



Report on Future of Sustainability in the Arab Region

Bibliotheca Alexandrina
Alexandria- Egypt

June 4th 2008



IUCN, West Asia/Middle East (WAME) Regional Office



IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature
West Asia/Middle East (WAME) Regional Office

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Outcome Report on
Future of Sustainability Debate in the
Arab Region
Voices from the South

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1- Background:

In a joint initiative by IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature, West Asia/Middle East (WAME) Regional Office and Bibliotheca Alexandrina, an open dialogue about the future of sustainability in the Arab Region was held in the premises of the bibliotheca. The meeting gathered an experienced group of Arab intellectuals and practitioners concerned with sustainability in its environmental, economic, social and political dimensions.

This activity is the first regional dialogue emerging from the global Future of Sustainability debate that was launched in 2006. This forum aimed at developing a south-based perspective for sustainability with the special emphasis on priorities of the Arab countries regarding the emerging theoretical and practical challenges for sustainability.

The dialogue forum was justified based on the accumulative experience of the IUCN WAME Regional Office in tackling sustainability issues in the region. The following assumptions were put forward as a launching pad for the forum

- 1- The absence of a unified Arab perspective towards the sustainability approach in the future and the weak capacity of generating and formulating a framework for sustainable development that takes into consideration the integration between the emerging trends in water, energy and agricultural policies.
- 2- Deterioration of local capacities in generating a knowledge body that has a distinguished Arab identity that enhances and contributes to the global debate on sustainability.
- 3- The current free market economic system does not provide a crystallized idea about the environmental and social realities in the region which are prerequisites for any planning of a sustainable future.

Based on the previous objectives, the following objectives were proposed for the dialogue

- 1- Contributing to the generation of local knowledge about the dialectic relationship between environment and development with special focus on navigating the potential future trends in issues of water, energy and food crises in the absence of a strong knowledge economy and society and the modest contribution from civil society and academic institutions.
- 2- Documenting traditional Arab wisdom and transferring it to the global arena to enhance better Arab epistemological contribution to the sustainability debate.
- 3- Attempting to explore the possibility of creating a forum that can discuss sustainability issues in the region in frequent basis.

This report does not constitute traditional proceedings of the workshop but aims to prepare an analytical and documentary publication based on the discussions that includes summaries of the participants input. The content of this report is a "collective accumulation" of the contribution of participants and is not specifically attributed to any of them except in the quotes. This English language report is a translation from the original Arabic report.

The Alexandria forum was held for one day (June 4th 2008) with the participation of 15 Arab professionals in sustainability issues from governments, private sector, NGOs, local communities, academics and the media from the IUCN network in the region. The dialogue was constructed in a way that allows the best investment of the participants' experience through the design of an interactive system in the discussions.

The dialogue was organized based on six sequential steps:

- 1- Welcoming remarks by the IUCN and description of the dialogue's objectives.
- 2- An audio-visual message from HRH Prince Hasan Bin Talal of Jordan about the challenges to sustainability to provide a baseline for debate.

- 3- An analysis of current trends and practices and challenges in sustainability issues in the region based on the participants' experiences.
- 4- A discussion on the potential innovations and solutions to achieve sustainability based on the Arab cultural and social features taking into consideration regional priorities.
- 5- Identification of the roles and responsibilities of various sectors in implementing the innovations and solutions.
- 6- A presentation by Prof. Ismail Serageldin, the Director of Bibliotheca Alexandrina about the relationship between environment and economy in the context of sustainability.

2- Features of the Alexandria Debate:

This dialogue was organized with the intent of paving the way for participants from all societal and institutional sectors concerned with sustainability to provide input that is based on quality more than quantity and the interactive method instead of monotonous lecturing.

There is a potential and demand to hold this particular meeting in an annual basis to act as theoretical framework for discussing sustainability issues and following up on the recommendations and options resulting from the dialogue in the decision making apparatus of the Union and other regional and global developmental institutions.

It is imperative that the dialogue have a local Arab identity by linking the discussions with the Arab priorities and focusing on terminologies and concepts that reflect Arab cultural identity. Based on this condition it is important to distinguish between the concept of "developing countries", the concept of the "south" and the Arab countries. Emphasis should be placed on the unique features of the Arab identity as a factor of cohesion and unity in the region that allows practical implementation of sustainability options, especially in light of energy, water and food challenges.

3- The Concept of Sustainable Development:

Although the concept of sustainability is comprehensive and encompassing, several approaches can be used to define sustainable development, based on various angles of perception. The participants have identified the following notions and perspectives of sustainable development:

- Conservation of resources and adhering to a culture of subsistence.
- A personal responsibility and a guarantee for the future generations.
- Humans are cornerstone for achieving sustainable development.
- Citizenship, freedom and liberation of human energies is key for sustainability.
- Emphasis on humanist values.
- Redefining globalization to a more justice-based system.
- Reconnecting the relationship between humans, nature and the universe in a harmonized manner.

"Humans are the center of development and can be utilized in a sustainable way to assist the Arab world in reaching its deserved potential"

Salah Suleiman
Alexandria Library, Egypt

4- The Challenges of Sustainability and Human Security:

In his audio-visual speech to the forum, HRH Prince Hasan Bin Talal focused on the clarification of the relationship between the challenges of sustainability (water, energy and food) and human security. The Prince has emphasized the vital role to be played by Arab states within its common frameworks of actions in developing a specific, locally-based vision for tackling the challenges of

water, energy and the environment by forging partnerships between all sectors. He noticed the absence of the scientific community from the decision making process in the region especially in the development and maintenance of infrastructure. The Prince described the civil society organizations as oases in the desert but they need to think in a more comprehensive manner and not limit their effort on single issues.

“There is a need for the movement of the silenced majority in the Arab World especially in the priorities of security, environment, energy and water and cultural identity and not relying on current policies that excludes people from participation”

HRH Prince Hasan Bin Talal, Jordan

The Prince further criticized the approaches used by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank which does not take into consideration the need for human development. However, the Prince stated that there is an important element that should be integrated in any effort for achieving sustainability which is the supranational framework for the enhancement of sustainability efforts especially through global commons.

He also warned about the impacts of climate refugees from the South to the North and their interference in the human development agenda and the need for supranational responses to deal with such challenges.

5- Diagnosis of the Current State of Sustainability:

In analyzing the realities of sustainability in the Arab World it is imperative to develop a clear framework and making sure that sustainability is a continuous process and not just a product. In the Arab World and the developing countries the human is the center of development and the main beneficiary. This reiterates the ultimate need for developing human and intellectual capacity. Moreover, although sustainability is always related to environmental dimensions, the associated social and cultural dimensions are crucial especially the value of citizenship, equity, social justice and the educational framework.

“We have stopped being creative and our thoughts are silenced. We have to focus on humans and achieve a social transformation that depends on creativity in education, cultural identity, justice and piety”.

Mohammad Shahbaz
Prince Hassan Bin Talal Representative, Jordan

The Arabic synonym for the word “development” is *tanmia*, which linguistically reflects a continuous process with positive elements. It is well known that the renaissance of the Arab World that was witnessed hundreds of years ago was based on elements that are still available in adequate supply. Actually a considerable enhancement occurred in the quality of human resources and knowledge. Humans are the center of development and human capital can be utilized in the Arab World to assist the region in reaching its potential. This aim requires a state of harmonization between work, intellect, performance and caring about the future. It is imperative to reiterate that one of the most basic requirements for sustainability is the reform of the educational systems to adapt to the ever increasing requirements of scientific thinking.

In summary, the Arab World currently faces 8 major developmental obstacles that are considered as challenges in the face of proper implementation of sustainability in its various dimensions. These obstacles are:

- 1- The presence of insecurity hotspots that are spread all over the Arab World. The consequences of such hotspots impact all the countries in the Arab World in different forms. Their impacts are not only threatening to sustainability but also to the whole future of the Arab Society.
- 2- Weak institutional frameworks in all Arab World. Rich Arab countries may possess abundant natural resources but still is in short supply for skilled human resources. University degrees are not necessarily an indicator of good human capital without a proper training and capacity building.
- 3- Poverty is one of the main challenges in the region. Even rich Arab countries have poverty pockets.
- 4- A lot of Arab countries face population pressures from their own national populations. Other countries face demographic and resource pressure from immigrant and foreign workers. The trends of diseases in Arab countries show the existence of infectious diseases associated with poverty and bad hygiene, while others face problems of obesity and over consumption of resources.
- 5- The majority of the Arab States have bypassed the challenge of illiteracy but still there is an inadequate quality of education and technology transfer. The Arab World has impressive human skills but still a lot of brain drain is occurring. A lot of creative Arab researchers are being attracted by the west.
- 6- There are problems at the level of resource management especially when linked to the global fluctuations of commodity prices and inflation.
- 7- The level of consumption in the Arab World is much higher than production.
- 8- Globalization is causing a lot of pressures on the Arab World and such pressures must be studied and analyzed in a comprehensive and structural manner especially trade and investments.

"I want to see the number of men and women equal in any environmental dialogue as sustainability requires the participation of women"

Naoufel Zayadi
Economic and Social Researches and Studies Center, Tunis

It is obvious that all the above mentioned problems are directly linked to the welfare of humans and the quality of life itself.

Arab countries have generally achieved good progress in economic and social platforms during the last decade and they are in the right direction in achieving the majority of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) except for environmental sustainability (goal # 7) based on the latest monitoring indicators.

"A lot of Arab professionals become researchers in the west and we still seek experts from the outside"

Shaheera Wahbi
League of Arab States

The continuous growth has exerted pressures and problems associated with wealth and prosperity such as pressures on resources and over-consumption. Institutions concerned with monitoring have been immersed with the magnitude of demand and variety of problems and are not being capable of dealing with them whether they are local in nature or emerging global challenges. What is currently implemented in the Arab World is a matter of crises management rather than long term planning and we have not managed to make use of previous reigns of

prosperity in developing a solid framework for sustainability. It is ironic that the same people and institutions that have contributed to the problems are the ones entrusted in finding solutions to the same problems.

“The Arabic culture is rich in the values of social and environmental responsibility and the dependence on foreign assistance has corrupted the social capital”

Odeh Al Jayyousi
IUCN

Such trends and indicators emerging from the Arab World show that the best entry point for achieving sustainability may not be necessarily the environmental one, despite its immense importance. The human rights approach may be the best option as it focuses on the inherent human right for a healthy and clean environment and access to basic commodities for life as well as the provision of basic services by the states and enjoying recreational and aesthetic beauty.

A lot of solutions to current problems have actually been designed and developed a long time ago without proper implementation such as the reform of education systems. The delay in implementation has made Arab countries lag behind other countries that started their development process at the same level but soon achieved high progress such as Korea, Malaysia and Singapore.

“The best entry point to sustainable development is the human rights approach which is both a constitutional rights and a key for positive change”

Abdul Majeed Haddad
UNEP

Sustainable development should expand beyond the environmental limits and incorporate the real balance between economic, social and political realms. Channels of dialogue and debate should be open between all sectors with the focus on empowerment of the private sector and civil society for enhancing productivity. At the same time it is important to know that in some occasions the paths for environmental protection and economic growth may not meet at any point without the proper framework of sustainability to incorporate both tracks. The sustainability values should monitor growth without making any compromises that weaken the environmental values. The effective participation of the private sector in development processes was based on the ability of the private sector to change course and adopt the values of sustainability in an honest and genuine way.

One of the main issues in the Arab World is the absence of the values of citizenship in all its political, social, environmental and economic aspects. This leads to a weakening of the participatory national dialogue required for sustainability. The resulting situation is that decisions are taken in a top-down approach under the control of international economic institutions or in response to international conventions instead of being a dynamic process of interaction at the social level.

“A lot of the solutions are available since decades as if they were written yesterday but no adequate implementation occurred”

Riyad Hamzah
Arabian Gulf University, Bahrain

Regarding natural resource uses in the Arab World, many of the provisions and benefits produced from natural resources are not given financial values and that allows for more unsustainable utilization. It is imperative that a system of economic valuation of natural resources

should be developed where values are given for the resource in its natural conditions and not after the deterioration of the natural resource base.

In many cases related to environmental management there is fragmentation in the authorities and the decision making process which leads to contradictory decisions resulting from the absence of institutional frameworks built on resources and ecosystems and the prevalence of institutional frameworks based on administration or geography.

In many cases, the developmental transformations are linked to external factors such as the globalized economy, climate change and investment promotion which all put pressures on Arab countries and result in a structural change in the framework of economies.

Arab Countries suffer from two types of environmental challenges. The traditional challenges of governance need responses that tackle the root causes. The other kind of emerging challenges result from the regional and global changes which need creative management to influence positive results.

6- Sustainability and the Private Sector:

Some important initiatives in the private sector's sense of environmental and social responsibility are starting to take shape in the region. One of the most notable experiences of Aramex Co. was presented in details in the forum. The experiment can be considered an inspirational case study that can be replicated throughout the region for the integration of sustainability principles in business.

Aramex has considered sustainability as a major activity in the core business of the Company. The sustainability initiatives were developed for enhancing the culture of public responsibility in business administration. It has been the first Arab Company to publish an audited sustainability report in 2006 and specifying certain commitments and targets to be met including cutting down on greenhouse emissions and developing targets for recycling in all operations. The Company has also focused on institutionalization of the sustainability activities through establishing a special unit for sustainability to make the concept integral to all operations and not limited to certain decision makers.

"It is important to change the culture of social activities from receiving aid to constructive partnerships in achieving development run by the local community"

Raji Hattar
Aramex International, Jordan

The successful impact of the private sector in implementing sustainability initiatives depends to a large part on partnership with the public sector where the governments will be able to regulate laws and policies that encourage the private sector for more entrepreneurship in sustainability.

In this context it is also important to link the developmental activities done by private sector organizations with the inherent cultural values of social solidarity which can easily penetrate the society and provide more influential results. The culture of social and environmental responsibility is easy to localize and be spread across the society with the simplest terms and examples.

Although emphasizing the importance of general ownership in the company for the concept and practices of sustainability, it is a common reality that the first initial steps have been done through an act of championship by the leading decision makers who have steered the implementation of sustainability values in the company culture.

“We should be a part of the solution and not the problem”

Hasan Al Hosany
Environment Friends Society, UAE

Experience has shown that sustainability practices in companies have had clear economic benefits as well through cost reduction in production and management. The success shown by financial values will encourage other companies to take a similar route.

Any private firm will have a social value when it deals seriously with social responsibility and making the employer a partner in the production process and not only a tool. This gains more importance in a time when the role of the private sector is increasing parallel to the erosion of state responsibility and opening up the economic policies for the market forces. The role of any state in the developmental context is vital for providing the required social protection and services and not being limited to the hindering bureaucracy.

Currently there are two forms of globalization. One that is linked with the market economy and one linked with the growth of global civil society which is a grassroots system hoping to develop an alternative globalization that include a new developmental paradigm for the benefit of humanity.

“Accountability measures should rise to the highest levels especially the accountability of the government and private sector by the civil society”

Laila Iskandar
International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Egypt

Regarding the dualism of the profit-sustainability discussion there is no fundamental problem in making sure that profitability is a legitimate objective for economic activity and is not necessarily contradictory to sustainability. The best companies are those that achieve the dual objective of profit to sustain the operation and the practical developmental results that contribute to enhancing people's livelihoods. The ultimate goal for any economic activity is the welfare of people.

It is noteworthy that the private sector is not completely innocent. Some companies do indeed get involved in greenwash activities for achieving public relations benefits. The private sector in the Arab World should be subject to accountability by the civil society and ready to receive advise on how to deal seriously and genuinely with sustainability challenges. It is important to develop a civil system of monitoring for project funded by the global financial institutions and/or the World Bank through indicators derived from the local context for sustainable development that focus on the priorities of poverty, consumption, employment, education and social justice in the distribution of wealth.

7- Sustainability and Culture:

There was a rich dialogue about the linkages between sustainability and cultural values in the Arab World. A consensus was evident between participants on the need to integrate the spiritual-cultural element as a fourth dimension in sustainability. The focus on the role of Arab cultural values in supporting sustainability in the face of strong market forces and commodification of humans and resources is a strong justification for strengthening the concept of sustainability in the Arab society.

“The Arab media is an important tool for education and awareness but it is currently moving towards entertainment outlets”

Mohammad Al Fahham
Alexandria Library, Egypt

In the same context the traditional role of the Arab state should be preserved as a developmental tool without neglecting some negative practices that have been evident by the ineffective bureaucracy. The withdrawal of the Arab State from its developmental responsibility will leave the population, especially the poor helpless in the face of market forces which has started to impact the family and social values as well. A lot of value changes have occurred in the Arab society while adapting to market rules which is based on extensive utilization of resources and labour and turning social relations into a pattern based on economic interests.

Moreover, the lack of opportunities for the inclusion of creative people has impacted the brain drain from the Arab countries to the west in particular. Such a phenomenon requires opening up opportunities for the most creative individuals in a system of freedoms and empowerment.

In the final analysis the relation between Arab culture and sustainability is based on the concept of “Reform and Enlightenment” to achieve compatibility in developmental approaches between the historic and traditional values of Arab culture and the best of what modern thinking has created in sustainability approaches.

8- Institutional Frameworks for Sustainability:

It is important to make sure that work for sustainability should now start again from square one and the wheel will not need to be reinvented. There are previous and current activities and institutional frameworks that can be built upon. Most important initiatives are the official Arab initiative for sustainable development and some civil initiatives that have been developed in the past few years.

“We need to go back to the frameworks and methodologies set by the international community for sustainable development indicators and analyzing our performance in a scientific way so that we do not reinvent the wheel”

Samir Ghazi
Presidency of Meteorology and Environment, Saudi Arabia

It is also vital to develop practical and measurable indicators for sustainable development to be evaluated and reviewed based on the package of indicators developed by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) with the addition of indicators related to cultural aspects of sustainability.

Education is one of the most important tools for developing and supporting creative thinking linked to sustainability. A new paradigm of sustainability can be developed in the Arab world based on the three pillars of cultural identity, justice and piety. This will lead to the enhancement of positive social values and steering the new generations to sustainability guided with such values.

“Sometimes wealth in natural resources can be a weak element in the Arab world if national human capital is not allowed to manage resources in a sustainable manner”

Amina Flous
National Agency for the Conservation of Nature, Algeria

In the same context, media and communication play vital roles in supporting sustainability and mainstreaming its concepts.

9- Sustainability between Environment and Economy:

At the end of the dialogue, Prof. Ismail Serageldin, the Director of Bibliotheca Alexandrina has a presentation about the linkages between sustainability, environment and economy. He focused on the vital role of economic and environmental indicators in measuring national accounts as its well known that economists and decision makers treasure what they can measure. Without proper indicators and measurement, the right decisions are hard to come by.

Serageldin based his presentation on the research he was leading when he was vice president of the World Bank for environment and sustainability. The scientific methodology that was developed through this research provided alternative measurements for including environmental dimensions in national accounting systems and expand the limited approach of the traditional Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Serageldin introduced a new definition of sustainability which can be stated as “providing future generation with the same amount of opportunities, or more of what the current generation has”. This definition makes sustainability more of a rights-gaining process as much as an environmental concept which provides it with a more human dimension.

One of the main recommendations in the presentation was the need for greening national accounts by integrating the environmental dimensions in the calculation systems of resource use and national production to account for the depletion of natural resources as a negative aspect of development rather than a positive contributor to production and GDP, as in the case now.

“Sustainability is providing future generation with the same amount of opportunities, or more of what the current generation was provided with”

Ismail Serageldin
Director of Alexandria Library, Egypt

The results of the groundbreaking research were published in a book entitled “The Wealth of Nations” that provided ample evidence of the importance of social and human capital, as well as natural capital in measuring economic progress. In this study, it was proved based on economic analysis of more than 100 countries that the combined social, human and natural capitals constitute 60% of a country’s economy, on average compared to 40% for products resulting from economic activities (GDP). This entails that the GDP represents only a third of the real values of economic activities and non-commercial capital assets in the country. This provides another compelling evidence of the importance of investing in the human and social capitals.

10- Options for the Future of Sustainability:

The previous analysis for the challenges and features of sustainability was a helpful tool to guide the participants to developing a set of principles, values and priorities for the future of sustainability in the Arab World

- 1- **Human welfare is the ultimate objective:** This is the first principle in designing and implementing sustainability options in the Arab World. These options should be able to provide a clear positive impact on the quality of peoples' lives and from the perspective of human rights principles.
- 2- **Strengthening and empowerment of existing institutional frameworks:** Moving towards sustainability should be done without compromising the existing institutional frameworks or inventing new ones. Focus should be on the existing framework and strengthening key institutions with networks and supportive programmes that cover the existing gaps. The current dialogue of Alexandria should be maintained by the creation of a network of experts and intellectuals that gather periodically to discuss sustainability approaches in the Arab World. It is important that the existing institutional entities concerned with sustainability be linked to the highest level of decision making in any country.
- 3- **Specifying roles of various sectors** based on the priorities and capacities of each sector and effective networking between them for achieving a comprehensive impact.
- 4- **Education as a tool for sustainability:** There is a consensus on the priority of education and learning in achieving sustainability through the focus on the role of enlightening and scientific thinking to support the spread of knowledge of sustainability in Arab societies. This can be best achieved via highlighting success stories and best practices that include pioneering and local solutions for local problems and the presence of incentives that will help in positive modifications of environmental behaviour.
- 5- **Focusing on solutions and innovations:** The Arab World, through its institutions and professionals has reached a proper state of its capacity in diagnosing and highlighting challenges related to sustainability issue but it is necessary to turn the attention to developing and implementing practical solutions and innovations that respond to the challenges through inter-sectoral partnerships.
- 6- **Partnerships in resource sharing:** Integration between various Arab states should be encouraged through supporting the investment of added values of various natural resources and sharing their benefits through complementary partnerships between states.
- 7- **Emphasis on cultural identity:** Strengthening the concept of integration between modernization and tradition in planning and implementation of sustainability initiatives.
- 8- **Capacity building** especially for potential leaders and important social groups like women and youth and learning from previous experiences, whether successful or faltering.

11- General Recommendations by Participants:

The Alexandria dialogue on the future of sustainability in the Arab World has resulted in the following recommendations presented to the various sectors as follows:

To the governments;

- 1- Strengthening the effect of the Arab initiative for sustainable development through the Arab League by developing practical programmes and monitoring indicators with time bound targets.
- 2- Making good use of the Arab Summit for Development to be held in Kuwait to highlight the sustainability challenges.
- 3- Establishing national institutional frameworks for sustainability in countries that does not have them, and linking such entities with the highest level of decision making in the country.
- 4- Providing economic and tax incentives for the private sector that presents documented and influential examples in supporting sustainability.

To the private sector;

- 1- Institutionalization and expanding the programmes for social and environmental responsibilities to include traditional cultural and social values of solidarity and support.
- 2- Promoting the success stories and best practices in achieving and managing sustainability to encourage other companies to put their trust in the possibility of linking profitability and sustainability.

To the civil society;

- 1- Approaching the Arab leaders in a programmatic way to conduct advocacy programmes for sustainability especially in important frequent events such as the Arab Summit.
- 2- Responding to problems at the local level and spreading the global consciousness in the same process to achieve local benefits and global values.

To educational and media institutions:

- 1- Highlighting successful examples of sustainability in media outlets and educational programmes to send a message of trust about the importance and potential of sustainable options.
- 2- Developing educational and learning curricula to eradicate stereotypes and supporting innovations and continuous training in sustainability issues.
- 3- Developing and implementing public campaigns that aim to spread the culture of sustainability to the widest possible audience through most effective media outlets.

To the IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature;

- 1- Institutionalization of the dialogue about sustainability to become a frequent event in which founding members as well as other regional experts and professionals will participate through an Arab Forum for Sustainability based on joint planning by the Union and Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Specific objectives need to be defined for the forum will need to be developed and agreed upon. The Forum may be held in parallel with the Arab Environment day.
- 2- Using the vast knowledge resources and networks of the Union as a platform for dialogue and initiatives to focus on education and communication tools spreading success stories and best practices from the region.
- 3- Publishing the outcomes of this dialogue through the Union's various platforms including the World Conservation Congress 2008 in Barcelona to help spreading the Arab vision for the future of sustainability.

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