

Distinguished President,  
Distinguished Deputy Prime Minister,  
Distinguished Panelists,  
Excellencies,  
Colleagues and Friends,

I am pleased to open this event, the second in the series of regional seminars on the contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights. As you know, this region is close to my heart, and I would have liked to be with you in Beirut.

In mandating this seminar series, the Human Rights Council recognized that sustainable development and human rights are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. This seminar will focus on some of the pressing development challenges related to the enjoyment of all human rights in the Arab world while keeping in mind the United Nations' central and transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind.

The comprehensive definition of development in the preamble of the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development provides a useful starting point for the discussion. In the Declaration, development is defined not only as an economic, but also a social, cultural and political process. It requires an inclusive approach, based on participation by all and a distribution of benefits from development that contributes to ending poverty and reducing inequalities and discrimination in all its forms. This emphasis on holistic human development considers the needs of both present and future generations.

Global challenges to human rights and development, such as the climate emergency, the fuel and food crises, armed conflicts, and a shrinking civic space in many parts of the world require our collective commitment, political will and concerted action. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic brought sustainable development to a standstill in many countries and set it back by several years in others. In this region too, inequalities and structural vulnerabilities have continued to intensify. The pandemic disproportionately impacted the most marginalised and vulnerable, including older persons, refugees, migrants, minorities, women and youth.

Every country, every region, has particular challenges. Some of the key challenges affecting the Arab region will be discussed in these two days. They include widening poverty, lack of youth employment opportunities, gender inequality, inadequate food, water and sanitation infrastructure and governance deficits. These challenges are too often compounded by violations of civil and political rights and armed conflict that have put an additional strain on public participation and further restricted the civic space.

According to a recent report from the Economic Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the Arab region is the most unequal worldwide. In 2020, 58 per cent of national income in the region was accrued by the top 10 per cent, and only 8 per cent went to the bottom 50 per cent. Poverty is intergenerational: once a family falls into poverty, it is likely to remain there for a few generations. Economic growth alone will not solve this problem. On the contrary, non-inclusive growth could exacerbate inequalities without strengthening economic participation for all.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/inequality-arab-region-ticking-time-bomb> at p. 1.

Youth unemployment in the Arab region is one of the most enduring forms of inequality and has been the highest worldwide for the past 25 years, with approximately 85 per cent of young people in the region working in the informal sector.<sup>2</sup> The unemployment rate among young women is also the highest in the world and over twice the rate among young men, reaching 49.1 percent in 2021.<sup>3</sup> I hope that over the next two days your discussions will provide insights into harnessing the creativity of youth to contribute to development opportunities and the enjoyment of human rights.

Climate change, political crisis and poor infrastructure hinder food production and distribution, with many countries in the region experiencing protracted drought and food and water insecurity. In Arab States, over 70 million people lack regular household water supply, as do another 26 million displaced persons in or from conflict affected countries.<sup>4</sup> Water security demands effective water governance and cooperation amongst countries to ensure sustainability.

Failure to protect human rights has created significant obstacles to development. We need human rights enhancing economies – that bring together economics, development and human rights, and uphold the dignity and rights of all, while promoting fully inclusive sustainable development.

We must double down without delay and return to the determined pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are underpinned by economic, civil, cultural, political

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/inequality-arab-region-ticking-time-bomb> at p. 57 and <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/38065/English.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/arab-human-development-report-2022-expanding-opportunities-inclusive-and-resilient-recovery-post-covid-era>, at p.67.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/arab-human-development-report-2022-expanding-opportunities-inclusive-and-resilient-recovery-post-covid-era> at p. 102.

and social rights, as well as the right to development. In his *Call to Action for Human Rights*, the United Nations Secretary-General makes the case for solutions anchored in human rights to sustain development progress.

Our Office has stepped up its engagement at the country level on economic, social and cultural rights, the SDGs and prevention in an effort to strengthen the link between human rights and development. Through the Surge initiative we bring together human rights experts and macroeconomists to provide specialized and contextual research, advice and analysis so that macroeconomic policies operationalize economic and social rights.<sup>5</sup> Our Office will launch a workshop this month on Mainstreaming the Right to Development in Voluntary National Review Reporting for Realizing the SDGs, which will build capacity of participants, many of them from the Arab region, involved in the preparation and elaboration of the Voluntary National Review Reports.

In *Our Common Agenda*, the Secretary-General has called for a renewed social contract, adapted to the challenges of this century, based on equal rights and opportunities for all. A social contract connects a Government and their people and is reflected within the society to embrace a comprehensive realization of human rights. Establishing new social contracts anchored in human rights will help rebuild trust between people and their governments, enhance social cohesion, and prioritize combating inequalities and creating an enabling environment for realizing all human rights.

In concluding, let me provide examples of some of our projects in the region. In Egypt, our Office has been promoting closer institutional cooperation between the National Commission on Human Rights and the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics to build the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/sdgs/seeding-change-economy-enhances-human-rights-surge-initiative>

foundation for human rights-based development programming powered by disaggregated data and indicators. In Mauritania, we are engaging with government authorities and civil society organisations to reinforce their understanding of and capacity on the nexus between climate change, migration, and human rights with a view to inform future strategies and solutions. In Tunisia, our Office implemented a pilot project supporting municipalities in adopting participatory human rights-based approaches to budget, with a special focus on vulnerable groups.

I also hope this seminar series will be an opportunity to address some critical questions about how to strengthen the commitment to international cooperation necessary for development and tailor regional and local development strategies to enhance the enjoyment of human rights and promote a fair distribution of the benefits of development.

As this seminar series moves from region to region, we must remind ourselves that development and human rights communities share the same universal goals – to end discrimination and marginalisation, advance human dignity and equality, and realize the well-being and rights of everyone, everywhere.

I wish you fruitful discussions and look forward to your conclusions and recommendations.

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