



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life

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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)
The League of Arab States (LAS) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**

Consultative Meeting on the Environmental Dimension of the Sustainable Development Agenda: The Role of Nature-Based Solutions in Biodiversity Conservation, Combating Desertification and Strengthening Resilience in the Arab Region

Online, Wednesday, 16 February 2022

INFORMATION NOTE**I. Background**

Within the framework of achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has been cooperating with regional partners since 2014, in organizing annual sessions for the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development (AFSD)¹ which is convened yearly to support the regional preparations for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)² of the year.

In preparation for the AFSD, the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment (CAMRE) requests the League of Arab States (LAS) Secretariat, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and ESCWA to organize a regional preparatory meeting on the environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to inform regional and global processes in preparation for the HLPF.

In this regard, CAMRE adopted resolution 600 during its 32nd regular session in October 2021 that “Calls on the Technical Secretariat of CAMRE, in cooperation and coordination with ESCWA and UNEP Regional Office for West Asia, and also in cooperation with relevant Arab and regional organizations and NGOs, to follow-up on the implementation of activities and programs of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda, particularly those related to the environment and natural resources priorities in the Arab region, and calls upon them to organize preparatory meetings to discuss these issues and prepare CAMRE’s contributions to AFSD2022 and HLPF2022, as well as present a report on the implementation of this resolution to the upcoming CAMRE session”

¹ The 2022 AFSD will be held under the theme “Recovery and Resilience”, on the 15-17 March 2022 <http://afsd-2022.unescwa.org>

² The 2022 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, “Building back better from the corona virus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, will be held from Tuesday 5 July to Friday 15 July 2022, under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf#hlpf2022>

In line with the AFSD2022 theme “Recovery and Resilience”, ESCWA in cooperation with UNEP-ROWA and LAS are organizing, a regional consultation meeting around SDG15 on the 16th of February 2022 titled “Environmental Dimension of the Sustainable Development Agenda: The Role of Nature-Based Solutions in Biodiversity Conservation, Combating Desertification & Strengthening Resilience in the Arab Region”

The consultative meeting will present an opportunity to consider ways to broaden and accelerate progress in the implementation of SDG15 and the necessary transformations and interventions to reduce the loss of natural resources and biodiversity. It will be also guided by the recommendations of the "Arab Working Group on the implementation of biodiversity and desertification related Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)", which will be held from 31 January to February 4, 2022.

The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020³ shows that achieving the sustainable development goals, including Goal 15 (Life on Land), faces various obstacles in the Arab region. The region suffers from a continued population growth, the negative impact of climate change, and biodiversity loss as a result of rapid urbanization, and land reclamation and encroachment on fragile natural habitats. This has led to the exacerbation of desertification coupled with the depletion of natural resources and to a number of interrelated negative effects. Conflicts in some regions also negatively affect land use and ecosystems. Levels of protected terrestrial and freshwater key biodiversity areas are well below global averages.

The Arab region made modest progress on few of the targets within SDG15, and additional efforts are needed to be back on track towards achieving that goal. In specific, the region falls short on five targets of SDG15 that should have been achieved by 2020, namely target 15-1, 15-2, 15-5, 15-8 and 15.9. Major gaps remain in the assessment and tracking of land degradation (target 15-3), the illegal wildlife trade (target 15-7), and measures to prevent the threat of invasive alien species (target 15.8). These are essential to achieve SDG15 and are crucial to preserve regional ecosystems. Land degradation and desertification pose major threats to biodiversity, food security and livelihoods in the region, as more than 90% of the land in the Arab region is classified as arid or very arid with limited rainfall, while 73% of the limited arable land is being affected by land degradation. The region also lost 6.3% of its total forest cover between 2000 and 2015, amounting to a total of 2.55 million hectares, and most of these losses occurred in the regional Least Developed Countries. The regional economic cost of land degradation is estimated at \$9 billion annually (i.e., between 2% and 7 % of individual countries' GDP). These factors constitute additional challenges to achieving the SDGs and more particularly SDG15, and therefore threaten regional socio economic and environmental stability.

Reversing the current environmental degradation and loss through policy change, identification of solid action-based reforms and the adoption of radical transformation in some practices are necessary to overcome the underlying challenges preventing the region from achieving SDG15 and other inter-linked SDGs, to accomplish the desired transformation and ensure human dignity and wellbeing of people in the Arab region.

³ [The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 \(ASDR 2020\)](#), E/ESCWA/SDD/2019/2.

II. Objectives and Processes

The Regional Consultative Meeting aims to exchange views and experiences on addressing the persisting regional challenges hindering the attainment of Goal 15 through enhancing nature-based solutions. The discussions will address issues related to conserving biodiversity, combating desertification and addressing climate change in the Arab region.

The meeting, guided by the experiences of all stakeholders from the public and private sectors and civil society, will seek to address priority issues and discuss the best ways to bring about the desired changes. The focus will be on policies aimed at reducing biodiversity loss and combating desertification and the risks arising therefrom, proposing concrete and innovative solutions, and supporting regional partnership.

The meeting will result in an outcome document that include key messages and recommendations on the different paths to accelerate implementation of SDG15. The key messages are based on regional views related to biodiversity conservation and combating land degradation and desertification to enhance the resilience of the Arab region.

The outcome document will be submitted as an input to the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development 2022 (15-17 March 2022) and will inform the regional input to HLPF2022 (5-15 July 2022). Finally, the outcome document will also be presented to the upcoming session of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment in 2022.

III. Thematic Areas

The discussions of the regional consultative meeting will focus on SDG15 to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and curb biodiversity loss.

Accordingly, discussions will focus on the thematic areas listed below, and will cover enhancing regional cooperation and building partnerships between stakeholders in decision-making processes. This will contribute to the bring about transformational change that takes into account marginalized groups, especially in rural areas (women, youth, internally displaced persons, refugees, people of determination, etc.)

- **Combating land degradation and desertification:**

Land degradation, desertification, and drought threaten a wide range of ecosystem services that conserve plant species and animal breeds in support to agricultural productivity and food security in the Arab region. Therefore, this can result in adverse negative effects on the economic and social development of countries of the region. The phenomenon of land degradation in the Arab region has exacerbated and led to reductions in agricultural land, increased displacement, and biodiversity loss. Sound land management and the availability of traditional/indigenous knowledge and practices are often proven measures for the conservation and sustainable use of plant species and animal breeds and are important for ecosystem conservation and progress towards Goal 15 and Goal 2 on food security.

During the meeting, discussions will cover the impact and consequences of land degradation, desertification, and water mismanagement on wildlife and food security in the Arab region. In addition, discussions will take place on drivers and innovative solutions to conserve natural ecosystems and ensure their long-term viability within the framework of the United Nations Decade for Ecosystem Restoration.

The meeting will also consider a set of related resolutions that will be discussed during the fifth session of the United Nations Assembly (February 28 - March 2, 2022).

- **Nature-based solutions:**

Nature-based solutions play a key role in achieving sustainable development goals and Goal 15 in particular and demand a forward-looking vision, as they encompass shared social, economic and environmental benefits. The adoption of such solutions helps ecosystem restoration and conservation, reduces biodiversity loss, addresses land degradation and desertification, and curbs climate change. It also enhances the capabilities of the Arab region to address environmental challenges by working in harmony with nature. For example, current trends in natural resource practices in the Arab region represent a broader challenge because they, in turn, affect the ability of populations to adapt to climate change and may lead to mass migration and internal displacement, and to conflict within and between countries.

During the meeting, the importance of adopting innovative nature-based solutions and investing on the various benefits and opportunities they offer, while sustainably managing resources, will be discussed. This will help to develop a forward-looking vision to limit the exacerbation of climate change and land degradation and support biodiversity conservation and use in the long term, for sustainable rural livelihoods.

- **Interlinkages between biodiversity conservation and selected sectors addressing related environmental challenges**

Biodiversity is affected by climate change and developments in various important sectors, including agriculture, water, and energy, through several factors, including land use practices, over-exploitation of natural resources, and the substitution of food crops with crops for biofuel production. The impact of affects biodiversity conservation, food security, and health. Some negative impacts may result from the infrastructure needed for these sectors, some of which lead to the emission of polluting elements such as foreign gases and others. Wind power plants may negatively affect birdlife, degrading the surrounding environment and disrupting ecosystems, thus exacerbating climate change. The negative repercussions on land life and plant diversity may also affect socio-economic conditions and food security.

This part will cover the interlinkages between biodiversity and selected sectors. It will discuss the importance of integrating or mainstreaming a biodiversity perspective in sectoral activities in the Arab region, as well as address areas related to impact assessments and ways to mitigate the direct or indirect negative repercussions of the energy, water and agriculture sectors on biodiversity. It will also tackle issues related to policy frameworks for sustainable consumption and production. The discussions will contribute to biodiversity conservation and will ensure benefits for all rather than the current practices in these areas.

IV. Organizational issues

A. Participants

The regional consultation will gather government experts from the Arab countries, practitioners, and advocate of the environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as concerned regional organizations.

Other regional stakeholders and experts, members of the “Arab Working Group on the implementation of biodiversity and desertification related Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)” will also be invited to contribute to its discussions.

B. Partners

The regional consultation is organized in partnership between CAMRE Technical Secretariat, ESCWA and UNEP-ROWA, under the umbrella of CAMRE process, and in implementation of resolution 600, adopted during the Council's 32nd regular session which was held in October 2021.

C. Date and venue

The meeting will be held virtually on Wednesday, 16 February 2022

D. Language

The meeting will be conducted in Arabic and English languages. Interpretation will be provided.

E. Registration

Invited participants are asked to register to this meeting using [this link](#) by **11 February 2022**, and to use the same link to join the virtual event.

F. Correspondence

Queries related to the meeting should be directed to the following counterparts:

<u>United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)</u>	<u>UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Regional Office for West Asia</u>	<u>The Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment (CAMRE)</u>
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