

III. The way forward

That a group of Arab civil society organizations became a Nobel Peace laureate is unequivocal testimony to their power as a force for the common good. Arab civil society has also shown admirable maturity by its involvement in global development processes such as the 2030 Agenda. Governments, international organizations and other stakeholders should build their relationships and equal partnerships with Arab civil society and harness its drive for positive change.

Arab civil society needs to be at the heart of a rights-based development paradigm as the region strives to achieve the SDGs. In the coming two years, ESCWA will continue to support member States in their efforts to: develop rights-based social policies and programmes for social cohesion, inclusion and protection; provide adequate social services for all; base social policy on consensus; empower civil society and enlist its help to achieve a just society.

To that end, ESCWA will make available its participatory social protection policy and partnership for democratic governance toolkits, which target civil society and decision-makers, in numerous member states through workshops and advisory services. In September 2015, member States mandated ESCWA to produce a social justice guidebook, which will be used, along with workshops



and technical assistance, to help State and non-State stakeholders to include the notion of social justice in national and local development plans. The focus throughout will be on the role of civil society and the contributions it can make.

ESCWA is determined to reinforce its partnerships with civil society organizations in the region and will explore new ways of working together to foster participatory social justice, inclusion and protection, to reduce inequalities and to improve social integration. Those aims are directly linked to the SDGs and will ultimately contribute to their achievement.

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Sharing Responsibilities for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region

Fostering Resilient Partnerships among Development Stakeholders

I. Introduction

Arab civil society made headlines recently when a Tunisian Quartet composed of the General Workers Union, the Employers' Institute, the Human Rights League and the Bar Association was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The quartet had "helped bring Tunisia back from the brink of civil war in 2013 and made a decisive contribution to the building of democracy", according to one newspaper report. Indeed, and against all odds, civil society has carved out for itself a distinct role in the political transitions in many Arab countries. In Morocco, participation in policymaking was made a constitutional principle, cementing the role of civil society in that country. Elsewhere in the region, civil society has also made headway, not least in connection with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

On 25 September 2015, the international community adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which recognizes the role of civil society organizations in "transforming our world." The SDGs call for responsibilities regarding sustainable development to be shared by all stakeholders.

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) actively involved Arab civil society groups in regional consultations leading up to the 2030 Agenda, mobilizing States and other stakeholders to commit to its implementation and promoting



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the exchange of information and expertise.

The role played by civil society in transition processes in Arab countries and in the preparation of the 2030 Agenda underlined the importance of its potential contribution to promoting and monitoring the implementation of the SDGs. Civil society groups can reach out to all segments of society in order to make sure that their aspirations are met, forge national, regional and international alliances and create viable networks with the private sector, trade unions, local authorities and State institutions.

II. The commitment of ESCWA to versatile and effective partnerships with civil society

ESCWA is committed to harnessing the power of partnerships in all its activities. It has reinforced regional consultative efforts and created forums in which civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can freely express their views and concerns. In the area of social

development, such partnerships aim to promote social justice, equality, participation and social protection.

In June 2014, ESCWA partnered with the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), the Arab Organization for Administrative Development (ARADO) and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation to organize the "Regional Forum on Addressing Social and Economic Inequalities: The Need for a New Development Paradigm." Representatives of civil society groups, NGOs, international organizations and the private sector joined experts to discuss the social and economic challenges facing the region in the run-up to the launch of the 2030 Agenda. They emphasized



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the contribution Arab civil society organizations could make in advancing social and economic reform and a new regional development paradigm based on respect for human rights, democracy, participation and social justice. The work of the forum fed into a number of regional and international processes, including the fourth session of the Economic and Social Summit of the League of Arab States, held in January 2015, and the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

In April 2015, a Civil Society Forum attended by Arab civil society groups, international organizations and other stakeholders issued a declaration defining the position of Arab civil society on the sustainable development agenda, which was then presented at the second session of the Arab High-Level Forum on Sustainable Development, held in Bahrain from 5 to 7 May 2015. ESCWA had participated in the organization of the two events.

Joined by ANND and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) under the auspices of the Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs, ESCWA marked the World Day of Social Justice on 20 February 2015 in recognition of the role of non-State actors in striving for social justice. A cultural programme featuring a well-known singer from the region, a documentary by a Lebanese NGO and a graffiti exhibition by young artists were the highlights of the event, which sent a powerful message on civil society's place in the struggle to uphold the principles of social justice, equitable development, democracy, freedom and

human dignity in Arab society.

ESCWA has launched the National Committees of Practice initiative, under which it provides newly formed committees with capacity-building on participatory development and partnership in democratic governance. The committees include representatives of government, academia, civil society and the private sector, who work to promote and institutionalize participatory processes.

In Iraq, ESCWA partnered with the Iraqi Business Council to establish a committee and promote the involvement of civil society in the socioeconomic and political arenas. In January 2015, the Council funded an ESCWA workshop in Jordan on "partnership in democratic governance and social accountability of the private sector" for Iraqi officials, civil society actors and private sector representatives.

The Iraqi National Committee of Practice became operational in late 2015. With the technical support of ESCWA, it has raised public awareness of the importance of making participation the norm in national development processes, and of enhancing the capacities of stakeholders in using the tools and programmes developed by ESCWA in that area. It has also succeeded in enhancing knowledge and skills on issues such as leadership, participatory public policymaking, transparency and accountability, reform strategies, effective networking, building trust, and dialogue and consensus building, through community and national workshops and knowledge-based activities.