

ARAB CONFERENCE ON THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA 2030

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By

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I was UN Special Rapporteur on Disability when the Millennium Goals were adopted. I remember at the time, because of the focus of my work, I made several interventions and suggestions that specific reference should be made to persons with disabilities in each of the eight goals.

Today, in my role as Arab League Envoy for Humanitarian Affairs, and seeing as how the world is now dealing with one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history, and considering that the focus of my work has been on refugees and displaced person—I once again find myself in the position of ensuring that the Sustainable Development Goals are inclusive of and relevant to the millions of refugees fleeing war and conflict.

In the last 15 years, the world made achievements in meeting some of the MDGs targets. Viewed globally I would say these achievements are very impressive.

For example;

- in terms of poverty, people living on under \$1.25 a day have been reduced from 47% to 15% .
- undernourishment has gone down from 23.5% to 12.9%
- out of school children have gone down from 100 million to 57 million
- vaccines for childhood diseases have reached 84% coverage, thereby reducing childhood mortality from about 13 million to 6 million

I could go on presenting numbers, but I think I have made my point. And that is that globally the MDGs have been successful in meeting their targets. And therefore, it was now time to ensure that these targets can be maintained, can be sustainable and can be increased.

This is the purpose of the Sustainable Development Goals—17 Goals linked to 169 targets.

But as I said before, these results are global—the variations in success are regional and national.

In our region, ladies and gentlemen, crisis after crisis has affected every aspect of human life from poverty to nutrition to education, to child and maternal mortality, to safety, housing, sanitation, medical care, human dignity...the list goes on.

Whatever success we were able to achieve in our implementation of the MDGs has been lost to war and conflict, which have resulted in displaced and refugee populations.

In light of these conditions, and with respect to the huge humanitarian and developmental crisis we are facing, we need to prioritize our implementation mechanisms of the SDGs; we need to improve our delivery systems; we need to tighten our monitoring mechanisms; and we absolutely have to involve civil society in every one of those steps—thus establishing true partnerships and collaborative relationships between all stakeholders.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Excellencies,

I will spend a few moments talking about the monitoring mechanisms of the SDGs. However, I will not enter into technical details as these are available on UN websites. I will focus on the implication of the monitoring to the successful achievement of the goals.

The indicators and monitoring mechanisms of the SDGs have provided us—national, regional and global stakeholders—with more flexibility in determining our priorities and measuring the successes achieved.

The 15 year experience with the MDGs has taught the development community some valuable lessons. One of which is the importance of having clear, detailed, achievable indicators early on; and setting targets to measure progress as we go along.

The international community has developed a comprehensive indicators framework that covers the concerns of all stakeholders. This was produced in collaboration with thousands of development experts from UN organizations, academia, civil society, business, and national statistics departments across the world.

The indicators form the backbone of the monitoring process towards achieving the goals of sustainable development at the local, national, regional and global levels. These indicators will help stakeholders, responsible authorities, grassroots activists, and civil society innovators to transform them into tools that will contribute to the implementation of strategies, projects and programs. Additionally, they will help as a guide for the allocation of resources and funding. They will also serve as a report card to measure successes attained and identify weaknesses, and ensure accountability and responsibility.

The focus of the monitoring process at this point is expected to be at the national level. It will also be thematic—each thematic community, i.e. health, education, nutrition, gender

equality...etc.—will monitor its own area of expertise and report progress according to the indicators that concern them.

However, it is very important to keep in mind that the indicators form an integrated package. This means that Gender Equality is a goal that cuts across other goals and related targets such as health, nutrition, safe environments, and education. Therefore, this requires collaboration and cooperation among the different sectors ensure that all aspects are covered.

At the national level and based on the experience gained from the MDGs, the international community has concluded that an annual review and reporting on the monitoring results is very important in addressing shortcomings and deficiencies, and taking corrective measures. Reports will be gathered from governments and NGOs to be presented to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) for their annual June/July meeting.

The outcome of the review will help countries to set their budgeting and priority agendas for the coming year.

At the regional level, regional monitoring meetings will play an important role in fostering knowledge-sharing, reciprocal learning and peer reviews across and between countries in the same region. It will promote shared interests for regional priorities—and the possibility of shared programs to address the issues. It could also provide shared accountability in relation to regional conflicts and their effects of the social infra structure.

As I mentioned above, the 17 goals for sustainable development have produced 169 targets for action and implementation. But these goals and their targets are interdependent. Not only do they rely on the collaboration of different sectors within society, but their achievement will provide successful indicators that can feed into other goals.

Let me give you an example:

Goal #1 End poverty in all its forms

Targets 1.2 for this goal are the reduction by half of the proportion of men, women and children living in poverty in all its dimensions.

This target automatically links with the work being done on gender equality, on women's health, on child nutrition, on basic education...etc.

This is how we will have to form collaborative working relationships whether we are working at the level of national governments, intergovernmental organizations, national or regional NGOs.

There are more than 100 targets that are interlinked and interdependent, but I will not go through them here. It takes a careful reading of all the goals and the related targets to see how they can be linked together in multi-sectoral projects and programs.

One of the areas that I believe we need to look at in terms of sustainable health care relates to medical services for long-term and chronic illnesses. Although there are a number of

organizations that provide emergency medical care, particularly to refugees, there is a lack of services for people with chronic diseases.

Sustainable development goal #3 mentions chronic illnesses but has not specified a target for it.

This also applies to medical services for psychosocial disabilities. It is important to raise awareness among the target communities about the importance of seeking psychosocial counselling, and ensuring that such services are available for the long term. This is particularly essential for children and youth suffering from war-and-violence-related trauma. Without the appropriate treatment, these individuals will be unable to rebuild their lives and contribute within their communities.

Having said this, I have two more important points to make:

The first is the importance, especially here in our region, of forming partnerships with NGOs and civil society organizations because they have the facility and the ability to work at the ground level, and also because they are often much more familiar with the people they serve than governments and governmental departments.

It is also extremely important to engage the youth in our societies—they have the energy, the time, the creative abilities to address many of these issues. Let us not forget that we are blessed in our region with a youth population who are creative and energized and able to contribute to their societies when given a chance. According to statistics by the UN agencies, the EU, and other informal sources 60% of the population in this region is under the age of 25.

They have access to social and communication technology, they are far more aware of the world around them than we were at their age, and they certainly far more capable of being social and civic agents of change in our societies. Our future lies in the hands of today's youth. Young people of today will mature in the next 15 years that are covered by the SDGs.

They will experience the impact of the success or failure of the SDGs. Therefore, SDG implementation should be inclusive and responsive to the needs of the youth. We will need to get them involved, to gear their technological know-how and their social abilities in a positive direction, and help them to develop a sustainable future and to help us develop sustainable societies.

The second point relates to what I had said earlier in my introduction and I would like you to bear with me as I link it to the issue of youth.

While the MDGs made no reference to refugees and migrant, the SDGs do include them, though not in specific targets. And they fall far short of dealing with the catastrophic results of civil war and armed conflicts that have been taking place in our region in the past few years.

SDG number 16 refers to the:

"promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provision of access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels."

The targets and indicators relating to this Goal are all-encompassing and comprehensive of development and reform strategies for government institutions that would apply to all countries.

Countries, specifically in our region, that commit to the implementation of the SDGs and that are most in need of them, have, in recent years been burdened by wars and/or an influx of refugees and migrants that have strained national economies and threatened civil coexistence.

In Lebanon and Jordan, for example, providing basic services to indigenous populations is difficult enough. Today each country is host to 1.5 and 1.4 million between UN registered and unregistered refugees. Therefore, there are two separate communities that are now competing for scarce resources, for fewer job opportunities, for affordable housing, for subsidized medical care—all of these factors have added to the burden on governments.

However, this added load on host countries and the need to provide for the day-to-day lives of refugees are not accounted for in the SDGs.

These are issues that need to be targeted regionally. As national governments, as national and institutions concerned with development, as civil society and NGOs, we need to find our own goals and set our own targets and provide the resources to deal with the additional strains on our development progress.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

This brings back the point I was making about the engagement and involvement of youth and NGOs in the next 15 years of implementing the SDGs, and more urgently in developing solutions for our regional crisis that prevents us from achieving our desired goals.

We know that the wars and conflicts have increased poverty levels; deprived children and adults from education and employment opportunities; created medical emergencies; created a housing crisis; strained water and electricity supplies; degraded nutritional values...and the list goes on.

Funds are being spent on rectifying these shortcomings and on compensating the countries. Whether through the United Nations, through the Arab League, the GCC or from Arab Gulf countries individually, money has been spent to improve the plight of refugees. But I believe that we have been overwhelmed by the magnitude of this crisis and have not always spent the funds wisely.

There are three initiatives that I would like to share with you in this context. I believe that we, members of the GCC states, the Arab League and UN agencies present here today can put together the expertise and the resources to implement them.

The overall aim is to involve innovative and entrepreneurial youth in creating solutions through business and industry.

Allow me to share with you information from a meeting I attended recently organized by the Carnegie Center. A number of experts, academics, UN agency officials and political figures attended the meeting. However, they were not what attracted my attention. It was the young civic minded entrepreneurs with fresh and creative ideas aimed at both creating a lucrative business opportunity and providing a service to society.

- One young woman presented a prototype design for a shelter (or tent) that is flexible, light and transportable. It is made of waterproof and weatherproof material. It is equipped with the means to collect rain water and purify it for human use, and uses solar energy for electricity generation and heating. It is also large enough to provide shelter for a refugee family and cost effective in its durability and mobility characteristics.

How many basic sustainable development goals does such an innovation cover?

- Another young entrepreneur demonstrated the use of 3D printing, which has actually been used to produce a prosthetic arm for a refugee child at the cost of \$75. This innovation aims at providing refugees with access to modern technology that will have a huge positive impact on their lives.

Yet another idea that would more than adequately cover the SDG dealing with education was presented at the meeting. It is particularly important because it targets higher education among refugees. We know that children are more or less being absorbed into primary education in the host countries. However, older students are unable to get access to higher education. This innovative idea, already being applied in Germany, can be adapted to our region.

- This initiative aims at enabling refugees to access university education online during the period where they do not have appropriate legal status to enrol. This online university does not provide degrees, but it does provide courses accredited by partner universities. Once legal status has been established, the former refugee is able to enrol in one of the partner universities and can complete his or her education as a regular student.

This provides refugees of university age, with the opportunity to acquire an education while they await their legal status.

These ideas some of which are generated by our own youth are creative and innovative as well as income generating. Additionally, these projects are potential job creators for other youths in the region. They have, therefore, fulfilled the sustainable goals numbers 3, 4, and 8 namely Good Health and Well Being; Quality Education; and Decent Work and Economic Growth.

We need to start seeking out these young people with creative and socially beneficial projects, as well as those with feasible plans and proposal but who need help in developing them.

We need to also reach out to the hundreds of NGOs across our region who are engaged in development work, not only with refugees but also with local communities and ensure that their initiatives are sustainable and that they are able to meet the goals and targets we have set.

We have talked about creating partnerships with civil society organizations, and called for increasing cooperation with them to implement sustainable development goals. This is our responsibility. But now I would like to call on civil society organizations themselves to play their part in seeking out individuals within the local communities, who are already connected to the target populations and to recruit in contributing to development initiatives. In this way we can produce a generation capable of leading community and social development and become initiators of sustainable development, deliverers of services rather than receivers.

It is not necessary that a young person be creative or innovative in order to contribute to successful sustainable development, there are so many enthusiastic, energetic youth, willing to help and be part of the process, who simply lack training and guidance.

Proposals and Recommendations:

1. Identify national priorities
2. Identify regional priorities
3. Organize a working meeting in which we can compare actions that will be taken at the national and regional levels; and establish means of cooperation where appropriate
4. Establish timelines for the achievement of priority targets on an annual basis
5. Establish national and regional baselines for achieving the targets for each of the goals
6. Set up a committee of experts to solicit and receive proposals for innovative and creative projects
7. Ensure that NGOs working on the ground are involved in the process and are receiving the support needed to continue their efforts
8. Set up a multi-disciplinary committee to document all efforts and measure them against the required goals and targets; and provide accurate data to the annual ECOSOC meeting at both the national and regional levels

These recommendations are primarily the responsibility of national governments, with the inclusion and collaboration of civic and non-governmental organizations as well as business. However, there are many areas where we can collaborate as a region to benefit the whole.

And so, one more recommendation I will make:

- Let us explore our areas of commonality and seek partnerships that will enable us to help our most vulnerable and at-risk populations.