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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

**ARAB CONSULTATIVE MEETING ON THE SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS
GAMMARTH, 18-19 NOVEMBER 2013**

Summary

The Arab Consultative Meeting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was held in Gammarth, Tunisia on 18-19 November 2013. It brought together experts from across the economic, social and environmental spheres, including professionals from Arab government agencies, regional and international organizations, and representatives of major groups.

The meeting discussions were informed by a paper prepared by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), which provided background information regarding the global processes shaping SDGs; regional progress on MDGs; priorities and principles for SDGs and post-2015 framework; and key elements required for a transformative SDG agenda. Initial discussions focused on regional progress on MDGs and identifying the key regional and national sustainable development challenges faced by Arab countries. The meeting then turned to discuss three key conceptual issues that will shape a transformative SDG framework: (a) achieving a universal agenda owned by all Governments, i.e. setting universal goals that also cater for national diversity; (b) effectively integrating environmental, social and economic considerations in a balanced, coherent framework; (c) establishing a new global partnership which embeds SDGs in an effective governance framework, with adequate means of implementation and accountability mechanisms for follow-up.

The meeting revealed the need for ESCWA and its partners to develop, based on the outcomes of the post-2015 and SDGs consultative processes conducted in 2013, a regional proposal reflecting Arab perspectives to be conveyed to the Open Working Group on SDGs. In addition, a common Arab point of view on SDGs should be further developed during the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development in April 2014, in preparation for the next session of the High Level Political Forum on sustainable development.

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Introduction

1. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), with its partners the League of Arab States, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Ministry of Equipment and Environment of Tunisia, organized the Arab Consultative Meeting on the Sustainable Development Goals in Gammarth, Tunisia, on 18-19 November 2013.
2. The meeting provided a platform to inform Arab regional stakeholders of the international processes to date and to discuss a regional perspective on SDGs. The meeting aimed to consult with experts on SDGs and the post-2015 agenda, in light of recent and ongoing global consultations on the subject, particularly the outcomes of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly of the United Nations and the meetings of the intergovernmental Open Working Group (OWG) on SDGs. The focus of the discussions was on key conceptual issues which form the basis for shaping and developing SDGs.
3. The objectives of the meeting were:
 - (a) To update and inform the meeting participants on progress to date and next steps with regard to SDGs and the post-2015 agenda;
 - (b) To discuss a regional perspective on SDGs, in line with Arab regional priorities and progress on MDGs;
 - (c) To explore and discuss a harmonized vision on key conceptual issues that will shape SDGs and the post-2015 agenda.
4. The following paragraphs summarize the discussions that took place during various sessions of the meeting and highlight the conclusions and next steps that were debated by the meeting participants.

I. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

A. OPENING SESSION

5. The opening session featured the statements of the meeting organizers. Ms. Melanie Hutchinson, Programme Officer, UNEP, highlighted that there was international consensus on the need for a post-2015 development agenda that would build upon the unattained targets and uncovered areas in the MDG framework and sustainable development agendas. The message of the region should be clear and strong in order to influence the global agenda and ensure that it takes account of the Arab regional and national diversity. SDGs should target the drivers of global problems; the human right to a sustainable and clean environment; strengthened environmental governance; and consumption and production patterns.
6. Ms. Shahira Wahbi, Chief, Sustainable Development and International Environmental Cooperation, League of Arab States, highlighted the importance of a unified regional position towards SDGs, reflecting regional perspectives and priorities. This position should take into account the need to achieve peace and development, and address disparities in the development of conflict-affected countries and the different challenges that they face. SDGs should be clear, limited in number, easily communicated and aspirational. They should lay down a long-term development plan to achieve Arab integration and unity. Means of implementation will be critical for achieving the goals and they must address national priorities and capacities.
7. Ms. Roula Majdalani, Director, Sustainable Development and Productivity Division, ESCWA, highlighted areas of cooperation between ESCWA and the Government of Tunisia, commending Tunisia's initiative to host this regional meeting as well as a national dialogue on SDGs. She outlined that SDGs will

have long-term implications for development programming and financing for the region. The post-2015 agenda should reach a limited number of international goals that are practical and ambitious. They should integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development and be adaptable to national circumstances. Engaging research centres and the civil society will be important to formulate an Arab regional vision for SDGs. It is important for the Arab region to have a strong voice in the negotiations, and ESCWA has been supporting the regional dialogue through consultative meetings with government and civil society stakeholders on SDGs. Ensuring that SDGs take into account Arab regional specificities is an important element of the work programme of ESCWA.

8. Mr. Sadok el-Amri, Secretary of State for Environment, Ministry of Equipment and Environment, Tunisia, highlighted the importance of SDGs given that the biggest challenge facing the future of humankind is preserving the environment. He emphasized the need to crystallize an Arab regional perspective on the post-2015 agenda and the follow up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio + 20). Indeed, there was a feeling of disappointment after Rio + 20, with many experts concerned that the aspirations of developing countries to increase the pace of development and ensure the welfare of the people were not met. SDGs should thus reflect Arab regional priorities and the importance of the challenges faced by the region. The future of the people in the region will be linked to the empowerment of women and youth. Despite big achievements in education and health in the context of MDGs, the progress hid the increasing disparity both between and within countries. Other national challenges include climate change and its consequences on water scarcity and drought, and the acute character of natural disasters. A limited number of realistic and measurable goals would be an effective tool to elaborate a new, collaborative development programme, with sustainable development and inclusiveness at its core. SDGs should be linked to the international human rights system, including the right to development, peace and security. The speaker concluded by expressing the hope that the meeting discussions would influence negotiations at the global level in redefining the post-2015 era, and invited all Arab countries to launch national dialogues on SDGs, similar to the one organized by Tunisia.

B. SESSION 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO MDGS, SDGS AND ARAB REGIONAL PRIORITIES FOR POST-2015

9. The first session of the meeting provided an introduction to MDGs, SDGs and Arab regional priorities for the post-2015 agenda. The session was divided into two parts and was moderated by Ms. Reem Nejdawi, Chief, Productive Sectors Section, ESCWA.

1. Background and context for a transformative SDG framework

10. The first part of session 1 commenced with a presentation by Ms. Roula Majdalani on building a transformative approach for SDGs that works for the Arab region. The presentation provided an introduction to the ESCWA discussion paper which served as a basis for the meeting dialogue. In particular, it highlighted the need for a transformative SDG framework that would merge the global development and sustainable development agendas into a single cohesive framework, building on the strengths and addressing the weaknesses of the MDG framework. The speaker also mentioned that the Arab region should be proactive and define its own sustainable development agenda; it should attempt to influence global negotiations during the policy development process, rather than awaiting the outcome and then trying to adapt the set goals to the region.

11. The presentation also highlighted the range of interlinking challenges that are faced by the Arab region across the social, economic, environmental and governance spheres. In doing so, it underscored the need for an integrated approach to planning and decision-making that should be embraced by the SDG framework.

12. The presentation also highlighted some of the key messages of recent global and regional reports and consultations on SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda, and outlined some of the key principles and priorities of SDGs from an Arab regional perspective. Key principles included effective governance,

sustainability and resilience, human rights, and the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability. Priority issues for SDGs included equitable growth and jobs, peace and security, poverty eradication, gender equality, food, energy, water, means of implementation, education and health. The speaker also highlighted the importance of sustainable consumption and production patterns, and the need for a nexus approach to energy, food and water security.

13. Finally, the presentation outlined the key conceptual issues that should be addressed within the SDG framework for it to be transformative, and some key elements of an SDG framework that would work for the Arab region. These included:

(a) Achieving a universal agenda that is owned by all Governments, i.e. universal goals that cater for national diversity;

(b) Effectively integrating environmental, social and economic considerations in a balanced, coherent framework, i.e. bridging the science-policy interface;

(c) Establishing a new global partnership which embeds SDGs in an effective governance framework with adequate means of implementation and accountability mechanisms for follow-up;

(d) Addressing the key regional and national sustainable development priorities faced by Arab countries, and building capacity in the region for implementation, monitoring and follow-up.

14. Following the presentation, Mr. Yousef Abusafieh, Former Minister, President's Advisor for Environment Affairs, Palestine, addressed the need for the SDG framework to acknowledge occupation and instability as key barriers to sustainable development. He pointed to challenges relating to Israeli settlements in Palestine and called for their total elimination. In particular, he referred to difficulties in accessing safe water due to contamination and prevention of drilling wells by force. He underlined the fact that food security in Palestine cannot be achieved unless sovereignty over natural resources is ensured. The speaker also highlighted paragraph 27 of the outcome document of Rio + 20, The Future We Want, which refers to the right of self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation, and which is a reiteration of the 2002 Johannesburg declaration.

15. Mr. Mohamed Khalil, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the United Nations, then provided an overview on the emergence of SDGs and the global processes that are shaping their formulation. SDGs represent the convergence of two global processes: the first is centred on social and economic development, and the second on environmental issues. The lack of integration between these processes has been a key obstacle to sustainable development. The emergence of global climate change and of food and energy crises have highlighted interlinkages between socioeconomic development and the environment, as new ways of thinking about sustainable development are emerging. Food security in the Arab region was highlighted as a good example of the interlinkages between the three dimensions of sustainable development, as increasing agricultural yields are constrained by resource scarcities, including those of water and arable land. Research and development and technology transfers will be needed in the region to help finding new agricultural methods. Trade liberalization will also be required to help Arab countries in finding new markets. All of these interlinking aspects must be addressed in SDGs.

16. The speaker also provided an update on the global intergovernmental process shaping SDGs. OWG has conducted four out of a total of eight meetings which constitute the first consultative phase of the process and will conclude in February 2014. After February, OWG will prepare a proposal on SDGs for consideration by the United Nations General Assembly by September 2014. The Group includes representatives of six Arab countries, who will require technical support from ESCWA and the League of Arab States for their work. SDGs will be designed for the next 15 years at the international level and are therefore very significant for the region. The Arab region is facing its own set of challenges to sustainable

development which are well documented, including job opportunities for the youth, equality, social justice, water, and energy and food security. It is thus crucial to formulate a vision and perspective and articulate it before the end of February and the completion of the OWG consultations. In this regard, the speaker proposed that ESCWA develop an Arab perspective and priority goals based on the outcomes of this meeting, including priority goals and targets for consideration and agreement by Arab Governments. He cited the example of the SDG proposal put forward in the African region, which could provide insight for the Arab region.

17. Ms. Reem Nejdawi highlighted that in order to formulate and design goals, it was first necessary to develop a transformative conceptual framework which would be used for the purpose. In this regard, the meeting should focus on the previously highlighted main conceptual issues to ensure that the goals are framed in an appropriate way. She underlined the importance of building on the strengths and addressing the weaknesses of MDGs.

18. During the subsequent open plenary discussion, participants commended the discussion paper prepared by ESCWA, as it constitutes a cornerstone for an Arab position on SDGs and raises a range of priority issues for the goals from the perspective of the Arab region. Participants highlighted the need to better define and mainstream sustainable development; ensure a clear connection between MDGs and SDGs; and identify the key barriers to the achievement of MDGs and to sustainable development in the region, linking these to the means of implementation. The key regional priorities of peace and security, agriculture, food and water security were mentioned.

19. Participants expressed that a new global partnership should be established as a critical component of SDGs, and that partnership programmes should be formulated for priority issues, including their objectives and resource requirements. The aim would be to create a conducive and enabling environment for productive economies, including a favourable international financial system and economic relations. Additional issues raised as top priorities for the achievement of sustainable development in the Arab region included peace, security and political stability, food security, environmental issues including air quality, and the transfer of green technologies in the areas of agriculture and water management.

20. The first part of the session then concluded with a final intervention from Mr. Mohamed Khalil, who highlighted that SDGs should shift from the 'donor-recipient' approach of MDGs to establishing an international enabling environment that is conducive to development and that provides the adequate means of target implementation.

2. Arab progress on MDGs, and regional priorities and guiding principles for SDGs

21. The second part of session 1 began with an introduction by Mr. Tarek Nabulsi, Head of the Department of Social Affairs, League of Arab States, in which he summarized the efforts of the League and of the Arab Ministerial Social Council in supporting the implementation of MDGs in Arab countries and identifying regional priorities for post-2015. He made reference to the outcomes of the three Arab development summits held since 2009, in particular the 2013 Riyadh Summit, during which a list of regional priorities was approved and consequently submitted to the General Assembly as regional input to the inaugural meeting of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development. He concluded by underlining the need for networking among various stakeholders to ensure the integration of all the dimensions of sustainable development.

22. This introduction was followed by a presentation by Mr. Khaled Abu-Ismaïl, Chief of Development Policy Section, ESCWA, on the Arab MDGs Report 2013: Facing Challenges and Looking beyond 2015. The presentation highlighted that progress on MDGs in the Arab region was mixed, with at least 50 million people in the region still suffering from poverty. Poverty rates in the Arab region have remained the same since 1990 despite the increase in per capita income during the period. This reflects inequalities in the

distribution of development gains which undermine political and social stability. Addressing these inequalities, achieving quality growth and better capturing and tackling national and subnational inequalities are among the priorities of the post-2015 development agenda, as well as measuring poverty and economic exclusion.

23. The Arab MDG report also highlights an interesting anomaly in MDG progress in the region: some of the leading performers on many MDGs, Egypt, Tunisia and the Syrian Arab Republic for example, are also those countries that are experiencing social upheavals and conflicts. This exposes potential governance and participation deficits and underscores the importance of considering subnational inequalities and differences. The report argues that any proposed post-2015 framework should therefore have governance and equity-related targets and indicators at its core, to capture and monitor the reforms required to uphold human rights, dignity and participatory decision-making. Other key priorities for the post-2015 agenda include the need to address food security and the management of natural resources, in particular water resources.

24. Following the presentation, Mr. Ziad Abdul Samad, Director, Arab Non-Governmental Organizations Network for Development, made an intervention on Arab progress in MDGs and priorities for post-2015, including the need for a human rights-based approach and the importance of democracy, voice and participation. The SDG framework will require the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, but governance will also be critical and should be tackled. This will include building strong democracies and civil societies, and effective participatory mechanisms in policymaking. Peace and stability, the right to development choices, sovereignty over resources and the move to productive economies are all priorities for post-2015 in the Arab region.

25. Ms. Razan Zuayter, President, Arab Group for the Protection of Nature, highlighted the need to address food security in the Arab region, where food production is limited by vulnerability and scarcity, and to ensure that the region achieves food sovereignty. International development aid and investment in the region generally focuses on humanitarian rather than development issues, and there should be a study in the region on enhancing the effectiveness of development investment and financing to prevent dependence and reinforce self-reliance. The speaker emphasized the importance of regional integration and a strategic framework for the achievement of food security and sustainable development in general. She raised the issue of sustainability in situations of conflict, making reference to the efforts of the Arab Network for Food Sovereignty in establishing a working group on food security in conflict-stricken areas.

26. During the subsequent open plenary discussion, meeting participants discussed a range of issues relating to MDG progress in the Arab region and priorities for SDGs. Some participants identified disaster risk reduction and waste management as areas of importance that could be covered within SDG targets. Others highlighted the impact of armed conflict on achieving MDGs and the failure of the international community to meet its promises; as well as the importance of the right to development for the SDG framework, the need for development states and the importance of Arab integration and complementarity. Other issues raised included the need for green financing to address the quality of growth. The importance of engaging youth in all regional meetings was underscored as critical, and the fact that future regional meetings should include the representation of youth. The limited coordination between Arab participants in OWG was raised, emphasizing that the region should better coordinate its efforts, formulating a joint position and defending it during negotiations.

C. SESSION 2: SDG PRIORITY CONCEPTUAL ISSUES – UNIVERSAL GOALS, NATIONAL DIVERSITY AND INTEGRATION

27. The second session of the meeting provided a platform for discussing key conceptual issues that will help to shape SDGs. The session was divided into two parts and was first moderated by Mr. Amr Nour, Director, Regional Commissions New York Office, then by Ms. Reem Nejdawi.

*1. SDGs that are universal yet account for Arab regional
and national diversity*

28. The first part of session 2 commenced with a presentation by Ms. Jana el-Baba, ESCWA, which drew on material from the ESCWA discussion paper relating to the need for SDGs that are universal yet cater for Arab regional and national diversity. The presentation highlighted that while OWG had agreed that SDGs should be universal, there were different understandings on how this characteristic should be reflected in the goals. To be transformative, SDGs should build on the key strengths of MDGs and address their weaknesses. Strengths included the broad policy direction and commitment to poverty reduction, and the fact that MDGs rallied the world around a moral purpose. Weaknesses included the limited focus of MDGs on developing countries and their ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach.

29. With regard to SDGs, the Arab region should contribute to elaborate universal goals that set the general direction but also facilitate national ownership, for example through national targets. A ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approach to target setting should be adopted, supporting both national ownership and global consistency; aggregation; measurability; and comparison. With regard to national target setting, the principle of common-but-differentiated-responsibilities should guide equity considerations. Finally, a ‘dashboard’ approach to national target setting was presented as an innovative approach to balance top-down and bottom-up requirements, whereby countries would select from a list of ‘template’ targets and would determine their own baseline, milestones and speed of delivery using consistent language.

30. Mr. Amr Nour highlighted that the universality of SDGs had now been agreed at the global level, and that SDGs would therefore apply to all countries. He then invited interventions from the lead discussants.

31. Mr. Mutasim al-Kilani, Director, Sustainable Development Section, Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Jordan, mentioned that the uniformity of MDG targets was a key deficiency, as they disregarded the particularities of countries and their national circumstances. Further, the MDG framework was agreed without input from Arab countries. For SDGs to be relevant, they must not be imported: they should start from Arab national and regional realities. The post-2015 national dialogues have been very important and have involved all parts of society. Jordan has a dashboard of development indicators which have been nationally agreed, and such indicators are critical for the evaluation of policies. However, there are different definitions of poverty at the national and global levels, and income is a limited indicator of poverty: a quality of life index is preferable.

32. Ms. Shahira Wahbi highlighted that the key gap with regard to MDGs was in the implementation phase. There is genuine political will in the Arab region, but limited capacity and resources to follow through. The barriers and constraints that prevent the implementation of sustainable development strategies should be taken into account. The region has done its best to achieve MDGs, but it has not always succeeded. The Sustainable Development Initiative in the Arab Region should be updated to become a regional strategic framework for sustainable development. Arab States have also adopted a set of 45 indicators for sustainable development that are considered as bottom-line indicators and provide guidance and a framework for monitoring sustainable development. The League of Arab States and the United Nations are working together to collect the needed data. With regard to governance, it is important not only at the national level, but also at the global level in terms of markets, trade and technology. Finally, Arab countries should also be looking at opportunities to influence the global negotiations on SDGs through the African and Asian regional processes.

33. Mr. Patrice Robineau, Former Senior Advisor to the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, discussed efforts in the European region with regard to SDGs, where a series of 14 issues have been determined as potential target areas for SDGs. He mentioned that, at the global level, there were priority issues that were broadly supported for inclusion in SDGs, such as job creation; poverty; water and sanitation; food security; health; and education. Other issues have been pointed out as more controversial due to political reasons, such as global common goods – oceans, forests; climate change;

energy; and disaster preparedness. A third category of issues had potential but were likely to experience significant political resistance, such as the means of implementation; inequalities; sustainable consumption and production; governance, human rights, rule of law; and peace and security.

34. The speaker mentioned that all of these priority areas for goals would be relevant for all countries, albeit to varying degrees. For the Arab region, peace and security is a key issue, along with water and food security. These issues are also relevant for Europe, but to varying degrees. All countries should be focusing on energy efficiency and renewable or cleaner technologies, however there are different ways of achieving this focus which would be more or less appropriate in different regions (nuclear versus solar, for example). Priority SDGs will emerge due to their high degree of relevance for all countries, and policies to achieve the goals will depend upon national capacities.

35. The speaker then identified three major challenges for SDGs: (a) integrating the social track with the environmental track; (b) decoupling well-being from resource use, as countries with the highest Human Development Index scores are also exploiting large amounts of resources; (c) the need to realize a transformative agenda or paradigm shift: the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons has minimized the issues of environment and inequality, and there seems to be a disconnect between the need for a transformative agenda and reality.

36. Finally, the speaker outlined a nexus of implementation for SDGs, considering not only finance, technology and capacity-building, but also partnerships with a broader range of actors that go beyond the donor-recipient approach, and effective accountability mechanisms and indicators. Accountability would be greatly improved if each goal could define the constellation of partners from Governments, non-governmental organisations, etc. In addition, the issue of sustainable consumption and production is critical for SDGs, including the need for greater efficiency, renewables, changes to lifestyles, technological innovation and social innovation.

37. Mr. Amr Nour highlighted that national implementation will be an important element of consideration for SDGs, and that regional integration and regional partnerships should be considered to support implementation. While the national starting point is critical, a regional framework could be useful and the region should look at ways to strengthen that aspect of cooperation. The sustainable development indicators should be assessed within the context of the post-2015 agenda. With regard to priorities, the challenges of the Arab region over the next 20 years should be considered, including governance, progress, well-being and social justice. Effective indicators will be needed to measure these development pillars. The current development model should be made fairer and more equitable, with opportunities for decent work and solutions for food and water scarcities.

38. During the subsequent open plenary discussion, meeting participants discussed a range of issues relating to the need for SDGs that support national ownership and implementation. Participants mentioned the importance of national ownership and relevance for the SDG framework, the need for effective national institutional frameworks, and that differentiation between countries should also take into account equity principles such as common-but-differentiated-responsibilities and the polluter-pays principles.

39. In response to issues raised during discussions, Ms. Shahira Wahbi highlighted the lack of resources for implementation in some Arab countries. She also noted that while the League of Arab States provides technical advice to Arab States, it also respects sovereignty and national policy choices. The framework and indicators for sustainable development in the Arab region are not being fully tapped and should be revisited after SDGs are agreed. Mr. Patrice Robineau mentioned that the transition from classical growth to sustainable development needs a change of mindset, and that sustainable consumption and production are both critical. A minimum set of core indicators should be developed for SDGs, as they should not be too technical nor too complex or difficult to grasp. Mr. Nour and Mr. Khalil concluded that the Arab region still had time up until the end of February to influence the negotiations on SDGs at the global level, and that the Secretariat of the meeting could be requested to draw up a roadmap or approach for the region.

2. Addressing the science-policy interface: an SDG framework that effectively integrates the three dimensions of sustainable development

40. The second part of session 2 began with a presentation by Mr. Cameron Allen, ESCWA, which drew on material from the ESCWA discussion paper relating to the need for SDGs to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced and cohesive framework. The presentation highlighted that the interlinking challenges faced by the Arab region across the environmental, social, economic and governance spheres require an integrated approach to decision-making and problem solving. For SDGs to be transformative in this context, they should build on key strengths of MDGs such as their central commitment to human development and poverty reduction, as well as their simple, concise and easy-to-communicate format. SDGs should also address the key weaknesses of MDGs with regard to the limited range of issues raised, taking particularly into consideration sustainability, human rights and governance, and the poor integration of MDG-7 with poverty reduction objectives. SDGs should also compensate for the fact that MDG progress has not been maintained in the context of shocks and crises.

41. The presentation then highlighted the importance of an integrated approach that balances all three dimensions of sustainable development. SDGs should have a central focus on poverty eradication, human development and well-being, but also address a broader range of resource challenges such as food, water and energy. There should be a balance between integration and complexity on the one hand, and simplicity on the other hand. To work for the Arab region, SDGs should also address governance as a potential ‘fourth dimension’.

42. The presentation also outlined some innovative approaches to developing a simple, balanced and integrated framework, covering the three dimensions of sustainable development at the level of each goal through the use of integrated targets. Such targets should place human well-being outcomes at the core of each goal and link them with the natural resource base upon which they rely. They should take into account global connections and limitations, and the need to protect global public goods that ensure long-term resilience and reduce vulnerability to shocks. Another important consideration is that targets should be formulated in a way that facilitates national planning and drives the transformation of our economies, for example through supporting sustainable and equitable resource exploitation, sustainable consumption and production, enhanced resource efficiency, and renewable or alternative technologies and resources.

43. Ms. Melanie Hutchinson then gave a presentation on embedding the environment in SDGs, which provided an overview of UNEP’s recent discussion paper in which it outlines its approach for an integrated framework for SDGs. The paper aims to stimulate the dialogue on how to best integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development in SDGs. To do so, it draws from international experience with over 90 environmental treaties to identify success factors that have been critical to support implementation. Such factors include support from both the science and policy communities; reliance upon the principle of common-but-differentiated-responsibilities; articulation of targets and timelines; monitoring and accountability frameworks; and effective governance and financing provisions.

44. The UNEP integrated framework for embedding the environment in goals and targets includes:

(a) A complementary set of goals and targets which cover all of the main objectives of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development;

(b) Integrated goals – the top level of SDGs should be filled with a limited number of integrated goals that are clearly expressed but not necessarily simple in nature. Goals should embody all three aspects of sustainable development – environmental, social and economic;

(c) Mix of targets – each of the integrated goals should be underpinned by a mix of targets – some integrated, and some ‘non-integrated’ in the sense that they concentrate on environmental, social or economic objectives.

45. The presentation concluded by underscoring that the environment should be considered a pillar in any approach to socioeconomic development.

46. Ms. Monia Braham Yousfi, Director of Economic-Environmental Studies, Analysis and Planning, Ministry of Equipment and Environment, Tunisia, mentioned that there was an immense volume of reports and studies relating to SDGs, however some key concepts still required definition. For example, human development was more commonly used in the Arab region than human well-being. The integrated approach to SDGs should also consider who shoulders the responsibility for implementing the goals. This is a complex issue which requires that a variety of actors, including the private sector, work together to secure human rights.

47. During the subsequent open plenary discussion, meeting participants discussed a range of issues relating to the need for SDGs to be integrated, addressing the three dimensions of sustainable development as well as key enablers such as governance and means of implementation. One participant highlighted that the issue of integration was the cornerstone of the SDG framework and that the approach outlined in the ESCWA discussion paper was theoretically sound and should be applied to formulate each goal. It has already been applied in Tunisia to develop a goal for sustainable food security. In this regard, lack of good governance has been a key gap that should be addressed.

48. Other participants highlighted the complexity of this conceptual issue for SDGs and the need to simplify the concepts so that they seem acceptable to all parties, particularly civil society which should be given a central role in the process. ESCWA should work to popularize these scientific concepts, including through education curricula. One participant raised questions regarding the approach to global public goods and that management should be guided by the principle of common-but-differentiated responsibilities to ensure that the region does not shoulder responsibility for global issues.

49. Participants agreed that SDGs should reflect all interlinkages. In the case of food security, targets can be used to integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions into each goal. Such an approach would be preferable to balancing the issues across goals.

50. The idea of considering governance as a fourth dimension of the SDG framework was questioned, as governance is best conceptualized as a cross-cutting issue or enabler. One participant believed that governance should both be a goal in itself and also be mainstreamed across all other goals. This approach would include national, regional and local governance relating to the various dimensions of sustainable development. Broad principles on governance should be decided and refined by Governments. SDGs should also be a package of all human rights. Also, questions still remained about whether the international community is committed to a human rights-based approach or only selective aspects of it. The political opposition to sustainable consumption and production was an issue of concern and was an important priority for the Group of 77 (G77).

51. Participants suggested that the region could focus on the goals put forward by the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons. In this regard, it was noted that these goals lacked consideration for social protection. They would be debated at the global level as one of several proposals put forward, so there needed to be a technical and political analysis of these goals based on a sound conceptual framework and Arab regional priorities.

52. Participants also proposed that the output of the meeting could be one or two separate papers addressing the agreed priorities and approach, as well as the goals and targets. These could be considered at a follow-up meeting which would need to take a formal intergovernmental character. It was highlighted that the discussions on integration were very academic and complex, and that further thought was needed on how to communicate technical information.

53. Mr. Cameron Allen closed the discussions by noting that a key challenge for SDGs will be designing integrated goals that effectively address the complexities of sustainable development and yet remain simple and easy to communicate. Sustainable development, by its very nature, is complex and no country has yet achieved it. However, opting for a simple approach that ignores this complexity by prematurely adopting goals and targets put forward by stakeholders such as the High Level Panel must be avoided. A sound conceptual basis for a transformative approach to the goals that works for the Arab region should be developed; otherwise opportunities for integration and for addressing the key weaknesses associated with MDGs and past approaches will be missed. A following logical step once a sound conceptual approach would be defined should be to apply this approach to a few priority issues, or to apply the framework to existing sets of goals, such as those determined by the High Level Panel, to assess their adequacy and identify gaps and areas to be strengthened. Finally, countries were invited to submit their proposals for SDGs to ESCWA to help inform a regional approach.

D. SESSION 3: A NEW GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP AND AN SDG FRAMEWORK THAT WORKS FOR THE ARAB REGION

54. The final session of the meeting provided a platform for discussing a new global partnership for sustainable development and addressing means of implementation, accountability and follow-up. It was moderated by Ms. Roula Majdalani and concluded with a discussion on the way forward.

1. A new global partnership for SDGs: addressing means of implementation, accountability and follow-up

55. The session commenced with a presentation by Ms. Reem Nejdawi, drawing from the ESCWA discussion paper on the key elements of a new global partnership for SDGs. The presentation highlighted that a transformative framework for SDGs should address key strengths and weaknesses of MDGs with regard to the global partnership. SDGs should indeed build upon the successes of MDGs in rallying the world around a moral purpose and catalysing investments in several areas, as well as in setting out clear and time-bound outcome indicators. With regard to weaknesses, MDGs fell short of being the vehicle for implementing, evaluating and reporting due to the following failures: lack of integration of MDG-8 with other MDGs; failure of developed countries in meeting their commitments; lack of an adequate accountability mechanism; perpetuation of the ‘donor-recipient’ type relationship; and lack of attention to development financing and cooperation beyond aid and other means of implementation.

56. To address these weaknesses, SDGs should be backed by adequate means of implementation, including finance, technology and capacity-building, from both public and private sources as well as dynamic, multi-stakeholder partnerships. SDGs will also require an effective accountability framework with global, regional and national accountability mechanisms for monitoring and follow-up. In addition to these means of implementation and accountability mechanisms, SDGs should also address other ‘enablers’, namely governance, institutions and policies. Given the importance of the means of implementation for the Arab region, SDGs could have standalone goals on finance, technology and capacity-building, as well as governance. In addition, enabler targets could be built into each goal, identifying the needed means of implementation such as financing targets, establishing multi-stakeholder partnerships around each thematic issue, and identifying critical governance, institutional and policy settings.

57. With regard to accountability mechanisms, the presentation outlined that the new HLPF will provide a key anchor institution at the global level for monitoring progress on SDGs and the fulfillment of commitments. At the regional level, an Arab high-level platform should be established within the HLPF framework; it could be led by the United Nations and closely linked to the League of Arab States. At the national level, a dedicated anchor institution should be identified and tasked with following up on SDGs, inter-agency coordination and implementation.

58. Ms. Roula Majdalani opened the discussions by highlighting that MDGs focused on developing countries, while SDGs are a global responsibility and should go beyond previous commitments.

59. Mr. Mohamed Khalil underscored that the means of implementation were an old issue that affected every aspect of sustainable development, with partner countries failing to meet their previous commitments. The G77 has indicated that having a single SDG on means of implementation, as was the case for MDGs, in the framework of which implementation relied on aid from donors, would not be enough. Building on that experience, SDGs should empower developing countries by establishing an international enabling environment for development. Issues including intellectual ownership, debt servicing, fund evasion and environmentally-friendly technology transfers should also be tackled by the new framework. After Rio + 20, the United Nations has been enhancing discussions on a technology facilitation mechanism; however developed countries have refused the recommendations made by the Secretary-General in this regard. The establishment of a practical mechanism is critical for SDGs. Accountability for SDGs at the global level will be achieved through HLPF, commencing in 2016. All commitments on means of implementation should then be reviewed.

60. Ms. Barbara Adams, Senior Policy Advisor, Global Policy Forum, noted that the key reference point for a new global partnership for SDGs is MDG-8. There are many different approaches to global partnerships, for example financing for development, and the right to development and aid effectiveness approaches. Some new elements outlined in the context of SDGs include multi-stakeholder partnerships, strengthened south-south cooperation and a growing role of the private sector. The outcome of the recent General Assembly Special Event on MDGs mentions the mobilization of all resources, both public and private, but does not mention conditions. It also mentions that accountability should be promoted at all levels. The final paragraph relating to the business sector and sustainable practices features a new idea. In a recent interview, the Secretary-General also referred to partnerships and to the emerging outline of a new agenda, bold in ambition and simple in design, which adopts a rights-based approach and tackles equality, sustainable consumption and production, and climate change.

61. The speaker highlighted the need for partnerships to distribute both resources and responsibilities. It is difficult to develop goals that encompass the whole agenda. SDGs should thus avoid the trap of MDGs, which had become the whole agenda and had narrowed accountability and the scope for financing.

62. With regard to the report of the High Level Panel, the speaker highlighted that it was not the only set of goals put forward and it did not represent an agreed position nor have any formal status. The High Level Panel has proposed multi-stakeholder partnerships in each thematic area, with Sustainable Energy for All as a potential model. However, while such partnerships have promoted resource mobilization, they have a poor track record on systemic change. The emerging trend is that global partnerships will determine what will be implemented, and that such partnerships should be built into the goals. A number of conditions should thus be put in place: all partnerships should meet United Nations norms and standards; and they should include reporting, accountability and information disclosure. Another proposition is that the international community should only agree to goals if the relevant technology, financing and accountability requirements are clearly identified.

63. The international community agreed by consensus to replace the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) with HLPF. CSD adopted an environmental discourse while decision-makers favoured the economics discourse; they thus did not participate in CSD. This issue will be a key challenge for HLPF if it is to establish an effective accountability mechanism that embraces all dimensions of sustainable development. Ultimately, high-level political commitment and participation is needed for integration and achieving sustainable development. With regard to indicators, there needs to be a political agreement from Member States on measures that go beyond the gross domestic product (GDP).

64. During the subsequent open plenary discussion, meeting participants discussed a range of issues relating to the elements of a new global partnership for SDGs. Participants highlighted the importance of the

institutional framework and governance mechanisms for SDGs, including that the next two years would be critical for the success of HLPF. Other participants outlined the need for more clarity on the means of implementation which had not been addressed at Rio+20, as well as the need for more solidarity between Arab countries.

65. It was noted that the means of implementation of SDGs should be a goal in itself, focusing on a global partnership for an international enabling environment. In addition, each goal should have a nexus of means of implementation, including the needed partnerships, accountability mechanisms and monitoring mechanisms. With regard to the scope of issues to be addressed by goals, the currently very broad High-Level Panel goals could provide the basis for a comprehensive agenda. If the scope of issues addressed is broad enough, and a nexus of means of implementation is attached to each goal, then the established framework would be transformative.

66. One participant mentioned that the meeting was not asking the right questions, indicating that technology transfer was one of the least important enabling conditions, and noting that investment in research and development was more important. With regard to raising financial means, non-traditional ones, including philanthropic Arab financiers, should be envisaged. Another participant compared progress in Latin America with progress in the Arab region, highlighting that key ongoing issues to be tackled included occupation, and peace and security. The impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on Lebanon was mentioned, as it is not only affecting sustainable development but also stability in the whole region.

67. The need for regional integration was underscored as one of the main implementation mechanisms of SDGs. The Arab region should encourage investments in research and technology and on patents, and tackle key priorities, such as food security, as an integrated entity. The forum on sustainable development in the Arab region should be a key platform for implementation.

68. In response to issues raised, Ms. Barbara Adams highlighted that the goals should be framed at the global level, but that they should also be given regional and national dimensions. SDGs should be developed in a way that not only addresses regional priorities, but also challenges the developed world to meet its targets and commitments. There needs to be a differentiation between issues that should be defined at the global level, and those that should be defined at regional and national levels. The United Nations is the only multilateral body with a value-based framework, but there is a reluctance to use this framework to hold countries accountable, including holding rich countries accountable for their commitments to sustainable consumption and production. However, there will be different agendas for different regions – civil rights and ending foreign occupation are priorities for the Arab region. The United Nations system should also better utilize the expertise of civil society.

69. Mr. Mohamed Khalil emphasized the need for self-reliance in the Arab region, which requires a conducive international development environment with fairer rules for development. While MDGs were based on a global partnership, the proposal is for SDGs to be based on many partnerships. This is likely to give a greater role to the private sector and raises questions regarding whether investments will be made for sustainable development or for profit. Technology transfer is paramount and a key means of implementation. It provides many solutions to sustainable development and has had a significant impact in addressing health and disease concerns. MDGs focused on health and the positive impacts of technology are demonstrable. This should not only rely on transfer, as research and development are also important. Rio + 20 addresses these various components, including transfer, as well as research and development.

2. Closing remarks

70. In her closing remarks, Ms. Reem Nejdawi assured that consultations would continue in the region to establish an Arab perspective on SDGs. Ms. Roula Majdalani acknowledged the fruitful discussions and serious issues raised during the debates which demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the conceptual issues related to SDGs. In follow-up to the meeting, ESCWA will review the various proposals and

suggestions put forward and work with the League of Arab States and UNEP to put forward a general Arab perspective on SDGs. An intergovernmental meeting will then be convened to finalize the proposal as an additional tool for Arab Governments in the OWG negotiations. Limited time is available for this process, as it should be finalized by February 2014.

71. Ms. Shahira Wahbi highlighted that the meeting has helped to lay down the steps towards formulating an Arab perspective on SDGs. Ultimately, positions would be agreed by States at intergovernmental meetings but experts will contribute to these. Ms. Melanie Hutchinson highlighted that a take-home message from the meeting is the need to continue engaging a wide range of stakeholders and enhancing communication. Ms. Monia Braham Yousfi hoped that the message of the Arab region will reach the international negotiations on SDGs.

II. CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

72. Participants found that the regional principles and priorities put forward by ESCWA in its discussion paper were relevant and representative of the challenges and aspirations of the Arab region. The meeting revealed the need for ESCWA and its partners to step-up the regional intergovernmental preparatory process to match developments on the global front. In particular, ESCWA and partners were urged to develop, based on the outcome of the post-2015 and SDGs consultative processes launched in 2013, a regional SDG proposal reflecting the Arab priorities and perspective. The proposal would be conveyed to the OWG on SDGs as the region's input to the international process.

73. In addition, a common Arab point of view on SDGs should be further developed during the intergovernmental meeting to be convened in April 2014, in preparation for the next session of the HLPF on Sustainable Development.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE

74. The meeting was held at the Ramada Plaza Hotel in Gammarth, Tunisia, on 18-19 November 2013.

B. AGENDA

75. The meeting was organized in three main sessions in addition to the opening and closing sessions:

- Opening session: Welcome and opening remarks.
- Session 1: An introduction to MDGs, SDGs and the Arab regional priorities for post-2015.
 - Background and context for a transformative SDG framework;
 - Arab progress on MDGs and regional priorities and guiding principles for SDGs.
- Session 2: SDG priority conceptual issues – Universal goals, national diversity and integration.
 - SDGs that are universal yet account for Arab regional and national diversity;
 - Addressing the science-policy interface: an SDG framework that effectively integrates the three dimensions of sustainable development.
- Session 3: A new global partnership and an SDG framework that works for the Arab region.
 - A new global partnership for sustainable development: addressing means of implementation, and accountability and follow-up;
 - Closing remarks and the way forward.

C. PARTICIPANTS

76. The meeting was attended by experts from Arab countries, the United Nations, international and major groups and organizations, with a total of 81 participants including the organizers. The full list of participants is included in the Annex to this report.

D. EVALUATION

77. An evaluation questionnaire was distributed in order to assess the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the meeting. A total of 23 participants responded to the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents (95 per cent) rated the overall quality of the meeting, including the quality of its presentations, as good to excellent. A total of 91 per cent of respondents rated the clarity of the meeting objectives as good to excellent, and 90 per cent of respondents thought that it was good to excellent at meeting its objectives, while 90 per cent of respondents thought that the meeting provided a good to excellent opportunity for networking and experience sharing among experts. When asked about the need for follow-up on the results of the meeting, 95 per cent of the respondents were positive.

78. With regard to written comments, the majority found the meeting very informative. Some participants suggested the need for extending the duration of such meetings to receive more detailed inputs and further discuss key topics. Another comment highlighted the challenge of unifying the views with regard to SDGs among government officials and non-governmental organizations.

79. With regard to follow-up, key proposals included the need to:

(a) Update and summarize the ESCWA position paper on SDGs in light of the significant proposals emanating from the meeting discussions;

(b) Organize small focused working groups to discuss specific important topics in depth, such as trade, foreign direct investment and financing support, and continue consultations on SDGs for the Arab region;

(c) Invite the statistics bodies to discuss the development of SDGs and specific indicators;

(d) Assess where the Arab region is lacking the means of implementation and why;

(e) Organize a final Arab consultative meeting inviting the same participants to discuss and approve the final ESCWA position paper on SDGs;

(f) Convene a dedicated intergovernmental meeting to put forward a general Arab perspective on SDGs which establishes a common Arab point of view, and finalize the proposal as an additional tool for Arab Governments in the negotiations of the OWG on SDGs prior to the end of February 2014.

E. DOCUMENTS AND PRESENTATIONS

80. ESCWA prepared a discussion paper which provided the background for the meeting discussions. The documentation and presentations are available from <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=3248E>.

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