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SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE POLICIES OF ARAB STATES

**INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE AND ACCESS
TO NATURAL RESOURCES**

I. BACKGROUND

1. The issue of intergenerational social justice lies at the heart of sustainable development. If social justice is understood as a means of reducing all forms of inequality in a society, then the issue of management of, and access to, natural resources is certainly a contributing factor towards achieving this goal. Achieving balance between the needs of the current generation and those of future generations is a complex question, which depends to a large extent on the abundance or scarcity of a resource. While it is less critical in the case of renewable resources, unless they are polluted to the extent that renders them useless and even harmful, it becomes more complex when a natural resource is limited and non-renewable.
2. Managing non-renewable natural resources in a manner that ensures their benefits for future generations means either limiting extraction so as to maintain reserves for future use, or converting some resources into sovereign wealth funds or economic capital reserved for future generations. Although some Arab countries are enjoying economic prosperity from the sale of oil and gas, the current elevated population growth rates associated with unsustainable patterns of consumption and undiversified economies entail that the availability of such vital resources in the same quantity and quality for future generations is highly threatened. This situation becomes even more complicated when considering non-renewable water resources.
3. While the economic and financial returns from oil and gas are tangible and can partially be reserved for future generations, there remains a lack of consensus on how to value or quantify the use of water for present and future generations. With the current trend in population growth, many countries are mining groundwater resources beyond their rate of replenishment. Moreover, the rights of future generations to non-renewable water resources are being violated by the current unsustainable usage pattern.
4. Energy resources are also being overexploited, even in net oil and gas exporting countries, in a context of increasing energy consumption coupled with low energy efficiency levels. On the basis of these trends, and in the absence of serious corrective measures and a sizeable introduction of renewables into the energy mix, most available oil and gas resources will be used domestically, thus depriving future generations in Arab countries from the revenues that could otherwise be generated by these resources.
5. Panel 3 will look into various aspects of social justice in relation to the use of and access to natural resources, on the basis of a proposed set of questions.

II. KEY ISSUES

A. ACCESS TO ENERGY

6. Many Arab countries are among the world's largest producers and exporters of hydrocarbon products. In 2011, the Arab region exported more than 35 per cent of the world's crude oil and 20 per cent of its natural gas. For the same year, its share of proven world reserves exceeded 48 per cent for oil and 28 per cent for natural gas. Yet energy resources are unequally distributed among Arab countries and, in most cases, are not used in a sustainable manner. For instance, Arab countries use about twice the amount of energy that European countries use to produce the same amount of gross domestic product (GDP). Furthermore, a remarkable increase in electrical demands took place in recent years, pushing the region to plan for a sharp increase in power plants' production capacities, with many countries considering the introduction of nuclear energy in their energy mix. The demand on electrical energy in the Arab region is expected to practically double by 2020 compared to its 2012 level, necessitating a comparable increase in electrical energy generation.
7. These trends can have critical implications for both oil and gas exporting and non-exporting countries. For Arab countries with incomes heavily skewed towards oil and gas revenues, any substantial reduction in hydrocarbon products destined for export will result in a dramatic fall in potential revenues, which also poses

a significant risk for future generations that may not benefit from these resources. Arab countries that are already net importers of energy will face a more critical situation, becoming more vulnerable to international energy price fluctuations and energy insecurity.

B. ACCESS TO WATER

8. To meet its water demand, the Arab region relies on renewable water resources and non-renewable surface and groundwater resources, with more than half coming from outside the region. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the demand for water is met from unconventional sources, mainly desalination for domestic uses and treated wastewater for irrigation. The situation is critical in the water scarce Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, where non-renewable groundwater resources form the majority of the natural water resources available.

9. In addition, access to water for irrigation, drinking and sanitation varies significantly among and within the countries of the region. The least developed Arab countries, such as Mauritania, Somalia and the Sudan, record less than 55 per cent access to improved water sources and sanitation facilities. In Yemen, farmers have deepened their wells by an average of 50 meters over the past 12 years, while the amount of water they are able to extract has dropped by two thirds. In Palestine, Amnesty International estimates that some 180,000-200,000 Palestinians living in rural communities have no access to running water, owing to Israeli discriminatory policies, and the Israeli army often prevents them from collecting rainwater. Similarly, significant rural-urban inequalities in access to improved water sources exist within countries, with 92 per cent in urban areas compared to 73 per cent in rural areas. Access to improved sanitation facilities follows the same trend: 91 per cent in urban localities and 65 per cent in rural areas.

C. ACCESS TO LAND

10. Although the contribution of agriculture to GDP is rather low in almost all Arab countries, the agricultural sector remains an important and sensitive sector as it provides employment to rural populations and contributes to the food security of rural and urban areas in the Arab region. At the country level, employment in agriculture varies from a maximum of 40 per cent in Morocco to as low as 1-6 per cent in Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Employment in agriculture has also displayed a declining trend in the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Given that around 45 per cent of the Arab population is rural, higher unemployment and low economic productivity of agriculture render rural communities most vulnerable to poverty. Therefore, all measures that contribute to higher economic productivity in agriculture also contribute to the welfare of the rural poor, and thus to social justice. Despite mixed results of past agrarian and land reform programmes in some Arab countries, success stories in other countries of the world, including Malaysia and South Korea, show a positive contribution to social equality and provide lessons that can be learned.

III. OBJECTIVES

11. Panel 3 aims to provide a platform for dialogue and for exchanging lessons learned among Arab leaders and prominent regional and international thinkers on the relationship between social and intergenerational justice, natural resources and sustainable development. The goal is to articulate a clearer regional vision on how to efficiently manage natural resources through a holistic intersectoral and long-term perspective, so as to secure the rights of future generations to these resources.

12. More specifically, the session aims to undertake the following:

(a) Highlight the linkages between the use of, and access to, natural resources, poverty alleviation, economic growth and social equality within the scope of intergenerational justice and the three pillars of sustainable development;

(b) Reflect on the relationship between natural resources and social justice within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals, the sustainable development goals and the post-2015 development agenda by moving from the narrow economic growth paradigm towards a broader human development and rights-based approach;

(c) Address the role of sustainable access to land, water and energy resources and services in poverty alleviation and discuss potential alternatives to enhance resource sustainability, food security and the welfare of populations through an integrated approach;

(d) Address the issue of intergenerational justice and security by discussing the participation and empowerment of different social groups; the relationship between governance, intergenerational justice and security; and modalities to ensure the right of future generations to access natural resources, including through sovereign funds.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

13. The following are the suggested discussion questions:

(a) How to ensure the promotion of natural resources as a human right and achieve their fair distribution?

(b) What were the main shortfalls of the Millennium Development Goals in terms of the sustainability of natural resources for future generations in an equitable way? What added value do the proposed post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development goals bring to the development path and discourse?

(c) How can the environment and natural resources (water, energy and land) be enablers for sustainable development?

(d) How to achieve a fair and just allocation system of water rights and ensure resource sustainability? How to develop water allocation systems that ensure integrated water resource management?

(e) How to establish a fair and just system for the allocation of energy resources across sectors, regions and beneficiary groups and ensure resource sustainability? How to ensure that energy use, development and investment have a direct bearing on human and social development? How to address the issue of energy subsidies reform to achieve economic benefits and ensure social justice?

(f) How would decentralized/participatory approaches involving local stakeholders in the planning, development and management of natural resources, such as water, help in ensuring more efficient natural resource management?

(g) What role can green technologies play to enhance resource sustainability?

(h) How to secure land access for the poor through legal tenure and protected ownership to increase productivity?

(i) What is the role of governance in the natural resource social and intergenerational justice nexus?

(j) What modalities can be adopted to ensure natural resource security for future generations, whether physically or through accumulated wealth from their present use (e.g. sovereign funds)?

V. PARTICIPANTS

14. The plenary session will comprise high-level representatives from member States, senior policymakers, prominent academic thinkers and representatives from the private sector, the United Nations system and civil society.

VI. LANGUAGES

15. The discussion will be conducted in Arabic and English, with simultaneous interpretation

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