

CONCEPT NOTE:

CSOs Forum prior to the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit

Beirut 10 - 11 January 2019



BACKGROUND

The League of Arab States (LAS) established the Arab Economic and Social Development (AESD) summit in 2007 to discuss and address the socio-economic challenges facing its member states and the region. The first summit took place in Kuwait¹ in 2009, the second in Egypt² in 2011, the 2013 summit was in Saudi Arabia³ and the fourth summit will take place in Beirut, Lebanon on 20 January 2019, ending four years of suspension.

In addition to Government representatives, the summit joins private sector actors and organizations such as banks, chambers of commerce, industry and agriculture. Civil society participation is ensured, however on unclear terms and without transparent selection criteria in order to limit its influence on the outcome of the meetings. During the previous AESD summits, Arab countries have agreed on the need to improve the standards of living for citizens in the region, prioritize joint investments and initiatives, and involve the private sector and civil society in the development process. As such, the previous summits concluded with strategies aiming to achieve sustainable energy by 2030, support the common Arab market, support small and medium enterprises, in addition to a draft of an Arab investment agreement, proposals to promote and activate collaboration between tourism and cultural sectors in the Arab countries, and efforts to proceed with the progress made in the Arab free trade zone. The upcoming summit will be the first following the adoption of the Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), therefore more commitment and actions are expected from the countries to make. The agenda of the upcoming summit is expected to discuss ways to eradicate poverty, the issue of identity and belonging, ways to combat all forms of violence, and assess the outcomes of wars and conflicts in the region.

Moreover, civil society organizations in the region, and particularly the Arab NGO Network for Development, in partnership with partners including the civil society directorate in LAS and ESCWA, have engaged in previous AESD summits through three forums discussing the challenges to development in the region from a civil society perspective. The forums were concluded by three outcome documents and recommendations raised before the summits⁴.

PURPOSE

In 2018, a group of civil society networks organized a platform on sustainable development whose members are Transparency International (TI), Disabled People International, Arab Chapter (DPI), the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC), Habitat International Coalition, the Arab Women Center for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Arab Network for Democratic Elections (ANDE), and the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND).

With the current constraints on civic space and rights in most countries in the Arab region, the role of civil society in holding power to account is particularly critical. Therefore, ANND and the platform members are planning to organize a civil society forum prior to the fourth 2019 AESD in Beirut. The aim is to hold an interactive dialogue between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to discuss the current challenges to development in the Arab region, and agree on a set of positions and priorities for the region to influence the outcome of the summit in line with civil society's identified priorities for the region. The two-day forum will be held on 10 and 11 January 2019. The forum will evolve around the five themes below:

- I. A new rights-based sustainable development model (paradigm)
- II. An inclusive development model that ensures social justice
- III. Culture in the framework of the development model
- IV. The developmental State
- V. The role of civil society in development

OBJECTIVE

The forum will be based on interactive dialogues that will underline a common understanding between CSOs on the development situation in the Arab region, its challenges and rooms for improvement. The forum would produce a common position amongst CSO with messaging for the summit and to be as a stepping stone for future advocacy on a regional level.

Moreover, the forum aims to open dialogue channels with the League of Arab States, which allow the involvement of civil society in policy issues affecting the region.

Finally, the forum will develop follow-up mechanisms for the future, which allow monitoring the outcomes of the summit and the level of achievement.

OUTCOME

The outcomes are to be presented before the AESD summit, in the hope of building and strengthening a cooperation between the governments and civil society, and securing a platform for civil society to be heard and thus contribute to development.

More precisely, the outcomes will gather the common understandings and positions CSOs have agreed to in regards to the aforementioned themes. The outcomes will also list the follow-up mechanisms that will allow civil society more involvement with the Arab League and development processes.

METHODOLOGY

The members of the platform on sustainable development will be involved in organizing the forum. The selection of participants will be based on geographical (covering Maghreb, Mashreq and Gulf countries), gender and sectoral distribution from the Arab region. In addition to CSOs' activists, Arab and foreign experts will provide informed contributions on the five selected themes.

In preparation for the forum, a background paper will be developed to assess the progress of previous AESD summits, and analyze their outcomes and relevance to the regional context.

1. Kuwait summit statement and declaration (Arabic): <https://bit.ly/2LucHAr>
2. Egypt summit statement and declaration (Arabic): <https://bit.ly/2AcSoTL>
3. Saudi Arabia summit statement and declaration (Arabic): <https://bit.ly/2EEQNJD>
4. Supporting documents attached to this note.



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