

Input of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia to the thematic review of the 2022 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

Key messages on the SDGs under review

SDG 4

1. COVID-19 has aggravated deep-seated challenges faced by Arab Governments, including uneven quality of education, low levels of skill attainment, and high levels of children not attending school. During the pandemic, an estimated 40 per cent of students in the region were unable to access distance education programmes,¹ and an estimated 1.31 million children were at risk of dropping out of school due to the crisis.²
2. Efforts are needed in the region to assess the learning loss triggered by the pandemic. Further data collection efforts are needed to fill gaps in that respect, notably for marginalized groups, and with the collaboration of grassroot organizations.
3. Solving the region's education challenges requires addressing crises that prevent children from attending school, and strengthening the right to equitable and quality education, with special focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups. Furthermore, education reform can assist students' transition to the workforce by reorienting approaches to emphasize problem solving, linkages across disciplines, and the use of technology.

SDG 5

1. Despite progress on achieving gender equality, barriers to full equality remain, including the persistence of discriminatory laws and entrenched social and cultural norms. Governments must enhance their political commitment to gender equality, and ensure equal access to opportunities.
2. The above is especially true for the opportunities emerging from the COVID-19 recovery. Of the total fiscal support announced by Arab Governments, only 1.2 per cent went to gender-responsive measures with women as direct beneficiaries. Recovery plans and resilience processes must be gender-responsive. Ensuring gender balance in COVID-19 task forces could help better reflect the interests of women.

1 UNICEF, COVID-19: Are Children Able To Continue Learning During School Closures? 2020.

2 UNESCO, COVID-19 education response: how many students are at risk of not returning to school? 2020.

3. At 20.3 per cent, women in the region have the lowest labour force participation globally,³ and those working are often overrepresented in the informal sector. Moreover, within households, women shoulder unpaid care work responsibilities at a rate 4.7 times greater than men.⁴
4. During the pandemic, increased incidences of domestic violence, early marriage, and online harassment against women and girls⁵ were observed. Arab countries must work to promote social and behavioural change, and to provide safe and inclusive public spaces.

SDG 14

1. While the oceans and seas surrounding the Arab region provide livelihoods for millions of people, they are under threat by ocean warming, acidification, illegal fishing and pollution. These trends threaten the long-term health, food security, cultural heritage and prosperity of the region's people. The pandemic has exacerbated shocks to the wellbeing of millions in coastal communities, who already struggled to access social protection and government support.
2. Guaranteeing the sustainability of livelihoods for those who rely on the seafood trade requires comprehensive strategies to manage fishery resources, curb illegal fishing, and sustainably develop coastal zones.
3. Waste management and marine area protection must be strengthened to reverse negative trends of increased ocean pollution, and to preserve environments for generations to come. Plastic waste in particular has challenged marine environments, and the massive use of single-use PPE in response to the pandemic has generated considerable plastic waste, much of which is expected to make its way to seas and coasts.⁶

SDG 15

1. Land degradation and desertification are accelerating biodiversity loss, contributing to food insecurity, degrading ecosystem services, and threatening human health, wellbeing, and resilience. The economic cost of land degradation in the region is estimated at \$9 billion annually.⁷ Addressing these challenges is a shared responsibility between countries and stakeholders.

3 ILOSTAT Database, Labour force participation rate by sex and age (%) - ILO modelled estimates, 2020 (accessed on 12 December 2021). Available at <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data>.

4 UN-Women, The Role of the Care Economy in Promoting Gender Equality, 2020.

5 UN-Women, Violence against women in the online space: insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States, 2021. The survey covered eight Arab countries, namely Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen.

6 Peng and others, Plastic waste release caused by COVID-19 and its fate in the global ocean, 2021.

7 ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

2. Risk-informed policy development and strengthened financing frameworks that are conscious of the synergies between environmental, economic and social policies benefit communities by increasing their resilience in the face of environmental risk.
3. The pandemic is a chance for Arab countries to build back greener, while creating opportunities in emerging economic sectors. Coordinated and strategic regional planning informed by science, and investment in nature-based solutions and land restoration can reverse land loss trends and ensure ecosystem resilience, while positively affecting human wellbeing by creating jobs, reducing poverty, protecting food security, and strengthening communities' abilities to adapt to climate change.

SDG 17

Data

1. Despite ongoing efforts to improve data collection and reporting, large gaps in data availability remain for many countries, presenting a bottleneck to informed decision-making. Challenges include uncovered indicators, low-frequency national indicators that are often not disaggregated, variable levels of international comparability, and poor transparency and accessibility.
2. At least 50 per cent of data at the country level can be timely disseminated if national statistical systems work together with national statistical offices to streamline data flow, thus highlighting the urgent need to strengthen coordination mechanisms of national statistical systems.
3. Potential solutions include the use of non-traditional data, building capacity to use administrative records for SDG statistics, and increasing the use of geospatial data.

Finance

1. The combination of the pandemic and decreases in oil revenues pushed the region's overall debt burden to a historic high of \$1.4 trillion, equivalent to 60 per cent of its GDP.⁸ At the same time, foreign direct investment inflows fell by an estimated 45 per cent,⁹ leaving the region with reduced fiscal space to address its challenges.
2. Arab countries must adopt new approaches to mobilize financial resources, including improving public financial management, incentivizing a transition to sustainable consumption, and creating a favourable environment for SDG-oriented private investment.

Technology

1. The Arab region has made progress in increasing Internet connectivity, but has been slow to harness the potential of technology in productive sectors of the economy. At 0.6 per cent of GDP,

⁸ ESCWA, Liquidity shortage and debt: obstacles to recovery in the Arab region, 2021.

⁹ ESCWA, The impact of COVID-19 on Arab economies: trade and foreign direct investment, 2020.

the region's research and development spending is far behind the world's average,¹⁰ and additional investment is needed to strengthen innovation and competitiveness in the region.

2. The pandemic has highlighted the extent of the region's digital divides. Priority must be given to ensuring greater access to technology and the skills needed to participate in the digital economy.

Socioeconomic developments in the region and leaving no one behind

1. Countries in the Arab region rely on indirect taxes, which impose greater burdens on the poor and middle class than on the rich. Rethinking tax policy and combatting tax evasion and avoidance could greatly improve the finances of Arab countries.
2. Poverty in the region increased in 2021, with 26.9 per cent of people in Arab countries living below national poverty lines. The region's total unemployment rate remained the highest in the world at 11.8 per cent, with only 35.1 per cent of people covered by at least one social protection benefit.
3. The numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) reached their peak in 2018 and 2020, respectively, with 5,602,702 refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, and 58,546,950 IDPs in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.
4. The pandemic pushed Governments to launch emergency responses that targeted many who had previously been excluded from social safety nets. This highlighted the need for and feasibility of universal, shock-responsive, whole-of-life social protection systems.
5. The efficiency and effectiveness of social protection systems can be improved in the region through rationalization efforts, improvements to beneficiary registries, and a renewed focus on programme financing. At the regional levels, collaboration between Arab countries can improve coverage of migrants and enhance the financial sustainability of social protection systems.
6. Wealth inequality and wealth concentration among the Arab region's economic elites increased significantly during the pandemic. The wealthiest 1 per cent of the region's population now control over 45 per cent of its net wealth, compared with 37 per cent in 2019. The top 10 per cent now control 81 per cent of the region's net wealth, a major jump from 75 per cent pre-pandemic.
7. Inequalities in access to COVID-19 vaccines must be addressed, especially in conflict-affected countries and Arab least developed countries (LDCs). While some Arab countries have reached vaccination rates of 90 per cent, the rate in Yemen stands at 1.8 per cent.

¹⁰ <http://arabsdgmonitor.unescwa.org>.

8. The pandemic has underscored the need to diversify exports, particularly for countries that rely on the sale of hydrocarbons. The energy trade has been slower to recover than other sectors, reflecting trends toward long-term economic shifts.
9. Economic recovery has been uneven across subregions. The crisis and government response measures have increased the region's debt burden, which threatens to constrain fiscal space. Public debt in the region has reached historically high proportions, at \$1.4 trillion. The international community has a duty to support developing nations in sustainably managing debt. With high and growing debt, high fiscal deficit, and low revenues-to-GDP, mobilizing domestic resources to meet peoples' needs and stimulate fast recovery is a daunting challenge. Arab LDCs, countries in conflict and highly indebted countries face an uphill battle.
10. The pandemic has accelerated the digitalization of Arab societies, with the launch of new online tools in the government, business, education and medical sectors. While this has improved accessibility for some, it also highlighted pre-existing inequalities in access to technology.
11. Governments must ensure that digitalization efforts remain human-centric and leave no one behind. To capture the full value of digital transformation, increased investment are needed to strengthen digital literacy and access to technology. At the regional level, an alliance to foster the collaborative development of digital public goods would facilitate digitalization in low- and middle-income countries.

Key messages to the international community

- Improve access to concessional finance from official creditors to revert the declining trends to developing countries, especially middle-income countries.
- Enhance access to green finance and finance for adaptation measures for Arab countries.
- Urge official creditors to extend the period and scope of moratoriums on debt service payments under the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) until the end of 2022, considering the prolonged impact of COVID-19; and to consider broadening the scope of DSSI to include all highly indebted developing countries, including middle-income countries with high debt burdens.
- Support humanitarian action for vulnerable countries and countries affected by conflict by guaranteeing access of IDPs and host communities to sufficient and healthy food, guaranteeing the suitability of food aid modalities to the regional context, and ensuring the resilience of humanitarian corridors to disruption from shocks such as pandemics that may limit their outreach and services.
- Formulate a humanitarian-development-peace strategy for resilient recovery in countries affected by conflict. A total of 66.3 million people required some form of humanitarian assistance in Arab countries affected by conflict, namely Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.