I. Introduction

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in cooperation with the League of Arab States (LAS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), organized on the sidelines of the 2nd meeting of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development an event entitled “Arab Integration ... A Transformative Change for Sustainable Development” (New York, 1 July 2014).

The side-event brought together over 60 participants, including a distinguished group of Arab and non-Arab country representatives, civil society organizations and United Nations agencies, to highlight the importance of Arab integration for achieving sustainable development in the region, and discuss the outcomes of recent Arab consultations on the post-2015 agenda. In particular, the side event addressed the following issues:

- Arab perspectives on SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda, and potential for working together as an Arab region in their achievement;
- The envisaged role of the AFSD as a catalyst for regional integration;
- The added value of an Arab Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development under the LAS umbrella and available means for operationalizing it;
- The role of ESCWA, LAS, and the UN system organizations active in the region in pushing forward a regional development agenda.

The agenda of the event is included in Annex A. Interventions and presentations made during the event can be downloaded from: http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=3493E.

II. Interventions

The event was moderated by Mr. Amr Nour, Director of the Regional Commissions New York Office, who began by welcoming participants and highlighting the evolution of the concept of sustainable development and the growing appreciation by the international community for the need to integrate and balance its various pillars. He pointed to the importance of the regional dimension in sustainable development as acknowledged in the outcome documents of Rio+20 and the HLPF, which give specific mandates to the UN Regional Commissions. He noted that the topic of the side event was very relevant and timely, and will be addressed by a group of distinguished speakers.
In her opening remarks, Ms. Rima Khalaf, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCWA, commended the Arab members of the Open Working Group for their active involvement in SDGs negotiations. She pointed out the many challenges facing the Arab countries including socio-political transformations, heightened levels of violence, and the persistence of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Within this context, she called on countries of the region to double their efforts to achieve sustainable development while struggling to establish security and stability, stressing on the importance of pursuing both tracks simultaneously. Indeed, regional consultations with state and non-state actors on post-2015 identified three interlinked priority areas: the protection of the rights, dignity and security of all; the establishment of diversified economies that can generate decent jobs and achieve social justice; and the revival of Arab culture and restoration of its historical vigor.

Ms. Khalaf indicated that enhanced Arab cooperation in the political, cultural, and environmental spheres and an integration scheme that is open to the rest of the world are essential for achieving a transformative agenda beyond 2015. Finally, she made reference to the on-going cooperation between ESCWA and the League of Arab States, the UN system and the Member countries in the field of sustainable development, with the formulation of an Arab Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development being a notable fruit of this positive collaboration.

In turn, Ms. Sima Bahous, Assistant Secretary-General and Director of UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, reiterated the vital agenda of Arab integration and sustainable development. She gave an overview of the efforts exerted by UNDP in support of the post-2015 process, including the organization of several national dialogues and a regional Arab development forum. UNDP is contributing to Arab integration at two levels: at the policy level, through the creation and support of expert networks and region-wide exchange of experience; and at the practical level, through the Aid for Trade project which aims to facilitate intra-Arab trade and enhance economic integration. Finally, Ms. Bahous stated UNDP’s readiness to help national partners to move towards implementation of the SDGs as soon as they are adopted, with a view to achieving results that make concrete improvements in people’s lives.

Ms. Roula Majdalani, Director of the Sustainable Development Policies Division at ESCWA, briefed the participants on the outcomes of the 1st Arab High-Level Forum on Sustainable Development, which was organized by ESCWA and partners and hosted by the Government of Jordan on 2-4 April 2014 in Amman. She noted that the AFSD, similarly to other regional forums organized by the Regional Commission, represents an acknowledgement of the importance of the regional dimension in sustainable development. A driver of regional integration, the Forum is expected to provide political impetus to sustainable development, review progress and discuss priorities and challenges, facilitate exchange of experiences and partnerships, and deliberate on an Arab perspective on sustainable development issues. Foremost, the Forum will tighten the inter-linkages between the various institutional processes existing through ESCWA, LAS, the UN System, and civil society organizations to provide a coherent regional input to the global HLPF. It will be informed by an Arab report on sustainable development that builds on national reports to provide a critical assessment of the state of sustainable development in the region and guide policy formulation.

Ms. Reem Nejdawi, Chief of the Food and Environment Policies Section at ESCWA, zoomed in on the regional consultation process conducted by ESCWA on SDGs, notably the ESCWA paper on “SDGs ... An Arab Perspective”, which was discussed at the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development and later endorsed by the LAS ministerial councils for Social Affairs and the Environment. She noted that the elaboration of a regional perspective on the SDGs was important for two reasons: on one hand to
support Arab negotiators taking part in the global SDG formulation process; and on another, to identify the elements of a regional sustainable development agenda that the Arab countries must follow independently of the outcomes of the global process. Ms. Nejdawi presented the principles, enablers and methodology which have guided the preparation of the paper, as well as the consultative process followed. The strength of the paper comes from a well-argued narrative that identifies the required areas of action (goals and targets) based on a description of the current situation, an assessment of the MDG progress, and an analysis of the interlinked development challenges and priorities.

Ms. Shahira Wahbi, Chief, Sustainable Development and International Cooperation at the League of Arab States, highlighted the recent adoption by the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment (CAMRE) of the Arab Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development, which was developed by LAS in cooperation with ESCWA, and will also be submitted to the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit to be held in January 2015 in Tunisia. She gave an overview of the history and the consultation process followed in the formulation of the said Framework, noting that the Framework will have an important role at both the national level, to accelerate implementation of sustainable development in Arab countries, and the regional level, to promote effective coordination, integration, dialogue and action, and mobilize the needed means of implementation. Ms. Wahbi highlighted recent efforts by LAS to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development, including the call by CAMRE to have environmental issues addressed by the Economic and Social Council and for a change of the name of the Arab Economic and Social Development Summits to reflect the inclusion of the environment on its agenda.

Mr. Mootaz Ahmadein Khalil, Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations, highlighted a number of important issues that are currently being debated within the context of the formulation of the post-2015 and SDGs. On the issue of accountability, he stressed the importance of anchoring this role in the HLPF where it belongs, calling for the inclusion of the means of implementation under any future review and accountability mechanism. He noted that the Arab region faces particular challenges related to terrorism and the persistence of occupation that will need to be addressed regionally and globally. On the issue of common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR), Mr. Khalil highlighted the efforts of the G77 to widen CBDR to all the areas of sustainable development rather than restricting it to the environment, a position supported by the Arab countries. He concluded by saying that the submission of the OWG report is not the end of the road, and that the post-2015 will include elements not necessarily addressed in the SDGs. As such, efforts should be exerted to keep the post-2015 agenda open for revision in the future, and to establish the power of the HLPF as a universal decision-making body that is able to follow-up on the delivery of means of implementation. He called on the civil society organizations to help advance these issues, and to fight attempts to dilute the functions of the HLPF.

III. Summary of discussions

Following interventions by main speakers, the floor was open for discussion. Several issues were raised by the participants, which are summarized below.

- Participants reiterated the view that peace and security are enablers of sustainable development, with ending of occupation being perceived as a priority for the region. It was acknowledged that stability will be enhanced by a development process that creates jobs, reduces inequalities and promotes social justice. Among the many consequences of instability,
the refugee crisis was highlighted, the magnitude of which raises real concerns as to how sustainable development can be achieved within the context of displacement and how to ensure the full rights of refugees and displaced persons. Differentiation was made between Palestinian refugees and refugees due to internal conflicts. For Palestinian refugees, the issue is about restoring their long ignored political rights and the right to return, which is currently suspended. For the latter group, while focus on humanitarian relief needs to be maintained, the international community needs to provide development assistance and help build livelihoods and strengthen resilience. It was alarming that the issue of refugees was not given the attention it deserves in the zero draft of the SDGs.

- The issue of terrorism was also highlighted as an emerging threat to peace and security in the region, and parallelism was drawn to the situation in a number of countries in Africa. The need to lobby for the inclusion of terrorism within the SDGs was put forward.

- The added value of the Arab Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development was seen in that not all Arab priorities and goals are expected to be incorporated in the SDGs. Concerns were raised, however, regarding the integration of the three pillars within the Arab Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development, given its recent endorsement by the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment. In this regard, the LAS representative advised that while the idea behind the Framework was initiated by CAMRE, its scope Framework was beyond environmental issues. Indeed, the Framework was discussed at length at the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development, which was attended by all sectors, and also by the Arab Ministerial Social Affairs Council. In addition, its submission to the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit in January 2015 will guarantee the integration of all the pillars of sustainable development.

- On the issue of youth as development actors, stress was made on the need to address youth issues not only from an education and employment perspective, but also from a participation point of view. The youth need to have a voice if the region is to reap the benefits of the recent political transformations. The upcoming UNDP Arab Human Development Report will focus on the youth issue, given its importance.

- Two concerns were voiced by participants regarding the on-going global SDG formulation process. The first relates to the scope of the SDGs. Drawing parallelism with the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, there was an acknowledgement that the post-2015 agenda will include elements other than the SDGs and will address a wider scope of issues. The concern was that, similarly to what happened with the MDGs, the global community would limit its focus to the SDGs only and disregard other critical elements in the agenda. The second concern relates to the fact that the Open Working Group is currently ahead in its work over other equally important related work streams, notably the financing for sustainable development process. As a result, there is a risk of addressing issues in silos rather than creating much needed synergies between goals and their means of implementation.
Annex A. Programme of the event

Opening Remarks

- Dr. Rima Khalaf, USG, Executive Secretary, ESCWA
- Dr. Sima Bahous, ASG, Director of UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States

Discussion Panel

- Outcomes of the Arab High Level Forum on Sustainable Development and the Arab Perspective on SDGs
  
  *Ms. Roula Majdalani, Director, Sustainable Development Policies Division, ESCWA*
  *Ms. Reem Nejdawi, Chief, Food and Environment Policies Section, SDPD, ESCWA*

- The Arab Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development
  
  *Ms. Shahira Wahbi, Chief, Sustainable Development and International Cooperation, Department of Environment, Housing, Water Resources, and Sustainable Development, League of Arab States*

- Arab Participation in the Open Working Group Consultations on SDGs
  
  *H.E. Mr. Mootaz Ahmadein Khalil, Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations*

Discussion

- Moderated by Mr. Amr Nour, Director, Regional Commissions New York Office