

Regional Report

THE ATTAINMENT OF SDGS IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES IN THE ARAB REGION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



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for Human Security

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. Situational overview – setting the scene

The past decade has witnessed widespread conflicts across the Arab region. These conflicts have proven fluid, protracted and complex, damaging the region's rich cultural landscape, while undermining human security and prospects for sustainable development. Since the early 2000s, the cumulative impact of conflict has resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, destruction of property and infrastructure, and the displacement of millions. This has exacerbated vulnerabilities, heightened multidimensional fragility, and eroded State and individual capacities to prepare for and cope with stressors.

Echoing human security principles, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize a world free of poverty, hunger, disease, and want. However, with evolving conflict dynamics across the Arab region, conflict-affected countries face a range of unique, context-specific challenges that constrain both capacities and resources and prevent the accrual and sustainment of development gains. The situation is stark. If this trend continues it will be impossible to meet the targets of the 2030 Agenda, even those related to basic needs. Against this backdrop, there is a growing awareness that many SDGs will remain out of reach without a comprehensive approach to address the unique humanitarian, development and peacebuilding challenges faced in conflict-affected contexts. Without enhanced efforts to understand and mitigate the impacts of conflict, there is a significant risk that the prospects offered by the 2030 Agenda may never materialize for conflict-affected populations and nations across the region.

Consistent with efforts by the League of Arab States to achieve peace and development for the region and concerned by the worsening trajectory of countries affected by conflict, the Arab Committee for Sustainable Development, at its third meeting in December 2017, requested the League of Arab States to prepare a regional report that examines the impact of conflict on the achievement of SDGs across the region.

As a regional initiative, the report covers Member States in conflict, post-conflict and affected by conflict. To better analyse the context-specific realities, including challenges and opportunities faced in conflict-settings across the region, the following eight Member States were selected: The Republic of Iraq, The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, The Lebanese Republic, The State of Libya, The Federal Republic of Somalia, The Republic of the Sudan, The Syrian Arab Republic and The Republic of Yemen.

The report brings together a range of relevant stakeholders to advance the attainment of SDGs in conflict and conflict-affected settings. The report refrains from adding additional layers of work to what are usually overburdened and under-capacitated systems; rather, it builds on, and strengthens, existing frameworks by closing potential gaps and combining existing tools to accelerate delivery and improve the use of resources. It further adds value by offering an exhaustive repository of existing frameworks to develop and strengthen responses to current gaps. This approach aids stakeholders to better identify the compound and dynamic challenges faced in countries affected by conflict across the region.

The report recognizes that Governments, the United Nations, multilateral institutions, civil society, and affected populations bring unique and comparative perspectives and advantages to advancing the 2030 Agenda in conflict-affected settings. Adopting a whole-of-society approach that recognizes the different roles played by these groups was critical for establishing the holistic framework used in the report. This approach did not, however, overlook overarching and group-specific findings and recommendations that support the transition from conflict to early recovery and sustainable peace.

The primary audience for the report is national policymakers, the United Nations system, multilateral and regional institutions, and civil society operating across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding nexus (HDPN).

The report uses a mixed-method approach, including background literature and desk review; more than 30 regional e-consultations with different stakeholders; a stocktaking survey with 32 appointed SDG focal points from Member States and members of a

Regional Task Force (RTF) and United Nations country teams; and statistical analyses using the most recent data available on SDG progress in countries affected by conflict.

B. Key messages on achieving SDGs in countries affected by conflict

The report identifies several key findings to support efforts to advance the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in countries affected by conflict across the Arab region. These are as follows:

1. The links between conflict and development are not linear. Violent conflict is a complex phenomenon that manifests itself in different ways in diverse social, political and economic contexts. Accordingly, development responses to mitigate the impact of conflict must also be assessed at the local, subnational and national levels and be tailored to the prevailing socioeconomic context. The five pillars of the 2030 Agenda, namely, peace, people, planet, prosperity, and partnership, provide an integrated framework to understand how the different dimensions of development are intertwined and the extent to which improvements in one of the pillars balance and support progress in the others.
2. Without peace, all other goals will be impossible to achieve. The 2030 Agenda emphasizes that there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development. Through SDG 16, the Agenda sets out targets to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Increasing investments in peace, dialogue and reconciliation as a foundation for achieving sustainable development is critical to catalyse transitions to more stable social and economic dynamics. These efforts should build on endeavours to develop inclusive and responsive governance models that put an end to discrimination and marginalization while reducing inequality. Subnational governance structures need to be empowered to ensure that national development responses are grounded in local realities and serve those at the highest risk of being left behind. This necessitates efforts to harness new mediums, such as integrated digital tools and 'peace-tech' for mediation and peacebuilding efforts. These can enhance inclusion regardless of location, social barriers and movement restrictions, offering opportunities to integrate civil society and community leaders, who already play key roles in local peacebuilding and de-escalation, in national-level processes. Furthermore, efforts should be enhanced, when possible and appropriate, to integrate peacebuilding architecture and activities into ongoing humanitarian and development
3. While humanitarian aid exemplifies the principle of leaving no one behind (LNOB), the provision of aid is a temporary relief that cannot substitute for long-term sustainable solutions. Simultaneous humanitarian, security and socioeconomic crises in many conflict-affected countries require a holistic and integrated model of humanitarian relief, development, peacebuilding and, increasingly, disaster risk reduction that addresses both the drivers and consequences of conflict and complex crises, while increasing preparedness to respond to evolving dynamics. Achieving the SDGs requires new working frameworks that recognize the strong relationship between development processes, humanitarian relief and peace efforts and that facilitate the identification of opportunities for progress by maximizing synergies where these three dimensions intersect. Efforts to break down operational and policy silos between humanitarian, development, peacebuilding and disaster risk reduction communities must be amplified to enhance coherence in policies and programmes, increase coordination and strengthen efforts to advance the SDGs.
4. The SDGs offer a coherent roadmap for harnessing synergies between different dimensions of development. They also provide an opportunity to identify common denominators for harmonizing interventions across development, peace and security, and humanitarian relief pillars. Accordingly, to be successfully implemented, a process of national ownership and localization needs to identify which areas lag furthest behind and which areas offer the greatest returns and synergies within the country's political, social and economic context. The process of prioritization must be harmonized with efforts to localize national development strategies, as needs and priorities often vary at the subnational level. The human security framework provides a valuable conceptual link between the peacebuilding,



humanitarian and development pillars, offering a point of convergence to move beyond the siloed approaches that have constrained efforts to advance sustainable development in conflict-affected environments. Human security is anchored around five fundamental principles that set the criteria for effective action toward enhancing human capabilities. It emphasizes action that is people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific, prevention-oriented, and focuses on protection and empowerment.

5. Adopting a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach will support stronger coordination. To bridge the gap between humanitarian, development and peace projects, establishing a multi-stakeholder platform will help coordinate efforts, funding channels and information, and will address duplication or gaps towards the most vulnerable communities. Such a platform includes all local actors concerned and coordinates the various efforts towards achieving the SDGs. It will also help in bridging coordination gaps between central and local entities. As such, a coordination platform involving humanitarian and development actors across governmental, United Nations and civil society entities will support Member States in harmonizing efforts, enforcing data collection and identifying national priorities. Strengthening coordination between national and subnational actors is also key.
6. Localizing SDG achievement efforts are critical for ensuring a whole-of-society approach, preventing vulnerable groups from being left behind and strengthening national and local-level coordination. Strengthening the connections between central and local efforts will support advancements towards sustainable peace and development. The involvement of local communities, particularly those affected by conflict, represents an opportunity to ensure that efforts at the national level yield results at the local level. Localization should focus on SDG policies and programming, building capacities to understand and use SDGs and their monitoring indicators. There is a need for an appropriate measure to monitor and implement SDGs by using relevant tools and involving local actors on the ground. Localizing the delivery of the goals also requires responses that are designed with a view to cross-cutting issues such as gender. Including people from both genders and different age groups, minority groups and people with various special needs will support LNOB efforts while contextualizing SDGs to local realities to ensure focus and impact. This can be done through localizing implementation to increase inclusivity at the local level and integrating local entities into the process.
7. Constraints relating to data continue to hamper monitoring SDG progress. Studies and e-consultations illustrate a significant gap in the collection, access and monitoring of the data needed to analyse the progress made in conflict-affected countries. While availability of updated data remains a challenge in several countries in the region, this can be compounded in countries affected by conflict with the lack of access to conflict areas and their populations, which affects census planning and limits data collection mechanisms. Moreover, in emergency situations, data is collected individually through various actors, which jeopardizes coordinated data collection and monitoring efforts and can sometimes undermine interoperability. With no centralized coordination body to consolidate data, it may also be lost. Strengthening partnerships through existing and new regional and international frameworks on data monitoring and evaluation would support national efforts within Member States as well as activities undertaken by United Nations agencies to monitor and produce data on SDGs. Promising steps forward were identified in several countries ensuring that respective national statistical bureaus are represented in national SDG frameworks and mandated to produce, monitor and analyse data on identified SDG indicators and targets.
8. Integrating internally displaced persons (IDPs) in development strategies and data collection efforts is critical to ensure that no one is left behind and to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable. A major shortcoming is that there is often limited integration of data on IDPs in SDG data. However, partnerships with international organizations can support relevant stakeholders in monitoring adequate data on IDPs, particularly regarding country-level performance conditions, and social and economic indicators. The 2019 SDG Index Dashboard also shows that data collection remains a key challenge in conflict-affected countries. A recent ESCWA report on SDG progress at the subnational level in countries affected by conflict also served to highlight the unique complexities of data collection in conflict settings.
9. While development interventions should ultimately be tailored to the national and subnational contexts, there are many areas where the regional dimension provides a cost-effective platform for progress. Furthermore, there are several areas of synergy in terms of principles and objectives between global and regional frameworks. For example, the 2030 Agenda shares key principles with the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and national development plans (NDPs) from the angles of resilience and stabilization. Relevant actors should reflect on

ways to integrate these frameworks to best collect data and advance SDG efforts efficiently. Reversals in development gains in the Arab region are a sombre reminder of why it is important for the international community, regional actors and Member States to focus on upstream conflict prevention, conflict resolution and sustainable development. This warrants a new regional approach applying the human security paradigm based on a holistic and inclusive concept of conflict prevention.

10. The international community's 'in-country' efforts to advance and monitor SDGs can also be further integrated. The United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) is one of the key instruments for supporting the United Nations in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Although the UNSDCF is led by the United Nations, it is anchored in pre-existing frameworks, such as NDPs, and aims at national ownership. The UNSDCF adopts the SDG analytical tool, which calls for SDG ownership at the global, regional, national, subnational, rural, and urban levels. It also aims to support stakeholders in their LNOB commitment through enhancing data on SDGs, supporting transformative economic pathways and promoting multi-stakeholder engagement. The Common Country Assessment (CCA) as a reporting mechanism for UNSDCF, helps United Nations agencies to discuss national development challenges and common approaches in the beginning of the funding cycle with key national and international stakeholders.

11. Conflict-affected countries face substantial structural challenges that hinder progress towards the SDGs and impede coordination efforts. To achieve the SDGs, Governments, United Nations agencies, civil society, the private sector, academia, and communities at large need to collaborate across societal sectors towards common objectives, necessitating strong and coherent partnerships. Due to the interconnectedness of the 2030 Agenda, it requires joint efforts to achieve collective outcomes and ensure the principle of LNOB. Without comprehensive and inclusive partnerships at the global, regional, national, and subnational levels, efforts to address the complex challenges posed by conflict to progress towards the SDGs will be jeopardized. In line with this, SDG 17 recognizes that multi-stakeholder partnerships are critical in mobilizing and sharing knowledge, expertise, technologies and resources. With targets focused on capacity-building, finance, technology, governance and policy, SDG 17 highlights the need to align SDG policies with ongoing policy and programming initiatives and engender coordination to promote sustainable development across borders and traditional silos.

12. A key area in need of strong partnerships to enhance knowledge exchange and capacity-building is the prioritization process of SDGs. Through inputs received from Member States, United Nations agencies and civil society organizations (CSOs) alike, special emphasis was placed on SDGs 16 and 17 as drivers towards achieving the other SDGs. The need for additional support for Member States from the international community was highlighted in identifying priorities that are catalytic and could support the transition from conflict to recovery and sustainable positive peace, and to follow a roadmap towards achieving such prioritization. The international community could support Member States in introducing a more comprehensive framework, linking a triple nexus approach that considers human development as an integral element to the 2030 Agenda.





C. Challenges and constraints in advancing the new paradigm for achieving the 2030 Agenda in countries of concern

Despite efforts to advance SDGs in conflict-affected countries in the Arab region through coordination mechanisms and reformed NDPs that build upon lessons learned and good practices, several challenges remain.

1. Coordination and cooperation between actors

The United Nations reform and the new generation of UNSDCFs provide the driving force to address coordination and capacity gaps. However, there continue to be cases of disconnected and duplicative planning and implementation within the United Nations system in its different forms, and between the United Nations system and national and external stakeholders. Divides along the lines of institutions and approaches regarding both conceptual and working cultures have perpetuated the separation between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors. Associated with limited cohesive and joint interventions, related issues emerge in the lack of clarity in leadership, mandate and functions among different agencies. Therefore, a systematic review of lessons learned in the Arab region could be useful to capture possible areas where regional cooperation could provide added value to tackle these issues.

2. Planning, implementation and funding mechanisms

To date, the efforts identified in using the New Way of Working (NWOW) have been ad-hoc and differ from country to country. This yields open-ended questions on how such outcomes could look and be manifested in different contexts. Existing regional funding mechanisms do not have an instrument for humanitarian-development-peacebuilding initiatives. While funding is often related to a specific plan or programme, which may reinforce the nexus, funding schemes are not designed with the specific intention or capacity to facilitate collaboration across the pillars. As a result, the lack of multi-annual and cooperative funding makes the achievement of ambitious collective outcomes, such as the SDGs, unattainable. In addition, the use of annual rather than multi-year funding schemes and the fragmentation of funding also limits the synergies across the triple nexus.

3. Policy/governance environment

One of the key principles that underpins efforts towards increased integration across the HDPN is the idea of increasing the resources channelled through country systems and contributing to the development of national capacities. However, despite more integrated planning frameworks offered by the new strategic approach of the UNSDCF in the Arab region, efforts

to work with and through country systems are still far from being the course of action. It must be noted that factors of political economy such as power distribution, weak rule of law and respect for human rights, trust in institutions, and high levels of perceived, or actual, corruption often limit more ambitious humanitarian and development efforts to be channelled directly by country institutions. Conflict contexts are particularly impacted by this. In these situations, the volatility of the situation on the ground and the evolving urgent humanitarian needs create 'packs of actions' without clear transition strategies.

4. Volatility of contexts and multiple crises happening in parallel

Few of the current plans or projects implemented include contingencies associated with new or renewed sources of violence, or vulnerability to other crises that relate, among other things, to health, floods and food shocks. While anticipatory planning and financing have become the norm in handling natural disasters, they have yet to be applied to conflict-induced emergencies. This can be facilitated through increasing synergies between disaster risk reduction actors and those in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding communities, and could enable the sharing of tools and approaches to better facilitate this.

5. Other operational challenges

A key challenge shared by all the countries of concern is a lack of data for effective monitoring and evaluation of SDGs progress and implementation. This common challenge reflects the difficulties of collecting complete and accurate data in contexts of conflict, which has now been compounded by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, making vulnerable populations even harder to reach. While the creation of multi-stakeholder networks is identified as a key element for success in the localization and advancement of the SDGs, it is not clear how the role of civil society can be articulated, especially in the context of reforms within the United Nations, the reinvigoration of the Resident Coordination (RC) system, the creation of the Joint Steering Committee (JSC) and the link to the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC).

D. Ways forward

While realizing that the goals of the 2030 Agenda require coordinated efforts and close synergies between the various actors, it is clear that conflict-affected countries are facing systematic challenges with regard to advancing the SDGs in national frameworks. Addressing these necessitates a focus on the following:

1. Fostering strong partnerships at the national, regional and international levels will support Member States in enhancing peace and strengthening institutions in line with SDG 16.
2. SDGs can only be achieved by cooperating with, and supporting, Member States to ensure capacitated institutions, including in monitoring data on SDG progress. This is outlined clearly in the targets of SDG 17. Enhancing capacities and ownership of the 2030 Agenda at the national level requires close coordination within national entities and between such entities and regional, international and local bodies.
3. To advance SDGs and achieve collective outcomes, it has become evident that an inclusive approach is crucial both at the level of stakeholders and through outreach to local communities.
4. Engaging with relevant local actors including, but not limited to, academia, civil society and local communities will ensure that national efforts to advance SDGs engage the most vulnerable and those at risk of being left furthest behind in the process of working towards achieving 2030 Agenda.
5. As demonstrated by the inputs of Member States representatives, Governments of conflict-affected countries are keen to work in close coordination with regional and international entities to elaborate a sustainable approach towards peace and development. Regional and international entities therefore have a key role to play in supporting Member States along their trajectory towards long-term peace and development.



