

## OVERVIEW

**THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY AND THE SDGs IN THE ARAB WORLD****Herbert Acquay**

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a priority region for the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as it partners with developing countries to protect the environment and promote sustainable management of natural resources. More than two decades after the Rio Conventions came into force, the global community is still grappling with the challenge of balancing environment and development goals. This challenge is particularly true in the production sectors, which depend on land and other natural resources to safeguard the lives and livelihoods of billions of people.

Environmental degradation is one of the greatest risks to sustainable development in the Arab region, particularly affecting local communities that depend on natural resources for their livelihood. It also poses a serious threat to regional security: national-level environmental challenges can lead to instability and conflict and result in migration that threatens the security of neighboring countries. GEF investments are helping countries reduce threats to the environment that are specifically associated with the multilateral environmental agreements it serves, while addressing issues such as poverty reduction, gender equality, and good governance. The GEF is looking for holistic approaches that create those benefits and that simultaneously benefit local communities and other stakeholders.

The GEF's engagement, therefore, is based on two overarching principles: environmental security, and food security for peace in a fragile region. Conservation of the natural environment and diversification of income sources improve the well-being of communities and help to reverse migration patterns towards urban areas and abroad. The GEF's role and commitment to sustainable land management (SLM) is now well established through its Land Degradation Focal Area, which focuses on helping countries avoid or minimize desertification and deforestation through the removal of economic, policy, knowledge, and institutional barriers.

Serving as the financing mechanism of the Rio Conventions, the GEF has been a major catalyst for innovation in sustainable land management in the Arab world. It supports country efforts across multiple, interlinked global environmental domains that are closely aligned with the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Between 2012 and 2018, GEF committed more than USD 100 million in grants, which leveraged more than a billion dollars in co-financing.

Examples of recently approved projects approved by the GEF in the Arab region include the following:

- A USD 3.9 million GEF/FAO project in Iraq on Sustainable Land Management for Improved Livelihoods in Degraded Areas. The project seeks to sustainably manage globally significant ecosystems, combat land degradation and conserve marshland ecosystems for improved livelihoods and ecosystem resilience and services. The key interventions in support of these objectives are: (i) strengthening the enabling environment to support SLM and conservation agriculture (CA) in degraded marshland ecosystems in Iraq; (ii) targeted land-based interventions to rehabilitate degraded productive land through sustainable land management and conservation agriculture practices and restoring and implementing sustainable management of marshland ecosystems through SLM, CA and the development of local communities' livelihoods; and (iii) raising awareness of the importance of agriculture for SLM and food security. The target is to reach 500 vulnerable smallholder households (20,000-30,000 inhabitants) in five locations across 4,000 hectares of marshlands and 6,000 hectares of degraded land close to marshlands.
- A USD 4.8 million GEF/FAO project in Morocco on Revitalizing Oasis Agro-ecosystems through a Sustainable, Integrated and Landscape Approach in the Draâ-Tafilalet Region. The aim of this project is to revitalize oasis agro-ecosystems to make them productive, healthy, and more resilient to the livelihoods of the local communities. The project has three main technical components: (i) supporting policy dialogue on the sustainable management of oasis agro-ecosystems; (ii) improving natural resource management and sustainable production intensification planning and monitoring; and (iii) demonstrating that Oasis agro-ecosystems are restored, safeguarded and sustainably managed through an integrated landscape approach. A fourth component focuses on monitoring, evaluation, and knowledge management.

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- A USD 2.8 million GEF/FAO project in Algeria on Rehabilitation and Integrated Sustainable Development of Algerian Cork Oak Forest Production Landscapes. The overall objective of the project is to promote sustainable management and utilization of the cork oak forest ecosystems to generate an integrated and diverse set of economic, environmental and social goods and services, while at the same time preserving the globally significant biodiversity. The three main aims of the project are: (i) piloting sustainable management, conservation and sustainable harvesting of Algeria's globally significant cork oak forest ecosystems; (ii) sustainably creating value from cork oak ecosystem products, goods and services; and (iii) replicating and up-scaling successful forest management practices.

GEF's work in the region also involves helping countries address the challenge of chemical and waste contamination. In its role as the financial mechanism to implement both the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants and the Minamata Convention on Mercury, the GEF is a catalyst to help governments and the private sector tackle the problem of chemical and waste pollution. The GEF also plays an important complementary role in achieving the objectives of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer. Recent projects on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) that have been approved for the Arab region are being implemented in Iraq, Jordan, and Morocco.

Another area of focus for the GEF is on innovation, green jobs, and sustainable cities. A notable example in the Arab region is the USD 1 million GEF/UNIDO project, Programme for Cleantech Innovation and Green Jobs in Morocco. This project is part of the GEF/UNIDO Global Cleantech Programme for SMEs. The programme is fostering clean technology innovation for climate change mitigation through a process of mentoring, training, and support. The technologies being promoted during the early phases of the project are related to energy efficiency, renewable energy, waste to energy, and water efficiency. The project specifically consists of the following components: (i) National Cleantech Platform to promote clean technology innovations; (ii) institutional capacity building for the organization of the competition and accelerator programme; and (iii) strengthening of policy and regulatory framework for the development of a supportive local innovation ecosystem. The Morocco project offers a strong potential for sustainability and scaling up by identifying and providing early support for innovators, which increases their ability to attract finance and achieve commercial success.

The GEF is also helping countries set voluntary targets under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and its key organizing principle of land degradation neutrality (LDN). LDN, which is an important goal in the Arab region, is defined as "a state whereby the amount and quality of land resources necessary to support ecosystem functions and services and enhance food security, remains stable or increases within specified temporal and spatial scales and ecosystems" (UNCCD, 2016).

For example, Lebanon, with assistance from the GEF (USD 4.6 million of GEF grants and USD 17.2 million co-financing), has developed a project to achieve LDN in the country's mountainous landscapes. The project is helping Lebanon revise existing policies and programs to ensure sustainability and rehabilitate land in pilot sites. Similarly, Jordan and Egypt are joining efforts to develop a USD 4 million GEF-funded project on sustainable rangeland management for biodiversity conservation and climate change. Working together, these two countries aim to halt and reverse land degradation, restore degraded ecosystems and sustainably manage their land resources.

In addition to its governments and local community partners, the GEF is also working in partnership with the private sector in the Arab region, which is the dominant driver of global economic activity and a vital player in the fight against climate change. For example, one of the private-public partnerships (PPP) the GEF is funding is the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's (EBRD) South Eastern Mediterranean Energy Efficiency Platform (USD 15 million of GEF funding plus USD 150 million in co-financing). This project is helping to establish an innovative financing facility to serve four countries in the Southern Mediterranean: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. The project aims to support the emergence of a market for energy efficiency, which would not have materialized without the GEF's assistance.

To expand its work, the GEF launched a non-grant financial instrument in 2014 to facilitate the participation of the private sector in the Arab region and other parts of the world in addressing global environmental challenges.

**Sources:**

Report of the Conference of the Parties on its twelfth session, held in Ankara from 12 to 23 October 2015. Part two: Actions. ICCD/COP(12)/20/Add.1. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), Bonn (2016) Retrieved from: <http://www.unccd.int/Lists/OfficialDocuments/cop12/20add1eng.pdf>