

Implementation of SDG 16 vital for the Middle East and North Africa

BY ZIAD ABDEL SAMAD, ARAB NGO NETWORK FOR DEVELOPMENT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its accompanying Goal 16, constitutes significant progress as compared with the previous MDG agenda, because it makes the links stronger between peace and security, nationally and globally, democratic, effective and transparent governance, social inclusion and access to justice.

It is obvious that war-torn and deep-rooted long-lasting conflict countries – where good governance is lacking and the rule of law and essential elements of democracy are undermined – will continue to fail even in meeting the most basic needs of their peoples. Almost all of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa are in such a situation. The bleak situation of the region is well reflected by the Global Peace Index 2015. Countries in the region are among those with the worst score, even deteriorating compared to the previous year (average rank stands at 109 over 162 countries).¹

1 Cf. Institute for Economics and Peace (2015). Scores worsened in particular in Libya, Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

There are both external and internal reasons for these conflicts and violence; yet all of these reasons are related to the great impact of the flaws in the global system and the failure of the international community to implement international law and respective resolutions. The lack of peace and security in the region is also linked to foreign invasions and occupation, and the violation of the right to self-determination. Furthermore, the unprecedented flow of refugees and displaced people from the region, which is the biggest since World War II, is intensively shaking stability in the region and creating or increasing tensions among and within the countries.

In parallel, there is a dramatic shift in the composition of official development assistance (ODA) towards the inclusion of expenditures for humanitarian interventions, security related expenditures and refugee costs in host countries, often at the expense of previous development programmes. This shift is based on the interpretation by the OECD countries of the link between security, justice and democracy, namely that security is necessary to democracy and development. Obviously, this logic ignores the root causes of instability and conflicts and focuses on its symptoms. This reflects a short term vision which might be serving

geopolitical interests but will not have long lasting positive impact on stability, security and peace in the region.

At the national level, the principle of allocation of maximum available resources to development is challenged by high military spending, which amounts to US\$ 196 billion in 2014, an increase of 5.2 percent over 2013, and 57 percent since 2005.²

In this context, the implementation of SDG 16 is vital for the region. However, progress is significantly challenged by failure of the region to deal with systemic and structural problems, to a large extent generated by its dependence on oil revenues, including authoritarian governments; widespread corruption, in both the public and private sector; and the default to a business as usual approach. Consequently, efforts to create stability and address governance

2 Cf. SIPRI (2015). SIPRI did not publish an updated estimate for the Middle East for 2015 as data for 2015 has been unavailable for several countries.

issues should be accompanied by efforts towards a paradigm shift focusing on the rights-based approach, enhancing productive economies and implementing fair redistribution of wealth policies.

To overcome these challenges, countries of the region should:

1. **Unpack the new paradigm of sustainable development:** The 2030 Agenda, including SDG 16, can potentially give more clarity on the role of the state and different actors including the private sector. To implement its goals and targets, countries have to be more inclusive and sustainable in patterns of production, consumption and the provision of public services.
2. **Focus on addressing inequalities in achieving peaceful societies:** Inequality and lack of inclusion remain the core challenge in the region hampering societal peace and stability. This challenge can only be addressed by eradicating disparities at multiple levels: geographic, political, gender, social, economic, cultural and environmental. This also requires the revision of social and economic policy choices.
3. **Redesign relations with international partners and institutions:** These relations should be based on the mutual respect of interests, mutual accountability and the protection of a more equitable policy space based on the right to self-determination and the right to development.
4. **Prioritize human rights and democracy as values and regard security as a tool to protect them:** The current tendency, not only in the region but worldwide, is to consider security as a value by itself, which is creating massive harm to development efforts and violating basic human rights.
5. **Foster political participation, inclusion, citizen empowerment and engagement:** People should enjoy an enabling environment for a more active engagement in public policy-making through increased levels of transparency and social dialogue.
6. **Reconstitute the state and ensure the separation of powers:** The accumulation of all powers in either one or a few hands is common in the region. Together with widespread corruption, clientelism and nepotism this jeopardizes accountability, widens inequalities and creates policies of exclusion and discrimination and gross human rights violations.

References

- Institute for Economics and Peace (2015): Global Peace Index 2015. Sydney http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Global-Peace-Index-Report-2015_0.pdf
- SIPRI (2015): Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2014. Stockholm <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1504.pdf>