Arab Preparatory Meeting on Environmental and Natural Resources Issues for the 2018 AFSD & HLPF
League of Arab States' Headquarters, Cairo, Egypt, 11-12 April 2018

Information Note

1- Background

Since 2014, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has been cooperating with regional partners in the yearly organization of the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development (AFSD), to support regional preparations for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The 2018 session of the AFSD will be organized from 24 to 26 April 2018 in Beirut, Lebanon. Its outcomes will feed into the 2018 HLPF session, to be convened in New York during the period from 9 to 18 July 2018 under the theme "Transformation towards Sustainable and Resilient Societies".

Cooperation between ESCWA, the United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment), the League of Arab States, and the UN Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) has contributed greatly to the success of the previous AFSD sessions. Moreover, the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment (CAMRE) has actively participated in the AFSD as the main LAS body responsible for the environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Stemming from its commitment to highlight the environmental dimension of sustainable development in all regional fora, CAMRE adopted a resolution during its 29th regular session which:

> *"calls on the Technical Secretariat of CAMRE, in cooperation and coordination with ESCWA and UN Environment Regional Office for West Asia to cooperate with relevant regional Arab and regional organizations, and concerned civil society institutions in the organization of preparatory meetings on priority environmental and natural resources issues in the Arab region, to formulate the Secretariat's input to the 2018 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development (AFSD) and the 2018 High Level Political Forum ." (Res 523, para. b)*

Box 1. The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and the importance of regional contributions

The HLPF was established in accordance with the Rio+20 outcome document to provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development. It also serves as a platform to follow up and review progress on the implementation of sustainable development commitments. In its resolution 67/290 adopted on 9 July 2013 regarding the format and organizational aspects of the HLPF, the General Assembly acknowledged the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development and invited the five United Nations Regional Commissions, including ESCWA, to contribute to the work of the Forum through annual regional meetings. In accordance with this mandate, and ESCWA has since 2014 organized the Arab Forums on Sustainable Development (AFSD) in cooperation with UN Environment, the League of Arab States and other partners

Outcomes of the AFSD are submitted as regional inputs to the HLPF, thus helping to highlight Arab regional perspectives and to incorporate regional specificities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The theme for the 2018 HLPF will be "Transformation towards Sustainable and Resilient Societies"". Under this theme, the set of goals to be reviewed during this session are listed below, noting that Goal 17 will be considered every year:

- Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

More information on the AFSD and the HLPF can be obtained from the following websites:

2017 Session of the AFSD: https://www.unescwa.org/arab-forum-sustainable-development-2017

HLPF: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf

This year, the environmental component is strongly expressed across the theme and goals of the 2018 HLPF. This is of particular importance to the Arab region due to the pressing environmental challenges it witnesses, namely: water scarcity, desertification and land degradation, low natural resource use efficiency, and access to land resources. These challenges are exacerbated by high population growth rates, the wave of conflicts and political unrest facing some of the region's countries leading to increased numbers of displaced and refugees, which contributes to increased pressure on natural resources in host countries/regions.

Based on all the above, in line with above CAMRE's resolution, and in preparation for the 2018 session of the AFSD, ESCWA, in partnership with UN Environment and the League of Arab States' Secretariat, is organizing the "Arab Preparatory Meeting on Environmental and Natural Resources Issues for the 2018 AFSD & HLPF" on 11-12 April 2018 in Cairo, Egypt.

2- Objectives and themes of the meeting

Laying the foundations for human dignity and well-being will require making societies sustainable and resilient. A clean environment and the sustainable management of natural resources contribute to enhancing resilience and sustainability of societies, ensuring the provision of ecological services which in turn contribute to income generation and poverty alleviation. The meeting will highlight means by which societies in the Arab region can become more resilient to address risks arising from pollution and natural resource depletion, conserve terrestrial ecosystems to achieve a healthy and productive environment, and shift to more sustainable consumption and production patterns.

The meeting will result in an outcome document that includes a set of key messages, conclusions and recommendations reflecting the participants' views on the issues under consideration. The outcome document will be submitted to the 2018 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development (AFSD) as the contribution of CAMRE.

In order to best support the region's contributions to the 2018 AFSD, this preparatory meeting will mirror in its scope the environmental topics of the 2018 HLPF, and will be thematically structured around the three major environmentally-related SDGs on the HLPF agenda for this year, namely SDGs: 11, 12 and 15; (recognizing that SDG 6 and SDG 7 will be elaborated in other focused preparatory meetings), while addressing the evident interlinkages and synergies between them and all other SDGs. The meeting's three major themes are as follows:

Theme 1: Sustainable Cities and Pollution

In recent decades, the world has experienced unprecedented urban growth which has brought enormous challenges, including increased air, water and solid waste pollution, and inadequate basic services and

infrastructure. The safe treatment and management of domestic and industrial wastewater and solid waste, considered land use planning and a focus on green design and design for the environment are all represents vital contributions to sustainable cities. Air pollution resulting from an ill-managed transport sector and uncontrolled industrial activities can cause major environmental health risks. Building on the findings of UN Environment's recent publication on Resource Efficient cities the meeting will discuss the options, opportunities and success stories of the region towards sustainable urban development in line with both the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda.

Theme 2: Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP)

Recent assessments have indicated that a small number of Arab countries appear to be leading the way on SCP with strong and balanced performance across a broad range of social and environmental SCP indicators. In many areas, these countries are on track to achieve the 2030 SDG target levels. At least seven Arab countries have adopted national SCP action plans, and there is evidence to suggest that the development of these plans have resulted in greater integration of SCP targets and indicators into national development strategies and visions [1].

At the sub-regional level, progress, challenges and priorities vary considerably. In the Mashreq sub-region, good progress has been made in most countries on the social indicators. While countries in the Maghreb sub-region have made strong progress on SCP-related indicators when compared with other sub-regions; countries in the GCC sub-region have mixed results. The Arab LDCs sub-region has comparatively poor progress on indicators relating to social development outcomes, however, the Arab LDCs are often performing better than the global LDC average[2].

Key SDG indicators experiencing little or no progress at the Arab regional level and which are currently going backwards include exposure to air pollution, per capita CO2 emissions, level of water stress, and per capita municipal waste. For these indicators, breakthroughs are needed to turn the situation around. For some indicators, baseline values are worse than the global benchmark, but are improving with a favorable trend, while other indicators had baseline values that were better than the global benchmark, but progressing in an unfavorable trend[3].

Building on ESCWA's paper "Progress on SCP in the Arab Region", on the Arab Strategy for SCP, and on the recommendations of the 5th Arab Roundtable Meeting on SCP, the meeting will exchange perspectives and discuss ways of achieving SCP patterns in the Arab region through development of strong national SCP plans well integrated into national and sectoral plans, while enhancing public-private partnerships, sustainable business practices and consumer behavior, in addition to green technologies and decoupling economic growth from natural resource use.

Theme 3: Combating Desertification and Halting Biodiversity Loss

Healthy lands and ecosystems are crucial for resilient and productive farming, however most of the Arab region is prone to drought, desertification, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity, jeopardizing the basis for sustainable livelihoods.

Nearly 90 per cent of the Arab region is prone to drought; and mismanagement of water resources, logging and overgrazing have contributed to desertification, soil erosion, salinization, and loss of biodiversity.

[1] Progress on Sustainable Consumption and Production in the Arab Region, E/ESCWA/SDPD/2017/Technical Paper.10, December 2017

[2] Progress on Sustainable Consumption and Production in the Arab Region, E/ESCWA/SDPD/2017/Technical Paper.10, December 2017

[3] Progress on Sustainable Consumption and Production in the Arab Region, E/ESCWA/SDPD/2017/Technical Paper.10, December 2017

Moreover, around 15.3 million hectares of the region's crop lands have been affected by land degradation, and the average vegetation cover as a percentage of land area in the Arab region has declined from 1990 to 2013[4].

Arab countries have made efforts to preserve their biodiversity through the work of the "Arab Group on Combating Desertification and Biodiversity Loss", and through the expansion of protected areas, however, desertification rates are on the rise in the Arab region. The meeting will exchange perspectives and discuss ways of strengthening the science-policy interface for proper land conservation and sustaining biodiversity, and of building partnerships for knowledge generation and sharing.

3- Participants

Member country representatives and concerned regional institutions members of the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region (JCEDAR) will be invited to the meeting, in addition to relevant experts.

Participants are kindly requested to submit a fully completed registration form to ESCWA before 12 March 2018, to allow enough time for logistical arrangements.

4- Logistical issues

Date and venue: The meeting will be held at the League of Arab States' headquarters in Cairo, Egypt from 11 to 12 April 2018.

Languages: Arabic and English are the official languages of the Meeting. Simultaneous interpretation between both languages will be provided.

Travel: ESCWA will issue the airline tickets for sponsored participants. Participants attending the meeting at their own expense need to make their own travel arrangements.

Visas: Participants are to make their own arrangements for obtaining entry visas to Egypt.

Accommodation: Participants are asked to make their own hotel reservation arrangements in Cairo.

5- Correspondence

All correspondence related to the meeting must be directed to the following addresses:

[4] Arab Sustainable Development Report, First Edition, E/ESCWA/SDPD/2015/3

ESCWA
Mr. Mohamed Al-Hamdi
Officer in Charge, Food and Environment Policies Section
Sustainable Development Policies Division.
ESCWA
Beirut, Lebanon.
Tel: +961-1-978524 (Direct)
Fax: +961-1-981510/2
E-mail: al-hamdi@un.org

With a copy to :
Ms. Lara Geadah and Ms. Rita Wehbe
Research Assistant, Food and Environment Policies Section
Sustainable Development Policies Division
ESCWA
Beirut, Lebanon
Tel: +961-1-978532/978513 (Direct)
Fax: +961-1-981510/2
E-mail: geadahl@un.org
wehbe@un.org

League of Arab States
Ms. Shahira Wahbi
Chief, Natural Resources Sustainability & Regional and International Cooperation.
Environment, Housing, Water Resources Department.
League of Arab States
Cairo, Egypt.
Tel: +202-25750511
Fax: +202-25740331
E-mail:
environment.dept@las.int
shuhryar@yahoo.com

UN Environment
Ms. Melanie Hutchinson
Regional Development Coordination Officer.
UN Environment.
West Asia Office.
Manama, Bahrain.
Tel: +973-17812775
Fax: +973-17825110
E-mail:
Melanie.Hutchinson@un.org