

المنتدى العربي للتنمية المستدامة
إسراع العمل نحو خطة عام 2030 ما بعد كوفيد

29-31 March 2021 – 2021 آذار/مارس 29-31



17 PARTNERSHIPS
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SDG 17

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Strengthen the means of implementation
and revitalize the global partnership
for sustainable development: data

Relevant, timely and usable data are essential for countries to set priorities, make informed choices and implement better policies for sustainable development. Arab countries, through their national statistical offices, are making significant efforts to produce data to inform and monitor the implementation of the SDGs and national priorities. Considerable progress in data availability has been recorded in recent years. Arab countries are also increasingly using voluntary national reviews as opportunities to broaden the scope of data collection and enhance data quality.

However, large gaps in data availability still exist in several areas related to sustainable development. Key challenges also include the quality and frequency of the statistical information produced nationally, and their international comparability, as well as data transparency and accessibility.

The lack of comparable and disaggregated data on people with disabilities, older persons, women, girls and other marginalized groups is a critical development issue in the Arab region. Without robust data, it is not possible to adequately plan and allocate the resources necessary to ensure that programmes and services achieve their objectives and reach the intended population groups. This effectively limits countries' ability to respond to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to prioritize action and resources, and to design responsive measures that leave no one behind. Consequently, the production of timely high-quality disaggregated data is not only a technical pillar for achieving the 2030 Agenda, but also a political one as it is fundamental to ensuring inclusivity and justice and to enhancing institutional and societal resilience to future shocks.

Impact of COVID-19 on data collection in the Arab region



The functioning of national statistical offices has been heavily impacted across the region.¹ Lockdown and emergency measures have impacted the work of statistical offices, especially operations requiring field data collection. The pandemic has halted also operations for household surveys and censuses. Around 80 per cent of national statistical offices have fully or partially stopped face-to-face data collection as a result of the crisis. Only 20 per cent have continued preparatory work activities for the population census, with 80 per cent postponing until after 2021 or not announcing plans for resumption. Moreover, 69 per cent of countries indicated that the pandemic had negatively impacted their ability to work on price statistics.

In addition, several disruptions were witnessed to 2030 Agenda frameworks of cooperation, coordination

mechanisms, and partnerships with line ministries, private producers and funding entities, including efforts to monitor SDG data. Such disruptions have been compounded by instability in some Arab countries, namely Libya, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen. Across the region, this disruption was further exacerbated as efforts were diverted towards rapid and humanitarian responses to address the implications of COVID-19. This has slowed efforts towards harmonized statistical frameworks linked to long-term national development plans.

The complex crises unleashed by the pandemic have highlighted existing data gaps, and the importance of coordination and data sharing between various ministries and institutions. A cohesive and integrated statistical system that leaves no one behind was

¹ ESCWA, Effect of COVID-19 on price and expenditure statistics, 2020; and the World Bank, Monitoring the state of statistical operations under the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020.

absent in most Arab countries, causing difficulties in effectively responding to the crisis. The pandemic has also highlighted the need for new indicators that measure the ability to produce rapid assessments at

any time. This was particularly evident with regard to socioeconomic data for the health sector, whose availability would have increased the effectiveness of efforts to address the health crisis.

Measures taken by Arab Governments

National statistical offices across the region have adapted planned activities in response to the pandemic, and introduced innovative data collection practices.

Those measures include changing data collection dates, organizing new surveys, adapting new collection tools, and using administrative data in countries such as Lebanon, Morocco, Oman and the State of Palestine. Around 44 per cent of surveyed national statistical offices have changed or adapted planned data collection activities. As a result, existing surveys have been amended to include new questions, administrative data is being used more widely, and phone surveys are the most used approach to analyse or monitor aspects of the pandemic.

National statistical offices are considering new data sources and partnerships. National statistical offices have forged new partnerships during the pandemic

to enhance data collection efforts, including between national statistical offices and the ministries of communication in Lebanon, Morocco and Oman. Of all the new partnerships, 45 per cent are with the public sector, 34 per cent are with international partners, and 18 per cent with the private sector. However, nearly a quarter of national statistical offices have not developed new partnerships.

A number of Arab countries are enhancing efforts to make data more accessible by adapting new dissemination tools, such as online dashboards. Around 93 per cent of national statistical in the region have set up or are planning to set up national data platforms to serve government and public data needs. The pandemic may also open up new horizons for transparency and data sharing with various stakeholders.

Policy recommendations on data for ensuring an inclusive recovery and achieving the SDGs by 2030

Update and modernize statistical legislation, in line with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, to authorize national statistical offices to play their new role as 'chief data managers' in adopting new data collection modes, forging new partnerships, openly disseminating data from the statistical system, coordinating and validating national information beyond official statistics, and integrating geospatial information and big data

Promote statistical literacy programmes to promote the use of data and evidence-based decision-making by engaging different stakeholders in monitoring and evaluating policies and interventions; improve data accessibility by adopting open data policies; and advance intersectoral analyses to leave no one behind

Increase support for data collection and capacity development needs, as stipulated in the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics, in the following six major categories essential for producing SDG-relevant statistics: national survey programmes; decennial censuses; administrative data, including civil registration and vital statistics systems; economic statistics, including national accounts; geospatial infrastructure; and environmental monitoring²

2 Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals, 2015.

Embrace the data revolution by using new sources of data, adopting innovative methods for producing and using statistics, modernizing administrative records for statistical purposes, integrating statistical and geospatial data, using big data and other data for high frequency statistics, including linking microdata from surveys and administrative sources through registers of people and businesses, and forging partnerships with other data producer and user communities

Prioritize the production of high-quality and timely data disaggregated by income, sex, age, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant to national contexts; and implement the recommended disaggregation of 12 priority SDGs by forced displacement status³

Establish and fully operationalize national reporting platforms with transparent and standardized use of metadata, and develop systematic coordination channels between all data sources to increase data flow and avoid wasted resources and duplication of efforts

Urge the United Nations and the international community to scale up technical support to national statistical offices, and increase partnerships with academia and the private sector to enhance innovation and the use of new technologies, tools and methodologies in data collection and analysis, including capacity-building for national statistical offices on adopting the International Recommendations on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics, and include such statistics in national statistical frameworks

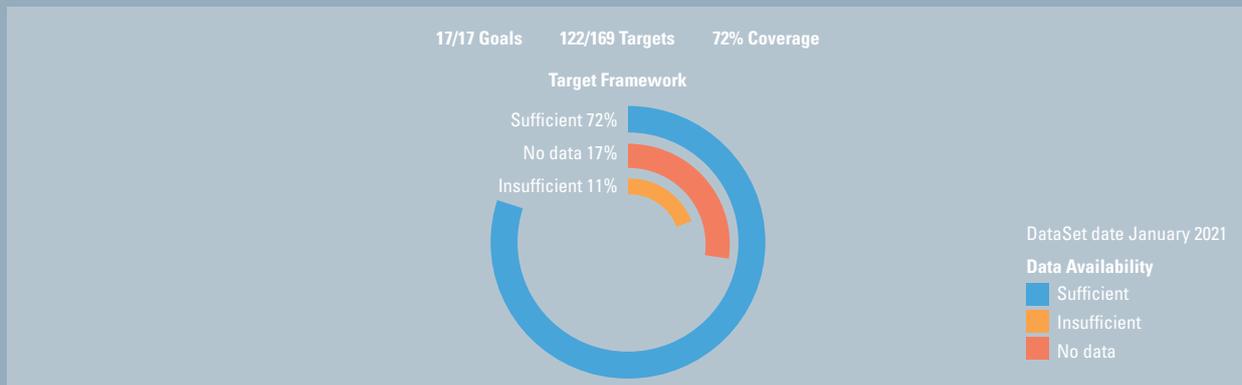
3 Statistical Commission, Data Disaggregation and SDG Indicators: Policy Priorities and Current and Future Disaggregation Plans, 2019.



Key Facts on SDG 17 - Data

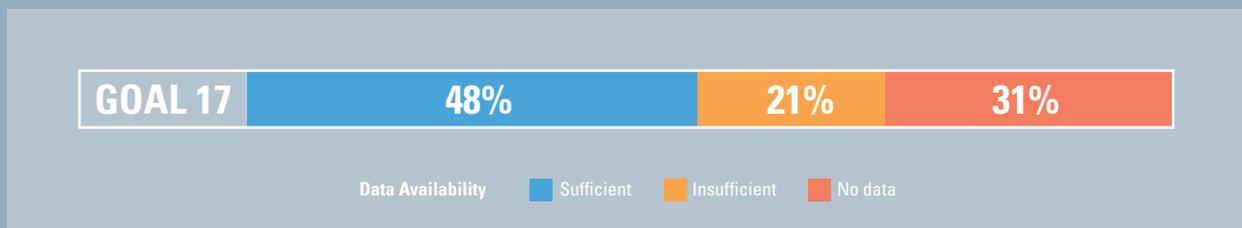
As per the SDG Target Framework, Arab region data cover 72 per cent of 122 SDG targets. However, country data constitute only half of those disseminated data in the Global SDG database.⁴

Figure 1. SDG target coverage



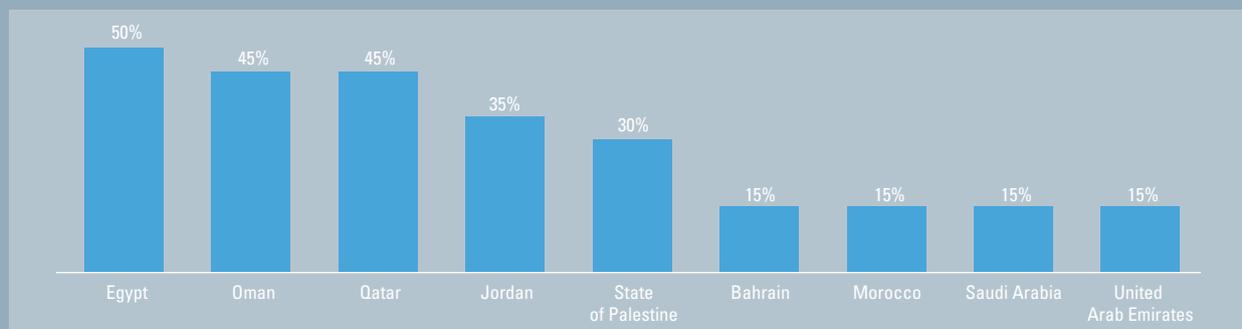
Sufficient data (two data points or more), for example, are available for only half (48 per cent) of the indicators under SDG 17.

Figure 2. SDG 17 data coverage



This is mainly because the data flow to the Global SDG database is weak; only 37 per cent of data are available for the 17 Goals are country data; the rest are unavailable or have been produced either through estimation or modelling methods, or are global indicators.

Figure 3. Arab countries' NRP implementation score



⁴ Arab SDG Monitor – SDG Regional.

Research shows that less than half of Arab countries have SDG national reporting platforms,⁵ many of them fell short of complying with the seven main criteria for developing an effective national reporting platform.

ESCWA analysis of countries' performance implemented in 2019 shows that all countries have collected few SDG gender-related indicators. However, while Egypt, for example, ranks first in this area, it only collects 17 per cent of the SDG gender-related indicators and disseminates most of them in totals – only 6 per cent of those are disaggregated by sex, as per the Global SDG database.

Figure 4. Availability of gender indicators disseminated in totals and disaggregated by sex (%)

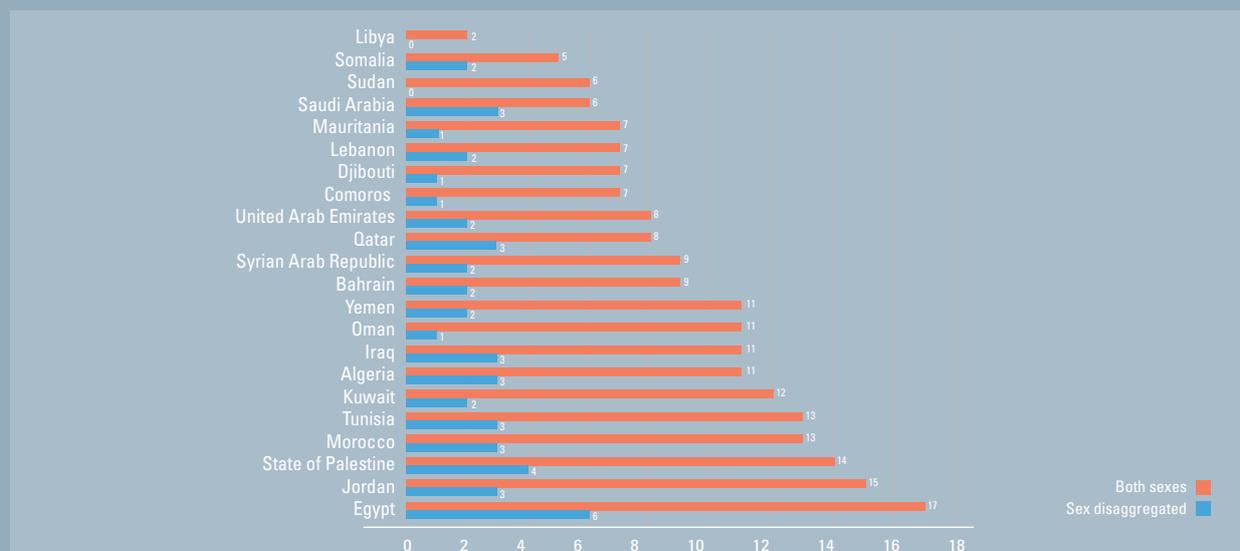
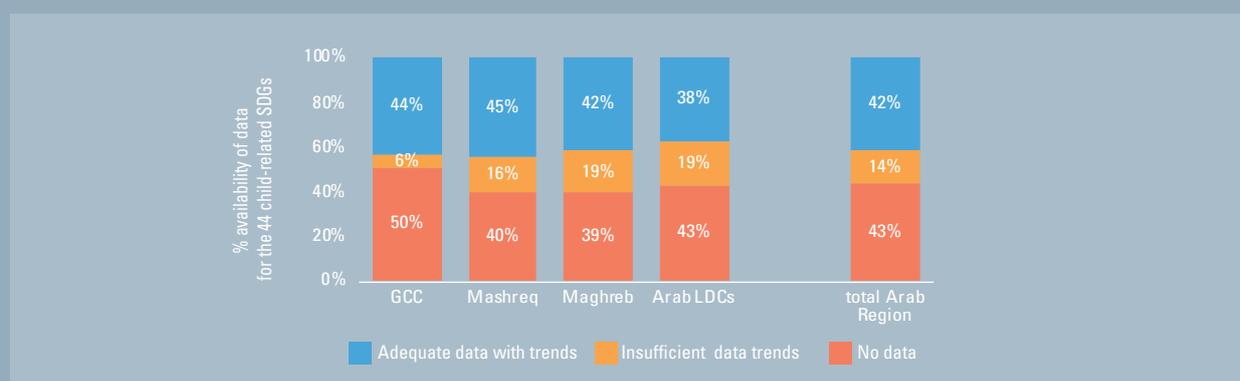


Figure 5. Availability of data for the 44 child-related SDGs



Only 42 per cent of the child-related SDG indicators in the Arab region have adequate country-level data allowing trend analysis. The lowest availability is in the Arab least development countries.⁶

National statistical legislation in almost half of Arab countries is old and outdates the endorsement of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics by the Statistical Commission in 1994.

National statistical offices are often trapped in a vicious cycle of statistical underdevelopment, where limited awareness and appreciation of the importance of data has led to sustained underfunding for statistics.

5 ESCWA, Arab National Reporting Platforms for the Sustainable Development Goals: Assessment, 2020.

6 UNICEF, Progress for every child in the SDG era, 2020.

A total of 14 Arab countries have national statistical plans under implementation; however, only eight countries reported to the Global SDG database that their plans were funded by the Government.

Figure 6. Arab countries' responses to Global SDG database



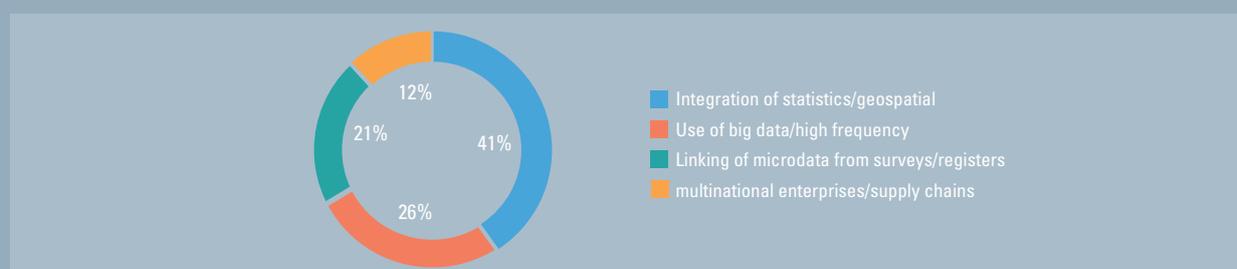
A total of 13 countries reported to the Global SDG database that they have implemented at least one population and housing census in the last 10 years. A total of 12 Arab countries stated that their birth registration data were at least 90 per cent complete, and 10 noted that their death registration data were at least 75 per cent complete.⁷

Household surveys

In terms of implementing three main national household surveys, namely household income and expenditure surveys, labour force surveys, and health-related surveys, only five out of 22 Arab countries have implemented all three in the past five years. The remaining countries have implemented only one or two main surveys. The Comoros, Libya and Yemen have not implemented any in the past 10 years.

In the past five years, household income and expenditure surveys and health-related surveys were implemented in only half of the 22 Arab countries, whereas labour force surveys were organized in 16 countries.

Arab countries are embracing the data revolution and starting to make use of new technologies and methods. In 2020, the World Bank conducted an assessment showing that the majority of Arab countries (41 per cent) consider that the integration of statistical and geospatial data is highly important, followed by the use of big data and other data for high frequency statistics (26 per cent), linking of microdata from surveys and administrative sources through registers of people and businesses (21 per cent), and the role of multinational enterprises including the integration global and domestic supply chains (12 per cent).⁸



⁷ Global SDG database.

⁸ World Bank, Monitoring the State of Statistical Operations under the COVID-19 Pandemic: Highlights from the Second Round of a Global COVID-19 Survey of National Statistical Offices, 2020.

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Strengthen the means of implementation
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The Arab region faced critical SDG financing challenges prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the outbreak, the gross financing needs of high- and middle-income Arab economies amounted to \$6 trillion to meet their national implied demand for SDG financing.¹ The COVID-19 crisis has further exposed low levels of investment in health, education and social protection, weakened fiscal and external balances, exacerbated health and humanitarian emergencies, and amplified existing inequalities. The pandemic's impact on SDG financing in the region has also been aggravated by pre-existing factors, including inefficient fiscal policies, high reliance on non-productive sectors, and limited fiscal space owing to inefficiencies in tax systems and domestic resource mobilization capacities and high levels of debt servicing. Moreover, the region has witnessed an alarming trend in non-concessional lending, and in reducing the grant element of official development assistance.

It is necessary to create the fiscal space to sustain urgently needed health and social

spending; reduce debt-financing overhangs; tap liquidity lines to avoid insolvency; and ensure social cohesion by safeguarding overall economic, fiscal, monetary and financial stability. Affirmative action is needed to enhance the targeting and efficiency of public spending, and to pursue fiscal equalization and systemic approaches to mobilize all strands of financing (public, private, domestic, international, plurilateral, multilateral, innovative and traditional). Affirmative action is also needed to sustain investments (domestic and foreign) through a rights-based and gender responsive lens, so as to mitigate imminent health hazards and the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic.

In addition to the pressing challenges facing Arab countries in securing necessary financing at the national level, global economic structures must also adapt through a stronger implementation of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development.

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



The pandemic hit the region amid multiple financing challenges, including financing insolvencies, funding shortfalls, fiscal space constraints, debt-financing overhangs; and severe financing inequalities.

Fiscal and external balances weakened across the region as poverty and unemployment rose. In 2020, the pandemic wiped out \$152 billion in economic gains across the region.² Arab capital markets lost nearly a quarter of their capitalization in just three months following the outbreak of the pandemic. The crisis threatens to push more than 14.3 million people into poverty, swelling the poverty headcount in the region to 115 million, equivalent

to slightly more than 32 per cent of the population of Arab middle-income and least developed countries. In a region where 14.3 million people were already unemployed, the International Labour Organization estimates losses equivalent to 17 million full-time jobs in the second quarter of 2020.³ Fiscal revenues are expected to lose nearly \$20 billion in indirect taxes: \$5 billion in import tariffs and \$15 billion in other indirect taxes, including value added tax and specific consumption taxes. More productive capacities are expected to slip into informality, particularly small and medium enterprises which are not likely to return to formality without targeted policy interventions.

1 ESCWA, SDG-Financing Dashboard, Integrated National Diagnostic and Financing Frameworks Project (forthcoming).

2 United Nations, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region: An opportunity to build back better, 2020.

3 International Labour Organization, ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work, fourth edition, 27 May 2020.

Increasing debts are projected to make things worse.

Responding to the pandemic will further increase fiscal deficits from an average of 2.8 per cent in 2018 to over 10 per cent of GDP in 2020.⁴ Arab oil producers, notably the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economies, are expected to endure the greatest losses. These deficits are more likely to be financed by increased borrowing, adding more debt stocks to the region's existing debt of \$1.3 trillion in 2019, with debt reaching unsustainable levels of 151 per cent and 212 per cent of GDP in Lebanon and the Sudan, respectively.

Foreign direct investments are expected to plunge by an unprecedented 45 per cent, with a 10 per cent probability that foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows to the region may drop by at least \$17 billion in 2020, based on a value-at-risk financial analysis.⁵ Moreover, remittance inflows, which grew at a rate of 7 per cent over the past decade, reaching a high of \$62.1 billion in 2018, are estimated to fall by \$8.3 billion in 2020.

*The United Nations and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimate that developing countries need an additional **\$2.5 trillion to cope with the COVID-19 crisis**. To date, advanced economies have responded to the pandemic through robust-counter-cyclical measures, accounting for 88 per cent of global interventions, financed mainly through debt-financing fiscal and monetary expansion measures by central banks. In contrast, developing countries have been unable to mobilize equivalent domestic resources, or to tap capital markets under the same terms, conditions and spreads.*

Economic losses are shrinking economies. With few exceptions, Arab countries will experience economic contractions that will reach double digits in some cases. The estimated overall economic losses are \$152 billion, more than the combined value of the stimulus packages announced by Arab countries in 2020.⁶

Measures taken by Arab Governments

- 1.** Economic stimulus packages in the region have fallen short. Collectively, Arab economies' stimulus represented 4 per cent of their GDP, which is significantly lower than the global average of 11 per cent.⁷ According to the COVID-19 stimulus tracker, the enacted measures fall into seven broad categories, namely social assistance, social insurance, health-related support, loans and tax benefits for individuals, the labour market, financial support for SMEs and other enterprises, and general policy support including fiscal expansion and expenditures mainly related to research and development and ICT digital solutions.
- 2.** Most measures were varied, less coordinated and less effective given the limited fiscal space that has long inhibited sustainable development efforts in the region. While most Arab countries have used available resources to implement fiscal stimulus packages, some, such as Algeria, have resorted to austerity to adjust to the new low oil price environment that coincided with the outbreak, while others, including Saudi Arabia, have increased taxes after setting out a large fiscal stimulus. In some instances, response measures have been slanted towards supporting

markets and loosening monetary conditions to boost the health sector, support businesses, and assist households and individuals. In other cases, fiscal measures and special funds/vehicles have been established to mobilize voluntary contributions, including in Algeria, the Comoros, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco and the State of Palestine.

*In an attempt to develop a systemic and coordinated response to the pandemic, several Arab countries took part in the **High-level Event on Financing for Development in the Era of Covid-19 and Beyond**, the largest gathering of world leaders in the context of COVID-19, to respond to the pandemic and maintain momentum towards financing the 2030 Agenda. The menu of financing for development (FfD) policy options could be construed as a needed addendum to the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda. Several proposals remain highly contingent on decisions to be taken outside the realm of the United Nations, including the G20, the Basel Committee, OECD, the United Nations Tax Committee, and IMF.*

4 ESCWA, Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region, Ch. 4, 2020.

5 ESCWA, The impact of COVID-19 on Arab economies: trade and foreign direct investment, 2020.

6 Ibid.

7 United Nations, Policy brief : The impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region: An opportunity to build back better, 2020.

At the regional level, there was no regional coordination or high-level meeting to discuss stimulus packages and the response. The lack of coordination on the size and timing of the stimulus packages limit multiplier effects, and can reduce their impact on economic growth and employment.

In addition, the lack of coordination among Arab countries weakens the effect of the response and recovery packages, and renders the region at a disadvantage compared with developed countries, given that 80 per cent of global stimulus is run by developed countries.



Policy recommendations to ensure an inclusive recovery and effective SDG financing for the Arab region

It is critical that Arab countries and the international community move forward with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and take into account corrective measures that enhance its recommendations. Arab countries also need to strengthen domestic resource mobilization, given the expected shortfall in external finance. Tax avoidance, evasion, havens, and aggressive tax planning practices diminish national revenues and lead to the erosion of the tax base, while corruption and financial crime

divert resources away from investment in sustainable development. These abuses offset the positive impact of public and private investment and international assistance. Tackling them is a priority for the region and can reduce inequalities, positively impact trust in institutions and strengthen social and political stability.

The following are key policy areas to enhance financing for sustainable development in the Arab region:

Enhance the delivery of public goods and services targeting both the revenue and expenditure sides of national budgets, through improved efficiency in public social expenditure and public investment. In parallel, improve equity and progressivity in taxation, tax administration, and compliance to curb tax-based illicit financial flows and increase tax revenue collection

Develop integrated national financing frameworks to capture and exploit all sources/methods of financing the SDGs, including mobilizing public and private finance from domestic and foreign sources, and reassessing tax expenditures; and developing capital account guidance to limit speculative inflows and currency mismatches in times of economic boom and bust, and minimize outflows during crises

Align fiscal policies and State budgets with integrated national financing frameworks, medium-term revenue strategies, and medium-term expenditure frameworks

Change public incentives in multiple areas, such as energy and fossil fuels, climate change, and food systems, to shape and accelerate the transition towards sustainable consumption patterns and ensure the necessary fiscal space for social spending towards SDG-centric accountable budgets

Consider debt swap as an innovative financing instrument to free up fiscal space for meeting essential expenditures. This approach is also useful in the context of accelerating a green and inclusive recovery from the pandemic, when rising external debt and debt service across the region has reduced expenditure on climate action and achieving the SDGs

Develop the necessary upstream policy and regulatory frameworks to create the right incentives for businesses and crowd-in private investment, including scaling frameworks that drive the shift to health, education, and other SDG-oriented investment

Develop an integral regional road map to provide anti-corruption and anti-money laundering solutions to protect the efficacy of stimulus measures, and the transparency and integrity of public procurement in combatting illicit financial flows and other fraudulent activities, including by sharing information on beneficial ownership information; combatting tax abuses and aggressive tax planning; doubling international tax cooperation and capacity-building; and ensuring the recovery of stolen assets, as presented by the FACTI Panel, in addition to addressing the tax implications arising from digitization



Key Facts on SDG 17 - Financing

Financing reflux

The region's financing exposures are further undermined as it continues to sustain a financing reflux amounting to \$2.5 on average for every dollar gained in cross-border financing, as demonstrated by analysis of these exposures for the period 2011-2016.⁸

Illicit financial flows

The region has sustained an estimated \$77 billion in annual losses associated with illicit finance between 2008 and 2015.⁹

Tax revenue to GDP

Ratios of tax revenue to GDP vary between oil-rich and oil-poor countries in the Arab region. For example, the ratio stood at 2.95 per cent and 4.86 per cent in Iraq and Qatar, respectively, in 2017, compared with 21.82 per cent and 21.92 per cent in Morocco and Tunisia, respectively.¹⁰

Indiscriminate de-risking

Several conditions have led to indiscriminate de-risking in the region, with 35 per cent of Arab banks reporting a decline in their correspondent banking relations over the period 2012-2015.¹¹

Non-concessional lending as a share of ODA

The share of non-concessional lending has been growing, which puts into question whether ODA itself has been a contributing factor to the region's debt build-up over the period 2010-2017. ODA to health, education and sanitation remain negligent.¹²

High transaction costs of remittances

Remittance transfers cost on average more than 7.5 per cent in 2020. The high cost of remittance corridors affects the lives of more than 26 million migrant families in the region.^{13,14}

⁸ ESCWA, The State of Financing for Development Report, 2018.

⁹ ESCWA, Illicit Financial Flows in the Arab Region, 2018.

¹⁰ ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

¹¹ Arab Monetary Fund, Withdrawal of correspondent banking relationships (CBRs) in the Arab region: recent trends and thoughts for policy debate, 2016.

¹² ESCWA, The Arab Financing for Development Scorecard: International Development Cooperation, 2019.

¹³ ESCWA, The State of Financing Development in the Arab Region, 2018.

¹⁴ United Nations, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region an opportunity to build back better, 2020.

ARAB REGION

WORLD

Personal remittances received as a proportion of GDP¹⁵



2% of GDP was personal remittances received in 2019
-1% since 2005

1% of GDP was personal remittances received in 2019
+2% since 2005

Intra-Arab Trade

The share of intra-Arab trade in goods was around 13 per cent in 2017, but remains well below the share of intraregional trade in the European Union (64 per cent) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (24 per cent).¹⁶

¹⁵ ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

¹⁶ ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

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Strengthen the means of implementation
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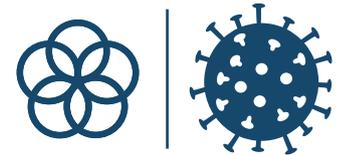
The digital divide between the Arab region and the world persists, posing challenges to the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Internet use varies widely between Arab countries. At the national level, Internet access and mobile penetration gaps are observed between the poor and well-off, between rural and urban areas, and between male and female users.¹ Technological disparities and gaps are also observed at the subregional level. High-income countries, namely Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, have implemented advanced infrastructural and service projects, whereas middle-income countries are still at less advanced levels. Conflict and post-conflict countries face the challenge of destroyed/ disrupted infrastructure and services, and least developed countries lag behind considerably.

The role of digital technologies in achieving the SDGs has become clearer owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. As disruptions affect various vital sectors and bring some to a complete halt, digital technologies have become key solutions, and sometimes the only means, to overcome sectoral

disruptions, maintain continuity, and provide access to information and services. Groups and countries that suffer from a digital gap face greater challenges in moving work to the digital space. In some Arab countries, emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, are gaining attention for their role in enhancing transparency, and in analysing big data to monitor climate change, biodiversity loss and predict pollution. Emerging technologies are also being utilized for contact tracing and social distancing during the pandemic.

Arab countries are aware of the need to adopt ethical and legal frameworks which ensure that technology development, transfer and use serve society without causing harm to vulnerable individuals or the environment. Today, the international community's role in achieving SDG 17 is more critical than ever. The global commitment to support developing countries through technology transfer and related instruments must be vitalized to strengthen the region's progress towards the SDGs and a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

Impact of COVID-19 on technology in the Arab region



Technological gaps and vulnerabilities have been revealed. Lockdown measures adopted worldwide and in the Arab region to contain the spread of the pandemic have resulted in severe disruptions to vital sectors. Arab countries that already had well-established digital infrastructure, good connectivity, and advanced innovation have been able to ensure continuity in businesses, education and trade during the pandemic, which was mostly the case in GCC countries. Where available, e-government services have ensured the continuity of service delivery, and maintained the relationship between Government and citizens. In contrast, Arab countries that do not have appropriate

infrastructure and suitable platforms or e-services to ensure work continuity in Government, the private sector, schools and universities, and the provision of information and delivery of essential services, have struggled to adapt. This was mostly the case in the Arab least developed countries and those affected by conflict.

The pandemic has driven digital transformation efforts as part of country response plans. The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated digital transformation efforts globally and in the Arab region, including the expansion of online education and use of digital open education resources, and the development of artificial intelligence systems, notably in the health sector.

¹ ITU, Measuring digital development: Facts and figures, 2019.

The crisis has also triggered government action and innovation in devising solutions to the pandemic. The role of Government has been reinforced, as has its obligation to be innovative, agile and effective in providing a timely response that targets people's needs and safety requirements. Examples of this can be seen in Egypt and Lebanon, where digital capacity-building programmes have been organized for government employees. Kuwait implemented Social Watcher, an online open community service platform that provides a dashboard with daily statistical updates on COVID-19,² resulting in legal and regulatory decisions to implement mechanisms that manage the crisis and provide an enabling environment for the post-pandemic period. Similar dashboards were set up in several other Arab countries.

Sectoral impact: food systems and agriculture

Food systems across the region need to change to ensure healthy diets for a growing and increasingly urban population, in a context of water scarcity and climate change. Such transformations should address the challenges of ensuring availability, access, stability and use of food in ways that provide smallholder producers and rural communities with opportunities in terms of driving income growth, employment and increases in food production and productivity, while ensuring the sustainability of the region's ecosystems and addressing climate change adaptation and mitigation targets. The use of innovation and digitalization in this field remains limited in the region, so harnessing their power is an efficient way to promote transformations in food systems towards sustainable development.

Limited access to digital transformation opportunities for women and girls

Various studies have found that the digital transformation imposed by the pandemic has not been inclusive, further widening the digital divide for women and girls because of their unequal access to the Internet, lack of awareness of digital tools, and limited access to investment finance in leap technology. Many women and girls have therefore missed the opportunities provided by this digital transformation.

Measures taken by Arab Governments

Digital transformation is vital to respond to COVID-19 health crisis, and to implement recovery efforts following the pandemic. The virus has triggered government action, expediting national efforts towards digital transformation, and promoting openness and transparency in government operations.

1. E-services have been deployed and strengthened in several Arab countries to facilitate citizens transactions during the pandemic. In Egypt, digital transformation has been expedited, with a transition to smart digital work environments, digital inclusion and digital literacy. E-payment has also been deployed for mobile phone bills, coupled with incentives to use e-transactions and enhance access to telecommunication services. In the Syrian Arab Republic, an e-government portal was launched to reduce in-person public services, and an e-payment system was launched that provides 18 services from 10 public entities. In Tunisia, the Ihmi application was developed to track and detect

COVID-19 cases. It is connected to the database of the Ministry of Health, and relies on several

Role of technology in education during the pandemic

In a number of Arab countries, schools, universities and the Government have created innovative methods, tools and programmes to keep the education system operational. For example, through a ministerial resolution, Saudi Arabia has implemented distance learning for public and private universities, as well as tools and portals to ensure continued education for over 7 million students. In the United Arab Emirates, distance learning has been implemented in schools and higher education institutions, and complemented with teacher training, free satellite broadband services for students in areas lacking connectivity, and free home Internet connection for households without Internet.

² ITU, WSIS Stocktaking Special Report, 2020.

technologies, including Bluetooth and encryption protocols, to protect personal information.³

2. Strategies, policies and laws have been formulated and enacted. For example, in Kuwait, a digital transformation strategy was published for public consultation, and the Sanad e-services gateway application was updated to include over 200 e-services to reduce in-person visits during the pandemic. Tunisia has issued new e-government laws to facilitate e-payments, the exchange of data and teleworking, and developed a national electronic identifier.

3. Some Arab countries have launched digital or technology-focused initiatives to support the job market. To ensure employment stability in the private sector of the United Arab Emirates, the country adopted the Virtual Labour Market to help the foreign workforce negatively impacted by pandemic response measures to explore new job opportunities. Qatar has launched an initiative to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and facilitate their digital transformation to increase business efficiency during and after the pandemic.

Most at risk of being left behind

A detailed review of the Arab region revealed that SDG technology targets will not be met by 2030 for the following social groups,⁴ whose vulnerability has been amplified by the pandemic.

 **Groups and areas disadvantaged by the digital divide:** In the Arab region, only 51.6 per cent of people use the Internet, and only 57.1 per cent of households have a computer.⁵ The digital divide between urban and rural areas, and between men and women within countries, affects access to the Internet and its various services. It is not yet clear how this picture is changing as a result of the pandemic and the increasing need to be digitally connected.

 **Digitally illiterate people:** Digital literacy is crucial for the basic use of digital technology. Some people in the region still need training on basic ICT skill to take advantage of digital technology. The ICT skill indicator varies between 31.98 per cent in Yemen and 84.93 per cent in the United Arab Emirates, with a regional average of 64.68 per cent, which is higher than the world average of 52.84 per cent.⁶

 **Countries with low levels of technological development and legal gaps:** Some Arab countries still lack regulatory and ethical frameworks that protect individuals and the environment from being harmed as a result of inappropriate technology use. Only

Countries are fostering the use of Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, namely artificial intelligence (AI), through strategies and the establishment of specialized national bodies. Examples include the National Program for Artificial Intelligence of the United Arab Emirates,^a and the National Council for Artificial Intelligence of Egypt.^b Several AI higher education programmes and AI incubators are being established, including the Faculty of Computers and AI at Cairo University^c, and the AI incubator at Alexandria University^d. Although these examples are not in response to the pandemic, they build a strong digital ecosystem to mitigate the pandemic's impact. If a structured and phased approach is adopted, and Arab countries across collaborate to build a robust ecosystem that supports this transformation, the region will be better able to weather future crises.

^a <https://ai.gov.ae/>.

^b https://mcit.gov.eg/en/Artificial_Intelligence.

^c <https://cu.edu.eg/FacultiesCairo>.

^d www.arabfinance.com/en/news/details/egypt-economy/517405.

³ <https://e7mi.tn/index.html>.

⁴ ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

⁵ ITU, Measuring digital development: Facts and figures, 2019.

⁶ Network Readiness Index 2020.

a few countries are using emerging technology to transform development sectors, such as agriculture, energy, transport and industry.

 **Persons with disabilities:** In the Arab region, persons with disabilities do not always have suitable access to computers and the Internet, and are at a higher risk of being digitally excluded.

 **Young people:** The post-COVID-19 job market will demand a new set of skills, which may not be compatible with the majority of the 1.5 million young people who enter the informal sector annually. Young people who live in underprivileged areas are the most vulnerable to being left behind, and the pandemic has further limited their prospects of receiving training.

Policy recommendations to ensure an inclusive recovery and promote technology for sustainable development

The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 identifies the following recommendations to accelerate the achievement of SDG 17 in the region and support action

on other SDGs. These recommendations also facilitate the COVID-19 recovery and enhance resilience to future shocks and crises.⁷

Ensure inclusive access to technology and accelerate the digital transformation of the public and private sectors, including by improving ICT infrastructure and strengthening broadband services

Prioritize and invest in building the absorptive capacity of populations to use, adapt, customize and develop technology applications according to development needs

Introduce strategies to improve research and development, and strengthen the local technological capacity of researchers, innovators and entrepreneurs, especially women and young people, communities of practice, policymakers and the media

Encourage entrepreneurship in its various types, including social entrepreneurship, and fields, such as agritech; and facilitate the emergence and establishment of SMEs

Promote the use of digital and emerging technologies in development sectors, including the health, agricultural, energy and transport sectors; and promote artificial intelligence and build an enabling environment for it, including by developing sectoral strategies and ethical frameworks

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



Key Facts on SDG 17 - Technology

ARAB REGION

WORLD

Fixed Internet broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants



8.1 per 100 inhabitants had fixed broadband subscription in 2020
+22.87% since 2005

15.2 per 100 inhabitants had fixed broadband subscription in 2020
+9.81% since 2005

Internet users per 100 inhabitants



54.6 per 100 inhabitants were Internet users in 2019
+13.38% since 2005

51.4 per 100 inhabitants were Internet users in 2019
+7.74% since 2005

Proportion of population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology



87% of the population had access to clean fuels and technology in 2018
+1% since 2000

63% of the population had access to clean fuels and technology in 2018
+1% since 2000

Proportion of medium and high-tech industry value added in total value added



31% of total value added was medium and high-tech industry in 2017
+1% since 2000

44.85% of total value added was medium and high-tech industry in 2017
0% since 2000

Proportion of population covered by mobile network



90.8% of the population was covered by mobile network in 2020
+3.33% since 2015

93.1% of the population was covered by mobile network in 2020
+2.93% since 2015

Source: ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor. <http://arabsdgmonitor.unescwa.org>. (Figures have been rounded).