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**Summary Report
on
Rural Development in the Arab Region**



By

Arab Organization for Agricultural Development
(AOAD)

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1. Introduction:

This report on rural development in the Arab region is intended for review of progress made towards implementation of the recommendations of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The focus is placed on identification of areas where good progress has been made, the challenges facing the realization of the unmet goals, and the areas that need more work relating to the plan of implementation of the World Summit and achievement of the MDGs.

Most of the countries in the Arab region are predominantly agrarian, and for that reason agricultural development constitutes a major core area for rural development activities. From a comprehensive perspective, rural development is constituted of several dimensions that need to be effectively integrated to achieve sustainable development. Of these dimensions are:

- the economic dimension which links all efforts aiming at achieving sustainable economic growth;
- the social dimension which is concerned with achievement of social equity and poverty reduction through the implementation of policies that lead to generation of employment opportunities, equitable access to resources and services, and the narrowing of social class and rural-urban socio-economic differences;
- the human development dimension concerned with provision of health services, the expansion of education, capacity building, and empowerment of the disadvantaged social groups; and
- the environmental dimension which is concerned with achievement of sustainable development through environmental protection, and conservation of natural resources, including water, land and biomass.

2. Historical development of the concept of rural development in the Arab region:

In their attempt to achieve the above-stated objectives, the rural development policies and programmes of the Arab region have been influenced over the years by evolutionary changes in development concepts, and by the internationally agreed upon agenda. Among the concepts which guided rural development in the Arab countries, and elsewhere around the world, are the concepts of “community development” and “integrated rural development”, and more lately the concept of “sustainable development” which constituted the focus in the recent conferences and summits supervised by the United Nations Organization. Thus, rural development objectives in the Arab region in the 1990s were geared to become more in line with “Agenda 21” and the proposed programme of action for sustainable development which was adopted by world leaders in the “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. Most of the countries of the Arab region were represented in that summit.

The Agenda 21 programme of action calls for promotion of sustainable development through expanding trade; combating poverty; changing consumption patterns; protecting human health; conserving the environment and natural resources, combating deforestation, desertification and drought; promoting sustainable agricultural and rural development; and the promoting education and public awareness. Human development is viewed as the most important tools for facilitation of transition to a more sustainable and peaceful world.

The “Millennium Summit” which was held in New York in September 2000 served to transform Agenda 21 into a set of 8 Millennium Development Goals for achieving sustainable development through reducing poverty, improving the quality of peoples' lives, ensuring environmental sustainability and building partnerships to ensure that globalization becomes a more positive force. Specific targets have been set for each of the 8 development goals to be achieved by 2015.

The Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development, which was held in Johannesburg, South Africa (2 - 4 September 2002), re-affirmed commitment to the Millennium Development Goals and developed a plan of implementation with targets and guides for achieving sustainable rural development.

3. The Current situation of rural development in the Arab Region:

Nation-wide country reports on rural development, covering the entire Arab region, were unavailable for the purpose of this report. Reporting on the situation of rural development in the region has, therefore, depended on available studies reflecting on rural development related activities in 13 Arab countries, namely Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Arab Republic of Syria, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Kuwait, the Arab Republic of Egypt, Tunisia, and the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.

Available studies indicate that rural development policies and programmes in Sudan are directed primarily towards achievement of improvements in crop and animal production, especially among traditional farmers and pastoralists, as a means for ensuring food security, improving the socio-economic conditions in rural areas; and reducing the rate of rural to urban migration. Rural development projects give special attention to diffusion of practices that lead to sustainable natural resource use and environmental conservation. An increasing attention is being directed at present to women's capacity development to facilitate their participation in productive socio-economic activities in rural areas.

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, rural development policies and programmes are targeting the elimination of rural poverty. The state provides health, education and other community services, including housing facilities in rural areas. Special attention is given to improvement of agricultural production through facilitation of adoption of modern production technology, and the state is paying more attention to empowerment of rural women through facilitation of their involvement in production activities and community service work in rural areas.

In Iraq, rural development programmes are focused on supply of subsidized agricultural production inputs and provision of credit services to farmers as a means for improving agricultural production and increasing rural incomes. The state facilitates marketing operations and ensures adequate prices for agricultural products.

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the state provides micro-finance services for support of small farm and non-farm investment projects as a means for improving the levels of living of low-income families. Employment opportunities in rural areas are created through the implementation of community development projects for improving the rural infrastructure and conservation of the natural resources. The focus of rural development activities in Jordan is on training and capacity building.

In The Arab Republic of Syria, the rural development policies are focused on the provision of agricultural development services and support of income-generating projects in rural areas as a means for poverty eradication and achievement of food security. Policies are directed to safeguard sustainable use of natural resources and protection of the environment. Food processing and capacity development projects receive special attention. Commercial banks provide services for modernization of agricultural production operations, and the state is enacting price and quality control policies which are intended for increasing farm income. The state also grants special attention to programmes for empowering rural women and improving their income-generation potential through training and production services.

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, rural development programmes are focused on provision of social services, and improvement of farm yields and incomes through technology transfer and credit supply services.

In the Sultanate of Oman, special attention is given in rural development programmes to the development of agriculture, fisheries and apiaries. Capacity building and technical support services are provided along with credit, especially to the young producers. Participation of rural women in agricultural activities is encouraged and supported by the state.

In Palestine, rural development projects are focused on improvement of the marketing potential of farm products and improvement of farmer incomes. Capacity building training is targeting the unemployed and the poor in rural areas to improve their income-generating potential. The state provides production resources to low-income families, including small land parcels and capital, as a means for eradication of poverty in rural areas.

In Qatar, rural development activities are focused on provision of research, extension and input supply services for promotion of agricultural output. Participation by rural women in income-generating activities is encouraged and supported.

In Kuwait, special attention in rural development programmes is given to natural resource development and improvement of agricultural productivity, expansion of opportunities for gainful employment, and supply of free medical and education services.

In the Arab Republic of Egypt, rural development projects focus their activities on diffusion of improved agricultural production technology as a means for improving levels of production and income among the farming population. Support is also granted to non-governmental organizations to activate their roles in poverty alleviation projects. Production finance services are also available for engaging the unemployed young people in small-scale income-generating projects. Special attention is given to meeting rural women development needs, in terms of production capital and free education and health services.

In Tunisia, rural development programmes give prime attention to provision of capacity building services for improving participation in agricultural development activities. Group action self-help projects in the fields of education, health, food security and housing are encouraged.

In the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, special emphasis in rural development planning is placed on policies and programmes for sustainable use of natural resources, environmental protection, and community participation in economic development projects, and provision of production support services to the poorer segments of the rural population.

4. Evaluation of progress made towards achievement of the Millennium development goals:

There are marked inter and intra regional variations within the countries of the Arab region with respect to availability of the resources needed for achieving sustainable development. This explains the existing variation in the progress made towards the application of Johannesburg's plan of implementation for fulfillment of the millennium development goals within expected time frame.

Notable progress has been made in the relatively more developed countries of the region in terms of rural socio-economic development and environmental and natural resource conservation. However, the implementation of the Johannesburg plan, and commitment to the millennium development goals and Agenda 21 has been weakened in some of the less developed countries in the region by lack of resources and the poor infrastructure, and/or by the onset of natural disasters which led to large scale displacement of the rural population, high rates of migration to urban centers, deterioration of the existing social and economic services, and higher rates of poverty in both rural and urban areas.

The efforts that are directed towards achieving sustainable development in the Arab countries that are endowed with rich natural resources are considerable, especially in the member states of the Gulf

Cooperation Council. In these countries incomes at all levels are progressively increasing, and notable improvements in health, education and capacity building services have been achieved. Private sector firms and community-based organizations are contributing significantly to rural development activities.

On the other hand, many of the low income countries of the Arab region have continued to be plagued with political instability and conflicts leading to the deterioration of an already weak infrastructural base. In consequence, poverty eradication efforts in these countries are constrained. There are indications of social problems in both rural and urban areas stemming from low incomes, expanding unemployment and malnutrition, and high rates of rural to urban migration triggered by deterioration in the physical and social environment in rural areas. The macro economic development policies adopted by some of the countries in the Arab region have led to imbalance in the distribution of development services and increasing marginalization of peripheral areas. Economic reform and privatization policies, coupled with external economic pressures have hindered the achievement of substantial progress towards achievement of the Millennium development goals in the countries of the region, like Sudan for example. Thus, it is unlikely that the least developed countries (LDCs) of the Arab region can achieve substantial progress toward achievement of the MDGs in the absence of adequate assistance from the high income states in the region, and from international donors and development agencies. However, as has been emphasized in the ESCWA 2005 report, the provision of resources alone would be insufficient as a means for achieving the MDGs, unless it is combined with reform of governance, including firm commitment to equitable wealth and service distribution and accountability. More efforts are needed across the Arab region for the forging of strategic regional and global partnerships, and the implementation of effective socio-economic policies conducive to achievement of the MDGs.

4.1 Progress towards achieving Goal 1: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty:

Based on the data provided by ESCWA (2005) on poverty in 10 Arab countries (which account for some 64% of the Arab population), poverty levels have nearly doubled in the Arab LDCs, and that makes the ability of most of the countries of the region to succeed in achieving Goal 1 quite doubtful. As reported in a more recent study, the proportion of the population living below the lower national poverty lines in the Arab region as a whole does not reflect significant progress in reducing poverty. Only a slight decrease in the proportion of the population experiencing income poverty has been achieved in the Arab region from 19.5% in the 1990-1995 period to 18.2% in the 2000-2004 period. In contrast, the average estimates of the proportion of the population living below income poverty line in the LDCs of the region show a significant increase from 37.1% in the 1990-1995 period to 46.8% in the 2000-2004 period. The poverty rates in the middle-income Mashreq and Maghreb countries were found to drop by 3 and 5 percentage respectively during the same period, and no dependable data were found to reflect the rate of poverty in the high-income GCC counties, which is expected to be the lowest.

As for progress toward achievement of the millennium development goal of eradication of hunger (halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger), the available data imply that the set target is unlikely to be met by 2015. The data revealed that the number of food deprived persons (who are living on less than the minimum level of dietary energy consumption) in the Arab region rose from approximately 20 million (8.8%) in 1991 to 23.3 million (8.6%) in 2002. More current data on this aspect are not available.

4.2 Progress towards achieving Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education:

The 2007 ESCWA report indicated that the enrolment rate in primary education in the Arab region reached 80.5% in the school year 2004/2005, a figure which reflects a 10% increase over 15 years. The available data suggest that the Mashreq, Maghreb and GCC countries are close to achievement of the goal of universal primary education, with net enrollment rates exceeding 90%. In contrast, almost half of all children in the Arab LDCs were not enrolled in school in 2005. Hence, there is a need for substantial acceleration of the rate of progress in primary education in the low-income countries of the region in order to achieve universal enrolment by 2015. This will lead to eradication of illiteracy in time. Lack of education in the past has resulted into high rates of illiteracy among women over 15 years in most of the countries of the region.

4.3 Progress towards achieving Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women:

It is expected that if countries maintain the current rate of progress, the overall Arab region will succeed in achieving gender equality at all levels of education by 2015. Between 1990 and 2002, the gender parity index (GPI) – the number of girls for every 100 boys attending primary school - increased from 0.79 to 0.90 in primary education. A more recent estimate shows an increase in GPI from 0.81 in 1991 to 0.92 in 2005. Thus, there is a marked region-wide improvement in enrolment of girls in schools, but there is still a disparity in favor of boys in primary school education in some of the countries of the region. This is coupled with the high rate of illiteracy among women over 15 years of age.

Some progress has been achieved in terms of programmes for empowering women through involvement in farm and non-farm income-generating activities. However, despite the notable improvements of women's access to education, gender equality on the economic, social and political fields is still very far from being achieved in most of the countries of the region. For example, according to ESCWA (2007), women in the Arab region occupied only 18.3% of the total paid employment positions in the industrial and service sector in 2004, and only 8.7% of the region's national parliamentary seats by April 2007.

4.4 Progress towards achieving Goal 4: Reduce child mortality rate:

From the available ESCWA reports, there is evidence that substantial progress has been achieved toward reduction of child and maternal mortality in the countries of the Arab region. From the ESCWA data in the 2005 report, under-five child mortality in the Arab region declined on the average from 91 to 70 deaths per 1,000 live births during the period from 1990 to 2003 (the 2007 ESCWA report indicated that the average under-five mortality rate in the region has dropped by 27% between 1990 and 2005). These data suggest that the Arab region, with the exception of the resource-poor LDCs, is on track to achieve the target of reducing child mortality by one third. The under-five child mortality rate had declined in the Mashreq countries during the same period from 78 deaths per 1,000 live births. There has also been a dramatic reduction in child mortality in the Maghreb countries, where child mortality rates have decreased by more than one-half since 1990, reaching 37 in 2003. According to ESCWA (2005), child mortality was the lowest in the GCC countries in 2003, being 23 down from 39 in 1990. Under-five child mortality is highest in the countries of the Arab region that are affected by conflict and/or underdevelopment, namely, Djibouti, Iraq, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. In these countries, close to or more than 100 deaths per 1,000 live births die before the age of five. It is estimated that child mortality in the LDCs (Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen), represents more than half of the total for the entire Arab region. In these countries, child mortality results from diverse factors including high levels of malnutrition, poor access to health services, and lack of education.

4.5 Progress towards achieving Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Substantial progress has been made in the Arab region towards improvement of maternal health. However, the current maternal mortality rates (MMRs) and natal care data suggest that the region as a whole is not in a position to meet the maternal health-related targets of the MDGs. According to UNECEF (2004), maternal deaths per 100,000 live births have dropped on the average from 465 in 1990 to 337 in 2002. The data suggest a general decline in MMRs with significant variation between the countries of the region. In 2000, the average MMR in the GCC countries was 29.8, compared to 144.8 and 165.5 in the Mashreq and Maghreb countries respectively. A much higher average of 716.7 maternal fatalities per 100,000 live births was reported in the Arab LDCs. Poor access to obstetric care services is often cited as a key factor behind the high maternal mortality the relatively high maternal mortality rates in the countries of the Arab region.

4.6 Progress towards achieving Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases:

The available records suggest that HIV/AIDS is not highly prevalent in the countries of the Arab region, but concern is rising because of the marked increase in the number of reported cases, especially in the LDCs of the region. It was found that the reported HIV-positive cases have increased by 42% to 13,865 between 1990 and 2003 (ESCWA, 2005). More than half of those cases were reported in the LDCs of the region, where more than 1% of the sub-region's population aged between 15 and 45 were reported as HIV-positive. In the more recent ESCWA (2007) study Algeria, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, and Morocco were reported to be witnessing HIV epidemics in certain areas, whilst both Sudan and Djibouti are facing generalized HIV/AIDS epidemics. In 2005, Djibouti recorded a 3.1% rate while Sudan saw rates ranging between 0.8% and 2.7%). However, because of the inadequacy of the data collection, monitoring and reporting systems in use, the extent of spread of the acute immune deficiency virus among the principal groups at risk, and among pregnant women, might have been underestimated. Hence, more efforts are needed to improve monitoring, reporting and curative measures, in order to contain AIDS and the other problematic diseases of the region.

4.7 Progress towards achieving Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability:

Substantial progress has been achieved in some of the Arab region countries in their attempts to face the challenges of sustainable development since 2000. However, more effective and conducive legislation and development policies are needed in many of the countries of the region for fostering environment protection and adoption of sustainable natural resource use practices, particularly those relating to soil, water and energy resources. It was also revealed by the United Nations Development Programme (2003) that only five of the countries of the Arab region have integrated the principles of sustainable development into their national policies and programmes. Consequently, as revealed by ESCWA (2005), land degradation and desertification still pose a serious threat in most of the countries of the Arab region, and this deflects a serious lack of adoption of effective natural resource use policies, and weak commitment to legislation for protecting the environment in many of the countries of the region.

4.8 Progress towards achieving Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development:

The achievement of the MDG of developing a global partnership for development is dependent on commitment on the part of the developed countries to provision of development assistance to the countries of the region for supporting sustainable socio-economic development activities and the means for global integration. The observer can easily notice that the conditions needed for achieving this goal are lacking in many of the countries of the Arab region. This is partly because of lack of firm commitment from the

developed countries to provide the needed assistance, and partly because of the accumulation of foreign debts in some of the countries of the region and their subjection to economic boycott. Many of the countries of the region are also lacking in stability because of their adoption of policies that have led to inequitable distribution of power and resources, and retarded socioeconomic integration. All these factors have contributed to weakening of the opportunities for creation of the conditions that are conducive to the development of sustainable regional and international partnerships for development.

5. Key Challenges facing achievement of sustainable development in the Arab region:

Substantial progress towards achievement of the eight MDGs has been made in some of the countries of the Arab region. However, the realization of some of the targeted goals has been hampered, particularly in the LDCs of the region, by a host of factors including indebtedness and low rates of economic growth, inadequate financing, inequitable distribution of development resources and benefits, persistent political tensions and conflicts, and the lack of firm commitment to implementation of pro-poor development policies and strategies that foster environment conservation, sustainable resource use, gender equality, the balancing of rural and urban development, and improvement of health and education services.

Among the challenges of rural development in the Arab region which are expected to retard progress towards attainment of the MDGs, if not effectively dealt with, are (1) the high rates of poverty, especially in the LDCs of the region, which are in cases coupled with high rates of population growth, (2) the national legislation and development policies which hinder equitable access to resources and services in some of the countries of the region, (3) the spread of unsustainable natural resource use practices and their harmful environmental effects, which are linked to poverty, defective land tenure policies and environment change, (4) the weak infrastructure and lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, (5) the high rates of rural to urban migration, especially among the educated youthful members of the rural communities, (6) the gender-insensitive policies which limit women's access to economic, social and political participation, and (7) the lack of adequate financial and technical support for rural development programmes from local, regional and international sources, particularly in the LDCs of the region.

6. Recommendation for improving sustainable development in the region:

Sustainable development can be achieved and expanded in the future by the countries of the region through:

- The establishment of peace and security in the region in order to create an environment conducive to sustainable development.
- Establishing and strengthening effective means for expanding cooperation between the countries of the region, and the coordination of sustainable development efforts with those implemented by UN agencies and other international development agencies.
- Rural development policies and programmes in the Arab region should give priority to environment protection and conservation of natural resources. The joining of in international and multi-state regional treaties concerned with environmental conservation should be encouraged.
- Strengthening the infrastructure in rural areas, and the means for equitable access to resources and services
- Paying greater attention to the capacity building needs of rural women and means for expanding their gainful employment opportunities.

- Attracting national and foreign capital resources for investment in labor intensive projects that are socio-economically and environmentally sound, especially in the more populated rural areas as a means for expanding employment opportunities for the rural poor.
- Strengthening the role of community-based organization and popular participation in planning and implementation of sustainable development projects.
- Giving special attention to maternal and child health, and the eradication of AIDS and other diseases, and improvement of statistical records.
- Efforts should be constantly made to improve enrollment in educational institutions and improvement of the curricula.
- Professional country studies should be regularly conducted to monitor progress toward achievement of the different MDGs in the form of annual standard reports to facilitate evaluation and comparative analysis.
- Encouraging the development of national strategies for poverty eradication, and expansion of capacity building projects for empowering and activating the disadvantaged groups.