



المنتدى العربي للتنمية المستدامة

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SDG 16

PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the weakness of institutions in many Arab countries, which undermines the ability of the State to respond quickly and effectively to crises. Weak rule of law, low adherence to universal human rights treaties and conventions, lack of accountability, increasing lack of trust, and protracted conflict and occupation already impeded Arab countries' ability to achieve SDG 16 and all the other SDGs. Genuine political will to address the root causes of these challenges and to open civic space are necessary to transition

to just, peaceful and inclusive societies, as is the creation of effective, transparent and accountable institutions capable of supporting all 17 SDGs.

Occupation and conflict continue to affect millions in the region. These conditions increase the vulnerability of individuals and communities and their risk of contracting the virus, and compromise the ability of Governments at all levels to respond to the pandemic and protect lives and livelihoods. They also place serious constraints on the region's ability to recover from the pandemic.

Impact of COVID-19 on SDG 16 in the Arab region



The social and economic impact of the pandemic is likely to increase instability and social unrest across the region. Governance deficits in the region include a shrinking civic space and limited political participation for a number of social groups, hindering efforts to move toward sustainable development, and increasing polarization, discrimination and inequality, including gender inequality. The political marginalization of young people and limitations on freedom of expression and assembly were already on the increase across the region before the pandemic. Multiple Arab countries have seen waves of protests and social unrest in recent years, fuelled in part by rising inequality. The economic repercussions of the pandemic and the uneven response by Governments has amplified the strained relations between communities and the State, on the one hand, and between social groups, on the other.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the governance deficit in the region, and emphasized the need to reform institutions. Weak rule of law has already compromised full adherence to human rights and marginalized some social groups, who are at even greater risk in crisis situations. Threats to the wellbeing of people and institutions are more acute in conflict-affected Arab

countries, where violence and humanitarian crises are pressing challenges. The effectiveness of pandemic responses is linked to issues of fairness and transparency in the management and distribution of resources and to evidence-based policymaking, and is strongly influenced by perceptions of and trust in institutions. Arab Governments' management of the recovery process will also test the effectiveness of institutional reforms, which require building local and national governance structures that are meritocratic, rules based, effective, transparent, accountable and participatory, so as to establish institutions capable of mitigating various types of shocks, including pandemics, violence and socioeconomic hardship, and of building the foundations of just societies.

The combination of conflict and the COVID-19 crisis is threatening a humanitarian catastrophe in the Arab region.¹ In 2020, the outlook of humanitarian risk in the seven Arab conflict-affected countries was already bleak. They are more exposed to hazardous events and increased vulnerabilities from protracted conflict and displacement, and from eroded social and institutional capacity. The region was already home to many of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with around 57.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance prior

1 ESCWA, COVID-19, Conflict and Risks in the Arab Region, 2020, p. 10.

to the pandemic. The virus has worsened the plight of those caught up in humanitarian crises, while making it more difficult for the humanitarian system to provide desperately needed assistance. The number of food insecure Syrians has risen by 42 per cent since 2019. In Yemen, millions of people are on the brink of famine.

Refugees and migrants are at greater risk of stigmatization and exploitation. *The pandemic has raised numerous concerns about the welfare of the large number of migrants and refugees in the region, estimated at 40.2 million.¹ Many live in overcrowded camps with limited access to medical services, clean water and social protection, making them vulnerable to discrimination, stigmatization and possible scapegoating by local communities. A contraction in local labour markets, which already had limited opportunities, coupled with reduced access to services provided by civil society organizations, including legal and medical support, are placing refugees and migrants at greater risk of exploitation.*

Stringent restrictions on movement to contain the pandemic have further shrunk civic space and increased the political marginalization of young people. Limitations on freedom of expression and assembly were already on the rise across the region before the pandemic, leading to social unrest in several countries. The social and economic tensions resulting from the COVID-19 crisis have further fuelled social unrest in several Arab countries.

Violence against women has increased, and they are facing increasing challenges in accessing justice services. Women across the region already faced difficulties in accessing justice services.² For many decades, women have faced discriminatory laws in matters related to nationality, divorce, child custody and land rights, in addition to gender-based violence and restrictions on mobility.³ The COVID-19 crisis has compounded the impact of all these challenges. Surveys in nine Arab countries show that women are currently facing an increased risk of violence from their husbands because of COVID-19, mainly owing to lockdown measures.⁴ Without access to private spaces, many women struggle to seek help online or through phone calls.⁵

Living under occupation, Palestinians are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 at all levels, including its health and socioeconomic impact. The pandemic has highlighted yet another dimension in the inequalities faced by Palestinians, including a stark disparity in vaccine access between Israelis and Palestinians. United Nations human rights experts have called on Israel to ensure equal access to COVID-19 vaccines for Palestinians, stressing that unequal access to vaccination is morally and legally unacceptable under the Geneva conventions. Nonetheless, only several thousand vaccine doses have been made available to Palestinians thus far, compared with millions of Israelis who have already received two doses of the vaccine.

Measures taken by Arab Governments

- 1. Of the 22 Arab countries, at least six have declared a state of emergency in the context of the pandemic.** For example, emergency laws have been imposed in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the State of Palestine and Jordan. However, many countries already had some form of state of emergency in place before the pandemic. Furthermore, some of these declarations have deviated from the international standards governing states of emergency.
- 2. Several Arab countries have introduced promising measures to respond to violence against women, and enhance access to justice for women during the pandemic.** For example, in Jordan, an emergency response team, with female police officers at its core, was formed and trained to respond to the crisis, including by conducting home visits to gender-based violence survivors to safely refer them to essential services.⁶ Moreover,

2 UN-Women, IDLO, UNDP, UNODC, World Bank and Pathfinders, Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19, 2020.

3 ESCWA, UNDP, UNFPA and UN-Women, Gender justice and the law: Assessment of laws affecting gender equality in the Arab States region, 2018.

4 UN-Women, Rapid assessment: The effects of COVID-19 on violence against women and gendered social norms, 2020.

5 United Nations, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women, 2020.

6 UNDP and UN-Women, COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker.

Digital services to access justice in Morocco

Digital services are provided by the Moroccan Ministry of Justice via a website (www.mahakim.ma), which allows users to file a complaint via email. A system was also developed to link telephone hotlines to all courts, complemented by a mobile application that allows victims to submit complaints urgently, without having to present themselves in person at a court or at a police station.

some Arab countries have provided alternative ways to exceptionally continue the administration of justice for cases related to women. For example, the Egyptian Ministry of Justice has suspended

work in courts, but exceptionally proceeded with family court cases. In Lebanon, the justice sector now supports online testimonies and case management.

Most at risk of being left behind

The further weakening of institutions as they struggle under the weight of multiple crises will adversely impact the rights and wellbeing of individuals, and exacerbate social and political unrest. The reverberations could affect the trajectory of inclusive and sustainable development for generations, and threaten fragile peace and security, where they exists. A detailed review of the Arab region revealed that SDG 16 targets will not be met by 2030 for the following social groups,⁷ whose vulnerability has been amplified by the pandemic.



Groups and individuals subject to discrimination on the basis of identity or status will be at further risk of being left behind. For example, more vulnerable migrants and persons with disabilities are not only disproportionately disadvantaged by the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic and its containment measures, but are also at greater risk of discrimination in accessing health care and life-saving procedures.



Forcibly displaced persons, including tens of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic. In the overcrowded camps and informal settlements that house the vast majority of displaced persons, incomes have shrunk significantly, services remain stretched beyond capacity, the prices of essential goods such as food and soap have skyrocketed, water

supplies are dwindling, malnutrition is rising, and the space needed for physical distancing is non-existent. Moreover, refugees and IDPs are being scapegoated as vectors of infection, further compounding their plight.⁸



Women in the region remain largely under-represented in political processes and institutions, including formal peace processes. Moreover, the pandemic has exacerbated their vulnerability to violence, limited their access to justice, and amplified gender-based discrimination. Even with tentative gains, including 28 per cent representation of women in the Syrian constitutional committee, and women's engagement in the Libyan and Yemeni peace processes, equal participation has yet to be achieved, despite evidence that women's participation in peace processes increases the likelihood of lasting peace.



The Palestinian people continue to suffer from Israeli policies and practices that compound their social and economic hardships, including the limited capacity of the health sector to combat the pandemic. By the end of 2020, almost half of Palestinians living under occupation (2.45 million people) needed at least one type of humanitarian assistance;⁹ unemployment in the third quarter of 2020 stood at 27.8 per cent (48.6 per cent in Gaza); and two million Palestinians are projected to be severely or moderately food insecure in 2021 (an increase of 300,000 compared with 2019).

7 ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

8 ESCWA, COVID-19, Conflict and Risks in the Arab Region, 2020, pp. 4-5.

9 OCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan, 2021.

Policy recommendations for ensuring an inclusive recovery and achieving SDG 16 by 2030

The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 identifies the following recommendations to accelerate the achievement of SDG 16 in the region and support

action on other SDGs. These recommendations also facilitate the COVID-19 recovery and enhance resilience to future shocks and crises.¹⁰

Intensify efforts to build effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels, including in local government

Uphold the rule of law, fight corruption and promote civil liberties

Expand civic space and encourage a vibrant civic culture, and engage civil society organizations

Support all efforts to advance human rights as social values

Increase efforts to de-escalate conflict and address its root causes

Ensure the full realization of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, including Palestinian refugees

Strengthen the capacity of local and national institutions in conflict or fragile contexts to address the impact of the pandemic and the numerous challenges posed by simultaneous humanitarian crisis, underdevelopment and conflict

Ensure the inclusion of all community members under local governance in designing the COVID-19 response

Enhance communication on crises, government transparency and resource mobilization during and in response to crises, so as to mitigate their impact and establish and strengthen channels for trust building and citizen engagement

¹⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of these recommendations, see ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.



Key facts on SDG 16

ARAB REGION

WORLD

Bribery incidence



20% of firms experienced at least one bribery payment in 2019

17% of firms experienced at least one bribery payment in 2019

Proportion of children aged 1-14 years who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers



83% of children experienced violence towards them in 2019

79% of children experienced violence towards them in 2019

Countries with national human rights institutions in compliance with the Paris Principles



23% of countries were in full compliance with Paris Principles in 2019

40% of countries were in full compliance with Paris Principles in 2019

+5% since 2000

+5% since 2000

(Calculated by ESCWA Statistics Division)

Source: ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor. <http://arabsdgmonitor.unescwa.org>. (Figures have been rounded).