

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Committee on Social Development
Twelfth session
Beirut, 8-9 October 2019



Item 10 of the provisional agenda

**The nexus approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda
for Sustainable Development in the Arab region****Summary**

The present document addresses the challenges and opportunities of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Arab countries, and adapting it to their development strategies, policies and programmes. The first part of the document examines the indivisible nature of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the importance of considering the synergies and complementarities in adapting the SDGs to national policymaking processes. The second part discusses a nexus approach to integrating the SDGs into development planning based on three thematic clusters: water-energy-food security; poverty reduction-decent employment-sustainable growth; and equality-inclusion-justice, with a focus on the latter. The third part proposes a set of policy actions that Arab countries can adopt to ensure that the equality-inclusion-justice nexus is adequately mainstreamed in national development processes.

The Committee on Social Development is invited to review the content of the present document and make comments, suggestions and recommendations thereon.

CONTENTS

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1-5	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
I. TRANSITION FROM THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS TO THE SDGS	6-11	3
A. Building on lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals.....	6-7	3
B. Cross-sectoral institutionalization of the SDGs: birth of the nexus approach	8-11	4
II. IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA USING THE NEXUS APPROACH	12-19	5
A. Nexus approach: indivisible agenda and policy coherence	12-14	5
B. Elaborating the nexus approach: an ongoing construction	15-19	5
III. THE NEXUS APPROACH AND ITS THREE CLUSTERS	20-37	7
A. Water-energy-food security nexus.....	23-25	8
B. Poverty reduction-decent employment-sustainable growth nexus	26-31	8
C. Equality-inclusion-justice nexus.....	32-37	10
IV. WHY THE EIJ NEXUS IN THE ARAB REGION?	38-45	11
V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION UNDER THE EIJ NEXUS: STRATEGIC AND MULTISECTORAL AREAS OF INTERVENTION	46-50	13
A. Education-people-employment axis	47-48	13
B. Economic growth-employment/decent work-social protection and social justice systems	49	14
C. Institutional reform-partnership-participation axis.....	50	15

Introduction

1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a universal, collective and comprehensive vision for transforming our world and an unprecedented declaration on the need to change the business-as-usual model of development. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are guided by a global action plan intended to shape international and national development agendas until 2030. The SDGs stemmed from an overall consensus that the poorest and most vulnerable people have been left behind, therefore the Goals encompass a wider and more complex framework to eradicate poverty in all its forms and manifestations.
2. The 2030 Agenda adopts a people-centred approach and calls for collaborative partnerships among all countries and stakeholders. Governments are expected to take ownership of the SDGs and adapt them to their national contexts by incorporating them into their policies, strategies and plans. Member States of the United Nations are expected to devise and employ the necessary means and mechanisms for mainstreaming the SDGs at the national level by developing adequate programmes and plans, and assessing their related progress.
3. Given the comprehensive and complex nature of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, fine tuning regional and national strategies is challenging for policymakers across the Arab region, especially when it comes to improving coordination between institutions and stakeholders. The indivisible nature of the SDGs warrants a holistic approach to their implementation, so as to ensure coherence and effectiveness.
4. The objective of the nexus approach is to facilitate the different phases of national strategy and programme development: preparatory, planning, policy elaboration and implementation. The suggested framework should be flexible and adaptable, and take into consideration specific constraints, limitations and changes before and during implementation.
5. The present document discusses three nexuses for integrating the SDGs in development planning: water-energy-food security (WEF); poverty reduction-decent employment-sustainable growth (PEG); and equality-inclusion-justice (EIJ), with a special focus on the EIJ nexus. More specifically, it attempts to develop a better understanding of the interlinkages between the 17 SDGs, and examine their synergies and complementarities. The present document also underscores the link between the 2030 Agenda and national development plans, and considers opportunities for contextualizing and applying the 2030 Agenda at the national level. It concludes with a set of recommendations for adopting the nexus approach to the SDGs in policy formulation and implementation at the national and institutional levels, while promoting participatory and inclusive approaches that actively involve diverse actors and stakeholders.

I. TRANSITION FROM THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS TO THE SDGS

A. BUILDING ON LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

6. Although extreme poverty in developing regions has been reduced by a third (from 47 per cent in 1990 to 14 per cent in 2015),¹ poverty persists, especially in Africa. Pronounced worldwide net improvements were realized in several indicators, such as out-of-school children of primary school age, literacy among young people aged 15-24, gender equality, women's participation in economic sectors, civic engagement and political life, child and maternal mortality, HIV and prevention of other infectious diseases, vaccination and treatment provision, improved drinking water supply and sanitation, environmental sustainability, and global partnerships. However, persisting disparities across and within countries and regions, as well as rural/urban inequalities worldwide, decrease the likelihood of further advancing poverty eradication. Today, inequality is a global problem: the Middle East is the world's most unequal region where the top 10 per cent capture 61 per cent of national income,² compared with 37 per cent in Europe, 41 per cent in China, 46 per cent in the

¹ [https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf).

² <https://wid.world/document/alvaredoassouadpiketty-appendix-widworldwp201716/>.

Russian Federation, 47 per cent in Canada and the United States of America, and 55 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, Brazil and India.³

7. Lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) process indicate that progress requires enhanced collective efforts by all stakeholders and a solid will and commitment by Governments to ensure that no one is left behind, particularly in view of persistent and recurring threats such as economic shocks, food insecurity, wars and climate change. It has become necessary to shift from an ‘anti-poverty’ approach to a ‘sustainable development’ approach, by following a more holistic and integrated planning and implementation method.

**B. CROSS-SECTORAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE SDGs:
BIRTH OF THE NEXUS APPROACH**

8. The shift from the MDGs to the SDGs enriched the debate on the interdependence between multiple sectors and policies covered by the Goals. While people remain the focus of the 17 SDGs, other pressing issues such as the environment, prosperity, peace and global partnership have been highlighted (figure 1).

9. MDG implementation and monitoring required the adoption of a sectoral approach by decision-makers, government institutions and civil society. The 2030 Agenda tackles complex global challenges through a multi- and cross-sectoral development approach, because employing a sectoral approach may prove inadequate in addressing the interconnectedness of the SDGs: policy goals in one sector may hinder the achievement of another sector’s strategic goals.⁴ It was therefore necessary to adopt an implementation framework that factors in the interdependence among SDGs, thus resulting in the nexus approach which requires policies, strategies, plans and reforms aimed at integrating the SDGs by establishing institutions that ensure good governance.

Figure 1. Five key elements underpinning SDG logic



Source: One World Centre, Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, 2017.

10. The Latin term ‘nexus’ denotes the act of binding together or making links between different areas or aspects of a whole. The term was introduced in the 1980s by the Food-Energy Nexus Programme of the United

³ <https://books.google.com.lb/books?hl=en&lr=&id=uNqSDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Alvaredo+et.al.,+World+Inequality+Report+2018>.

⁴ <http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/10388/>.

Nations University,⁵ and gained importance at the Bonn 2011 Conference on the theme "The water, energy and food security nexus – solutions for the green economy". The nexus approach focuses on integrating management and governance across sectors and scales, reducing trade-offs and building synergies, and promoting overall sustainability and a transition to a green economy.⁶

11. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the debate now focuses on which methods of implementation within the nexus approach facilitate the cross-sectoral institutionalization of the SDGs. Despite the absence of a methodology for applying the nexus approach, there is agreement that well-defined statistical indicators and sustainable data collection methods that produce solid and reliable data are essential prerequisites for ensuring a rigorous, methodologically coherent and statistically robust nexus approach.

II. IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA USING THE NEXUS APPROACH

A. NEXUS APPROACH: INDIVISIBLE AGENDA AND POLICY COHERENCE

12. The nexus approach aims to facilitate effective synergies in national planning and implementation processes by highlighting coherence between the SDGs. Coherence can be defined as "an attribute of policy that systematically reduces conflicts and promotes synergies between and within different policy areas to achieve the outcomes associated with jointly agreed policy objectives".⁷ Creating and preserving policy coherence is challenging given that the 17 SDGs and their 169 targets are standalone objectives, and that there is room for interpretation and contextualization at the national level. Therefore, part of the challenge is empirical: efforts should be made to produce reliable data that measure the relationships, causalities, correlations, and horizontal and vertical interactions between the SDGs. Policy coherence levels can be summarized based on the following coherence levels:

- (a) Sectoral coherence;
- (b) Transnational coherence;
- (c) Governance coherence;
- (d) Multi-level coherence;
- (e) Implementation coherence.

13. Systemic thinking is arguably one of the best pathways to the nexus approach, bearing in mind that the former focuses on the context and its institutions, actors and social structures, while the latter focuses on interconnectedness between Goals and targets to build synergies and priorities.

14. Nevertheless, despite the importance of establishing coherence based on reliable and up-to-date empirical data, the nexus approach should not be transformed into a purely technical quantitative approach that allows decision-makers to make trade-off between targets. It must be based on a coherent and consistent methodology that takes into account systemic challenges, future uncertainties, and national and regional constraints. All these aspects should be clear to enable appropriate spaces for policy dialogue and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

B. ELABORATING THE NEXUS APPROACH: AN ONGOING CONSTRUCTION

15. The nexus approach entails clustering SDGs based on their interaction and complementarity, and developing a common axis upon which countries should build policies and strategies. Literature on the nexus approach shows that the debate revolves around the ways different targets interact with each other. This is based on empirical exercises that differ from one context to another, and through which systemic and

⁵ <http://archive.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/80757e/80757E00.htm>.

⁶ https://www.water-energy-food.org/uploads/media/understanding_the_nexus.pdf.

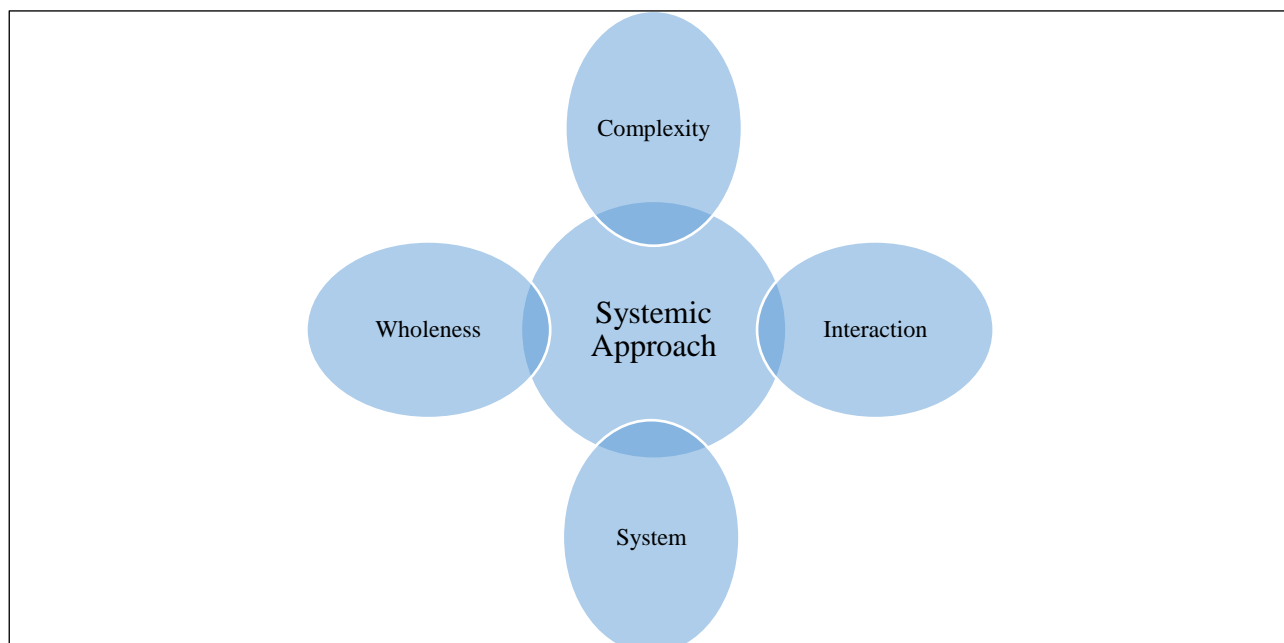
⁷ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/eet.1589>.

contextual interactions of SDG targets are assessed.⁸ Understanding the different interactions between Goals and targets requires a dualistic lens. On the one hand, it is necessary to adopt a detailed approach to distinguish the linkages; and on the other, a holistic approach is needed when looking at the SDGs as an indivisible and extensive agenda. Significant effort must be made to address the scientific gaps in this field.

16. Empirical research using quantitative methods, which explains and analyses interactions among SDGs and their policy implications, remains limited. This limitation could impede the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in two ways: working on specific policy areas by focusing on the SDGs and their targets as entry points, rather than dealing with the SDGs as one indivisible agenda; and being unable to contextualize the SDGs and their interactions within specific institutional arrangements, governance models, technology paradigms and social structures.

17. Although quantitative models could constitute a strong framework for elaborating the nexus and showcasing synergies between SDGs, there is a need for a wider qualitative approach in the Arab region that includes all the constraints of the region's realities. Consequently, the systemic approach is provided as an alternative that goes beyond the analytical approach by analysing systems in their totalities and complexities, and by understanding their dynamics, impacts and mutations over time. This approach is highly contextual, and can provide an advanced understanding that facilitates the policy and strategy design from a nexus perspective. The analytical and systemic approaches complement each other. If the analytical approach deconstructs the system to its elementary components so as to form a better understanding of the interaction between them, the systemic approach addresses complex systems with diverse elements that are highly interconnected.

Figure 2. Four pillars of the systemic approach



Source: Prepared by ESCWA.

18. Based on the four pillars of complexity, wholeness, interaction and system (figure 2), the systemic approach's main objective is to understand complexity, which is also defined as ambiguity, lack of clarity or vagueness. In doing so, systemic rather than analytical thinking is applied, by developing a vision and focusing on the bigger picture and the dynamic interaction between elements. Wholeness expresses coherence and interdependence of elements, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In practice, an SDG cannot be examined in isolation from other Goals or targets, so the SDGs must be looked at as a whole, which is the

⁸ <https://www.sei.org/publications/systemic-contextual-priority-setting-2030-agenda/>.

nexus approach. Interaction goes beyond cause and effect; it represents the interplay between elements of the system to further explain the complexity. Interaction between various targets in a progressive and holistic manner, rather than a sequential one, is key to implementing the Goal they serve. Systemic thinking is also influenced by the flow of information, feedback and progress re-examination. In short, the system connects in an orderly manner, what are otherwise disorderly factors and sectors, such as the ones affecting the implementation of the nexus.

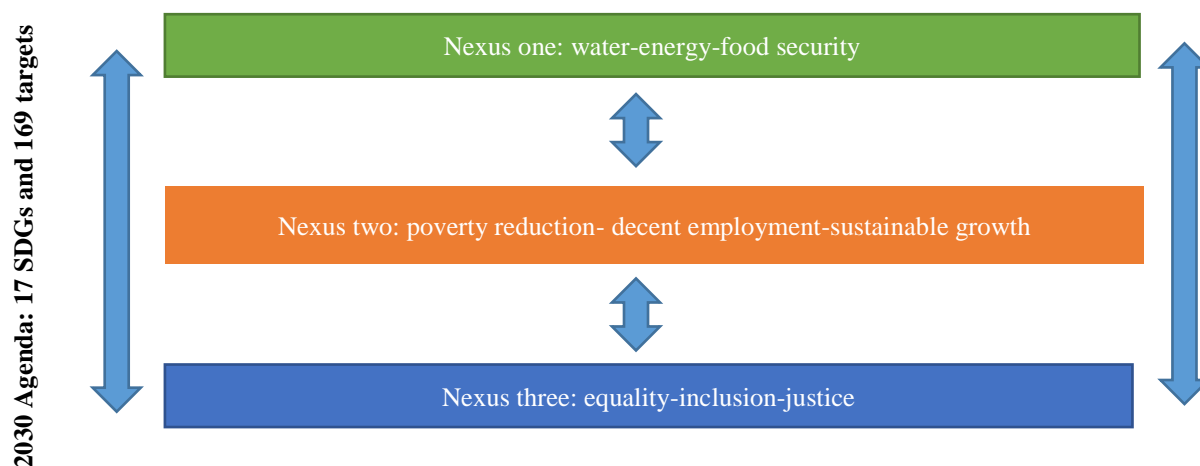
19. When applied to a nexus, the systemic approach requires the development of a vision and the recognition of actors and players that influence it, in addition to their will and skills that impact progress. This goes beyond mere operational roles or projects to reach an understanding of interactions and dynamics between those players – be they individuals, Governments or organizations – and the impact they have on the root causes and not just the symptoms. The systemic approach focuses on sustainability and improvements beyond the life of current goals. It demands tireless efforts to understand the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a problem until a solution is found.

III. THE NEXUS APPROACH AND ITS THREE CLUSTERS

20. The Preamble of the 2030 Agenda attests to the indivisible nature of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. In other words, eradicating poverty in all its forms, combatting inequality, protecting the planet, creating inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and promoting social inclusion are deeply interconnected and require integrated solutions.

21. To address these challenges effectively and facilitate the integration of the 2030 Agenda’s core principles into national development planning processes, ESCWA calls for the adoption of a nexus approach to the three main cross-sectoral clusters that form the 2030 Agenda’s basis for action: water-energy-food security; poverty reduction-decent employment-sustainable growth; and equality-inclusion-justice. As mentioned above, the nexus approach not only reflects cross-cutting elements and synergies between the three clusters, but also between the different sectors and principles within each cluster (figure 3).

Figure 3. Three nexuses



22. While the three nexuses are intended to apply to the 2030 agenda as one indivisible agenda, each country can choose a different angle by adding or reducing the number of nexuses, or defining their own entry points and the connections between them depending on national context, capacity, priorities and development level.

A. WATER-ENERGY-FOOD SECURITY NEXUS

23. Water, energy and food security are key to human survival and overall sustainable development. Most of the world's freshwater resources are used in agriculture, and more than one-quarter of energy used globally is spent on food production,⁹ meaning that shortages or action in one sector can impact the others. Increasing demand for water, energy and food is driven by demographic change and unsustainable production and consumption patterns, and is influenced by rapid urbanization, economic growth and climate change.

24. Integrated approaches can improve water, energy and food security, and advance progress on all other SDGs. Arab countries depend on one another for energy resources, and over two-thirds of water resources are shared. Moreover, all Arab countries are food importers, with the region importing over half of the food it consumes.¹⁰ This creates an opportunity for regional cooperation and for devising integrated and mutually beneficial solutions that address the socioeconomic challenges and resource disparities in the region. Similarly, intraregional cooperation at the level of the WEF nexus can have a positive impact on the PEG and EIJ nexuses by stimulating growth, eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities and advancing peace, making the WEF nexus a cornerstone in any transnational process for achieving the SDGs.

25. The mutually reinforcing nature of the WEF nexus approach is better explained through the examination of the related SDGs. For example, the achievement of SDG 2 on ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture is closely linked to SDG 6 on ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all and SDG 7 on ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, in addition to SDG 12 on ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns through Goal 13 on taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. In turn, improvements in nutrition play an important role in building human capital, as represented by SDG 3 on ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all at all ages and SDG 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all; both of which are prerequisites for achieving SDG 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Explicit linkages also exist between the water-dedicated SDG 6 and other Goals, such as those related to ending poverty (SDG 1), ensuring healthy lives (SDG 3), ensuring quality education (SDG 4), ensuring sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), ensuring sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), and protecting ecosystems (SDGs 14 and 15).¹¹ Similarly, achieving the energy-dedicated SDG 7 is a prerequisite to achieving the food and water-dedicated SDGs 2 and 6 in addition to many other Goals, such as those related to ending poverty (SDG 1), achieving gender equality (SDG 5), promoting decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and developing industry, innovation and resilient infrastructure (SDG 9).¹² ESCWA has presented an analytical framework of the water-energy-food security nexus that considers the linkages that affect the achievement of water, energy and food security through the lens of sustainable development and the achievement of the SDGs, with a view to mitigating climate change and ensuring access to food, water and sustainable energy for all in the context of a human-rights based approach.¹³ Furthermore, forging regional and international partnerships in resource mobilization, knowledge and technology transfers, and capacity-building are fundamental to effectively implementing these Goals, as stipulated in SDG 17 on strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development.

B. POVERTY REDUCTION-DECENT EMPLOYMENT-SUSTAINABLE GROWTH NEXUS

26. Sustainable development requires transformative change at the economic, social, political, institutional, environmental and cultural levels. More specifically, economic reforms should aim at creating jobs and decent

⁹ <http://www.unwater.org/water-facts/water-food-and-energy/>.

¹⁰ E/ESCWA/C.4/2019/5-E/ESCWA/C.3/2019/12.

¹¹ E/ESCWA/C.4/2019/4, p. 6.

¹² E/ESCWA/C.3/2019/11.

¹³ E/ESCWA/SDPD/2015/2.

employment for all, as one element in a larger development policy framework for achieving poverty reduction, reducing inequalities, and stimulating growth and investment. Sustainable growth can enable job creation and consequently have direct positive effects on income generation. At the same time, reconsidering social protection policy and the links between labour policy and employment generation programmes is crucial to promoting equitable resource distribution, building resilience in times of crisis, and providing opportunities for the lowest income groups to move out of chronic poverty. In addition, there is a need to implement effective tax reforms to strengthen this redistributive process. Against this backdrop, and to achieve the goals associated with the PEG nexus, it is important to rethink the economic model, as well as the social, political and economic institutions that govern the markets, and the role of the State and economic sectors.¹⁴

27. Broadly speaking, the economy model underlying the thinking of some of Arab Governments has been marked by a desire to increase trade liberalization, privatization and attempts to promote business-friendly policies. These reforms have undermined fundamental aspects of social contracts that, in time, weakened the role of the State in fighting poverty and ensuring access to social services. The roll-back of the State has meant, for many experts and civil society activists, the risk of failing to deliver on the SDGs and of fulfilling human rights. These practices have led to the emergence of alternate views that States should facilitate connections with different non-State actors such as the private sector and civil society organizations under public-private partnerships, rather than reinforcing its role as the sole service provider.

28. The emphasis on strengthening partnerships for development has also materialized in a number of global events, particularly in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa, 13-16 July 2015) where Governments committed to reinvigorating multi-stakeholder partnerships to mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources. Governments also pledged to support the achievement of the SDGs, especially in developing countries and countries in conflict or post-conflict situations. The importance of partnerships is also underscored in SDG 17 that calls for revitalizing global partnership for sustainable development, so as to mobilize, redirect and unlock the transformative power of trillions of dollars of private resources to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

29. As a result, several Governments and business firms are becoming strong advocates of public-private partnerships as a means of stimulating global, regional and national economic growth and investment, particularly in infrastructure projects and public works. However, in some cases, public-private partnerships raise fiscal challenges because of a lack of transparency in budgeting and resource obligations. Despite some improvements on this front, considerable concerns remain about required transformations regarding institutional arrangements and the terms that govern contracts between the Government and the private sector. The fiscal and monetary policy, taxation systems and the role of the State in economic life are also key to leveraging sustainable development. From a social policy perspective, having a budget-balanced situation in a country, based on economic efficiency and markets equilibrium, does not necessarily trickle down to the most vulnerable. This approach requires a blend of economic policies that tax wealth and capital gains, instil progressive taxation to build a healthy fiscal space, and increase government spending on targeted development priorities. In this context, on the eve of the popular uprisings that began in late 2010, ESCWA argued that economic efficiency and laissez-faire practices had aggravated inequality of opportunities and outcomes.¹⁵

30. Furthermore, in a world where new technology is regularly introduced, some experts have raised the concept of the ‘end of work era’¹⁶ and argued that paradigm shifts in technology may have a significant job-substitution impact on some economic sectors. At the same time, many Arab economies struggle to implement effective reskilling programmes, and to create enough jobs in the information and communication technology sector. In such cases, economic growth will be insufficient to respond to the development challenges in countries facing rapid demographic growth, which is likely to lead to increases in informality. This situation

¹⁴ <https://www.albin-michel.fr/ouvrages/fondements-dune-analyse-institutionnelle-comparee-9782226171078>.

¹⁵ E/ESCWA/SDD/2013/3.

¹⁶ Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work*, 1995.

is aggravated by the fragmentation of labour markets, low returns on education, the mismatch between supply and demand for skills, and the formal sector's limited capacity to create jobs.

31. Addressing these structural deficits requires rethinking the growth model to balance between the role of the State and moving towards a free market economy, and between the economic performance of a country as a whole and the wellbeing of those left behind. Like the WEF nexus, the PEG approach aims to redress the current growth model through four highly interdependent Goals: SDG 1 on ending poverty in all its forms everywhere; SDG 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; SDG 9 on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization and fostering innovation; and SDG 10 on reducing inequality within and among countries. While SDG 8 constitutes the foundation of this nexus, the four interlinked Goals must also meet the conditions for SDG 12 on ensuring sustainable production and consumption patterns. Within the PEG nexus, there is significant complementarity between SDG 9 and SDG 11 on making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Cities are centres of knowledge, commerce, productivity and innovation. With 58 per cent of the region's population living in urban areas in 2015¹⁷ – which is estimated to rise to 62 per cent by 2030 – it is vital for economic reforms and urban planning practices to be well planned and managed to deal with challenges raised by urbanization, including job creation and public service provision.

C. EQUALITY-INCLUSION-JUSTICE NEXUS

32. The United Nations defines social inclusion as “the process of improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged on the basis of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights”.¹⁸ The aim of social inclusion is to create a more stable, safe and just society for all, in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play. In this framework, promoting social inclusion is primarily concerned with policies and mechanisms that accommodate diversity, ensure equal opportunities for all to achieve their full potential, and enable people's active participation in all walks of life. Social protection, specifically, is an effective policy tool that can alleviate poverty and inequality, and promote social inclusion particularly that of children, young people, older persons, persons with disabilities, labourers, international migrants and other marginalized groups. The availability, accessibility and adequacy of social protection systems are prerequisites to leaving no one behind.

33. Social justice is essentially concerned with rights, equity, equality and participation. Justice in broad terms is all of the above in addition to the rule of law, which affirms that “all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to just, fair and equitable laws and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law”.¹⁹ The link between justice, inclusion and equality is thus inextricable, since the absence of one undermines the existence of the others. Inequality, marginalization and inability to exercise social, economic, political and cultural rights leads to social exclusion and perpetuates injustice. Similarly, the absence of rule of law and a lack of access to justice undermine people's ability to exercise their civil and political rights and hold Governments accountable.²⁰ Promoting justice requires appropriate institutional and legislative frameworks and monitoring mechanisms that protect people's rights and penalize violations and discriminations.

34. The principle of equality is rooted in social inclusion and social justice. In other words, achieving inclusion and social justice requires that all members of society have equitable access to resources, services and opportunities, and enjoy equitable treatment and freedoms. It also requires a transformation in current attitudes and practices that discriminate against certain individuals and groups to prevent the perpetuation of

¹⁷ <https://population.un.org/wup/>.

¹⁸ <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/2016/chapter1.pdf>.

¹⁹ A/67/L.1, para. 2; ch. 14.

²⁰ <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/thematic-areas/access-to-justice-and-rule-of-law-institutions/access-to-justice/>.

inequality within and across countries and in current and future generations, as set out in international legal instruments. The human rights framework also highlights equality of rights and emphasizes the need to “combat specific forms of discrimination, including discrimination against indigenous peoples, migrants, minorities, people with disabilities, women or racial and religious discrimination”.²¹

35. Considering all these principles, the EIJ nexus is key to achieving the SDGs. Specifically, the nexus is founded on the multiple interactions between Goals 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 16 and 17. The three dimensions do not only correlate with combating poverty (SDG 1) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10), they also contribute to the creation of an appropriate environment that enables both men and women (SDG 5) to achieve their full potential through access to good health services (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and adequate housing (SDG 11). This discussion also points to a parallel interaction: SDG 8 on decent work opportunities is the junction between the EIJ and the PEG nexuses, since it is not only a means for empowering people but also a channel for reducing income gaps and social polarization.

36. Furthermore, the EIJ nexus integrates SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions: while it endorses the assumption that peace is a precondition for development and achieving justice, it also recognizes that in order to promote and protect the rights of all people to services and opportunities, more efficient political, institutional and legislative frameworks should be put in place, including the creation of independent national human rights institutions and transparent accountability systems. It should be noted that inclusion is also related to SDG 17 on partnerships through the promotion of people’s participation in social, economic, cultural and political activities.

37. The EIJ nexus is characterized by another important interaction with SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns, since the long-term implications of current production and consumption patterns and energy use are inversely related to intergenerational equality and justice, and could ultimately violate the rights of future generations to access natural resources.

IV. WHY THE EIJ NEXUS IN THE ARAB REGION?

38. The principle of ‘leaving no one behind’ is a key challenge facing the Arab region for decades. Despite significant progress on several fronts, millions of people continue to suffer from multiple political, economic, social and cultural injustices and exclusions, such as gaps in health outcomes, unequal access to economic opportunities and environmental goods, widening disparities in income, wealth and education, and the absence of meaningful venues to voice grievances. These disparities have had a considerable impact on the political landscape, resulting in conflict and violence that have worsened living conditions and widened gaps between and within countries.

39. Wars, severe economic decline and the collapse of essential public services in several conflict-affected Arab countries have taken their toll on equality, inclusion and justice, leaving millions to fend for themselves amidst threats to their lives and dignity. Such countries are seeing a rapid regression of gains made in past decades, as a result of hostilities, large-scale displacement, destruction of schools, hospitals and infrastructure, and limited access to basic goods and services.

40. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that 11.7 million people in the Syrian Arab Republic require humanitarian assistance.²² Critically, the refugee crisis is not only straining host countries’ infrastructure but also the social fabric, with host communities reporting negative perceptions of refugees as they compete for resources and jobs. Similarly, the situation in Yemen is so dire that it has caused one of the world’s worst human-made humanitarian crisis: in 2018, an estimated 22.2 million people, equivalent to 75 per cent of the population, were in need of humanitarian or protection assistance.²³

41. Moreover, and as discussed in previous sections, the economic model followed by most Arab countries has beset the region with chronic unemployment and increasingly visible multidimensional poverty and

²¹ <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/thematic-areas/human-rights/equality-and-non-discrimination>.

²² <https://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/about-ocha-syria>.

²³ <http://www.unhcr.org/yemen-emergency.html>.

inequality. In the “Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report”, which covered 10 Arab countries, 116.1 million belong to poor households, of which 13.4 per cent live in acute poverty, particularly in rural areas.²⁴ The inequalities registered in multidimensional poverty assessments were aggravated by inequality of opportunity in health and education, and other socioeconomic factors such as poor nutrition, child mortality and early pregnancy, combined with female genital mutilation, weak access to electricity, inadequate access to sanitation, safe drinking water and clean cooking fuel, inadequate floors and roofs, and overcrowding.²⁵ Based on such indicators, the study revealed that the regional weighted poverty headcount is 40.6 per cent, while the Multidimensional Poverty Index stood at 20.6 per cent.²⁶

42. The rise in poverty and inequality within Arab countries is also accompanied by development disparities between countries. The less populated oil-rich countries enjoy very high levels of development, while most Arab countries exhibit middle to high levels of development, and a few are considered least developed countries according to international classifications. Across the region, the average per capita GDP in 2018 was \$6,625.5 per year, compared with \$30,834.6 in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and \$699.6 in the least developed countries.²⁷ Similar disparities are observed in health, education and other welfare indicators. Vertical and horizontal disparities are also significant within countries. They include social disproportions between the rich and the poor and are expressed in terms of poverty and deprivation. The share of the highest wealth quintile of the population to the bottom quintile in some Arab countries – not including GCC countries – ranges from 4.4 times in Egypt to 7.8 times in Mauritania. This is accompanied by other composite inequality indices between women and men; for example, the share of women in the labour force varies between 15 per cent and 30 per cent by country, with a record of unequal wages and rights, even in the presence of appropriate legal frameworks.²⁸

43. Regional disparities, most notably disparities between rural and urban areas, are still significant across multiple development indicators, such as poverty and the provision of social services and basic infrastructure. For example, the proportion of the population across the Arab region with access to improved sanitation and to an improved water source stood in 2015 at 79.2 and 84 per cent, respectively, with high disparities between urban and rural areas.²⁹

44. The challenges brought about by inequality and poverty in the region continue to lead to greater marginalization and exclusion of specific groups, including young people and women whose unemployment rates are two to three times higher than overall unemployment. Furthermore, the participation of women and young people in political activities is still low compared with men. For example, women in the Arab region held 19 per cent of parliamentary seats in 2017, compared with 24 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 23 per cent in least developed countries, and 32 per cent in Europe.³⁰ Persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, such as displaced persons, refugees and migrant workers, also bear the brunt of social exclusion and discrimination in many Arab countries in the absence of inclusive policies and adequate social protection systems.³¹

45. Against this backdrop, it can be stated with some confidence that by centring the EIJ nexus in every aspect of policymaking, Arab Governments, despite their different contexts and development outcomes, can implement innovative policy options that are inclusive and equitable so as to address the root causes of injustice and leave no one behind. This means rethinking policy arrangements to break down silos, and making sectoral

²⁴ [E/ESCWA/EDID/2017/2](#), p. 6.

²⁵ [E/ESCWA/EDID/2017/2](#), p. 9.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 13.

²⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?end=2018&locations=XL-1A&start=2000&view=map>.

²⁸ E/ESCWA/SDD/2017/Technical Paper.18.

²⁹ [E/ESCWA/SDPD/2015/3](#), pp. 77-78 (values refer to year 2014).

³⁰ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>.

³¹ [E/ESCWA/SDD/2018/TP.6](#).

policies more coherent to ensure simultaneous progress in all three development pillars and to manage trade-offs when they arise. This also entails implementing governance reforms that redistribute power and responsibilities, encourage multi-stakeholder partnerships and accountability, and empower people as set out in the 2030 Agenda. The Jordan 2025 vision is a good example of how to implement the 2030 Agenda and merge with the EIJ nexus. The vision refers to Jordanian support for the 2030 Agenda and provides answers to national challenges and regional issues, by adopting a comprehensive approach and demonstrating the importance of alignment between different activities and sectors. This exercise has allowed Jordan to design strategies and implement institutional arrangements that reflect intersectoral linkages.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION UNDER THE EIJ NEXUS: STRATEGIC AND MULTISECTORAL AREAS OF INTERVENTION

46. There are no blueprints for the application of the EIJ nexus in development strategies, plans and policies in Arab countries. Each country can adapt the nexus to its own context, circumstances and national priorities. Broadly speaking, the adoption of the nexus must take into consideration the intersection and complementarity of sectors. Despite improvements in integrating policy sectors in national strategies and programmes, more efforts are needed towards the consolidation and coherence of national strategies, policies and programmes under the umbrella of equality, inclusion and justice. The following multisector crosscutting areas of intervention (axes) under the EIJ nexus are proposed to reframe current trends in policymaking, programme design, implementation and monitoring in the Arab region:

- (a) Education-people-employment axis;
- (b) Economic growth-employment/decent work-social protection and social justice axis;
- (c) institutional reform-partnership-participation axis.

A. EDUCATION-PEOPLE-EMPLOYMENT AXIS

47. Obtaining a quality education plays a central role in achieving sustainable development. In addition to human capital formation, access to quality and inclusive education can equip individuals with the required tools to access decent employment opportunities, and help societies develop innovative solutions to development problems. In this context, education should be revisited and approached as a comprehensive, multidimensional, all-inclusive sector that embraces knowledge production, innovation, research and development, formal and informal education systems, culture and arts, democracy and tolerance, social dialogue and cohesion, and non-discriminatory environments. The reasons for the absence of quality education in the Arab region are numerous and are due, for the most part, to a lack of adequately trained teachers, reliance on rote learning, poor conditions in schools, and inequality based on wealth, gender, type of school (public or private) and geography. In countries where wars and conflict are rampant, the disintegration of State control over educational services and the politicization of educational curriculums has serious implications on children's educational outcomes and on future social cohesion.

48. Under the EIJ nexus, policy reforms in the area of education should facilitate the following:

- (a) Instituting the right to quality education for all individuals and social groups as key for sustainable development. This can be achieved by providing accessible, affordable, high quality, skills-oriented education at the primary, secondary, tertiary and vocational levels;
- (b) Increasing access to educational opportunities that better prepare individuals for transitioning to work, promote employability, reduce school drop outs and help equip students with technical, practical and social skills;
- (c) Investing in educational scholarships, upgrading teachers' skills, building schools and improving public infrastructure;

(d) Developing curriculums that include citizenship education and nurture the values of social cohesion and civil participation;

(e) Acknowledging the importance of learning and training that takes place outside formal educational institutions by creating opportunities for non-formal education such as literacy and basic education for adults, 'catch-up' programmes for school drop-outs, pre-school education, and various types of educational work relevant to the needs of specific groups, such as courses for trade unions, agricultural extension initiatives, health education and some vocational programmes;

(f) Investing in social and human capital with the aim of building self-reliance at the economic and social levels. In other words, education does not only allow people to become financially independent and self-reliant, but also builds individuals who are knowledgeable about their rights and services, and are free, vocal and active within a social setting;

(g) Providing high quality technical and vocational education and training (TVET) by reforming the sector, boosting existing structures and creating incentives to enrol in TVET programmes. This intervention should aim at substantially increasing enrolment and retention rates, reducing dropouts, and creating a new labour force of skilled workers that matches market demands;

(h) Creating spaces to promote and revamp research and innovation in public and private universities and research institutions, and promoting the role of universities and academic centres in producing knowledge in different disciplines (i.e. social, political, development, environmental and economic sciences, health sciences, medicine, engineering, urban planning, architecture, and arts) and linking the academic community with policymaking. In this context, the reform of the educational sector can play a crucial role in promoting partnerships through collaboration between hubs of knowledge creation, the community and the State, and, in turn, lead to knowledge-based and people-centred policies and programmes.

B. ECONOMIC GROWTH-EMPLOYMENT/DECENT WORK-SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

49. Education sector reform under the EIJ nexus can contribute to sustained economic growth by fostering employability and self-reliance among all social groups. In parallel, national policies and strategies for employment, job creation and economic growth must have ecological and social dimensions and be designed based on the following activities and objectives:

(a) Designing and adopting a long-term sustainable economic growth model that emphasizes local economic development in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, handcrafts and cultural heritage. The latter can promote localities and regions as touristic destinations, and protect the environment;

(b) Boosting decentralized economic initiatives and projects that reduce territorial inequalities, generate alternatives to informal settlements around cities, and change current economic patterns that aggravates inequality. Interventions must create complementarity between regions but, at the same time, avoid monopolizing economic activities by specific regions or localities;

(c) Facilitating skills matching and reducing unemployment and vulnerability among the unemployed and informal workers through the design and effective implementation of universal social protection and other social assistance programmes. This also involves improving access to high quality social and health services and technical and vocational training, and to market and finance systems, social entrepreneurship programmes, economic incentives, and micro-level enterprise support programs. At the same time, reducing pressures on the informal sector through social protection interventions will incentivize informal workers and create transitional passages for them to formal work;

(d) Reforming public-sector employment packages to attract highly skilled professionals, by establishing meritocratic selection systems, incentives, rule of law (accountability and transparency), and less complex bureaucratic and more efficient administrative procedures.

C. INSTITUTIONAL REFORM-PARTNERSHIP-PARTICIPATION AXIS

50. As mentioned earlier, the successful integration of the EIJ nexus is highly dependent on the implementation of SDG 17. Hence, efforts towards governance reform and social cohesion in the region should be geared towards promoting partnerships at the regional, national and local levels. A socially cohesive society is one where all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy.³² This entails reforming existing institutions and establishing additional bodies to channel communication between the community and decision-makers and grant the voiceless a say in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Efforts to promote participation and partnerships include the following:

(a) Reforming national strategies, policies and laws in partnership with civil society and other non-State actors from inception to implementation, and monitoring the stages of programmes and projects. To achieve this, initiatives should first focus on networking between civil society actors, and local and national authorities. This includes strengthening communication, support and information sharing between civil society and community-based actors and organizations, and enabling them to participate in vetting, lobbying, contesting, and setting standards and procedures to enhance accountability;

(b) Promoting corporate sustainability and responsibility, and making investments in local economic development and environmental projects a priority for the business sector;

(c) Creating mediating institutions and intermediary actors to maintain synergy and establish communication between governmental and community stakeholders, and incentivizing women and young people to take up leadership roles in these institutions or activities;

(d) Creating community-based cultural institutions, associations and organizations that represent people's voices, promote participation and sustain constructive policy dialogue;

(e) Conducting referendums on a regular basis and implementing initiatives to involve all social groups in decision-making processes and public discussions on issues that affect them. These consultation processes will not only promote trust and legitimacy in national and local authorities, but also foster social solidarity among all members of society by coming together on issues that have a direct or indirect impact on their lives and wellbeing;

(f) Strengthening the role of unions and associations, and their participation in decision making and in promoting rights and services among different groups, such as different categories of workers, women, young people, and syndicated professions;

(g) Establishing coordination and advisory mechanisms to build and strengthen effective partnerships between Arab Governments and civil society organizations at the regional level, including a regional partnership mechanism proposed by ESCWA. This mechanism can serve as a think tank to analyse sustainable development issues in the region, share experiences and lessons learned in mainstreaming social justice issues in national development plans, and integrate civil society contributions into relevant regional and global conferences and decisions that affect development policy in the region.

³² <https://www.un.org/development/desa/socialperspectiveondevelopment/issues/social-integration.html>.