

Harvesting the knowledge on accountability in the Arab region

Introduction

1. This harvesting paper focuses on accountability for sustainable development in the Arab region based on assessing the existing national, regional and international tools and mechanism for reviews of some Arab countries. These existing sustainable development accountability mechanisms address policies' design and implementation of different commitments of development actors at different levels. In addition, the paper outlines issues around a transformative accountability framework for the post 2015 Agenda with the involvement of regional actors including ESCWA.
2. The paper will inform the global debate on accountability in the post 2015 and provide preliminary input on the issue. However, more detailed input will be provided following the consultations with various stakeholders including member countries, civil society and international and regional organizations. The regional consultative meeting on accountability within the post 2015 agenda is planned for 15-16 September in Tunisia in parallel with the 28th ESCWA ministerial Session. The meeting will be informed by a discussion paper that ESCWA is currently preparing on accountability within the post 2015 agenda at the regional level. The outcome of the meeting will be a Chair's summary and will constitute the region's contribution to the Secretary-General's Synthesis Report due in December 2014.
3. Regarding the existing review tools and mechanisms, various Arab countries have selected experiences on accountability for trade, investment and environmental policies. A number of countries seem to be accountable to other regional review systems, the African Peer review mechanism and to other regional partners, the European Union, and directly to the global level with the Annual Ministerial Review under ECOSOC, and few Arab countries reported to CSD process since its inception. ESCWA member countries are systematically accountable to the Multilateral Trade System and to the Universal Periodic Review on human rights.

I- Current practices of accountability tools and mechanisms in the Arab Region

4. Review tools and mechanisms for accountability in the Arab region are currently state-led and based on some international agreed commitments such as the implementation of MDGs, voluntary commitments under Multilateral Environmental Agreements and mandatory commitments under international conventions and agreements on human rights. Some of the commitments reviewed are linked to the trade multilateral system and to international partnerships, other commitments are proposed for policies design, aid effectiveness and citizen-driven accountability.

5. Five Arab countries have voluntarily presented their progress on the implementation of MDGs and internationally agreed commitments through the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) under ECOSOC. Many Arab countries prepared national MDG progress reports to assess their achievement of the MDGs. Furthermore, regional AMR preparatory meetings organized periodically by ESCWA and partners¹, have been reported to the Annual Ministerial Review. The League of Arab States, in cooperation with the UN system (with ESCWA leading the process), prepared on a periodic basis MDG progress reports, which proved to be a useful process for countries to accelerate implementation of the MDGs in the region. Recently the 2013 Arab progress report on MDGS was discussed at the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, which served as the regional preparatory meeting for the 2014 Annual Ministerial Review.
6. Arab countries participated in the Trade Policy Review process. Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are particularly interested in this review mechanism, considering the wide trade relationships established within the Gulf Countries Council. Other Arab countries like Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Mauritania seem to be less interested in this mechanism. The reason may have to do with the weaknesses of the sub-regional trade frameworks and the privileged relationship with the European Union as a main economic partner for Maghreb countries. Between reviews, WTO members need to provide brief reports when there are significant changes in their trade policies; an annual update of statistical information should be provided according to the agreed format as it is mentioned in the WTO guidelines for the Trade Policy Review.
7. New free trade agreements between the European Union and some Arab countries and their contribution to sustainable development were recently subject to the Trade Sustainability Impact Assessments (TSIA) by Ecorys (the sole consulting company engaged with the European Union to undertake the TSIA's). Arab Countries negotiating the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with the EU are facing challenges with TSIA's regarding the independence of this entity and the difficulty to conduct a parallel assessment individually.
8. Furthermore, these four countries, namely Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan have been supported by OECD for reviewing their investment policies since 2007. The objective of this process is to adhere to the Declaration of OECD on International Investment and Multinationals. Based on their adherence to this declaration, the positive impact of multinationals in terms of sustainable development and social progress should be encouraged and maximized for the implementation of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, which are the most comprehensive set of government-backed recommendations on responsible business conduct. Strategic frameworks on Corporate Social Responsibility, national platforms for dialogue and information along with an increasing role of civil society are needed to make progress in effectively meeting the commitments under the declaration and the guidelines.

¹ Respectively on Sustainable Urbanization (2008), non-communicable diseases and injuries considered as major challenges to sustainable development (2009), innovative approaches to reaching women, girls and the marginalized in the Arab region (2011) and science, technology and innovation for sustainable development (2013).

9. The Environmental Performance Review (EPR), which aims mainly to improve the environmental management and associated environmental performance by making concrete recommendations for better policy design and implementation, are state-led assessments of progress in reconciling countries environmental and economic targets and in meeting international environmental commitments. The efficiency of the UNECE methodology deployed by the EPR programme has attracted the attention of other bodies outside Europe, leading to requests for a transfer of know-how from UNECE to other UN regional commissions. At the request of Morocco, UNECE has launched in 2012 the EPR of the country in cooperation with the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). More recently, Tunisia expressed interest to be reviewed under the third cycle of UNECE EPR programme with the support of ESCWA.
10. The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique process involving a review of the human rights records of all UN Member States. ESCWA member countries reviewed are as follows: For the First cycle: Morocco, Tunisia, Bahrain, UAE (2008), Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen (2009), Egypt, Qatar, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Lebanon (2010), Oman, Sudan, Syria (2011), while the following countries started the second cycle in 2012, Tunisia, Bahrain, Morocco, UAE (2012), Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, (2013), Qatar, Iraq, Egypt (2014), Lebanon, Oman, Kuwait (2015), Sudan, Syria (2016).

II- Toward a transformative framework on accountability for the post 2015 development Agenda

11. The accountability framework for the post 2015 Development Agenda is expected to be transformative at national, regional and global levels. Reviewing existing legal and institutional national and regional frameworks, and establishing enabling mechanisms and platforms at all levels are particularly challenging, in particular with the prevailing instability situation in the Arab region.
12. At the national level, there is a need to build on the expectations of the population for development, prosperity and human well-being in order to establish good governance, rule of law, state of institutions and the responsibility of all stakeholders. Building accountable institutions and reinforcing the national institutional frameworks on sustainable development are crucial for the adoption of accountability tools and mechanisms such as conducting sustainability performance reviews, monitoring SDGs and reporting on sustainable development for progress assessments.
13. For a multilayered Accountability for the post 2015 Development Agenda Framework, the national level is the most relevant in view of the fact that the majority of commitments are either those of the state or those of development actors established under national laws and regulations. Based on the principle of responsibility, governments are accountable for voluntary commitments on economic and social development under planning system, for policy design under strategic sustainable development frameworks and for policies implementation under mutual accountability; they are responsible for embedding international commitments under Multilateral Environment Agreements into national strategies and law. A results-based approach for sustainable development is needed in order to assume all these commitments and to

engage other national and international development actors: private sector, trade unions, NGOs, researches institutions and academics, individuals, etc.

14. At the regional level, reviewing the roles and responsibilities of regional organizations, to ensure accountability is crucial for the effectiveness of national and international commitments on sustainable development. Policies design, means of implementation and measurement of progress are three main issues to conceive a regional mechanism for accountability. There is a need for building strong partnerships for sustainable development at the global and regional levels as a basis for accountability. In addition, it is important to explore further the feasibility of some tools for policy design such as Environmental or Sustainability Performance Review.
15. Reporting on sustainable development by international and regional institutions and national development stakeholders (other than the official state reports) should be considered as an additional tool for accountability and needs a special commitment and capacity from the civil society in the Arab region. The Council of Arab Ministers Responsible about Environment (CAMRE) resolution called for preparation of a periodic report on sustainable development for the Arab region to be discussed during the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development. The first report on Sustainable Development will be prepared by ESCWA and partners and will be ready in April 2015. The report will be based on the newly adopted Arab Strategic Framework on Sustainable Development.
16. A solid monitoring system on SDGs from regional views and national priorities is actually the key stone of an accountability framework. For this purpose, an accounting system for SDGS through a network of national statistics offices and feeding into a regional accounting system under UN statistics system should be discussed during regional consultations.
17. The option to establish adequate platforms for a multilayered system of accountability for the post 2015 development agenda at all levels, national, regional and international, should take into consideration the different mandates of regional institutions and entities. For coherence, we have to conceive a regional mechanism, anchored to the national level and feeding into the global process of accountability. Indeed, we need to improve the national level of accountability through an active and proactive role of the civil society and to build a new culture of accountability in the Arab region in order to establish the adequate accountability platform at the regional level.