the pace of efforts on the SDGs must accelerate. **However, the present report's main argument is that transformative change not only requires financial resources and an acceleration of efforts but, above all, demands a shift in orientation and approach** towards policy integration, environmental sustainability, and universal human rights with their emphasis on equality, justice, inclusion, fundamental freedoms and participatory politics.

The story of the SDGs in the Arab region, therefore, is also a story of human rights, gender equality, sustainability and integrated development. The gravity of the task, and the scale of the ambition, are greater than measuring progress at goal, target and indicator level. Five years into the era of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, **the present report is a reminder that the starting point**

for implementation and the horizon for achievement must be aligned for change to be transformative. It is only through the alignment of policies and other interventions with the overarching framework of the 2030 Agenda that the region, and the world, can hope to achieve the 2030 Agenda. How close, or how far, the Arab region is from this alignment is the story the present report aims to tell.

Under each SDG, the report assesses the situation, charts the linkages to other Goals and targets, and delves into the backstory of the challenges faced. To aid policymakers, stakeholders and practitioners align their efforts and resources with the framework of the 2030 Agenda, the main guiding question of the present report, evident in each chapter, is the following: what is blocking the transformation needed to achieve the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda in the Arab region?

Each chapter considers the gender divide, identifying how and where the rights, needs and voices of women and girls are recognized, and where they are not. Through a human rights lens, each chapter sketches the intersections of different forms of inequality and marginalization, identifying categories of people and countries at risk of being left behind

The report finds that structural and entrenched barriers block transformation towards inclusive sustainable development in the Arab region. These barriers are often interconnected and their impact is evident across SDGs and sectors. They reinforce each other and exacerbate inequality and exclusion in the region. **Accelerating efforts to achieve one or more of the SDGs and to secure increased financing will only bear fruit in the long term if these barriers are dismantled.** Each chapter offers a concise list of critical recommendations to dismantle barriers to transformative change and accelerate achievement on the SDGs.

A report for all people

In the Arab region, dismantling structural and entrenched barriers identified in the present report demands serious efforts from Governments and policymakers. Across many SDGs, the analysis calls for the political will to change course, to choose differently, to move in a new policy direction. Through an integrated analysis of barriers and their impact, the report offers the building blocks to align efforts and enhance policy coherence.

Transformative change, however, is a whole-of-society project. While the responsibility for achieving the 2030 Agenda rests primarily with Governments, people and their agency are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. Achieving sustainable development demands the wider engagement of the people of the region. For example, changes to agricultural practices to increase sustainability and productivity can only succeed if farmers and women in rural areas are aware and capable

of using natural and technological resources differently, and if they are able to contribute and elaborate on indigenous knowledge and traditions. Similarly, the continuous assessment of the use of natural resources by Governments, corporations or households is only possible if a free civil society and a free press have access to data and platforms to share information and perspectives. The active engagement of the private sector is also critical in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption and production, spurring innovation and technological production, creating decent jobs, and strengthening public-private partnership for the common good.

Institutions must change, as well as cultural practices. For example, mobilizing education to drive productivity, technological awareness and sustainability in the region can only succeed if education is re-envisioned across society, at home and in schools by prioritizing critical thinking, creativity and life-long learning. This re-envisioning of education is critical to achieving several SDGs in the region, including those related to poverty, health, sustainable consumption and production, peace and justice.

In addition, dismantling barriers to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the region, a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, can only be accomplished if policies, legal frameworks, and social and cultural values and practices also change.

Despite the strong contributions of civil society organizations and trade unions in some Arab countries, challenges remain. As evidenced in the present report, the ability of people and societies to come together and effect change is curtailed by institutional, political or legal frameworks that impede multi-stakeholder engagement. These too must change to leverage the contributions and capacities of all stakeholders.

A regional report on the 22 Arab countries

The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 offers an overview of the SDGs in the 22 Arab countries. It calculates averages, where possible, for the region as a whole. It considers structural and major barriers in most countries. While it notes subregional differences where appropriate, it presents the story of each SDG for the Arab region.

This regional perspective emerges as organic when considering barriers to transformative change. Across richer and poorer Arab countries, structural and main barriers are often one and the same. Shrinking civic space, rentier economies, unsustainable patterns of resource extraction, gender inequality, weak science-policy interface, high youth unemployment, weak educational visions, water scarcity, climate change, and conflict and its spillover effects, among others, manifest across the region to varying degrees. The present report

notes variations between different subregions or different categories of countries, including oil-producing and non-oil producing. It also notes variations within countries where relevant. However, its focus remains on identifying the region's main barriers to achieving the 2030 Agenda. In addition, a number of transboundary issues emerge requiring regional approaches, notably conflict and its spillover effects, trade, climate change, water scarcity, infrastructure and connectivity, migration, and issues related to biodiversity and the protection of marine ecosystems. These demand a coordinated regional response.

Status of the SDGs in the Arab region

The region is not on track to achieve the SDGs.

The analysis quantitatively shows that the region lags behind in many critical targets, including those related to gender equality, income poverty, health-care coverage, social protection, peace and security, the sustainable management of natural resources, consumption and production, and climate change. Further good-quality data is needed to help the region move forward in implementation, follow-up and review. This not only includes better coverage of indicators, but different coverage: better disaggregation, more robust methodologies, more public availability of data, and better use of data produced by multiple-stakeholders. Qualitatively, the policy gaps and the inadequacy of policy frameworks are striking. The region needs an urgent overhaul of policies to address intersectional inequality, environmental degradation, youth unemployment, water management, and people-centred urban planning, among other issues. Missing or inadequate policies derail efforts to address the mammoth challenges facing the region in achieving the SDGs.

The impact of this situation is borne disproportionately by groups that face multiple layers of social, economic or political marginalization: women, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, refugees and displaced persons, among others.

Arab least developed countries also face significant challenges. More than other Arab countries, they stand to bear the brunt of an international system that is falling short on its commitments to developing countries, specific commitments to least developed countries, and the commitment to transformative change at the global level.

Analysis of barriers to transformative change helps chart the way forward by identifying gaps, linking challenges across sectors and SDGs, and paving the way for an integrated policy approach to achieving the 2030 Agenda in the region.

Similarly to an integrated approach to policymaking, an integrated approach to SDG analysis cannot be reduced

to narrowly targeted interventions. There are no quick fixes here, no short cuts. The reader is urged to consider the analysis of each SDG and its interlinkages in the context of the report as a whole. The barriers and the recommendations identified in each chapter, though many of them repeat across SDGs, are most useful when seen in their interconnectedness.

The complementarities and tradeoffs must be addressed in the context of national, regional and global shifting realities. However, patterns emerge across SDGs, barriers and recommendations. This interconnected analysis, at its broadest level, shows that the next 10 years are critical if the region is to change course.

For the region to make a transformative shift, the following emerge as fundamental considerations for the way forward:

- **Integrated policymaking must be enhanced:** From planning to implementation, follow-up and review, the region has yet to embrace an integrated approach that brings together the different dimensions of sustainable development. To a large extent, tradeoffs and complementarities between different Goals and dimensions are unaddressed. While financing needs are vast, especially in least developed countries, non-oil producing countries and debt-burdened countries, policy choice remains a barrier to achieving the SDGs in many Arab countries, rich or poor. Policy change could also be an enabler of progress.
- **The structure of Arab economies must shift towards sustainability and productivity:** Current patterns hamper progress not only on climate change and environmental sustainability, but also on poverty, employment, fiscal policies, trade, and food security, among others. With an over-reliance on oil, rents and investment primarily in real estate and services, Arab economies are vastly depleting natural resources and failing to create the labour demand to absorb people's capacities, especially young people. Efforts to diversify the economy are underway in a number of countries but have yet to make a significant impact. As wealth remains concentrated in a few non-productive sectors, the gap widens between the rich and the poor, and inequality is on the rise. A shift in economic thinking and planning to restructure Arab economies is necessary.
- **The region must ensure full adherence to universal human rights across all levels of Government and society:** In addition to a number of legal and/or political impediments to gender equality and the equal participation of all social groups in public life and the economy, a number of cultural and social norms and institutions contribute to the marginalization of different social groups. To ensure no one is left behind, an overhaul of discriminatory legal frameworks is necessary across the region, as is the need to address discriminatory social and

cultural norms and institutions. A rights-based approach to sustainable development must take hold across sectors to inform integrated policymaking. The political dimension of sustainable development in the region is a critical element in the framework for transformative change.

- **Exerting all efforts to end conflict and enhance governance structures to help build just and peaceful societies is fundamental:** The most immediate impact of conflict in the region is already staggering in terms of loss of life, communities, livelihoods, mass displacement and destruction of infrastructure. However, the long-term impact on people and societies in terms of health, education and their ability to build peaceful and prosperous societies is detrimental. Conflict has not only reversed development gains in the region; it is also sabotaging future progress. The impact on children is most acute and the signs already point to future deficits: increases in levels of stunting, hunger, and mental illness; an entire generation left out of school or training; increasing poverty; and the destruction of homes and communities. While the impact is severe now, signs of its amplification in the future are already evident and must be reckoned with. Despite the large humanitarian response from within and outside the region, more must be done to link humanitarian efforts to long term development and rebuilding strategies.
- **The region must re-envision the role of education and learning and reverse shrinkage of civic space:** Weak educational systems, shrinking civic space, and limited investment in research and development block possibilities to transform Arab societies, address environmental challenges, and enhance prosperity. They also stem the potential and participation of young people and other stakeholders. Despite increased investment in education in many Arab countries, unemployment remains high, and technological productivity and knowledge production remain low. The region needs to move towards a vision of education where schooling at all stages produces creative critical thinkers and lifelong learners with the freedom to access information and knowledge, build connections, and produce and disseminate knowledge.
- **The global community must deliver on its commitments to support developing countries in their implementation efforts:** Inequality in global economic governance structures, unmet official development assistance commitments, and weak technology transfer and capacity-building for developing countries is not creating an enabling environment for countries of the region to achieve the SDGs. The global community must stand by its commitments, including respect for national priorities. In areas as diverse as food security, climate change and trade, as well as capacity-building and technology

and knowledge transfer, the promise of the 2030 Agenda can only be fulfilled if global frameworks transform to support regional and national efforts. Primarily, this entails more equitable sharing of responsibilities, as well as knowledge and resources.

These takeaways guide the way forward to transformative change. At the country level, they can restructure methods of working and coordination; re-orient political will; and unlock the huge potential of human and non-human resources.

Regional action to support the way forward is critical. Where weak, regional integration appears in the present report as a barrier at the country level, and as an enabler where strong. Economic integration is one part of the story. Harmonization of standards and capacities in transport and connectivity is a second part. Promoting cultural change, from gender equality to better diets to educational reform, is a third. The list goes on. Regional collaboration to produce data on the health of ecosystems is vital. Water governance across borders is critical. Bridging political divides, ending conflict and moving forward with a coherent response to the humanitarian crises now, and containing their ripple effects in the future, demand a committed and coherent regional response. Advocating for the restructuring of global governance structures, and addressing the inequities of global trade systems and the cost of climate change demand a coordinated regional response. Pushing the global community to deliver on its commitments to developing and least developed countries can only succeed if the region mobilizes its collective will and capacities.

The present report focuses on a region already united by language, culture and history. Despite great diversity and contrasts in resources and income levels, political traditions, social outlooks and cultural practices, overall the 22 Arab countries share more than what differentiates among them. As the present report considers the status of the 17 SDGs in the region, and alignment with the framework of the 2030 Agenda, a common trajectory also emerges: if structural and entrenched barriers are dismantled, transformation to sustainable development in the Arab region is possible.