MENARA Future Notes
No. 20, March 2019

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE MENA REGION

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THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: OVERVIEW OF SDGS IN THE MENA COUNTRIES

As with most other parts of the world, the MENA region is affected by a global "multiple crisis", which is a combination of phenomena such as climate change, mass loss of species, soil erosion, increasing social and economic divisions and instabilities, depleting fossil fuels and resources, increased forced migration and overburdened governance. Besides many other concepts, sustainable development has been created and defined as a basic strategic framework for meeting these and other challenges that threaten human well-being and livelihood and that of future generations. In 2015, all UN member states agreed to the Agenda 2030 and to use the SDGs as guiding principles for their policies and activities. The UN's Agenda 2030 is a universal policy treaty that must be implemented by all member states in order to solve the crises mentioned above. As a common framework towards global sustainable development, the Agenda 2030 defines seventeen SDGs and 169 specific targets that are supposed to be translated, established and realized on all levels – from global to local. The pace of their implementation varies from country to country depending on each country's specific challenges, preconditions and capacities.

In general, it can be stated that the attainment of the SDGs in the countries in the MENA region depends on the extent of past achievements related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the UN. The establishment of the SDGs differs across MENA. Whereas there is more progress in sub-regions such as the Gulf, there is little progress in other sub-regions such as Mashreq. Furthermore, priorities differ significantly across MENA due to the specific needs and situations of each country.

Apart from in countries facing violent conflicts, progress in MENA has been made in ending extreme poverty (SDG 1), and promoting affordable and clean energy (SDG 7). In several sub-regions, an enhancement of energy security has been achieved due to an increase of energy efficiency and renewable energy diversifying the energy mix. Reliable and sustainable solutions have been developed to facilitate access to modern energy services among rural and remote populations. These modern services also contribute to poverty alleviation (UN 2018, Saab and Sadik 2016). Yet the overall goal for education (SDG 4) is far from being reached: in 2016 the participation rate in early childhood and primary education was only 52 per cent in Northern Africa and Western Asia. In comparison, the region remains below the global level, which was 70 per cent in 2016.

Figure 1 presents an overview of SDGs.

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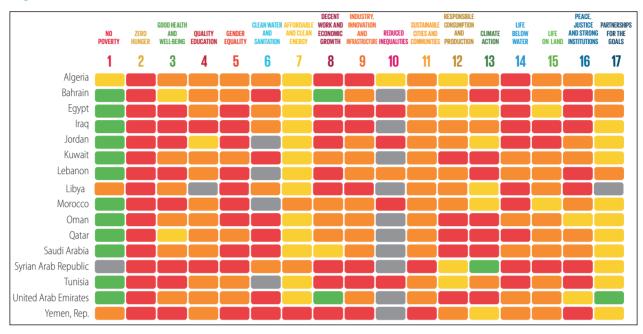
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Figure 1 | SDG Dashboard for the Middle East and North Africa

Note: A green rating on the SDG Dashboard denotes SDG achievement, and is assigned to a country on a given SDG only if all the indicators under the goal are rated green. Yellow, orange and red indicate growing distance from SDG achievement.
Source: Sachs et al. (2018: 26).

Nevertheless, the biggest challenges facing some of the MENA countries are the targets to reduce undernourishment (SDG 2) – with the Arab region being the only region in the world with an increasing undernourished population – and to provide access to drinking water (SDG 6). Most countries in the region have stagnated or even regressed in regard to environmental goals, which include SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Some of the most advanced countries generate high spill-over effects, such as higher consumption of resources, which reduce their overall performance. Further deficits concern gender equality (SDG 5) and income inequality (SDG 10). Regarding trends for sustainable cities (SDG 11), it must be stated that the MENA region showed an increase between 2000 and 2014 from 46 to 61 million people living in slums. The mean level of air pollution (target in SDG 11) was in 2016 more than five times the guideline value defined by the World Health Organization. This means that nine out of ten people living in urban areas lacked clean air.

Food security and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2) as well as sustainable water management (SDG 6) are high-priority challenges in most Arab countries. In some MENA countries, the water stress level is above 70 per cent, indicating the strong probability of future water scarcity (UN 2018: 17). In a general perspective, the problematic inter-linkages between water (SDG 6), energy (SDG 7) and food security (SDG 2) in the Arab-majority countries are getting stronger, since population growth causes increasing demands on resources. Therefore, it is crucial for the region to build capabilities in order to be able to adopt an integrated nexus approach in the management of these three vital resources.

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PERSPECTIVES FOR SDGS IN THE MENA COUNTRIES

MENA is by no means a homogeneous region. The economic, political, social, cultural and natural conditions of each Arab country are unique and have to be considered separately. These differentiating conditions are also the reason for the distinctive needs and therefore the disparate priorities for achieving sustainable development. As countries in other parts of the world have shown, the implementation of the SDGs can only succeed if the local context and the specific conditions are sensitively considered.

But despite all the differences between countries, there are common challenges. The MENA region and its societies not only have to handle the multiple crisis mentioned above but have also to deal with a young population suffering from high rates of unemployment, weak research and development capabilities, a lack of public participation in development decision-making, and inadequate institutional and policymaking capacities. All these challenges are also disproportionately greater for women. If the SDGs are supposed to be achieved, their implementation has to 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" (Saab and Sadik 2016: 6).

In the following list, examples are given of recent national development strategies in Arab countries, which in part have included aspects of sustainable development (Saab and Sadik 2016: 25):
• Qatar's National Vision 2030 (2009) and National Development Strategy 2011–2016
• Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (2016)
• The United Arab Emirates' National Agenda Vision 21; National Green Growth Strategy; and Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030
• Jordan's National Resilience Plan 2014–16 (2014) and National Vision 2030 (in preparation)
• Lebanon's National Sustainable Development Strategy (in preparation)
• Bahrain's Vision 2030 (2007)
• Development Strategy of the New Tunisia (2012); National Sustainable Development Strategy 2016–2020 (2014); Guidance Note for the Strategic Development Plan 2016–2020 (in preparation)
• Iraq's National Development Plan 2010-2014 (2010)
• Egypt's Sustainable Development Strategy (2030)
• Algeria's National Strategy for the Fight Against Poverty (2005–2015) and Five-Year Plan (2010–2014)
• Sudan's Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2012)
• Djibouti's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2009)
• Morocco's National Sustainable Development Strategy (2015)

The focus on the water-energy-food nexus is of highest importance compared with other challenges for MENA countries. This requires a cross-sectoral approach, involving multiple institutions such as government, business and third-sector players. Such integrative approaches are needed to collaboratively achieve sustainable development in the MENA region. This endeavour can only be successful if global as well as regional partnerships for development are set up – especially between the most and the least developed economies. All kinds of resources are needed in the future, from financing (subsidies and funds) to knowledge transfer and network-building exchanges

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in order to strengthen regional and local sustainable development.

To take the example of Egypt, agriculture is an important sector of the economy, providing livelihoods for 55 per cent of the population. It employs 30 per cent of the labour force, accounts for 20 per cent of exports and foreign exchange earnings and nearly 14 per cent of GDP. The Egyptian government adopted a multi-faceted strategy for improving socio-economic development, applying a policy mix that entails (a) an increase of employment opportunities due to prioritizing economic growth, (b) improved land and water use, increasing yields, income and food security due to efficiency improvements and (c) a more participatory governance. Smallholder producer associations were particularly strengthened by improved access to market information. The West Noubaria Rural Development Project has helped new settlers to reclaim desert land, providing credit and technical expertise. Creative local partnerships have gradually strengthened the local economy, with an infrastructure of clean piped water and consistent electricity supply as well as a network of well-maintained roads and health facilities, schools and mosques (UNEP 2016: 152).

Figure 2 | SDG Trend Dashboard for the Middle East and North Africa

	NO POVERTY 1	ZERO HUNGER 2	GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 3	QUALITY EDUCATION 4	GENDER EQUALITY 5	CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 6	AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY 7	DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 8	INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 9	INEQUALITIES REDUCED 10	SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES 11	RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 12	CLIMATE ACTION 13	LIFE BELOW WATER 14	LIFE ON LAND 15	PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS 16	PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS 17
Algeria	→	↗	↗	↗	↗	••	↗	↗	↑	••	↓	••	↓	→	→	→	••
Bahrain	→	↗	↗	••	↗	••	↗	↑	↑	••	••	••	→	→	••	→	••
Egypt	→	↗	↗	↗	→	••	↑	→	↗	••	→	••	↑	→	→	→	••
Iraq	↑	→	→	••	→	••	↗	→	••	••	↗	••	↓	→	→	••	••
Jordan	→	→	↗	••	→	••	↗	→	↗	••	↓	••	↗	↓	→	↑	••
Kuwait	→	↗	↑	→	→	→	↑	→	↗	••	••	••	↗	↓	••	→	••
Lebanon	→	↗	↗	→	→	••	↗	↗	↗	••	••	••	↓	↗	→	↓	↓
Libya	↓	→	↗	••	↗	••	••	••	••	••	••	••	→	→	••	↓	••
Morocco	→	→	↗	↗	↗	••	↗	••	↑	••	→	••	→	→	↗	↗	••
Oman	→	→	↗	→	→	••	↗	••	↑	••	••	••	→	↗	••	→	••
Qatar	→	↗	↑	→	↗	••	↗	••	↑	••	••	••	→	→	••	→	••
Saudi Arabia	→	↗	↗	↑	↗	••	↗	↗	↑	••	••	••	↓	→	→	↗	••
Syrian Arab Republic	••	↗	↗	••	→	↗	↑	••	••	••	↓	••	↑	↗	→	••	••
Tunisia	↑	→	↗	••	↗	••	↑	••	↗	••	→	••	↓	→	↑	→	••
United Arab Emirates	→	↗	↗	↗	→	••	↑	↑	↑	••	••	••	↓	↑	••	→	••
Yemen, Rep.	↓	↓	→	→	→	↗	↗	↗	••	••	→	••	→	↗	↓	→	••

Note: Meaning of the "arrows": decreasing (red), stagnating (orange), moderately increasing (yellow), on track (green vertical), keeping SDG achievement (green horizontal).
Source: Sachs et al. (2018: 27).

In order to foster sustainable development, more intelligent and systemic efforts and innovations are needed. As Figure 2 shows, there are several positive changes on the way in MENA, but at the same time there are various backlashes and persistent problems still to be solved. Countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Egypt and Morocco are those that have experienced greater progress with regard to the SDGs. However, overall and compared to other regions globally, progress is still quite modest (Sachs et al. 2018: 11–13).

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CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Progress in realizing sustainable development in most parts of MENA is slow. Positive changes can be observed – concerning, for example, renewable energy – but even in the case of the most pressing issues fulfilment of the SDGs remains limited. Whereas many other countries in the world are also experiencing problems achieving the SDGs, there is one fundamental challenge that MENA societies have to deal with. In its ninth annual report, the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) concludes that implementing the 2030 Agenda and achieving the SDGs in Arab countries cannot be realized in isolation from addressing the many violent conflicts in the region (Saab and Sadik 2016). Because more than ten of the twenty-two Arab countries are either under occupation or experiencing war or conflict, tens of millions of people are refugees or internally displaced, and many lack basic needs and rights at multiple levels. Almost all Arab countries are adjacent to countries experiencing significant instability, or are suffering such a problem themselves, which undermines the potential advantages of regional cooperation and the critical role this can play in enhancing the implementation of national SDGs. Those Arab countries that have experienced severe damage and profound disarray in their physical and social infrastructures over the past years have seen the prospects for re-establishing the status quo prevailing in 2010 severely decimated, let alone for achieving the SDGs by 2030.

Even if all conflicts and wars were to come to an end immediately, the Arab region cannot achieve the SDGs by 2030 using traditional methods. "A change in the mindset and culture of designing development strategies, policies, and plans, and their monitoring and assessment is essential if Arab countries are to achieve SDGs and address climate change concerns", argued the AFED report (Saab and Sadik 2016: 13). An integrated approach to policymaking is necessary to ensure the needed policy coherence, not least because not only is time limited but so are many other resources such as societal and political capabilities and governance. A broad spectrum of regulatory and market-based measures, innovative policies and smart projects are urgently required in order to ensure that the policies, plans and programmes for the SDGs are economically viable, socially equitable and environmentally acceptable.

Moreover, adopting a transparent, accountable, and participatory approach is a prerequisite for achieving this end. Building human capacity is one of the key requirements needed to make a qualitative shift towards sustainable development. It is recommended to reform the current institutional arrangements at the regional as well as national levels, such as [through] establishing "High Councils for Sustainable Development". (Saab and Sadik 2018: 13)

Such activities and institutions would ensure integrated policy formulation, better cooperation and coordination among different government entities, and between the government and non-state stakeholders. In all countries, mainly in the European Union (EU), where such new policies and institutions have been established and have been empowered at the national and local levels, sustainable development is more advanced.

In this regard, the EU should increase and strengthen its policies and initiatives in support of the SDGs in MENA. One important measure would be to stop its member states from exporting weapons to the region and fuelling tensions and conflicts (SDG 16). Another measure would be to

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support administrations, researchers and civil society activists who are relevant and motivated to work on specific SDGs in MENA, and further for them set up direct contacts with counterparts in EU countries. This kind of peer-to-peer approach could be organized by the EEAC (Network of European Environmental and Sustainability Councils); all levels of policies and societies can be mobilized. Since the SDGs enjoy some sort of international authority, it would be hard for elites not to struggle for them, even if only in symbolic terms at the beginning. The focus then should be on those issues that are most pressing and in which relevant actors in the administrations and the society are interested. This would make it possible to get quick positive results which then might motivate different sets of actors to continue or even increase their engagement. One of the key drivers of this virtuous process could be the youth in the MENA region, who are eager to live their lives in a sustainable world.
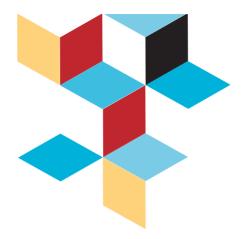
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Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.