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

Virtual, Wednesday 16 February 2022

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), organized in cooperation with the League of Arab States and the United Nations Environment Program/Regional Office for West Asia, a virtual consultative meeting on the “Environmental Dimension of the Sustainable Development Agenda: The Role of Nature-Based Solutions in Combating Desertification, Conserving Biodiversity and Strengthening Resilience in the Arab Region”. The meeting, which was organized on 16 February 2022 aimed at exchanging views, experiences and expertise on accelerating progress in implementing SDG15 through promoting nature-based solutions.

The meeting discussed regional priorities needed for accelerating progress in implementing SDG15 in the Arab region taking into account the interconnectedness with SDG13 on climate action and SDG7 on clean and affordable energy. The meeting addressed the negative social and economic impacts of biodiversity loss, land degradation and drought, with particular emphasis on the effects on livelihoods of people in rural areas.

The meeting resulted in this outcome document which includes a set of key messages that reflect regional views on the different needed tracks to accelerate achievement of SDG15 in the Arab region. This document was also guided by recommendations of the twentieth meeting of the Arab Group concerned with International Environmental Agreements to Combat Desertification and Biodiversity of the League of Arab States. This document will be submitted to the 2022 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development (15-17 March 2022) and supports regional inputs for the 2022 HLPF session (5-15 July 2022). Finally, messages and findings will also be presented to the next session of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment in 2022.

More than 150 participants from 18 Arab countries participated in the meeting, and included representatives of governments, academic institutions, regional and international organizations, the Arab Group concerned with International Environmental Agreements to Combat Desertification and Biodiversity, civil society organizations, youth and persons with disabilities.

A- The region’s current situation and achieving SDG 15

The Arab region is suffering from an accelerated loss of arable land and biodiversity, and it is facing various obstacles hindering the achievement of the SDG15 targets. It is estimated that 90%



of biodiversity loss and water stress are caused by resources extraction and processing¹, and more than 90% of land in the region is classified as arid or hyper-arid with very limited rainfall². The region has also lost 6.3% of its forest cover from 2000 to 2015, and the economic cost of land degradation has been estimated at \$9 billion per year³.

- The Arab region is rich in biodiversity in terms of species and numbers and those have adapted to human and natural threats over the years. However, threats affecting biodiversity are constantly increasing and the scope of interventions must be expanded to preserve biodiversity and thus ensure the continuity of key ecosystem services that are essential for life and sustainable development in the Arab region.
- The region contributed to supporting the global biodiversity conservation trend and reducing land degradation and mitigating the impacts of climate change by hosting the 14th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UN Convention on Biodiversity, and the G20 meetings for the year 2020. It will also be hosting the 27th and 28th Conference of the Parties of the UN Convention on Climate Change.
- Promising regional and national initiatives exist, and they aim at reducing land degradation, preserving biodiversity and mitigating climate change impacts. Those include, among others: the Arab Regional Strategy to Support Implementation of the Strategic Global Framework to Combat Desertification (2018-2030); the Arab Strategy for the Sustainable Management of Pastoral Resources (2020–2040); the Middle East Green Initiative (MGI) launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2021; the Green Dam project in Algeria as part of the African Great Green Wall Initiative; the Egyptian initiative for a coherent approach to addressing biodiversity loss, climate change, land and ecosystem degradation; the Mesopotamia revitalization project in Iraq aiming to mitigate the impacts of climate change; and other relevant initiatives.

B- The Arab region's requirements to progress towards achieving SDG 15

- Strengthen regional partnerships- including South - South cooperation and triangular cooperation - to support regional planning and to increase knowledge and experience sharing along and good practices on transboundary issues of combating desertification and biodiversity conservation.
- Develop and enact legislations and laws to prosecute aggressors on environmental systems and agricultural lands, and to halt environmental violations resulting from armed

¹ Global Resources Outlook 2019. <https://www.resourcepanel.org/reports/global-resources-outlook>

² https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/desertification-drought-day-2020-food-feed-fibre-english_0.pdf

³ ASDR 2020 <https://asdr.unescwa.org/sdgs/pdf/en/ASDR2020-SDGs/ASDR2020-SDG15.pdf>



conflicts and occupation, particularly in Palestine, noting the difficulty in implementing such laws in countries experiencing armed conflicts and tensions.

- Invest in expanding and managing protected areas in the region, including terrestrial, mountain and freshwater ecosystems, and in rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots to support regional social and economic development, in particular poverty and unemployment reduction.
- Include issues related to circular economy, climate change, desertification, biodiversity and enhancing resilience in national plans and sustainable development frameworks.
- Apply appropriate sustainability criteria when developing plans that transform the region towards relying on renewable energy to guarantee the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity, while simultaneously meeting the population's energy needs.
- Degraded lands reclamation and restoration is a shared responsibility that includes governments, land users (farmers), civil society organizations and others, with the need to promote the participation of Arab youth as future leaders in these efforts.
- Benefit from opportunities offered by global mobilization within the interconnected and synergistic tools of the various international agreements: the Sustainable Development Agenda of 2030, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Convention on Land Degradation, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration, the Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework, and the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Change in addition to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.
- Benefit from global mobilization and align relevant national policies and strategies with global trends, and achieve serious political commitment to halt the deterioration of environmental systems, in addition to undertaking strategic planning and management by Arab countries.
- Adopt the "Build Back Better" initiative and put-up measures to implement the United Nations Decade for Ecosystem Restoration.
- Incorporate Nature-Based Solutions into post-Covid-19 recovery plans, including those related to climate change, and strengthen countries' reliance on these solutions which achieve synergies in biodiversity conservation, combating desertification and land degradation and mitigating the effects of drought.
- Develop mechanisms that strengthen the science-policy interface towards adopting a "participatory approach" that includes different groups and spectrums of society in planning, budgeting and implementing initiatives and projects to combat desertification and preserve biodiversity, including the private sector, rural population, women, youth and people with disabilities.



- Use and incorporate traditional and indigenous knowledge and practices into modern technologies, while focusing on managing and sustaining natural resources and conserving indigenous (local) plants, trees and seeds for each area.

C- Accelerators for achievement of SDG 15 in the Region:

- Develop national policies and legislations supporting the preservation of ecosystems and lands, and develop innovative mechanisms to finance related projects.
- Strengthen the role of accountability in all initiatives aiming to preserve nature and biodiversity, which ensures liability and confidence-building regarding the initiatives' goals. Monitoring, reporting and verification efforts must be intensified in this context, and linked to an information system that supports the collection of environmental data in an integrated manner, and the development of national environmental accounts.
- Adopt and invest in green technologies for agricultural production along the supply chain to reduce the depletion and degradation of natural resources, and to invest in digital techniques.
- Include nature-based solutions in national and local development programs to build back better.
- Strengthen programs that support rural women and that enhance their skills and knowledge, as they play an essential role in the conservation of land, soil and biodiversity.
- Provide incentives to promote research and development to facilitate the transition towards a circular economy, thus ensuring increased resilience to climate change and disaster risk reduction.
- Increase national and regional investments to implement Arab countries commitments to reduce biodiversity loss and land degradation and mitigate the effects of drought, especially in the least developed Arab countries and countries experiencing occupation and conflict and suffering from severe water scarcity.
- Focus on environmental guidance and awareness programs, develop and integrate environmental concepts in educational curricula.
- Support and guide Arab youth entrepreneurs in projects related to biodiversity conservation, and promote projects in the field of medicinal plant cultivation and beekeeping, especially in arid and semi-arid areas while facilitating the access of youth to land.