

Statement by Ms. Rola Dashti,
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations
and Executive Secretary of ESCWA

Opening of the 2019 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development

United Nations House, Beirut

Tuesday, 9 April 2019

His excellency Saad Hariri, Prime Minister of Lebanon, represented by your excellency Bahia Hariri,

Your excellency Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States,

Your excellency Nouri al-Dulaimi, Minister of Planning of Iraq,

Ms. Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of ESCWA, I would like to welcome you all to the United Nations House in Beirut. I warmly thank Prime Minister Saad Hariri, represented by Ms. Bahia Hariri, for his continued support. I would also like to thank Lebanon for chairing the 2018 Arab Forum for Sustainable Development, which Iraq is kindly chairing this year.

We meet today on yet another occasion to renew our strong partnership with the League of Arab States, the United Nations family, the civil society and private sector. This Forum embodies a spirit of collaboration and integration that is no longer an option, but an absolute necessity. An integration that reflects the underlying ethos of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which promises to 'leave no one behind'.

We come together today at a Forum hosted annually by ESCWA to examine the state of sustainable development in our region. We meet under the theme "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality in the Arab region", to analyse the situation, forge solutions, and explore pathways for the region and its citizens to be on the right development track.

Distinguished guests,

Arab States' voluntary national reviews reveal progress that calls for optimism.

Most States have adopted long-term development plans and more inclusive approaches. They have made progress in education, in formulating environmental protection policies, and in enshrining human rights in constitutions. Our region is enriched with 100 million young people who are capable of advancing society and transforming our world, if given the opportunity to be more actively involved in the economy and in politics.

Despite progress made, there is still a long way to go to achieve inclusive, fair and sustainable development. Climate change and water scarcity threaten the region's stability. Multi-dimensional poverty affects 40 per cent of the population. Youth unemployment is at 30 per cent, the highest worldwide. The middle class, the backbone of societies, is being eroded. Stark income disparities exist in some Arab countries. The number of persons with disabilities has reached 11 million, with potential daily increases as a result of conflicts. The number of older persons will exceed 100 million by 2050, ageing under weak social protection systems in most Arab countries.

War and conflict. Displacement and expatriation. The longest occupation in modern history. Rapid transformations and changes, which know no borders and redraw our region's features.

ESCWA is keeping pace with those rapid developments. It has adopted a comprehensive view that draws its strength from collaboration with the League of Arab States, United Nations development entities, the revamped Resident Coordinator system, regional organizations, civil society and the private sector.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Young people are our opportunity for renewal. I am pleased to announce that we recently established Young ESCWA. Our vision is to involve young people in internal reforms, aimed at revitalizing ESCWA, updating its working methods, and increasing its effectiveness and efficiency to make it fit for purpose. ESCWA is striving to be a modern, flexible, youthful and reinvigorated institution, which keeps step with rapid developments. We will adopt new technologies and innovation to implement our vision and improve our working methods. Our objective, under the United Nations development system and in collaboration with resident coordinators, is to provide more relevant services to the Arab region and its peoples, so as to help them build entrepreneurial and knowledge societies, transition towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and confidently move forward with a clear direction of travel in their development paths. This approach is based on a firm belief that the region holds enormous potential and opportunities.

Distinguished guests,

A society cannot prosper without human dignity and social justice. In our region, many people continue to be left behind. Today, we highlight their

plight with photographs that remind us of our human and ethical duty to protect their dignity and achieve social justice for them.

In conclusion, I invite you to work together, tenaciously and determinedly, to ensure a safe and promising future where no one is left behind. I am aware that we face great challenges, but our determination is greater. A determination driven by the strength of our women, the wisdom of our elders, the enthusiasm of our young people, and the passion of our children. Let us arm ourselves with the determination to advance our societies and ensure a brighter future for all.

Thank you.