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Rural Development in the Arab Region



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CONTENTS

Title	Page
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Historical development of the concept of rural Development.....	2
1.1.1 The concept of community development.....	2
1.1.2 The concept of integrated rural development	3
1.1.3 The concept of sustainable rural development.....	3
1.1.4 Agenda 21.....	3
1.1.5 The concept of sustainable agricultural and Rural development.....	5
1.1.6 The Millennium Development Goals.....	6
1.1.7 Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development	7
2. The Current situation of rural development in the Arab Region.....	11
3. Evaluation of progress made in the implementation of Johannesburg Plan, the directives of Millennium development goals and Agenda 21.....	14
4. Key obstacles and challenges facing sustainable development in the Arab region	20
5. Available opportunities for sustainable development in the Arab region.....	21
6. Recommendations for future sustainable rural development policies and programmes in the Arab region	21
7. References	24

RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARAB REGION

1. Introduction:

Rural development in its comprehensive perspective is a process of participatory planned developmental change directed towards the bringing about of progressive economic, social, cultural and environmental improvements in rural communities. Ideally, it involves wide popular participation in project planning, implementation and evaluation processes in a democratic manner. It combines local initiative with formal institutional efforts in a complementary manner for achieving natural resource and human development improvements, and ensuring equity in the distribution of development benefits.

Most of the countries in the Arab region are predominantly agrarian, and for that reason agricultural development constitutes a major core area for rural development activities which are geared towards the bringing about of overall improvements in rural life. This comprehensive approach to rural development is in line with the definition that featured in a joint study conducted by FAO and UNESCO (2003) according to which:

Rural development: encompasses agriculture, education, infrastructure, health, capacity-building for other than on-farm employment, rural institutions and the needs of vulnerable groups. Rural development aims at improving rural people's livelihoods in an equitable and sustainable manner, both socially and environmentally, through better access to assets (natural, physical, human, technological, and social capital), and services, and control over productive capital (in its financial or economic and political forms), that enable them to improve their livelihoods on a sustainable and equitable basis.

Thus, from a comprehensive perspective, rural development is constituted of several dimensions that need to be effectively integrated to achieve sustainable development in the Arab region. Of these dimensions are:

- The economic dimension which links all efforts aiming at achieving sustainable economic growth. Agricultural development constitutes the prime force in this dimension, and associated with it are related economic, social and cultural activities.
- The social dimension which is concerned with achievement of social equity and poverty reduction through the implementation of policies that lead to generation of employment opportunities, the narrowing of social class differences in rural areas, and the narrowing of

rural-urban differences in terms of social development. The prime attention relating to this dimension needs to be given to improvement of the incomes and living conditions of the rural poor.

- The human development dimension which is concerned with provision of health services, the expanding of education opportunities, training and capacity building, and the enabling of the disadvantaged groups to effectively participate in the planning and implementation of community development projects.
- The environmental dimension which is concerned with achievement of sustainable development through environmental protection and the conservation of natural resources, including water, land and biomass.

1.1 Historical development of the concept of rural development in the Arab region:

The concept of rural development in the Arab region has evolved over several stages from the concept of "community development", which was founded on the idea of encouraging self-reliance, through the concept of "integrated rural development" to the concept of "sustainable rural development" which has captured the attention of development organizations in recent years.

The rural development policies and programmes in the countries of the Arab region have been influenced over the years by evolutionary changes in development concepts and by the internationally agreed upon agenda. Of these are the concept of community development, the concept of integrated rural development, and the concept of sustainable development which emerged strongly in the conferences and summits supervised by the United Nations Organization.

1.1.1 The concept of community development:

The concept of community development was first adopted by the African Administration Conference that was held in Cambridge, UK in 1948. It was conceived of as a potentially viable mechanism for sustaining self-reliant development work in the British colonies that at the time were being prepared for independence from Great Britain. In that conference, community development was described as a movement in which communities take the initiative to bring about

improvements in living conditions. It is essentially an approach to social development work that depends on popular participation and local self-help.

All of the countries of the Arab regions were former colonies, and the earlier post-independence years in most of these countries have witnessed the implementation of some community development programmes as vehicles for participatory social development at the local level with varying degrees of success. Community development projects in many of the countries of the Arab region have experienced problems of sustainability because they focused on collection of financial contributions from community members to support social services with no or little attention being granted to income-generating activities.

1.1.2 The concept of integrated rural development:

This concept calls for supply of integrated services for sustaining economic and social activities in rural areas.

Integrated rural development projects in the Arab region generally focus on support of agricultural activities as a means for poverty reduction. Many of the projects adopting the integrated rural development approach in the Arab region are supported by United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations. The governments in the region have adopted use of the integrated rural development approach in many of the national programmes.

1.1.3 The concept of sustainable rural development:

This concept places the emphasis on sustainability of livelihoods in rural areas under diverse economic, social and ecological conditions.

The greater challenges facing sustainable rural development projects in the Arab region are achievement of poverty eradication, the empowerment of the rural poor and their organizations, and the facilitation of access to employment, credit, education and health services by community members, and particularly by the rural poor.

1.1.4 Agenda 21:

Agenda 21 constitutes a non-binding programme of action for sustainable development into the 21st century, which was adopted by more than 178

Governments at the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, including most of the countries of the Arab region. The Agenda includes 40 chapters (arranged in 4 Sections) which address all levels of social organization, from national and local governments through to development agencies, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, in every area in which human activity affects the environment. The Key chapters of Agenda 21 call for:

- promoting sustainable development through trade (chapter 2);
- combating poverty (chapter 3);
- changing consumption patterns (chapter 4);
- protecting and promoting human health (chapter 6);
- combating deforestation (chapter 11);
- managing fragile ecosystems: combating desertification and drought (chapter 12);
- managing fragile ecosystems: sustainable mountain development (chapter 13);
- promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development (chapter 14);
- conservation of biological diversity (chapter 15);
- environmentally sound management of biotechnology (chapter 16);
- protection of the quality and supplies of freshwater resources (chapter 18);
- environmentally sound management of solid wastes and sewage-related issues (chapter 21); and
- strengthening of the role of major groups identified as:
 - women (chapter 24);
 - children and youth (chapter 25);
 - indigenous people (chapter 26);
 - non- governmental organizations (chapter 27);

- local authorities(Chapter 28);
- business and industry (chapter 30);
- scientific and technological community (chapter 31).

Chapters 33-40 of Agenda 21 concern the means of implementation, including:

- financial resources and mechanisms (chapter 33);
- transfer of environmentally sound technology (chapter 34);
- science for sustainable development (chapter 35); and
- promoting education, public awareness and training (chapter 36);

It was emphasized in Agenda 21 that training constitutes one of the most important tools for development of human resources and the facilitation of transition to a more sustainable world. It was agreed that all training programmes should promote a greater awareness of environment and development issues.

1.1.5 The concept of sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD):

This concept has been adopted by FAO as an integrated approach agricultural and rural development guided by chapter 14 of Agenda 21 (promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development).

The SARD concept emerged as a framework for focusing greater attention on sustainability issues within agricultural and rural development processes. It is based on the idea that agriculture and rural development become sustainable when they are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, culturally appropriate, humane and based on a holistic scientific approach.

The concept of SARD focuses on actions that:

- enhance food security in a sustainable way (a way that enhances social, institutional, economic and environmental sustainability).
- provide durable employment opportunities for improving incomes and levels of living of the farming population.

- enhance the productive and regenerative capacity of the natural resource base, reducing vulnerability and strengthening self-reliance,
- build the capacity of the poor and others to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate policies, programmes and practices for sustainable agriculture and rural development, and
- foster sustainable access to and use of resources by the disadvantaged.

1.1.6 The Millennium Development Goals:

At the Millennium Summit that was held in New York in September 2000, over 150 United Nations member states ratified the Millennium Declaration, offering a common and integrated vision on how to tackle some of the major challenges facing the world. The Millennium Development Goals that were generated from the Declaration focus on reducing poverty, improving the quality of peoples' lives, ensuring environmental sustainability and building partnerships to ensure that globalization becomes a more positive force for the entire world's people. Specific targets and indicators have been set for each of the goals stated below, to be achieved by 2015.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty, by reducing by half the proportion of people suffering from hunger and/or of those living on less than one dollar a day;

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education, by ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling;

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women, by eliminating gender disparity at in all levels of education;

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality rate among children under five by two thirds;

Goal 5: Improve maternal health, by reducing the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters;

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, by halting and beginning to reverse their incidence and spread;

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability, by integrating sustainable development into country policies, reversing the loss of environmental resources, reducing by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water, and improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020; and

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development, which includes addressing least developed countries' needs by reducing trade barriers and improving debt relief, and increasing official development assistance from developed countries.

1.1.7 Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development:

The World Summit on Sustainable Development that was held in Johannesburg, South Africa (2 - 4 September 2002) adopted the basic principles and programmes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Agenda 21, and the millennium development goals. It reaffirmed the following commitments:

- commitment to sustainable development;
- commitment to building a humane, equitable and caring global society, cognizant of the need for human dignity for all;
- commitment to the creation of a world free of the indignity and indecency occasioned by poverty, environmental degradation and unsustainable development;
- commitment to the creation of a new and brighter world of hope;
- commitment to a collective responsibility to advance and strengthen the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development (economic development, social development and environmental protection) at the local, national, regional and global levels;
- commitment to the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development; and

- commitment to a determined effort to respond positively to the need to produce a practical and visible plan to bring about poverty eradication and human development.

The Summit viewed poverty as the principal challenge facing the world, and provided guidelines for poverty eradication and ways for attaining the other sustainable development goals. The actions needed for achieving sustainable development, as stated in Chapter 7 of the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, are detailed below.

- a) halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than 1 dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and, by the same date, to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water;
- b) establish a world solidarity fund to eradicate poverty and to promote social and human development in the developing countries pursuant to modalities to be determined by the General Assembly, while stressing the voluntary nature of the contributions and the need to avoid duplication of existing United Nations funds, and encouraging the role of the private sector and individual citizens relative to Governments in funding the endeavors;
- c) develop national programmes for sustainable development and local and community development, where appropriate within country-owned poverty reduction strategies, to promote the empowerment of people living in poverty and their organizations. These programmes should reflect their priorities and enable them to increase access to productive resources, public services and institutions, in particular land, water, employment opportunities, credit, education and health;
- d) promote women's equal access to and full participation in, on the basis of equality with men, decision-making at all levels, mainstreaming gender perspectives in all policies and strategies, eliminating all forms of violence and discrimination against women and improving the status, health and economic welfare of women and girls through full and equal access to economic opportunity, land, credit, education and health-care services;

- e) develop policies and ways and means to improve access by indigenous people and their communities to economic activities and increase their employment through, where appropriate, measures such as training, technical assistance and credit facilities. Recognize that traditional and direct dependence on renewable resources and ecosystems, including sustainable harvesting, continues to be essential to the cultural, economic and physical well-being of indigenous people and their communities;
- f) deliver basic health services for all and reduce environmental health threats, taking into account the special needs of children and the linkages between poverty, health and environment, with provision of financial resources, technical assistance and knowledge transfer to developing countries and countries with economies in transition;
- g) ensure that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and will have equal access to all levels of education;
- h) provide access to agricultural resources for people living in poverty, especially women and indigenous communities, and promote, as appropriate, land tenure arrangements that recognize and protect indigenous and common property resource management systems;
- i) build basic rural infrastructure, diversify the economy and improve transportation and access to markets, market information and credit for the rural poor to support sustainable agriculture and rural development;
- j) transfer basic sustainable agricultural techniques and knowledge, including natural resource management, to small and medium-scale farmers, fishers and the rural poor, especially in developing countries, including through multi-stakeholder approaches and public-private partnerships aimed at increasing agriculture production and food security;
- k) increase food availability and affordability, including through harvest and food technology and management, as well as equitable and efficient distribution systems, by promoting, for example, community-based partnerships linking urban and rural people and enterprises;

- l) combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought and floods through measures such as improved use of climate and weather information and forecasts, early warning systems, land and natural resource management, agricultural practices and ecosystem conservation in order to reverse current trends and minimize degradation of land and water resources, including through the provision of adequate and predictable financial resources to implement the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa,⁷ as one of the tools for poverty eradication;
- m) increase access to sanitation to improve human health and reduce infant and child mortality, prioritizing water and sanitation in national sustainable development strategies and poverty reduction strategies where they exist.

Thus, the plan of action of the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development constitutes a guide for sustainable rural development programming, and has set the targets to be globally reached within the specified time framework.

The principal prerequisites for achieving sustainable development, as agreed by world leaders in the Johannesburg Summit, include good governance within each country and at the international level; sound domestic social, economic and environmental policies; democratic institutions responsive to the needs of the people; the rule of law; anti-corruption measures; gender equality and an enabling environment for investment. It was also recognized by the leaders that, as a result of globalization, external factors have become critical in determining the success or failure of developing countries in their national efforts. The gap between developed and developing countries points to the continued need for a dynamic and enabling international economic environment supportive of international cooperation, particularly in the areas of finance, technology transfer, debt and trade and full and effective participation of developing countries in global decision-making. Peace, security, stability and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, as well as respect for cultural diversity, are essential for achieving sustainable development and ensuring that sustainable development benefits all.

2. The Current situation of rural development in the Arab Region:

Nation-wide country reports on rural development, covering the entire Arab region, were unavailable for the purpose of this report. Reporting on the situation of rural development in the region has, therefore, depended on available studies reflecting on rural development related activities in 13 Arab countries, namely Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Arab Republic of Syria, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Kuwait, the Arab Republic of Egypt, Tunisia, and the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.

Rural development policies and programmes that are adopted by the countries of the Arab region are generally geared towards the realization of the overall goal of achieving natural and human resource development in ways that lead to improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the rural population.

Available studies indicate that rural development policies and programmes in Sudan are directed primarily towards achievement of improvement in crop and animal production, especially among traditional farmers and pastoralists. The principal stated goals are achievement of food security, improvement of the socio-economic conditions in rural areas, and the reduction of rural to urban migration. Integrated rural development projects are implemented in rural areas with assistance from United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations and local community institutions. Rural development projects give special attention to practices that lead to sustainable natural resource use and environmental conservation. Rural development policies encourage cooperation among public, private sector and community-based organizations in rural development programmes. An increasing attention is being directed at present to women development, and the facilitation of their participation in socio-economic activities in rural areas.

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, rural development policies and programmes are targeting the elimination of rural poverty by planning and implementing projects that are intended for transforming the rural poor from recipients of humanitarian aid into productive self-reliant members of the labor force. The state provides health, education and other community services, including housing facilities in rural areas. Special attention is given to improvement of

agricultural production through facilitation of adoption of modern production technology, and the state is paying more attention to empowerment of rural women through facilitation of their involvement in production activities and community service work in rural areas.

In Iraq rural development programmes are focused on supply of subsidized agricultural production inputs and provision of credit services to farmers as a means for improving agricultural production and increasing rural incomes. The state facilitates marketing operations and ensures adequate prices for agricultural products.

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the state provides micro-finance services for support of small farm and non-farm investment projects as a means for improving the levels of living of low-income families. Employment opportunities in rural areas are created through the implementation of community development projects, development work for improving the rural infrastructure and conservation the natural resources. The focus of rural development activities in Jordan is on training and capacity building.

In The Arab Republic of Syria, the rural development policies are focused on the provision of agricultural development services and support of income-generating projects in rural areas as a means for poverty eradication and achievement of food security. Policies are directed to safeguard sustainable use of natural resources and protection of the environment. Food processing and capacity development projects receive special attention. Commercial banks provide services for modernization of agricultural production operations, and the state is enacting price and quality control policies which are intended for increasing farm income. The state also grants special attention to programmes for empowering rural women and improving their income-generation potential through training and production services.

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, rural development programmes are focused on provision of social services, and improvement of farm yields and incomes through technology transfer and credit supply services. Community participation in rural development projects is encouraged by the state.

In the Sultanate of Oman, special attention is given in rural development programmes to the development of agriculture, fisheries and apiaries. Capacity building and technical support

services are provided along with credit, especially to the young producers. Participation of rural women in agricultural activities is encouraged and supported by the state.

In Palestine, rural development projects are focused on improvement of the marketing potential of farm products and improvement of farmer incomes. Capacity building training is targeting the unemployed and the poor in rural areas to improve their income-generating potential. The state provides production resources, including access to land and capital, to low-income families for eradication of poverty in rural areas.

In Qatar, rural development activities are focused on provision of research, extension and input supply services for promotion of agricultural output. Agricultural development initiatives by community members are encouraged, and participation by rural women in income-generating activities is encouraged and supported.

In Kuwait, special attention in rural development programmes is given to natural resource development and improvement of agricultural productivity, expansion of opportunities for popular participation in development projects and for gainful employment, supply of free medical and education services, as well as advancement of loans on easy terms to the nationals to facilitate marriage and house construction for the needy.

In the Arab Republic of Egypt, rural development projects focus their activities on diffusion of improved agricultural production technology as a means for improving levels of production and income among the farming population. Support is also granted to non-governmental organizations to activate their roles in poverty alleviation projects, in addition to provision of direct humanitarian assistance to the rural poor by the government. Production finance services for establishment of small-scale businesses are also made available as a means for engaging the unemployed young people in small-scale income-generating projects. Special attention is given to meeting rural women development needs, in terms of production capital and free education and health services.

In Tunisia, rural development programmes give prime attention to provision of capacity building services for improving the capabilities of rural people and the level of their participation

in agricultural development activities. Group action self-help projects in the fields of education, health, food security and housing are encouraged.

In the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria special emphasis in rural development planning is placed on policies and programmes for sustainable use of natural resources, environmental protection, encouragement of community participation in sustainable economic development projects, and provision of production support services to the poorer segments of the rural population.

3. Evaluation of progress made towards achievement of the Millennium development goals:

There are marked inter and intra regional variations within the countries of the Arab region with respect to availability of the resources needed for achieving sustainable development. This explains the existing variation in the progress made towards the application of Johannesburg's plan of implementation for fulfillment of the millennium development goals within expected time frame. The implementation of the Johannesburg plan, and commitment to the millennium development goals and Agenda 21 has been weakened in some of the less developed countries in the region by lack of resources and the poor infrastructure, and/or by the onset of natural disasters which led to large scale displacement of the rural population, high rates of migration to urban centers, deterioration of the existing social and economic services, and higher rates of poverty in both rural and urban areas. Progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the Arab region in general is retarded in many of the countries of the region because of their low rates of economic growth, deficits in national development budgets (even in some of the oil producing countries), indebtedness and high rates of population increase.

The efforts that are directed towards achieving sustainable development in the Arab countries that are endowed with rich natural resources are considerable, especially in the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In these countries incomes at all levels are progressively increasing, and notable improvements in health, education and capacity building services have been achieved. Private sector firms and community-based organizations are contributing significantly to rural development activities.

On the other hand, many of the low income countries of the Arab region have continued to be plagued with political instability and conflicts leading to the deterioration of an already weak infrastructural base. In consequence, poverty eradication efforts in these countries are constrained. There are indications of social problems in both rural and urban areas stemming from low incomes, expanding unemployment and malnutrition, and high rates of rural to urban migration triggered by deterioration in the physical and social environment in rural areas. The macro economic development policies adopted by some of the countries in the Arab region have led to imbalance in the distribution of development services and increasing marginalization of peripheral areas. Economic reform and privatization policies, coupled with external economic pressures have hindered the achievement of substantial progress towards achievement of the Millennium development goals in the countries of the region, like Sudan for example.

Thus, as revealed by the findings of available reports, it is evident that sharp regional and intra-country discrepancies exist in the Arab region in terms of progress made towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The 2005 report of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) observed that substantial progress has been made in the high-income countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE). However, marked variations were noted to exist in the middle-income Mashreq and Maghreb countries in terms of their potential for achieving each the MDGs. As for the least-developed countries of the region (Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen), as well as in Iraq and Palestine, the past trends suggest that achievement of the 8 MDGs within the specified time framework is most unlikely. It is expected that the majority of the Arab LDCs, and those coping with conflict, will make limited progress. More progress towards achievement of the MDGs, particularly in the LDCs, is dependent on getting development assistance from the high-income states of the region, and from international donors and specialized development agencies. However, as had been emphasized in the 2005 ESCWA report, the provision of resources alone would be insufficient as a means for achieving the MDGs, unless it is combined with reform of governance, including firm commitment to equitable wealth and service distribution and accountability. More efforts are needed across the Arab region for achieving the goals of poverty reduction, gender equality, environmental sustainability, the forging of strategic

regional and global partnerships, and the implementation of effective macroeconomic and social policies conducive to achievement of the MDGs.

3.1 Progress towards achieving Goal 1: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty:

Based on the data provided by ESCWA (2005) on poverty in 10 Arab countries (which account for some 64% of the Arab population), poverty levels have nearly doubled in the Arab LDCs, and that makes the ability of most of the countries of the region to succeed in achieving Goal 1 quite doubtful. As reported in a more recent study, the proportion of the population living below the lower national poverty lines in the Arab region as a whole does not reflect significant progress in reducing poverty. Only a slight decrease in the proportion of the population experiencing income poverty has been achieved in the Arab region from 19.5% in the 1990-1995 period to 18.2% in the 2000-2004 period. In contrast, the average estimates of the proportion of the population living below income poverty line in the LDCs of the region show a significant increase from 37.1% in the 1990-1995 period to 46.8% in the 2000-2004 period.. The poverty rates in the middle-income Mashreq and Maghreb countries was found to drop by 3 and 5 percentage points respectively during the same period, and no dependable data were found to reflect the rate of poverty in the high-income GCC countries, which is expected to be the lowest.

As for progress toward achievement of the millennium development goal of eradication of hunger (halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger), the available data imply that the set target is unlikely to be met by 2015. The data revealed that the number of food deprived persons (who are living on less than the minimum level of dietary energy consumption) in the Arab region rose from approximately 20 million (8.8%) in 1991 to 23.3 million (8.6%) in 2002. More current data on this aspect are not available.

3.2 Progress towards achieving Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education:

The 2007 ESCWA report indicated that the enrolment rate in primary education in the Arab region reached 80.5% in the school year 2004/2005, a figure which reflects a 10% increase over 15 years. The available data suggest that the Mashreq, Maghreb and GCC countries are close to achievement of the goal of universal primary education, with net enrollment rates exceeding 90%. In contrast, almost half of all children in the Arab LDCs

were not enrolled in school in 2005. Hence, there is a need for substantial acceleration of the rate of progress in primary education in the low-income countries of the region in order to achieve universal enrolment by 2015. This will lead to eradication of illiteracy in time. Lack of education in the past has resulted into high rates of illiteracy among women over 15 years in most of the countries of the region.

3.3 Progress towards achieving Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women:

It is expected that if countries maintain the current rate of progress, the overall Arab region will succeed in achieving gender equality at all levels of education by 2015. Between 1990 and 2002, the gender parity index (GPI) – the number of girls for every 100 boys attending primary school - increased from 0.79 to 0.90 in primary education. A more recent estimate shows an increase in GPI from 0.81 in 1991 to 0.92 in 2005. Thus, there is a marked region-wide improvement in enrolment of girls in schools, but there is still a disparity in favor of boys in primary school education in some of the countries of the region. This is coupled with the high rate of illiteracy among women over 15 years of age.

Some progress has been achieved in terms of programmes for empowering women through involvement in farm and non-farm income-generating activities. However, despite the notable improvements of women's access to education, gender equality on the economic, social and political fields is still very far from being achieved in most of the countries of the region. For example, according to ESCWA (2007), women in the Arab region occupied only 18.3% of the total paid employment positions in the industrial and service sector in 2004, and only 8.7% of the region's national parliamentary seats by April 2007.

3.4 Progress towards achieving Goal 4: Reduce child mortality rate:

From the available ESCWA reports, there is evidence that substantial progress has been achieved toward reduction of child and maternal mortality in the countries of the Arab region. From the ESCWA data in the 2005 report, under-five child mortality in the Arab region declined on the average from 91 to 70 deaths per 1,000 live births during the period from 1990 to 2003 (the 2007 ESCWA report indicated that the average under-five mortality rate in the region has dropped by 27% between 1990 and 2005). These data suggest that the Arab region, with the exception of the resource-poor LDCs, is on track to achieve the

target of reducing child mortality by one third. The under-five child mortality rate had declined in the Mashreq countries during the same period from 78 deaths per 1,000 live births. There has also been a dramatic reduction in child mortality in the Maghreb countries, where child mortality rates have decreased by more than one-half since 1990, reaching 37 in 2003. According to UNICEF (2005), child mortality was the lowest in the GCC countries in 2003, being 23 down from 39 in 1990. Under-five child mortality is highest in the countries of the Arab region that are affected by conflict and/or underdevelopment, namely, Djibouti, Iraq, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. In these countries, close to or more than 100 deaths per 1,000 live births die before the age of five. It is estimated that child mortality in the LDCs (Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen), represents more than half of the total for the entire Arab region. In these countries, child mortality results from diverse factors including high levels of malnutrition, poor access to health services, and lack of education.

3.5 Progress towards achieving Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Substantial progress has been made in the Arab region towards improvement of maternal health. However, the current maternal mortality rates (MMRs) and natal care data suggest that the region as a whole is not in a position to meet the maternal health-related targets of the MDGs. According to UNECEF (2004), maternal deaths per 100,000 live births have dropped on the average from 465 in 1990 to 337 in 2002. The data suggest a general decline in MMRs with significant variation between the countries of the region. In 2000, the average MMR in the GCC countries was 29.8, compared to 144.8 and 165.5 in the Mashreq and Maghreb countries respectively. A much higher average of 716.7 maternal fatalities per 100,000 live births was reported in the Arab LDCs. Poor access to obstetric care services is often cited as a key factor behind the high maternal mortality the relatively high maternal mortality rates in the countries of the Arab region.

3.6 Progress towards achieving Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases:

The available records suggest that HIV/AIDS is not highly prevalent in the countries of the Arab region, but concern is rising because of the marked increase in the number of reported cases, especially in the LDCs of the region. It was found that the reported HIV-positive cases have increased by 42% to 13,865 between 1990 and 2003 (ESCWA, 2005).

More than half of those cases were reported in the LDCs of the region, where more than 1% of the sub-region's population aged between 15 and 45 were reported as HIV-positive. In the more recent ESCWA (2007) study Algeria, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, and Morocco were reported to be witnessing HIV epidemics in certain areas, whilst both Sudan and Djibouti are facing generalized HIV/AIDS epidemics. In 2005, Djibouti recorded a 3.1% rate while Sudan saw rates ranging between 0.8% and 2.7%). However, because of the inadequacy of the data collection, monitoring and reporting systems in use, the extent of spread of the acute immune deficiency virus among the principal groups at risk, and among pregnant women, might have been underestimated. Hence, more efforts are needed to improve monitoring, reporting and curative measures, in order to contain AIDS and the other problematic diseases of the region.

3.7 Progress towards achieving Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability:

Substantial progress has been achieved in some of the Arab region countries in their attempts to face the challenges of sustainable development since 2000. However, more effective and conducive legislation and development policies are needed in many of the countries of the region for fostering environment protection and adoption of sustainable natural resource use practices, particularly those relating to soil, water and energy resources. It was also revealed by the United Nations Development Programme (2003) that only five of the countries of the Arab region have integrated the principles of sustainable development into their national policies and programmes. Consequently, as revealed by ESCWA (2005), land degradation and desertification still pose a serious threat in most of the countries of the Arab region, and this deflects a serious lack of adoption of effective natural resource use policies, and weak commitment to legislation for protecting the environment in many of the countries of the region.

3.8 Progress towards achieving Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development:

The achievement of the MDG of developing a global partnership for development is dependent on commitment on the part of the developed countries to provision of development assistance to the countries of the region for supporting sustainable socio-economic development activities and the means for global integration. The observer can easily notice that the conditions needed for achieving this goal are lacking in many of the

countries of the Arab region. This is partly because of lack of firm commitment from the developed countries to provide the needed assistance, and partly because of the accumulation of foreign debts in some of the countries of the region and their subjection to economic boycott. Many of the countries of the region are also lacking in stability because of their adoption of policies that have led to inequitable distribution of power and resources, and retarded socioeconomic integration. All these factors have contributed to weakening of the opportunities for creation of the conditions that are conducive to the development of sustainable regional and international partnerships for development.

4. Key Challenges facing achievement of sustainable development in the Arab region:

Substantial progress towards achievement of the eight MDGs, as pillars for sustainable development, has been made in some of the countries of the Arab region. However, the realization of some of the targeted goals has been hampered, particularly in the LDCs of the region, by a host of factors including indebtedness and low rates of economic growth, inadequate financing, inequitable distribution of development resources and benefits, persistent political tensions and conflicts, and the lack of firm commitment to implementation of pro-poor development policies and strategies that foster environment conservation, sustainable resource use, gender equality, the balancing of rural and urban development, and improvement of health and education services.

Among the challenges of rural development in the Arab region which are expected to retard progress towards attainment of the MDGs, if not effectively dealt with, are (1) the high rates of poverty, especially in the LDCs of the region, which are in cases coupled with high rates of population growth, (2) the national legislation and development policies which hinder equitable access to resources and services in some of the countries of the region, (3) the spread of unsustainable natural resource use practices and their harmful environmental effects, which are linked to poverty, defective land tenure policies and environment change, (4) the weak infrastructure and lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, (5) the high rates of rural to urban migration, especially among the educated youthful members of the rural communities, (6) the gender-insensitive policies which limit women's access to economic, social and political participation, and (7) the lack of adequate financial and technical support for

rural development programmes from local, regional and international sources, particularly in the LDCs of the region.

5. Available opportunities for sustainable development:

Great opportunities for achieving sustainable development in the Arab region can be seized in the future through joint effort targeting the following:

- The establishment of peace and security in the region in order to create an environment conducive to sustainable development activities.
- Strengthening socio-economic cooperation and coordination of development efforts in the countries of the Arab region with those of counterpart countries and international and regional organizations (especially those involving the Islamic countries and the member states of the Group of 77 and China) as a strategy for establishing peace and security and legitimizing peaceful coexistence of the countries of the region.
- Attracting foreign capital resources for investment in the Arab region in projects that are economically, socially and environmentally sound.
- Joining with other interested countries in international and multi-state regional treaties concerned with environmental conservation.
- Making use of the services that are available from the United Nation agencies and non-governmental organizations operating in the region in capacity building programmes at all levels.

6. Recommendations for future sustainable rural development policies and programmes in the Arab region:

Sustainable development can be achieved and expanded in the future by the countries of the region through:

- The establishment of peace and security in the region in order to create an environment conducive to sustainable development.
- Establishing and strengthening effective means for expanding cooperation between the countries of the region, and the coordination of sustainable development efforts with those implemented by UN agencies and other international development agencies.

- Benefiting from joining international and multi-state regional treaties and projects concerned with environmental conservation should be encouraged.
- Strengthening the infrastructure in rural areas, and the means for equitable access to resources and services
- Paying greater attention to the capacity building needs of rural women and means for expanding their gainful employment opportunities.
- Attracting national and foreign capital resources for investment in labour intensive projects that are socio-economically and environmentally sound, especially in the more populated rural areas as a means for expanding employment opportunities for the rural poor.
- Strengthening the role of community-based organization and popular participation in planning and implementation of sustainable development projects.
- Giving special attention to maternal and child health, and the eradication of AIDS and other diseases, and improvement of statistical records.
- Efforts should be constantly made to improve enrollment in educational institutions and improvement of the curricula.
- Professional country studies should be regularly conducted to monitor progress toward achievement of the different MDGs in the form of annual standard reports to facilitate evaluation and comparative analysis.
- Rural development policies and programmes in the Arab region should give priority to environmental protection and conservation of natural resources in a sustainable manner that serves the needs for achieving water and food security, ecological balance and biodiversity, and control of desertification.
- Strengthening the roles of the private sector, community organizations and popular participation in planning and implementation of sustainable development projects, and projects for empowering of women.
- Development of effective national strategies for poverty eradication through capacity building projects for the poorer segment of the population as a means of preparing them for effective participation in sustainable development projects.

- Paying greater attention to the capacity building needs of women and the means for their engagement in home-based income generating activities and employment in labor intensive projects.
- Providing continuous capacity development training to the personnel involved in the planning and implementation of development projects at both local and national levels, and ensuring sectoral and area coordination of development activities.
- Community-based training on methods for conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.
- Giving the priority to the establishment of labour-intensive development and investment projects, especially in the more populated rural areas to expand the opportunities for gainful employment.
- Involvement of the targeted population groups in programme planning, monitoring and evaluation of rural development projects.
- Strengthening the infrastructure and the means for ensuring provision of equitable development services to all producers in rural areas.
- The development and enforcement of laws governing the use of natural resources in a sustainable manner.
- The development of environmental protection and economic policies that safeguard against excessive and environmentally harmful use of un-renewable power sources.
- Giving special attention to human deployment needs concerning maternal health and the eradication of AIDS and other diseases in the Arab region.
- The continued modernization of education curricula and the awareness raising programmes at all levels, and the strengthening of research and development centers are recommended.
- It is also strongly recommended that each of the countries of the Arab region should prepare an annual report using a standard format to give detailed statistics on progress made toward achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the implementation of Johannesburg plan for sustainable development. Such reports are currently lacking.

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