

Input for the 2025 High-level Political Forum

ESCWA

Your assessment of the impacts of the multiple and interconnected crises on the implementation of SDGs 3, 5.8, 14 and 17.

Conflicts in the Arab region, directly affecting 40% of the region's population living in eight countries, have had a huge human toll. and caused regression on many SDGs. In Gaza alone, around 50,000 people have been killed. More than 70 million people across the region require humanitarian assistance.

In the area of health, Arab countries in conflict have experienced deteriorating bed capacity and constraints on delivering critical inpatient care, responding to the re-emergence of communicable diseases, and providing needed care to patients with non-communicable diseases, especially given large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. Conflict countries are also witnessing an increase in child malnutrition and child marriage, losing ground on previously achieved gains.

The global polycrisis has battered the region's chronically challenged economies. Unemployment in the region remains the highest in the world and the highest also for women and young people. The Arab region's debt reached \$1.55 trillion in 2023, while external debt servicing for middle-income countries reached \$40 billion in 2024, constraining the ability to increase social expenditure to bring it to global standards.

Climate change threatens the Arab region, which is the world's most water-scarce and food-import dependent region: 90% of the Arab population lives in countries grappling with water scarcity, and vast numbers of people confront escalating droughts and other climate-related disasters. In countries with limited adaptive capacity, climate change is a threat multiplier, interacting closely with conflict and contributing to loss of lives and livelihoods, food insecurity, competition over resources and displacement.

Three key areas where sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for achieving the SDGs and leaving no one behind are being effectively delivered, especially related to the cluster of SDGs under review in 2025, also bearing in mind the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interlinkages across the Goals and targets.

Health: Some Arab countries are extending health insurance coverage to the most vulnerable groups by subsidizing their contributions. Countries are also strengthening primary healthcare delivery systems at the community level, including in underserved rural areas and refugee camps, to reduce the burden on public hospitals, increase access to comprehensive health services and achieve universal

health coverage. Many countries have developed multisectoral strategies or action plans for various non-communicable diseases and common risk factors, including unhealthy diets, sedentary lifestyles, smoking, and alcohol consumption.

Women's economic participation: Several Arab countries have introduced care-related labor market and social protection measures that address discrimination against women in employment and facilitate their participation in the labor force. They include maternity-related benefits and job protection reforms that help women to balance motherhood and professional life, such as measures to prohibit the dismissal of pregnant workers, support maternity leave entitlements, require the government to cover maternity leave benefits, or provide childcare subsidies or paid nursing breaks.

Economic diversification: In the Arab region, innovation and digital transformation strategies aim at channeling investments towards SMEs, targeting strategic sectors of the 4th Industrial Revolution and knowledge-based economy. Oil producer countries have intensified efforts to promote economic diversification and to shift away from the dependency on oil exports, targeting logistics, finance, real estate, tourism, manufacturing, and transportation, with investments on education and science to promote innovation in emerging sectors. Arab countries have also improved their business environment through enhanced infrastructure, new regulations, and trade connectivity, with significant investments in infrastructure.

Three examples of measures to accelerate progress towards SDGs through well-coordinated actions in key transitions to bring progress to scale (food security, energy access and affordability, digital connectivity, education, jobs, and social protection, climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution), building on interlinkages between SDGs to ensure cohesive progress.

Comprehensive progress on the SDGs depends on the de-escalation of conflict and the consolidation of peace. It also requires reforming the global financial architecture, implementing debt relief measures, and increasing development assistance to close the SDG financing gap in low- and middle-income countries and conflict-affected states.

Examples of measures needed to bring progress to scale include:

- Dismantling social, cultural, and logistical barriers impeding women's participation in the labor force, including through measures to penalize gender discrimination and criminalize sexual harassment in the workplace, redistribute care responsibilities, and by strengthening social insurance coverage for maternity and childcare benefits.
- Bridging the digital divide between and within countries by enhancing global digital governance, making digital technology more affordable and accessible, preventing monopolization of technology by major actors, and ensuring digital access in rural and conflict-affected areas.

- Integrating food security into social policies, targeting vulnerable populations, and strengthening food systems to ensure access to affordable, nutritious food for all, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas. There is also a need to invest in sustainable agriculture and reduce food waste.

Follow-up actions and measures being undertaken by your intergovernmental body or forum to support implementation of the 2023 SDG Summit Political Declaration and the outcomes of the 2024 Summit of the Future, to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

All ESCWA subsidiary bodies that met after the adoption of the 2023 SDG Summit Political Declaration and the Pact of the Future have adopted resolutions and recommendations that support their implementation.

ESCWA resolution 346 (XXXI) of 18 Dec. 2023 on "Effective economic governance and modernization of public administration" emphasized "that one of the main pillars for achieving sustainable development is following a governance approach based on transparency, participation, accountability, and fighting corruption," echoing para. 20 of the Political Declaration. The resolution called for adequate attention to countries in conflict and reducing inequality, in line with the Political Declaration paras. 13, 20, 26, 37 & 38. The session discussed the governance challenges of the Arab region to find solutions that uphold global governance principles affirmed in the 2023 Political Declaration.

In October 2023, the 16th session of the ESCWA Statistical Committee stressed the need to adopt guidelines on the use of AI and related technologies in national statistical work, in line with para. 38 (q) of the Political Declaration. Member States also committed to "expand the use of innovative data sources and new technologies to improve SDG data collection" and to "provide more data on persons with disabilities and sex-disaggregated data in line with the 2030 Agenda principle of leaving no one behind."

After the Summit of the Future, the 9th meeting of the ESCWA Executive Committee discussed Summit outcomes and requested the secretariat to "support implementation of the Pact of the Future to accelerate Arab countries' progress in achieving the SDGs, while ensuring integration of development and climate action efforts."

The Arab Forum for Sustainable Development supports Arab countries to position themselves with respect to key global events including FfD4 and WSSD2, and supports regional implementation of the Pact for the Future.

Recommendations and key messages to be considered for inclusion in the Ministerial Declaration of the 2025 HLPF.

- Secure peace and stability as preconditions for progress in sustainable development.
- Mainstream mental health in social policies, including national social protection systems.
- Improve primary healthcare infrastructure in rural and remote regions and refugee camps.
- Enforce international humanitarian law to protect healthcare systems and personnel from targeted attacks in conflicts.
- Ensure binding budgetary commitments to implement legislation on combating violence against women and empowering women.
- Develop sex-disaggregated data to support gender-responsive budgeting initiatives.
- Align skills with labor market needs.
- Broaden social protection and reduce informality through policies that translate economic growth into decent, socially insured employment.
- Boost economic diversification by increasing investment in R&D, enhancing knowledge and technology transfer, and supporting high-value sectors.
- Implement policies against the open dumping of municipal waste and the discharge of untreated wastewater at sea.
- Invest in regional and national capacities to monitor and control marine pollution and fishing activity.
- Extend social security benefits to small-scale fishers and support the commercialization of their products.
- Finance social development by strengthening resource mobilization and creating fiscal space to sustain social spending.
- Improve debt sustainability and debt relief mechanisms by activating debt service suspension formulas during crises and reviewing credit rating methodologies.
- Bridge the digital divide by improving connectivity, building digital skills, and investing in digital public goods and infrastructure.
- Expand access to the digital economy by fostering innovation, supporting SMEs and entrepreneurs, and enabling equitable access to digital technology.
- Advance the safe, secure, and ethical use of artificial intelligence.