

Foreword



The previous edition of the Arab Sustainable Development Report (*ASDR 2020*) came out in the spring of 2020, just as the Arab region and the world were plunged into the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this point, the region was already lagging in progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and structural transformative shifts across the different dimensions of sustainable development were much needed. With the pandemic, efforts and energies were mobilized across Arab countries to reduce its impacts on lives, livelihoods and the economy. The impacts on sustainable development and SDG progress were significantly adverse and countries are still reeling today from the shocks suffered by economies and health and education systems.

The outbreak of war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine further exacerbated this crisis, sharply impacting global supply chains and, of particular importance for the Arab region, food security. As a major importer of food staples, and with a third of its countries experiencing conflict, the region is particularly vulnerable to price fluctuations and food shortages. The region is also highly vulnerable to rising temperatures and water scarcity, and increasingly suffers from droughts, sandstorms and other natural disasters. With the climate crisis disproportionately affecting the Arab region, the impact of these concurrent shocks has been magnified.

Understandably, the efforts of most Arab Governments focused on responding to the crises, strengthening their levels of resilience and minimizing the vulnerability of economies – particularly in light of long-standing structural economic challenges. Issues of particular concern were the extent to which health and education services and digital infrastructure could handle the challenge; the impacts on economic diversification agendas; and the implications for middle-income economies that have grown increasingly concentrated in the services sector. The need to scale up manufacturing capacity and accelerate the integration of Arab economies into global and regional supply chains became more pressing. Regional economic integration re-emerged as critical not only in the context of trade, but also digital connectivity, health services, food security and other key areas.

Much attention was rightly given to the state of social protection programmes and their ability to shield vulnerable populations from shocks. New vulnerabilities were emerging against a backdrop of a shrinking middle class and rising wealth inequality in the vast majority of countries.

In light of these multiple crises, the importance of the public sector re-emerged as the primary guarantor of economic and social rights. A key lesson learned from this period is that

public institutions continue to be the core actor capable of driving a rights-based, sustainable and inclusive development agenda. This is not to downplay the importance of a whole-of-society approach to the achievement of the SDGs. Indeed, only a robust private sector can create the decent jobs needed for the 26 per cent of the region's young women and men who are unemployed. The private sector must lead in shifting practices towards more sustainable production that protects the health of the planet and its people. A vibrant and free civil society is the cornerstone of democratic societies that hold Governments to account, empower citizens, and advocate for the rights of all.

However, as these crises have underscored, it is the policies, laws, frameworks and mechanisms in place that ultimately determine the region's resilience or lack thereof.

Accordingly, **policy directions taken up by States** need to be re-examined, strengthened, changed, or introduced to ensure that Arab societies can withstand shocks, anticipate risks, and protect our people, economies and environment. The region's chosen policy directions will impact the ability to coordinate effectively for change at the global level, especially when it comes to the structural inequalities of the global financial architecture and managing the climate crisis.

Against this background, ASDR 2024 analyses the policy directions adopted by the 22 Arab countries towards achieving the SDGs. It examines the main policy directions at the regional and sub-regional levels, allowing the reader to see in one report for the first time, where efforts are concentrated in addressing each of the SDGs. Building on the structural barriers identified in [ASDR 2020](#) and the recommendations to dismantle them, ASDR 2024 examines the policy trends that are hindering SDG progress in order to identify possibilities for advancements and the gaps where more, or different, efforts are needed. The report also highlights the importance of and potential for regional action to achieve each of the 17 SDGs.

In a region heavily burdened by debt and shrinking fiscal space, the report sheds light on financing challenges for each SDG. Although more work needs to be done to fully assess the budgetary situation for each Goal, we urgently need more discussions linking the policy and financing landscapes. Only this way can we begin to aim more effectively for the impacts we hope to achieve.

The Arab region is beset by conflict with many countries affected, including Iraq, Libya, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, with tragic consequences and significant regression on key development indicators. The ASDR 2024 is being published while a devastating war is being waged in Gaza. To date, it has claimed tens of thousands of lives, wiped out basic infrastructure, is threatening famine, and destroying faith in multilateralism. During these darkest of times, the rule of law, the human rights framework, insistence on justice and the principles of equality and respect for the dignity of each woman, man and child can deliver us into the light. These same principles that we expect globally will also guide our work and policy advice at the regional and national levels.

A lot is being done in this region, even in areas where we might have assumed we are lagging or in areas that are emerging, including artificial intelligence and generative technologies. We need to build on this existing work, refine it, improve it, and scale it up where necessary. There is a lot of work to be done; 464 million people are directly impacted, and there is no time to lose.



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