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**Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development in the Arab States**

Implementation challenges at the national level

(Ministerial panel 1)

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. The Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, held in New York from 25 to 27 September 2015. The Agenda was the outcome of interlinked international initiatives, led by Governments in collaboration with various non-governmental parties, lasting three years and culminating in results set out in a single document adopted by 193 countries entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.¹

2. The Agenda sets out five principal areas to stimulate development action over the next 15 years, namely people, the planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. It contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 related targets, balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. The SDGs are considered more ambitious than the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000, whose deadline expired in 2015, and aim to bridge the gaps that marred the MDGs. Goal 17 of the Agenda addresses the means of implementation and the means of implementation under the other 16 SDGs, most notably global partnership, resource mobilization, capacity-building, resilient infrastructure and the transfer of clean technologies to developing countries, stressing that each country is primarily responsible for achieving its own economic and social development.

3. The 2030 Agenda tasks the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development² with overseeing follow-up and review processes at the international level. The Political Forum is held annually, and a summit is convened every four years. The 2030 Agenda invites all countries to identify an appropriate regional forum to work under. ESCWA, in collaboration with the League of Arab States, established the Arab High Level Forum on Sustainable Development in 2014 as the principal framework for monitoring and following up on the 2030 Agenda. To date, the Forum has held three sessions (2014, 2015 and 2016).

4. The coming years will be critical for Arab countries to develop systems, policies and mechanisms for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This requires identifying development priorities and major challenges at the national level, and formulating a vision to tackle those challenges. Regional and international organizations operating in the Arab region can provide the necessary support in that regard, and facilitate the exchange of expertise and best practices.

5. It should be noted that the 2030 Agenda is not a plan that has been imposed on countries. It is rather a general framework to guide national and regional policies, which countries can refer to when formulating their national sustainable development plans and adapting the SDGS to their specificities, challenges and priorities.

II. OBJECTIVES

6. The first discussion panel aims to launch a dialogue between Arab leaders on challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda in a manner consistent with Arab countries’ capacity and circumstances and that meets their needs, so as to support country efforts in formulating national development plans and policy and to follow up on their implementation over the next 15 years.

III. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

7. The discussion panel will consider challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda, which can be divided into the following three categories: challenges stemming from the global environment; challenges arising from circumstances in the Arab region; and challenges inherent to the 2030 Agenda itself. The discussion will also address the procedures developed to tackle these challenges and implement the Agenda, including capacity-

¹ General Assembly resolution 70/1. Available from www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1.

² The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development was established pursuant to the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012, entitled “The future we want”, to replace the Commission on Sustainable Development of the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

building to adapt the global Agenda to national contexts, preparing the statistical infrastructure to monitor progress, and mobilizing resources to fund the implementation process.

A. CHALLENGES STEMMING FROM THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

8. The 2030 Agenda calls for a qualitative transformation in development management across the world, requiring changes in production and consumption patterns to ensure sustainability; alterations in managing the global economy to limit inequality between and within countries and eradicate poverty; and adjustments in the global governance system to ensure peace, security and stability in highly troubled regions across the world. However, the achievement of these ambitious goals is impeded by many challenges stemming from an unfavourable global environment. Arab countries will struggle to achieve their sustainable development goals without international assistance and political and development approaches that support such transformation, notably strengthening international partnerships; tackling debt and fulfilling developed country promises to provide official development assistance to developing countries; avoiding the militarization of international politics that has allowed major external powers to become militarily involved in some Arab countries under the pretext of assisting them in resolving their conflicts; regulating global markets, especially the prices of raw materials; and improving international policy on the Arab region to tackle wars, conflicts, the spread of terrorism and illegal migration.

B. CHALLENGES ARISING FROM CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE ARAB REGION

9. Development and the 2030 Agenda face numerous challenges in the Arab region, predominantly those related to security, peace, good governance and political and institutional transformation, in addition to social, economic, environmental and knowledge challenges.

(a) *Peace and security challenges*

10. Conflicts in many Arab countries (Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen) have caused the complete or partial collapse of State institutions and the destruction of economic and social infrastructure, and have prompted the review of national priorities, especially economic and social priorities, given the influx and exodus of refugees and displaced persons resulting in the redirection of support, funding and institutional efforts from development to humanitarian relief and aid. It is necessary to distinguish between the following different types of security challenges:

- The Israeli occupation of Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict;
- Wars in numerous countries and the related national, regional and international dimensions;
- Security problems and confrontations of extremist movements and armed terrorist groups;
- Refugees, displaced persons and the forcibly displaced because of war and conflict, and the related humanitarian, developmental and political dimensions;

(b) *Social challenges*

11. A fifth of the region's population lives in abject poverty (according to a poverty line of under \$2). Unemployment rates are high; labour productivity is the lowest worldwide; social security is limited (on average, allocation of an additional 1.5 per cent of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) could fund basic social security); and debt levels are high, with non-oil economies suffering from considerable public debt reaching 73 per cent of their GDP.³ Moreover, the region faces hunger; discrimination against women, young

³ ESCWA, *Arab Development Outlook: Vision 2030*, 2016. Available from www.unescwa.org/publications/arab-development-outlook-vision-2030.

people and vulnerable groups, such as migrants, refugees and persons with disabilities; social fragmentation; and the spread of tribal, clan and ethnic social formations at the expense of social and national cohesion;

(c) *Economic challenges*

12. The drop in oil prices is a key challenge facing Arab economies. Oil-exporting countries are now obliged to explore alternative funding sources, such as levying taxes, requesting loans from external providers or attracting foreign capital. Such crises affect countries' ability to offer education, health and other services, and limit capacity to transform their economies from a consumption economy to a productive economy and promote innovation;

(d) *Environmental challenges*

13. Such as water shortages and disparities in the availability of fossil fuels, such as petrol, and in the capacity to develop and use alternative energy sources. The risks posed by these challenges is rising because of unsustainable production and consumption patterns in the region, limited rationalization of consumption, insufficient recycling and high levels of pollution, especially in urban areas. Given current conflicts, the region is facing the difficulty of sustainably managing cities and other human settlements, and must build capacity to tackle disasters, including the effects of climate change.

C. CHALLENGES INHERENT TO THE 2030 AGENDA

14. Challenges are not limited to the global environment and country circumstances and capacity. They also include those related to the 2030 Agenda itself. From a technical perspective, the MDGs were clear and easy to use by decision-makers to direct policy; however, the same cannot be said about the 2030 Agenda. The new topics in the Agenda are both comprehensive and relevant to each country. Given the broad consultations undertaken to prepare the Agenda, there are likely to be overlaps and inconsistencies between its many goals and targets, making it more complex than the MDGs in terms of guiding national policy.

15. Countries could face the following challenges inherent to the Agenda when developing national development plans for 2030:

(a) Multiple and overlapping goals, targets and indicators, complicating the maintenance of consistency, cohesion and integration between goals;

(b) The Agenda is incomplete - discussions are still underway on some issues, such as indicators and their number and use;

(c) The ability to review the Agenda, requiring flexibility to address any changes that may arise;

(d) Commitments to partnership and funding, especially given developed countries' non-fulfilment of their development financing promises and pledges to earmark a set percentage of their budgets for official development assistance.

D. PROCEDURES DEVELOPED TO TACKLE CHALLENGES AND IMPLEMENT THE 2030 AGENDA

16. Procedures developed to tackle challenges and implement the Agenda in the region include capacity-building to adapt the global Agenda to national contexts, preparing the statistical infrastructure to monitor progress, and mobilizing resources to fund the implementation process.

(a) *Capacity-building*

17. The Agenda gives rise to complex interactions between its economic, environmental, social and cultural dimensions and governance and institution-building issues. Consequently, adapting the Agenda in line with

national and regional specificities and meeting sustainable development conditions in the medium and long term require high levels of skills and knowledge. Building the capacity of national actors is therefore vital, requiring countries to establish appropriate national and regional institutional structures and frameworks; to operationalize coordination between various ministries and institutions; and to strengthen partnerships between the Government, the private sector and civil society, including scientific and academic institutions, the media and local authorities, thus ensuring broader participation.

(b) *Preparing statistical infrastructure*

18. The implementation of the MDGs in the Arab region has revealed weaknesses in the collection of data required to develop implementation indicators. Official national statistics from Arab countries most qualified in the statistical field provided data for only 42 per cent of the MDGs. Of the remaining 58 per cent, 34 per cent was covered by international organizations and 24 per cent have no data. Given that the SDGs are more complex than the MDGs, it is vital to build the capacity of national statistical offices and authorities concerned with adapting global indicators, gathering data and following up and reviewing progress, so as to facilitate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

19. Although the preparation of a development plan requires a national strategy for the development of statistics, only 3 of 22 Arab countries apply such a strategy, four countries have no strategy, and the remaining countries' strategies have expired. Arab countries now have the opportunity to design their national statistical strategies in the light of the 2030 Agenda and to benefit from recently updated guidelines for preparing national strategies for the development of statistics.

(c) *Financing sustainable development*

20. Securing financing for sustainable development has become a necessary and urgent matter. Although views differ on the cost of implementing the SDGs, there is near consensus on the need to calculate in 'trillions' rather than 'billions'.⁴ Commitment to financing development has become more urgent in the Arab region in view of the increasing geopolitical risks that limit opportunities to sustainably finance development. Escalating violence and conflict in the region have caused the largest forced mass displacement since the Second World War.

21. Latest efforts by ESCWA to measure the financing gap for implementing the Agenda in the region show that Arab countries need additional funding estimated between \$3.7 trillion and \$4.3 trillion to ensure a 7 per cent growth rate, which is the rate required to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

22. Urgent measures in this regard include ensuring the sustainability of maintaining public debt, raising tax revenue, tackling tax evasion, limiting illegal financial flows, increasing official development assistance, attracting foreign direct investment, optimizing benefits from remittances, identifying innovative financing sources, and developing mechanisms to stimulate domestic savings.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

23. The following are the suggested discussion questions:

(a) How can Arab countries determine their development priorities in view of current challenges and the requirements of the 2030 Agenda? Do Arab countries possess the necessary capacity to develop strategies and visions to ensure consistency between their national needs and priorities and the Agenda's priorities?

(b) What are the proposed mechanisms for following up on the implementation of the SDGs at the national and regional levels?

⁴ World Bank, *From Billions to Trillions – MDB Contributions to Financing for Development*, 2015.

(c) What is the role of the private sector and civil society, including scientific and academic institutions and the media?

(d) How can statistical needs required to support policies on the implementation and follow-up of the SDGs be addressed? Do Arab countries have the capacity to develop national strategies for the development of statistical capacity? How to standardize statistical terms, indicator features and measurement methods, etc.?

(e) What planning tools (quantitative or other) are available to harmonize between SDGs and national plans? To what extent are new tools needed and is there a possibility of developing them?

(f) How will Arab countries deal with the issue of resource leakages caused by high public debt, tax evasion and illegal financial flows, among other things?

(g) The Agenda urges countries to rely more on their domestic resources rather than on assistance, therefore it is necessary to improve investment and productivity, alter production and consumption patterns, diversify the economy, employ technology, and integrate women and young people into the labour market. What are the proposed strategies to achieve these aims?

(h) What steps can be taken to tackle the challenges of population growth and its pressures on natural resources, food security and the provision of services, such as education, health care, energy, drinking water and sanitation.

(i) What changes to production and consumption patterns and global economy management are required to facilitate the implementation of the Agenda for Arab countries, especially regarding poverty eradication and ensuring security, peace and stability? Can they achieve these goals without international support? What type of international support is needed? Arab countries are heterogeneous, so what roles do regional integration and trade coordination have in supporting the Agenda's implementation? What role can regional frameworks play in supporting Arab countries in that regard? What measures can be expected from those frameworks?

(j) What role does cultural and moral reform have in driving development and achieving peace in the region?

V. PARTICIPANTS

24. Six ministers from ESCWA member States, tasked with implementing the Agenda, will participate in the discussion panel.

VI. LANGUAGES

25. Discussions will be conducted in English and Arabic, and simultaneous interpreting will be provided in both languages.

VII. CONTACTS

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