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SDG 15

LIFE ON LAND

Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

The present background note was prepared by ESCWA, FAO, UNEP, the UNESCO Cairo Office, and UN-Habitat.

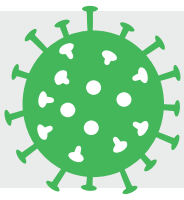
The planet is facing a complex crisis related to biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution. The Arab region is particularly vulnerable, being a climate and conflict hotspot. Climate change is exacerbating land degradation trends, threatening forest cover, and accelerating the expansion of drylands, which represent almost half of the total land area of the region. Climate change is also triggering irreversible shifts in species distribution and interactions. Wars in several Arab countries have resulted in the destruction of habitats, including rangelands and rain-fed farming ecosystems, and the loss of important plant and animal species, contributing to poverty, displacement and hunger.

Unsustainable economic activities, notably the over-exploitation of agricultural land beyond its productive capacity and the misuse of natural resources in agriculture, are major stress factors. Many areas of the region are locked in a vicious cycle where desertification and land degradation are causing a dramatic reduction in agriculture productivity, thus reducing income of vulnerable communities; accelerating the spread of invasive species, the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services; catalysing over-extraction of groundwater; and exacerbating conflict over scarce resources. Combined with rapid urbanization and encroachment on fragile natural habitats, these factors are progressively impacting human health, well-being, and resilience.

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SDG 15 has not yet been assessed, anecdotal evidence suggests that the crisis may have reshuffled government priorities, momentarily redirecting the attention of Arab Governments away from the protection, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. National fiscal constraints aggravated by the crisis may have further limited the resources available to finance forest management and biodiversity conservation actions, although the alignment of global funding with international conservation priorities was mostly maintained. The converging risks of the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic and pre-existing threats posed by climate change, pollution and ecological fragility represent a growing source of concern, especially for poor and vulnerable communities.

The COVID-19 recovery is a unique opportunity to build back greener. Coordinated and strategic regional planning, and greater investment in nature-based solutions, sustainable forest management, and landscape restoration are necessary to reverse the current trajectory of loss and degradation, ensure ecosystem resilience, and build social preparedness. The co-benefits in terms of human health, job creation, poverty reduction, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and food security are significant and largely outweigh the costs.[1]

Impact of COVID-19 on SDG 15 in the Arab region



When the pandemic hit, the Arab region was already witnessing land degradation and desertification, deterioration of ecosystems, and biodiversity loss, including in forests. The pandemic might have had direct and indirect impacts on terrestrial ecosystems, although a full assessment is yet to be undertaken. Given strong interlinkages in the region, regression on SDG 15 is expected to delay the achievement of other SDGs, notably SDG 1 on poverty reduction, SDG 2 on food security, SDG 6 on water, and SDG 7 on sustainable energy.

In its early phases, the COVID-19 outbreak might have temporarily halted economic activities with an environmental footprint, thus reducing stress on ecosystems. Restrictions on movement and an overall slowdown of the economy could have led to better opportunities for nature conservation and regeneration. Nonetheless, such positive impacts are expected to be temporary, with modest impact on long-term environmental quality.

The surge in water consumption and waste generation that accompanied the pandemic may have had negative effects on the ecosystems of the region, especially in countries with weak and already overstretched waste and wastewater management systems. The increasing amounts

1 OECD, Gender and the Environment: Building Evidence and Policies to Achieve the SDGs, 2021.

of medical and hazardous waste, plastic bottles, sanitization chemicals and disinfectants could have led to severe negative impacts on the environment and human health.

The pandemic has triggered financing challenges for SDG 15 activities. In the forest sector, for example, Maghreb countries witnessed a reduction in revenues (owing to loss of ecotourism, for instance) and decreased funding from development partners. The shrunken budget has delayed the achievement of sustainable forest management targets.[2] Reduced monitoring capacity was accompanied by an increase in the illegal harvesting of timber and non-timber forest products, and poaching and grazing in protected areas, as in the Atlas cedar forests in Morocco.

Positive impacts were observed in some cases. For example, some guesthouses located in the vicinity of biosphere reserves saw an increase in business from individuals seeking to isolate, and increased interest in nature-based activities partially compensated declines in ecotourism revenues, such as in Lebanon.[3] Organic farming and harvesting of wild plants were boosted, given the increased demand for healthy products marketed in guesthouses. This gave women a real opportunity for income generation, and fostered the development of e-commerce where women have worked on the production and marketing of traditional products, such as in Algeria and Tunisia.

Global funding was aligned with the needs emerging from the pandemic, and aimed to further support countries in advancing conservation priorities through the crisis. For example, the Global Environment Facility allocated additional funding to analyse the connection between infectious diseases, deforestation, and ecosystem fragmentation.[4]

The pandemic's impact on the forestry sector is affecting the livelihoods of many rural populations in the region. Movement restrictions and lockdowns have adversely affected local marketing and export of non-wood forest products (NWFPs), a major component of the forest subsector in the Near East and North Africa region. Businesses in this sector were negatively affected, whereas financial support and social protection programmes introduced in response to COVID-19 did not cover NWFPs businesses or other forest sectors.[5]

The pandemic has brought into focus the strong relationship between human and environmental health, highlighting that habitat destruction and the encroachment on ecosystems boundaries increase the risk of zoonotic infectious disease emergence and spread. This provides an opportunity to reflect on the choices to be made towards a sustainable and resilient recovery, and reinforces the need to scale up investments in healthy ecosystems.[6]

2 Alhassan Nantogmah Attah, Initial Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19 on Sustainable Forest Management: African States, 2020.

3 UNESCO, Working paper on Socio-economic Impacts of COVID 19 on biosphere reserves in the Arab region: An estimation of negative and positive externalities, 2021.

4 Global Environment Facility, GEF Council marks 30 years of results and looks to the future, 2021.

5 FAO, Policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis in the Near East and North Africa – keeping food and agriculture systems alive, 2021.

6 OECD, Gender and the Environment: Building Evidence and Policies to Achieve the SDGs, 2021.

Measures taken by Arab Governments

The COVID-19 crisis response in Arab countries has not explicitly focused on the protection and restoration of terrestrial ecosystems. However, some recent policy trends and projects are promising steps towards greener recovery, as follows:

1. **Several Arab countries have increased forest areas designated as biodiversity conservation zones.** The total area of forests with biodiversity conservation as a primary management objective has increased by 61.9 per cent in the last 30 years, rising to 19.8 per cent of the total forest area in the region in 2020.[7] Placing these forests under sustainable management regimes presents an important opportunity to protect biodiversity in the region. Another positive trend involves the establishment of stakeholder participation platforms for forest policy development in several Arab countries.

2. **Green belts have been used in the region to halt and reverse land degradation and desertification.** The Green Dam in Algeria is a prominent example. Stretching over 1,200 km across the country, the 3 million hectares plantation was first initiated in the 1970s.[8] In recent years, Algeria has sought to revive the project using new scientific approaches to protect gains from climate change. Other examples include the Great Green Wall of the Sahara and the Sahel in Africa, a collaborative effort involving eight Arab countries.

3. **Regional and inter-regional assessments and collaborations are ongoing to address global environmental concerns, such as sand and dust storms,** which have become increasingly problematic in the Arab region, notably in the Mashreq, owing to limited rainfall and to severe soil aridity and land degradation. In a recent example, Iraq and Kuwait embarked on a collaborative effort to identify and implement mitigating solutions, and enhance resilience against sand and dust storms.

4. **All Arab countries are signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention to Combat Desertification.** Their actions in connection with SDG 15 are typically framed by national strategies and action programmes related to those conventions.[9] Moreover, Arab countries strive to preserve their ecosystems and biodiversity under the auspices of the Arab Group on International Environmental Conventions on Combating Desertification and Biodiversity Loss of the League of Arab States.

The Middle East Green Initiative

Launched in October 2021 in Saudi Arabia, the initiative rallies regional collective action towards the achievement of ambitious targets: planting 50 billion trees across the Middle East; restoring an area equivalent to 200 million hectares of degraded land to capture 2.5 per cent of global carbon levels; and reducing carbon emissions resulting from hydrocarbon production in the region by more than 60 per cent, including through more sustainable transport systems. Under this initiative, Saudi Arabia has committed itself to planting 10 billion trees, and to expanding its protected areas to more than 30 per cent of total land area.

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Source: United Nations, Middle East Green Initiative: 'pathbreaking work' to protect the planet, 2021.

7 FAO, Global Forest Resource Assessment, 2020.

8 Ramzi Benhizia and others, "Monitoring the spatiotemporal evolution of the green dam in Djelfa province, Algeria", *Sustainability*, vol. 13, No. 14 (July 2021).

9 For example, 17 Arab countries have submitted national biodiversity strategies and action plans to date. Available at www.cbd.int/nbsap/about/latest/.

Most at risk of being left behind

The following groups are at particular risk of being left behind if Arab countries do not adopt solutions to the specific vulnerabilities they face, and which have been amplified by the pandemic.

Areas projected to experience significant negative effects from global environmental change are often home to indigenous peoples and other local communities. These groups already face several socioeconomic and environmental challenges because of historical inequities, have poor access to technological resources, and are nearly three times more likely to live in extreme poverty compared with their non-indigenous counterparts.[10]

Rural women constitute a large proportion of the agriculture workforce. Lacking social protection, they shoulder a disproportionate burden from land degradation and biodiversity loss, which affects their livelihoods.[11]

The Arab region faces substantial population displacement, which has dramatically affected productive lands in abandoned areas and areas of settlement, as productive land was either not cared for or overexploited, thereby removing it from productive activities. Refugees and the internally displaced assemble in makeshift camps usually built on farming lands in host countries, thereby negatively affecting ecosystems and the productive capacity of those lands.[12]

Small holder farmers and small businesses offering non-wood forest products rely on subsistence farming and the forest sector for their livelihoods, and are particularly vulnerable to reductions in ecosystem services, such as pollination, erosion and pest control, and water filtration.[13]

Countries in conflict and fragile contexts, including Iraq, Djibouti, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, witness persistent decimation of rangeland ecosystem-based agro-pastoral livelihoods and rain-fed farming, with more recurrent famine and displacement consequences. Conflicts are contaminating farmlands and rivers, and causing the loss of critical biodiversity species. Conflict and displacement also further weaken coping mechanisms and resilience in the face of environmental challenges.

Desertification and land degradation can prompt people from rural communities to migrate to cities, pressuring urban settlements. Such migrants tend to be become urban poor, and to live in informal settlements prone to natural disasters and climate risks including floods.

10 United Nations System, Common Approach to Integrating Biodiversity and Nature-based Solutions for Sustainable Development into United Nations Policy and Programme Planning and Delivery, 2021.

11 OECD, COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses, 2020.

12 ESCWA, Desertification and Drought Day, 2020.

13 ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

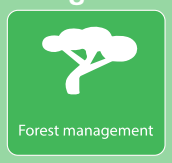
Policy recommendations for ensuring an inclusive recovery and achieving SDG 15 by 2030

The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 identified a series of recommendations to accelerate the achievement of SDG 15 in the region which, along with the following recommendations, can provide a road map for a green COVID-19 recovery, and enhance resilience to future shocks and crises.[14]

- Raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity, and the dangers of land degradation and forest loss.
- Make recovery efforts resilient by rethinking the environment's role in national development policies, with a greater focus on risk-informed development pathways.
- Invest in the strategic expansion and interconnectedness of the region's protected area network, including terrestrial, freshwater and mountainous key biodiversity areas.
- Introduce planning regimes that better account for biodiversity, ecosystem service provision, and climate change.
- Develop national ecosystem accounts and regional long-term environmental data collection and monitoring programmes to better inform decision-making.
- Develop legislative and policy frameworks and innovative financing mechanisms to support biodiversity conservation, while reflecting the interconnections between environmental, economic and social policies.
- Strengthen the science-policy interface, and build partnerships for strategic regional planning and knowledge generation and sharing.
- Integrate nature-based solutions in the post-COVID-19 recovery, by harnessing possible synergies with climate change action and enhancing co-benefits.
- Invest in sustainable forest management, scale up restoration of degraded ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots, and rehabilitate degraded agricultural lands.
- Strengthen institutional and regulatory capacities to help implement the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, and align national policies and strategies with the Global Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework.
- Use strategic environmental assessment tools as part of socioeconomic assessment processes.
- Build the resilience of ecosystems to the risks of climate change and natural hazards, so as to prevent the emergence of future zoonotic diseases that can trigger a global health emergency.
- Undertake regional and inter-regional assessments to better understand transboundary risks, including those resulting from sand and dust storms, and identify possible areas for regional collaboration to address them.
- Seize the opportunities provided by the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration to intensify restoration actions, and those provided by the Global Environment Facility, the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund and other accelerating and funding mechanisms to mobilize investments, including private investments, to support large-scale ecosystem restoration and climate action and the scaling up of sustainable land management practices.

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

Key facts on SDG 15

	Arab region	World
Forest area as a proportion of land area		
	**2.8** per cent (2020) **-0.54 per cent since 2000**	**31.2** per cent (2020) **-0.11 per cent since 2000**
Progress towards sustainable forest management		
	**-0.6** per cent was the net change rate in forest area (2020) **-2 per cent since 2010**	**-0.1** per cent was the net change rate in forest area (2020) **+0.73 per cent since 2010**
	33 per cent of forest area had a long-term management plan (2020) **+3 per cent since 2000**	**58.3** per cent of forest area had a long-term management plan (2020) **+0.57 per cent since 2000**
	18.1 per cent of legally established protected areas were forests (2020) **+2 per cent since 2000**	**17.8** per cent of legally established protected areas were forests (2020) **+1 per cent since 2000**
Mountain Green Cover Index		
	**29.6** per cent (2018) **+0.08 per cent since 2000**	**73** per cent (2018) **+0.01 per cent since 2000**
Countries that have adopted legislative, administrative and policy frameworks to ensure fair and equitable sharing of benefits		
	**81.8** per cent of countries were contracting parties to the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (PGRFA) (2021) **+0.57 per cent since 2012**	**61.2** per cent of countries were contracting parties to PGRFA (2021) **+2 per cent since 2012**
	**27.3** per cent of countries reported through the PGRFA Online Reporting System (2021) **+35 per cent since 2016**	**23.6** per cent of countries reported through the PGRFA Online Reporting System (2021) **+30 per cent since 2016**
	**23.8** per cent of countries reported to the Access and Benefit-Sharing Clearing-House (2012)	**26.6** per cent of countries reported to the Access and Benefit-Sharing Clearing-House (2020) **+53 per cent since 2015**

Source: ESCWA, Arab SDG Monitor.

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