

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARAB REGION “FROM CONCEPTS TO IMPLEMENTATION”

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Regional Workshop on National Sustainable Development Strategies and
Indicators for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region
Cairo House, Cairo, Egypt, 12-14 December 2004

INTRODUCTION

- In 1998, only five Arab countries had NSDS.
- by 1992, nine Arab Countries have engaged in national sustainable development (SD) planning exercises; namely Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Syria, Tunisia, UAE & Yemen.
- Lebanon & the Palestinian Authority have also initiated the SD planning process by completing environmental baseline studies and strategies that served as the basis for SD planning.
- By 2003, most of the Arab Countries have engaged in some level of SD planning or preparation.

I- CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR SD IN THE ARAB REGION

Environmental management thinking in the Arab Region has undergone significant transformation over the last three decades. Much of this parallels the global reorientation of environmental goals & concepts.

I-A. Evolution of SD concepts At the National Level:

Environmental concepts in most Arab Countries have evolved into three distinctive phases:

1. Support for sanitary engineering, municipalities and public health (1920s-1960s);
2. Shift from public and environmental health to environmental management (1970s - mid. 1980s); and
3. Gradual move from environmental management towards SD (mid. 1980s to present). This transformation can be witnessed at the national as well as at the regional levels.

I-b- Evolution of SD concepts at the regional level:

Regional evolution of SD concepts is best observed in declarations issued following regional forums such as:

- Arab Declaration on Environment & Development (1986);
- Arab Declaration on Environment & Development & Future Prospects (1991);
- Regional Action Program for SD (1992);
- Abu Dhabi Declaration: Perspectives of Arab Environmental Action (2001);
- Oman Declaration on Environment & SD (2001);
- Arab Declaration to the WSSD (2002); and
- Arab Initiative for SD (2002).

I-C- Commonalities in SD Concepts Among Arab Countries:

1. Similar national priorities & perspectives of SD as an environmental issue.
2. Shared inter-regional commitments to SD.

I-D- Challenges and constraints:

1. Definition of SD:

The first challenge to achieving SD in the Arab Region is the lack of a proper definition of SD to establish the scope of SD efforts.

2. Priority setting:

While policy platforms are often articulated, goal and priority setting are not always well applied in the Arab Region. National goals and priorities tend to emerge from traditional paradigms premised on national security, economic growth and cultural preservation.

3. Reservations about policy integration at the operational level:

Countries in the region have been slow to move beyond an environmental management culture at the operational level. As noted above, this is illustrated by the fact that governments in the region still tend to consider SD the domain of environmental institutions. Accordingly, institutional responsibilities need to be reformed and arranged in an integrated manner that addresses SD.

II- INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK **FOR SD IN THE ARAB REGION**

II-A. Evolution of National Institution Frameworks

Environmental institutional arrangements in most Arab Countries have generally undergone three periods of restructuring, each responding to changes in the conceptual framework regarding environmental management, namely:

1. Shift from municipality to national level of responsibility for environmental matters (1960s-1980s). During the colonial period and early period of national independence, local governments in Arab Countries were responsible for environmental matters.
2. The strengthening of environmental agencies (1990s). Following the 1992 UNCED linking environment & development, a significant restructuring of environmental governance took place in the Arab Region. However, the new environmental structures remained inadequate to address the expanded scope of environmental issues from a multi-sectoral perspective. Most Arab countries responded to this by establishing National Councils for SD (NCSDs). However, these councils were unable to effectively coordinate the integration of SD policies.
3. Rethinking institutional arrangements (early 2000s). WSSD preparations & outcomes have stimulated renewed thinking about institutional frameworks for SD.

II-B. Challenges & constraints

Most national environmental institutions in the region suffer from:

- 1. Their relatively recent establishment and/or restructuring;**
- 2. Power politics (which sideline environmental agencies relative to economic and social ministries);**
- 3. Political constellations;**
- 4. Limited institutional mandate (little or no legislative, enforcement or licensing authorities);**
- 5. Advisory capacity (limits enactment & implementation);**
- 6. Limited budgets;**
- 7. Limited capacity to generate income (including from licensing fees or other economic instruments); and**
- 8. Overlapping institutional jurisdictions (which leads to policy conflicts, program duplication & inefficiency).**

II-C. Common characteristics of governance systems

Commonalities between governance systems in the Arab Countries can be listed as the follows:

- Strong national leadership:

Governments in the Arab Region are generally led by strong leaders that play an important role in determining national policy directions and priorities. This allows long term planning.

- Centralized governance, limited decentralization:


Centralisation of decision-making in the Arab Region is the norm. Lack of decentralization of planning and financing limits the ability of local governments to formulate or implement local SD strategies & action plans.

- Top-down political culture & limited public participation:

Heads of government institutions & agencies tend to be appointed, not elected. This makes them accountable to the head of government more than to the public. Public participation & bottom-up consultative approaches to decision-making remain limited.

- Resistance to institutional change:

While heads of governments might be open to appoint new ministers or create new SD institutional frameworks, the ability of technocrats to quickly impose such changes renders government bureaucracies to be risk averse, and fearing openness and transparency of their operations.



III. PLANNING & IMPLEMENTING SD IN THE ARAB REGION

III-A. Planning for SD in the Arab Region

- Most Arab Countries have begun or completed the task of developing a NES and/or NEAP; however, progress in formulating an umbrella NSDS or National Agenda-21 remains obscure. This is because preparation for NES & NEAP were (conceptually) considered as adequate substitute for NSDS formulation.
- This misconception has in a few cases resulted in national strategies & action plans focusing on environmental management, rather than on SD.
- However, on the positive side, most of the NES and NEAP, particularly in the ESCWA Region, were prepared using the participatory bottom-up approach with the involvement of most stakeholders & relevant sectors including the national socio-economic development sectors.

III-B. instruments for Implementing SD in the Arab Region:

Challenges to the effective implementation of SD policy instruments include the following:

1. Inadequate political commitment and insufficient use of policy analysis to determine the most effective instrument to adopt;
2. Lack of selection criteria for identifying the best policies;
3. Poor synchronization & streamlining effective bundles of policy measures;
4. Limited technical, human and financial capacity;
5. Exemption of some activities from environmental oversight;
6. Inadequate monitoring of environmental conditions & pollution sources;
7. Inability to enforce reporting and compliance requirements;
8. Lack of SD indicators to assess progress and effectiveness of policy measures to improve policy implementation in the future; and
9. Political, cultural & social constraints hindering the removal of subsidies or the use of environmental taxes which in turn also prevents the application of economic instruments.

III-C. Budgeting and financing

- Most national ministries of planning & finance in the Arab Region do not have systematic means to allocate, secure & monitor funding for SD initiatives. While NSDAP should play an important role in prioritising activities for funding, the integration of these initiatives into national development plans & sector plans remains limited & thus reduces their opportunities for funding from national budgets.

III-D. Monitoring, reporting & assessment:

- One of the most important components of SD involves monitoring & assessment. Planning is dependent on accurate information. As such, policy-makers and stakeholders need accurate & regularly updated information on environmental, economic, and social conditions.
- This sort of information is not readily available in the Arab Region.

III- E. Public participation:

- In the Arab Region, the prevailing culture, traditions & political norms, & top-down approach to decision-making cannot easily tolerate public pressure, public accountability or a participatory bottom-up approach.
- Some decision-makers expresses concern that access to information & vocal public expression may cause public panic & confusion or may dissuade trade, investment & tourism.
- The importance of civil society & public participation in decision-making for planning & implementing SD was finally realized in most of the Arab Region at various degrees.

IV- LESSONS LEARNED

IV-A. Lessons learned: factors of success

■ Role of multilateral environmental agreements in galvanizing support for SD action:

Commitments are subsequently reinforced when countries ratify international agreements. Action is further prompted when funding mechanisms were made available to comply with international agreements. In most non-oil Arab exporting countries, focal points or national units were established following ratification to reap the technical and financial benefits made available.

■ Role of National Agenda 21 and Local Agenda 21 Initiatives:

The UNCED Conference Agenda 21 Declaration increased awareness of the need to consult with non-governmental stakeholders and local communities. This prompted some governments to identify ways to decentralize or to support the localization of SD planning and implementation initiatives.

■ Cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial engagement:

The importance of engaging different line ministries in SD planning has not only been articulated by international donor organizations, but also by countries seeking to pass and implement environmental action plans. Those ministries participating in making policies feel a sense of ownership & moral obligation of implementing their own recommendations and plans.

IV-B. Lessons learned: causes for failure

1. Institutional rigidity

Environmental institutions in the Arab Region tended to develop before or alongside environmental legislation, which implied that organizational structures were established & personnel recruited before environmental laws or SD policies & plans were formulated or adopted.

2. Poor communication and coordination between line ministries & government agencies with environmental responsibilities (horizontal communication)

Despite the presence of higher councils for the environment that assemble ministerial and senior decision-makers from various line ministries in some Arab States, coordination and consultation between line ministries remains weak.

3. Poor communication and coordination between national ministries and local governments (vertical communication)

This difficulty is primarily due to a lack of clarity between national and local institutional mandates, as well as to the challenge of going against a political culture of centralized governments.

4. Lack of mechanisms for monitoring SD activities

Although most countries have an agency or council responsible for monitoring SD activities, no country in the ESCWA region has established a permanent, active National Committee for SD to formulate, support, monitor, assess, and follow-up on SD priorities with specific reference to the implementation of Agenda 21.

5. Limited consideration during identification of instruments for implementation

Some Arab Countries have made progress in identifying criteria for determining SD priorities. However, with very few exceptions, little to no effort has been made in identifying the role of criteria in the selection of policies and instruments necessary to implement NSDAP.

6. Inadequate systems of environmental compliance

Countries in the Arab Region do not have adequate mechanisms for enforcement of environmental legislation. Furthermore, if mechanisms exist in the legal form, application in practice remains limited.

7. Lack of funding

Political commitment in most Arab Countries is often premised on the availability of funds to realize policies and activities, whether or not the political will exist.

It is often politically difficult for governments with limited budgets and high deficits to allocated funds for environmental programs if they are identified as projects independent of development programs.

CONCLUSION

- **The limited effectiveness in planning and implementing NSDS is partly due to the differences in the vision & purpose of environmental management versus SD. While environmental planning & implementation has, by definition, a sector-based orientation, SD requires a broader, multi-sectoral perspective that is process-oriented, strategic & participatory.**
- **SD also addresses complex issues such as poverty, health, unemployment, trade and education, which run beyond the scope of improving environmental management.**
- **It is important to recognize that SD is not the responsibility of one institution, but of all institutions and stakeholders.**



THANK YOU FOR THE ATTENTION