



GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2023

Concept Note

United Nations Regional Consultation for the Arab Region Global Sustainable Development Report 2023 23-25 January 2023



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Background

The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) was originally mandated by the United Nations Member States in the outcome document of the 2012 “Rio +20” conference on sustainable development, “The Future We Want”. Three years later, as part of the 2030 Agenda, Member States reaffirmed the importance of the GSDR and requested in 2016 that it would be written by an independent group of scientists (IGS). The first report was published in 2019. The next report is scheduled for release in September 2023.

The IGS, appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General, consists of 15 leading experts from the natural and social sciences, representing developed and developing countries. The current group is co-chaired by Prof. Imme Scholz of Germany and Prof. J. Jaime Miranda of Peru. The IGS is supported by a United Nations Task Team, with secretariat servicing from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DESA-DSDG). The current consultation has received additional substantive and secretariat support from the DESA United Nations Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD).

As requested by Member States, the GSDR aims to strengthen the science-policy interface and to provide evidence-based guidance on global sustainable development issues and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The report is an important instrument to inform the deliberations at the quadrennial Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit (next held in September 2023), where it is presented to heads of state, who take stock on the progress towards the 2030 Agenda. The 2023 report will be launched at the half-way point on the 2030 Agenda when decision-makers will be looking for practical solutions that can accelerate progress.

The 2023 GSDR will incorporate a broad range of existing scholarship on SDG implementation. It will build on the 2019 GSDR which identified four levers for change as well as adding a fifth lever on capacities:

- Governance
- Economy and finance,
- Individual and collective action

- Science and technology
- Capacities

It will also build from the six entry points identified in the 2019 GSDR where interlinkages among the SDGs are especially strong such that interventions can address many goals and targets:

- Strengthening human wellbeing and capabilities
- Shifting toward sustainable and just economies
- Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns
- Achieving energy decarbonization with universal access to energy
- Promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development
- Securing the global environmental commons

For the 2023 GSDR, the IGS will expand on the 2019 report with a focus on accelerating action and overcoming impediments that stand in the way of making the levers work together toward transformation through the entry points. Acceleration and enabling transformations is critical as the world struggles to rebuild in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. The time dynamics of transformation and implementation are explicitly addressed — moving from emergence toward acceleration and finally to stabilization. The focus will be on identifying concrete recommendations and tools grounded in evidence for accelerating the implementation of the SDGs and on making the field of science more supportive to this acceleration.

Science and technology have long been recognized as essential to achieving sustainable development. They allow for objective assessment, evidence-based policies and innovative solutions towards difficult challenges. Leveraging the systemic relationships between the individual SDGs leads the way towards the needed rebalancing between human progress, social outcomes and environmental conditions that are at the heart of sustainable development. While many science-based tools on interlinkages and transformation pathways¹ already exist, there are many impediments to accelerating their uptake and applying them in practice. The GSDR 2023 aims to strengthen the science-policy interface and to provide guidance on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by presenting case studies and calls to action for governments, private sector actors, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders.

Sustainable Development Progress and Challenges in the Arab Region

The Arab or Western Asia² region faces a unique set of natural, political, economic and social challenges on its road towards sustainability. Past and ongoing regional armed conflicts have tremendous effects on humanitarian needs, economic stability, and the local environment of the region. Furthermore, rapid development and a growing population in Western Asian countries have been associated with resource stress. Large parts of the region face increasing water shortages, including groundwater table declines, especially in highly populated and agricultural areas where unsustainable practices are exacerbating the challenge. For groups without access to public water sources, this development is particularly alarming. Protecting global environmental commons such as groundwater and managing the natural capital they provide is crucial for the sustainable development of the region.

Reliance on non-renewable energy resources and growth in consumption for transportation, construction, and landscaping has been associated with a doubling of average energy usage and carbon emissions over the past 30 years. And although a large share of the world's fossil fuel resources is located in the Western Asian region, large parts of the region are confronted with energy shortages. The region has an enormous potential for renewable energy production, as a great part of Western Asia lies within the Global Sun Belt, the world's area with the most sunlight (and least rainfall). Developing this

¹ Pathways are context-specific configurations of levers to achieve transformation in each entry point

² The member states of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

potential beyond the 1%-share of renewable energies and decarbonizing the energy sector with universal access to reliable energy sources are essential for achieving the 2030 Agenda. There are some signs of progress and these should be continued – for example, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar are investing in several renewable energy schemes and aiming to achieve 30, 15, and 20 percent of their power generation respectively from renewable energy sources by 2030.

The climate conditions which benefit the transformation towards energy decarbonization heavily challenge the regional food system of Western Asia. Further complicated by past and ongoing conflicts, limited arable land, water scarcity, population growth and climate change impacts, the issue of food insecurity is particularly complex. As countries like Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are highly dependent on food imports, the disruption of regional and global food production as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in the Ukraine add to the risk of a large-scale famine. Already over 51 million people in the region are suffering from hunger and 22% of children under five years are stunted. Simultaneously, overweight, obesity and micronutrient deficiencies continue to increase at an alarming speed in Western Asia. Additional health challenges are posed by the rising temperatures linked to climate change, including excess mortality due to heat waves.

Economic growth has been deeply unequal, increasing disparities in wealth and income – a trend that is expected to intensify in the future. Without sustainable livelihoods, the prospects for human wellbeing, gender equality, good health outcomes and social cohesion are undermined.

This multitude of threats and challenges towards the sustainable development and resilience of the region requires systematic approaches, international and especially regional cooperation, and just economic concepts.

GSDR Arab Regional Consultation Objectives

SDG implementation is achieved primarily at the local, national, and regional level. To inform the GSDR as an assessment of assessments, the IGS are collecting perspectives from different regions and stakeholders including context specific priorities, challenges, and opportunities as well as scalable, practical tools to accelerate progress. The IGS are seeking perspectives from scientists, government officials in their technical capacities, private sector experts, members of civil society, youth, indigenous people and local communities, people with disabilities, and stakeholders at all levels. The aim will be to identify case studies that will breathe life into the report and give shape to the concrete policy recommendations that the Member States are expecting.

In particular, the aim is to identify:

- 1) Innovative ways to make the five levers work together in the context of the 6 entry points to create enabling conditions for acceleration;
- 2) Specific promising tools for accelerating transformation in the context of these entry points (policies, initiatives, technologies, partnerships, etc.); and
- 3) Ways to create enabling conditions for transformation moving from emergence to acceleration to stabilization (including in different contexts).

In the Arab Region all six entry points identified in the 2019 GSDR are important for achieving the SDGs, but the following three entry points are especially critical to accelerate the sustainable development of the region.

- 1) Strengthening human wellbeing and capabilities
- 2) Achieving energy decarbonization with universal access to energy
- 3) Securing the global environmental commons

Identifying interventions

Within these entry points, workshop participants would be asked to identify practical tools and interventions to accelerate progress in the implementation of the SDGs. In thinking about these interventions, the following guiding questions can be considered.

- How is this intervention a strategic choice for addressing systemic and structural challenges? Does it have potential for generating synergies among the SDGs through a given entry point and managing critical trade-offs? Are there positive and negative spill-overs internationally?
- Is this intervention in the emergence, acceleration, or stabilization stage (globally and in different regions/contexts)?
- If in the emergence stage, are there ways to shorten the timeframe of scaling up and accelerating uptake? What evidence or signs do you see of tipping points/windows of opportunity to move into the acceleration phase?
- How particular is the intervention to a given context? What additional international support may be required to support the transformation in these contexts?
- What would help ensure that this intervention would address inequalities including gender inequality, reach those at risk of being left behind, and build resilience against shocks?

Bringing the levers together for action

Within these entry points, workshop participants would also be asked to discuss how levers can work together to accelerate progress and create enabling conditions for action. The following guiding questions can be considered.

- Who are the key actors and stakeholders involved, either promoting or resisting the intervention?
- Are there promising ways to apply the five levers together in support of acceleration through the intervention? At what levels of governance/society (local, national, regional, international)?
- What are the impediments to using the levers/engagement by different actors and are there promising ways for them to be overcome?