

## Preface

Even if all conflicts and wars were to stop immediately, the Arab region cannot meet the target of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 using traditional methods. Many Arab countries have experienced collapse at gigantic scale over the past years, which has largely reduced their hopes to no more than re-establishing the status quo which prevailed in 2010, rather than achieving the SDGs by 2030.

This AFED report recommends an alternative approach, based on integrating sustainable development principles within the anticipated rebuilding efforts. It calls upon local, regional, and international aid organizations not to limit their efforts to providing safety and basic necessities to those affected, but rather to use the relief plans as a launch pad for promoting new approaches to development, rooted in a transition to green economy.

This report, on prospects and challenges on the path towards achieving the SDGs, builds on the previous eight reports on the state of Arab environment, produced by the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) since 2008. AFED annual reports have so far addressed major development issues in the Arab region, including Water, Food Security, Energy, Green Economy, Ecological Footprint, Sustainable Consumption, and Climate Change. The report highlights the policy options available for the Arab countries to realize the Sustainable Development Goals by the 2030 target set by the United Nations, in light of the new political, economic, and social developments.

AFED annual reports have become main source of information and prime driver for policy reforms in Arab countries. The Energy-Water-Food Nexus proved specifically significant, especially with the growing impact of climate change. AFED reports have repeatedly emphasized the importance of promoting better efficiency and fair access to energy, water and food, and reducing waste, as there are tough limits to what Arab ecosystems can support.

AFED continues to engage many regional players, including public policy officials, corporations, academia, NGOs, and the media, on the question of sustainable development, mainly through its annual policy-oriented reports. The present report concludes with a set of messages tailored to specific actors with a stake in the critical implementation of SDGs in the Arab region.

The *first message* is that we need to *stop treating Arab countries* as a monolith. Individual countries have distinctive needs, priorities, and economic, political, and social contexts that must be recognized when developing implementation plans. Countries will need to identify their priority SDGs and develop national plans for their implementation, including policies and budgets. There certainly are many commonalities to build on, and regional cooperation is of paramount importance. However, this has to consider

and utilize the variety of natural and human resources in a vast region stretching over two continents. Sustainable development priorities and goals in Qatar, for example, are certainly different from those in Jordan. And for a country mired in strife, such as Yemen, the needs of a post-conflict era would be vastly different. Effective SDGs implementation requires deploying local knowledge based on an understanding that is relevant to a particular place and time, while utilizing generalized knowledge. Implementation without context would cause a distortion.

The *second message* revolves around some *common challenges* facing our region: a young population suffering from high rates of unemployment which is disproportionately greater for women, weak research and development capabilities, a lack of public participation in development decision-making, and inadequate institutional and policy-making capacities. Therefore, implementation plans for achieving SDGs must be linked to (1) effective participation of non-state sectors, (2) job creation, (3) home-grown science, data collection and monitoring capabilities, and (4) institutional and public policy capacity building. If we fail to address these problems in the course of SDGs implementation, we will have missed yet another opportunity, contributing instead to a state of perpetual dependence.

The *third message* is directed towards *partnerships for development*. This concerns financing, a key implementation ingredient. The ambitious SDGs need to be matched with revitalizing partnerships to mobilize sufficient resources. Inadequate financing was one of the impediments to full realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In this respect, developed countries need to galvanize their efforts to fulfill their commitments to the UN long-standing target of 0.7 percent of gross national income as ODA to developing countries, pledged in 1970. But foreign aid has to be matched by local action. Therefore, there is a pressing need to mobilize local resources through reforms in subsidies and tax collection practices. Beyond that, our region boasts ten regional and national Economic and Social Development Funds, which have amassed tremendous experience in providing finance to development projects worldwide. These Funds have recently issued a joint declaration on their commitment to sustainable development and means of implementation, and created a Coordination Group on Sustainable Development. They can play an important role in assisting Arab countries in implementing the SDGs, including through fostering partnerships with other providers of development finance. Arab countries need to align their priorities with the framework of the post-2015 development agenda, to accelerate the process of resource mobilization for achieving the SDGs.

In its *fourth message*, AFED report calls upon Arab governments to adopt a genuine *cross-sectoral approach* to sustainable development. This entails the integration of climate change considerations in the implementation of the SDGs, mainly based on the *water-energy-food nexus*. This goes beyond establishing a multi-ministerial higher council for sustainable development, or any such council. This is a genuine integrative effort across disciplines and institutions, involving government, business, and third sector players, where members share knowledge, collaborate, and rise above, past or beyond official agency boundaries or jurisdictional territorialities.

The *fifth message* concerns the *state of conflict* in the region, demanding an approach to implementation that responds directly to the particular needs and priorities of areas suffering from armed conflicts and illegal military occupation. Beyond acting with multiple local, regional, and international aid organizations today to provide safety and basic necessities to those affected, it will be wise to lay the foundation for integrating SDGs implementation with the anticipated reconstruction efforts. We call upon local

and regional civil society organizations to develop capacity building programs that engage youth and women groups in conflict areas, so they would be prepared to take a strong leadership role in integrating SDGs implementation and climate action in the rebuilding process.

While we do not expect SDGs to provide a political solution in areas under military occupation, we do believe that the implementation of SDGs should create the enabling conditions for Palestinians living under occupation to exercise sovereignty over their water and resources.

One good news is that sustainable resource management is gaining stronger ground in various countries of the Arab region. Gulf states have recently initiated bold policies and measures to enhance water and energy efficiency and put a price tag on nature services. Voluntary energy and water efficiency programs have been enhanced and complemented with fiscal measures, including phasing out generous subsidies. Vision 2030 plan adopted by Saudi Arabia fully embraces sustainable development principles. While MASDAR in Abu Dhabi is a shining example of government-driven transformative initiative in renewable energy, Dubai was host to the world's cheapest kilowatt-hour of PV electricity, through private company applying a market-based investment model. On the westernmost side of our region, we have a star performer in Morocco when it comes to renewable energy investment, with a daring target of 52 percent of the energy mix by 2030. It is a model worthy of emulating.

However, the Arab region still has work to do. Renewable energy and energy efficiency are the low hanging fruits and their adoption has been driven by economics more than anything else. We have not yet made the leap to transforming the most energy consuming sectors, namely, housing and transportation. In addition, there is a need to focus public attention on the SDGs to facilitate their implementation. Public engagement and participation can have a direct impact on whether or not there will be policy changes that make the goals achievable.

This report highlights an urgent need to invest in people-centered development, which fosters integration of human rights, including the right to development, and the principles of genuine public participation, accountability, transparency, and non-discrimination, into the development agenda. This is what we can distill from the events of the past five years in Arab countries.

AFED wishes to thank all those who made this report possible, especially our organizing partner and host of AFED 2016 Annual Conference, the American University of Beirut (AUB), which celebrates its 150th Anniversary in 2016. Special thanks are due to our institutional partners: Islamic Development Bank (IDB), Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS), OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Center for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM), alongside all corporate and media partners who supported this endeavor.

AFED hopes that its report on Sustainable Development Goals will help Arab countries achieve successful implementation by the 2030 target.

*Beirut, 10 November 2016*

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