

**Statement by Ms. Rola Dashti
Under-Secretary General of the United Nations and
Executive Secretary of ESCWA
Arab Forum for Sustainable Development
Beirut, 29 March 2021**

Your Excellency, Mr. Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States,

Your Excellency, Dr. Faisal bin Fadel Al-Ibrahim, Vice Minister of Economy and Planning of Saudi Arabia, which has kindly assumed the chairship of the 2021 Arab Forum for Sustainable Development,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to welcome you to the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development. I am pleased to address you from Beirut, a city whose successive tragedies reflect the entire Arab region, and whose renaissance, time and again, renews our hope for the revival of our region.

We should have met a year ago, but the pandemic that severed the world prevented that meeting, and continues to drain our already exhausted countries.

Before COVID-19, the region had made some development achievements albeit in the shadow of multiple and intersecting crises: occupation, war and grinding conflict. Rampant unemployment among young people and women, the highest worldwide at 23 per cent. Environmental and climatic degradation, warning of the dangers of water scarcity. Stark inequalities between Arab peoples, with the top 10 per cent of the region's adult population owning 76 per cent of the wealth. And a gap in justice and equity between women and men.

With the outbreak of the virus, those crises worsened, and the region's hard-won development gains were lost.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In view of the pandemic's devastating effects, it was clear to us that convening the Forum at this critical time was an urgent necessity that could not be postponed. The region's burdens are too heavy for one country to bear alone. It is our duty to work together, to recover together, and advance together towards our common purpose.

Our shared objective is Arab countries where peace, justice and tolerance prevail, and no one is left behind. Societies that support their young people, and empower girls and women. Productive societies that secure the health and wellbeing of their inhabitants, and the sustainability of their



environment and land, and provide means of education and innovation to keep pace with the Fourth Industrial Revolution and seize the future.

Our destination is the present, and the future, near and far, which the 2030 Agenda has delineated and that we all aspire to.

The Arab Forum for Sustainable Development is a vital stop on our journey.

A stop that brings us all together, Governments, regional and international organizations, academics, civil society, the private sector and legislators under the theme "Accelerating progress on the 2030 Agenda post-COVID", not to dwell on the challenges, but rather to identify realistic approaches and ways to work together, to effect positive change and move forward.

At this stop, we exchange experiences. We draw lessons, devise solutions, and operationalize many of the regional roadmaps that we have already developed to support the region and its people on the path to sustainable development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Growth in the Arab region has shrunk, investment flows have receded, poverty has sharply increased, and the fiscal space has narrowed. The region requires more financing, amounting to \$80 billion, in addition to the financial incentives provided by Arab Governments to combat the repercussions of the pandemic, totalling \$90 billion. Inequality within countries has increased, threatening stability and the most basic human rights.

Faced with these national and regional challenges, ESCWA did not stand by and watch.

We have called for innovative solutions to reduce countries' debt, to boost investment in people and social services, and to respond to the pandemic with determination and effectiveness. In line with this call, we have launched the Climate/SDGs Debt Swap Mechanism, an innovative method to facilitate climate action financing.

We have called for activating all cooperation mechanisms between Arab countries, for public policies that frame economic growth, and for direct measures to prevent the middle class from falling into poverty. We proposed deferring payments on personal loans and mortgages, offering tax exemptions to those in need, providing credit support to small and medium enterprises and protecting the wages, employment and social security of their workers.

We have urged the international community and donors to increase their technical and material support to Arab countries, especially the least developed countries.

We called on official creditors to freeze debt service payments for heavily indebted Arab middle-income countries and least developed countries. We stressed the importance of fulfilling previous pledges to provide development assistance, and we called for increasing access to concessional loans to improve financing for the Sustainable Development Goals.

We have requested the development of governance mechanisms and structures to establish a region, and indeed a world, that is more equal and equitable, not only in trade and economy, but also in the exchange of scientific and technical expertise and the provision of vaccines and medicines.



Ladies and gentlemen,

Our plea cannot become a reality without collective action. Without solidarity and collaboration between individuals, countries, the Arab region, and the rest of the world.

From the ESCWA platform, I personally made a call for the establishment of an Arab social solidarity fund, to support Arab least developed countries and those at risk, and to serve the poorest groups. A call that echoes the messages that the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development has been disseminating since its inception in 2014.

Our belief in the importance of collective regional action is not recent. It has guided our work since before the pandemic.

We have been cooperating with other United Nations entities operating in the region to enrich Arab knowledge, and to support various policies and initiatives.

We are working on developing an official statistics portal that facilitate access to and exchange of data between Arab Governments and United Nations organizations, and that are linked to global databases. We are proud to have created the "Manara" platform, which provides you with platforms, interactive tools, studies, indicators and courses in Arabic, to strengthen knowledge nationally, regionally and internationally, and to ensure the participation of all in achieving sustainable development in the region.

In conclusion,

Thank you for attending. I look forward to constructive discussions and innovative ideas that make a difference to the lives of all Arab individuals, to the region and to our future, drawing our determination from our young people, from the ambition embodied in the 2030 Agenda, and from the hope renewed by our resilient countries ... and our proud Beirut.

