Food Security, Conflict and SDG achievement in MENA - Leveraging the Humanitarian-Development Nexus

Achieving food security and Sustainable Development Goal 2 will be challenging in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The reasons are complex and interconnected – conflict, civil unrest, demographic and socio-economic trends, governance challenges, amidst resource scarcity and an increasing vulnerability to economic shocks, natural disasters and climate change. The MENA region has de facto become the largest importer of cereals in the world with commercial imports providing about half of all calories consumed. Concurrently, against a global trend of improving nutrition, MENA is the only region where malnutrition has been on the rise over the last decade: in eight MENA countries, more than 20 percent of households are considered food insecure; in some cases, this proportion has soared to 65 percent (Yemen).

The escalation of armed conflict in the region has unleashed the largest wave of internally displaced people and refugees in the world since World War II. The surge of displaced people has placed extraordinary demands on national economies and systems, including refugee receiving countries. Refugees and internally displaced people lose their economic and physical access to food security due to lack of safe and sustainable income opportunities, and pose extraordinary demands on host countries' basic services and social protection systems. Limited access to services and increased competition for job opportunities may contribute to raising tensions with host communities. As crises become protracted, due to limited access to income generating opportunities, refugees and internally displaced people may become more vulnerable. As an example, the vast majority of Syrian refugees today lives below the poverty line, 70 percent of people in need being women and children. This also massively impacts education with close to 48 per cent of Syrian refugee children – 817,000 children - out of school.

The massive humanitarian crisis affecting the region required a commensurate scaling up of humanitarian response in support of the most vulnerable. The World Food Programme (WFP) for example – one of the largest humanitarian actors in MENA – has ramped up food assistance from 6.8 million people in the region in 2010, to nearly 30 million people in 2017.

As the Syria crisis illustrates, food insecurity can be both a cause and an effect of conflict. Meanwhile there is today a clearer understanding of the interdependency between conflict, food insecurity, displacement and migration. A recent WFP study[1] found that countries with the highest level of food insecurity, coupled with armed conflict, have the highest outward migration of refugees. Additionally, when coupled with poverty, food insecurity increases the likelihood and intensity of armed conflicts; something that has clear implications on displacement and migration.

All of the above will have critical implications for the achievement of Agenda 2030 in the region. For example, if current conditions of conflict and instability persist, it can be foreseen that SDG2 (Zero Hunger) will not likely be achieved in the affected countries, and that regional indicators will continue to show rising malnutrition rates. As crises become

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[1] At the root of exodus: food security, conflict and international migration, 2017, WFP

protracted, funding support by the international community may start to diminish. Concurrently, the ability of refugee and IDP hosting countries to continue ensuring scaled up provision of assistance may become increasingly challenging, and the governance of such crises at the national and regional level may become more complex. There is therefore a need to reflect on the key factors and drivers of poverty, instability, food insecurity and change that may affect SDG achievement, as well as on the key entry points that might offer opportunities for the UN system to provide a more strategic, effective and impactful contribution to restoring conditions for Agenda 2030.

What are some implications for UN strategy setting and policy making?

1. Achieving the restoration of peace and security and the respect of human rights will remain a crucial prerequisite for delivering on Agenda 2030.
2. Until peace and security are restored, humanitarian assistance will continue to be required at scale to ensure critical life-saving assistance, and preserve and protect the lives and livelihoods of millions of affected and displaced populations.
3. The crisis will also offer a number of entry points that may be strategically relevant in determining approaches by UN operational humanitarian agencies and partners, including:

   ✓ In crisis affected countries, sustaining life-saving humanitarian assistance will remain critical, and also offer opportunities to leverage the humanitarian-development nexus, and contribute to longer term resilience, stability and addressing root causes of vulnerability.
   ✓ Linking emergency interventions to strengthening livelihoods and resilience, as well as national social protection and safety nets systems, services and capacities. This has already demonstrated to be a crucial entry point contributing to sustainability in the long run.
   ✓ Supporting on-going reforms of social protection system as important instruments of social inclusion, stability, enhanced food security and poverty reduction outcomes.

Recent conflicts in the MENA region have brought devastation to millions of lives and livelihoods, dramatically reversing hard won development gains, and deepening the situation of food security and malnutrition affecting millions of civilians. This document argues that a strong peace and stability agenda is required to re-establish conditions for Agenda 2030 in the region. In the context of the ongoing crisis, the experience of WFP is that international organizations providing humanitarian assistance can strategically and systematically leverage the humanitarian-development nexus, providing assistance in forms that allow to respond to urgent short-term requirements while simultaneously maximizing benefits for affected populations and national institutions in the mid-to longer term. Productive safety nets interventions aimed at sustaining livelihoods and resilience as well as at stimulating local markets, supply chains and local economies, measures aimed at empowering women and communities and revitalizing the agricultural sector, inclusive school meals and nutrition programmes that promote enhanced school attendance among the most vulnerable, discouraging child labor and girls early marriage, alongside country capacity strengthening efforts for example for improved targeting, enhanced monitoring and stronger operational platforms, represent just some areas of high potential. If successfully implemented, larger and more cost-effective impacts on poverty, food and nutrition security, resilience, protection and social cohesion, and other related priority areas can be achieved. Working with partners, WFP is committed to providing leadership and ensuring its strong support and contribution to joint efforts aimed in this direction.