



League of Arab States



Arab Strategy

For Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030





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Preamble

The 30th Arab Council for Housing and Construction (AMCHC) session endorsed the preparation of an Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (“Strategy”), whereas the League of Arab States (LAS) General Secretariat gives special attention to developing strategies and programs of actions to achieve sustainable development in the Arab States, with the technical support of United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat).

A Task Force composed of seven country representatives from the Scientific Technical Committee of the Department for Environment and Housing (Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Democratic People’s Republic of Algeria, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Republic of Sudan, Republic of Iraq, State of Libya and Arab Republic of Egypt) prepared the Strategy. Representatives from all twenty-two Arab countries¹, in cooperation with LAS and the UN-Habitat, reviewed the document for refinement and agreement over a framework for all Arab States efforts. Further technical review by relevant units of UN-HABITAT was facilitated through the Regional Office of Arab States (ROAS).

On the international level, the Strategy represents a methodology for identifying the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Arab Region, in particular SDG11: **“Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable”** in addition to other related sustainable development goals, that can be achieved through addressing the key housing and urbanization challenges towards a New Urban Agenda for the Arab States.

The Strategy proposes a set of goals and targets to develop the sector of housing and other relevant sectors to achieve integrated, inclusive and sustainable urbanization at the Arab regional level, to be adapted and developed according to the specific context of each country at the national level.

The 29th session of AMCHC (December 2012) confirmed the establishment of the Arab Ministerial Forum for Housing and Urban Development (AMFHUD). UN-Habitat’s 24th Governing Council (GC) recognized the importance of cooperation between the League of Arab States’ department for Environment, and Housing and UN-Habitat ROAS, through AMFHUD, for achieving the goals of sustainable urbanization in the Arab States.

1 The 22 Arab states in Arabic alphabetical order are: Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Bahrain, the Democratic People’s Republic of Algeria, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Republic of Sudan, Federal Republic of Somalia, Republic of Iraq, Sultanate of Oman, State of Palestine, State of Qatar, The Union of Comoros, State of Kuwait, Republic of Lebanon, State of Libya, Arab Republic of Egypt, Kingdom of Morocco, Islamic Republic of Mauritania, Republic of Yemen.

Executive Summary

The Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development is considered to be a framework for joint Arab action in housing and sustainable urban development, and an important step to strengthen regional cooperation in the Arab region. It aims to propose strategic goals and targets to develop the housing sector, address future challenges and achieve sustainable urban development through connecting them to the concept of urban planning and promote community participation in development and decision making. The strategy covers the urban geographical scope of the Arab region that comprises of Twenty-two Arab states².

This strategy derives its importance from two key elements; first, the need to create an urban development system at the regional level, and second, the necessity to enhance cooperation among Arab states to exchange experiences. Various positive outcomes are expected from this strategy and are divided into short-term or medium-term. The most important and instant outcomes are the consolidation of the concepts and standards of urban development and sustainable housing in Arab states; learning from previous successful experiences; and integrating the goals of economic, social, environmental, and urban policies; as well as connecting to the global trends.

On the medium term, positive results lie in the efforts of each State to preserve and optimize the use of resources, improve livelihood and quality of life, reduce poverty and develop informal areas through addressing the developmental gaps among Arab states.

To understand the current status of urban development, issues and challenges associated with the following sectors were identified:

Housing, basic services and infrastructure / Urban Demographics / Land and Planning / Urban Administration and Legislations / Urban Environmental Sustainability and Climate Changes/ Productivity and Urban Economy

The future vision is dedicated to ensure:

“Integrated and sustainable human settlements that are resilient, competitive, and capable of providing better life standards in the Arab region”.

2 And rural and remote areas as appropriate.

1 Introduction

To achieve that vision, six principal objectives enclosing thirty-five goals in all the urban development fields associated with and quality of life in residential areas were formulated. Objectives include **access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, achieve prosperity, attain equity in development and social integration, plan integrated and sustainable human settlements in all Arab states, Implement principles of good urban governance and build capacities to plan and manage human settlements, improve urban environmental sustainability, enhance adaptive capacity to climate change and protection of natural resources, boost the productivity of cities to achieve economic growth and sustainable development on the national and regional levels.**

The strategy covers a time frame of fifteen years to 2030 and will be subject to review every five years. It will be followed by an implementation plan for five years. Implementation mechanisms of the strategy occur at three levels:

- National mechanisms: These mechanisms are established by every state depending on its peculiarities and priorities, while indicators to measure sustainability shall be indicated.
- Regional mechanisms: At the level of all Arab states to allow for coordination and achieve integration among them.
- Participatory mechanisms with UN Habitat through the ROAS.

The strategy concludes on the importance of coordination and integration, whereas Arab states will be considered to be part of a whole.

Each state will set out its own mechanisms and priorities in the framework of the vision and the strategy. Besides, national strategies would be integrated with regional objectives aligned with the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

The Arab Home is home to one of the oldest civilizations in the world and the most urbanized. Urban population in Arab countries grew by more than four times during the period of 1970 to 2010. As of 2010, the Arab population was estimated at 357 million people, 56 per cent of whom live in cities. By 2030, it is expected to increase to 487 million people, 63 per cent of whom will live in cities and margins. Therefore, achieving sustainable development is vital to accommodate rapid urbanization in a positive manner. Many Arab countries have realized significant progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in the region, particularly in health and education. However, economic growth was limited during the nineties of the past century and early years of the 20th century, probably in result of the recent global economic crisis, lack of peace and security and continuation of foreign occupation in some Arab lands. Across the region, around 18 per cent live under the poverty line, with significant economic disparities among Arab countries. With 60 per cent of the population below 25 years of age, most Arab countries confront the challenge of providing adequate employment opportunities for youth³. Despite the large investments in infrastructure in most of the Arab countries, the improvement in housing, food subsidies, water and energy, many have been suffering from the impact of rising food and energy prices besides the provision of affordable housing. Significant disparities continue to exist between rural and urban areas as well as between the least developed, mid and high-income countries. In this regard, “The Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development” provides an Arab vision for housing and urban development to enhance Arab solidarity and cooperation and bolster regional economic integration in order to deliver good quality of life for Arab citizens in their home countries and help the region occupy prestigious position worldwide. The Strategy serves as a framework for joint Arab action in the sectors of housing and sustainable urban development. It is based on a number of key references at the international and regional levels. In the framework of this strategy, an analysis of the Arab urbanization was carried out based on relevant quantitative indicators, an analysis of response to a questionnaire implemented in Arab countries, and the discussions and outcomes of a participatory workshop to consider the common challenges and objectives. While the challenges and objectives were classified according to the thematic areas of the State of the World’s Cities Report 2013/2012 which proposes the City Prosperity Index⁴ (CPI), and defines a prosperous city as one that provides (1) productivity, (2) infrastructure development, (3) quality of life, (4) equity and social inclusion, and (5) environmental sustainability, taking into account the specificity of each Arab state and focusing on common challenges. This strategy comes in line with several Arab documents and strategies relevant to sustainable development in Arab states; the most important of which is the Arab Strategic Framework for sustainable development 2025 – 2015, approved by the Arab League summit in Baghdad 2012.

³ Statistical data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015). *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision*

⁴ CPI is a new tool introduced by the UN-Habitat in 2012 to achieve prosperity in urban areas. It helps cities to move towards more economically, socially, politically and environmentally prosperous urban future. It measures the cities current and future progress towards prosperity, and helps decision-makers make good political decisions.

2 Urban Challenges in the Arab Region

2.1 Housing, Basic Services and Infrastructure

The sector of housing, basic services and infrastructure is considered to be one of the key sectors in achieving sustainable urban development and requires effective and feasible policies and strategies that enable adequate housing for all and sustainable urban development in the Arab region. In this regard, the Arab Charter on Human Rights, approved in Tunis on 2004 and entered into force on 2008, states in its 38th Article, “Every person has the right to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, which ensures their well-being and a decent life, including food, clothing, housing, services and the right to a healthy environment. The States parties shall take the necessary measures commensurate with their resources to guarantee these rights” Accordingly, some Arab countries have made significant progress in increasing the supply of affordable housing, and eradicating informal and poor areas through upgrading and resettlement programs, and in partnership with between public institutions and the private sector. In general, the supply of formal housing for low and middle income categories has decreased in many Arab countries as a result of the absence of housing finance mechanisms, except for the highest income levels, in addition to the limited capacity of public private partnerships to provide adequate housing and the increasing housing prices owing to the imbalance between supply and growing demand, compounded by the rising speculation, lengthy and exorbitant property registration process and legal barriers to mortgage lending. In consequence, the constant population increase driven urban pressures to hazardous or unsafe areas or substandard buildings. On other hand, social housing programs have been criticized in some countries for selecting far distant sites from employment, basic, commercial and public services, insufficient public transport and incomplete facilities. Governments in most Arab countries encounter predominantly the challenge of providing urban basic services and infrastructure to keep with the increasing urbanization trends. Cities lack recourses and management capacities to cope with increasing demand for drinking water and sanitation, energy, public transport, public facilities and healthcare and education facilities, most evidently in rural areas.

Key housing, basic services and infrastructure issues can be summed up as follows:

- Public Sector inability to meet the growing needs for housing
- Increase in the costs of serviced land, ready for housing
- Lack of finance mechanisms
- Inconsistency between access to basic services and international planning standards.
- Increasing gap between the demand and supply of housing for low-income group and poor distribution of units
- Lack of management system for the housing stock to ensure maintenance and exploitation of all vacant units
- Lack of integration between housing and employment opportunities

- Lack of provision of housing for middle and low income groups by the private sector
- Poor partnership between public and private sectors in providing infrastructure
- Spread of housing unit ownership pattern, and limited safe, affordable rental stock
- High prices of construction materials and poor use of modern and sustainable building technologies
- A proportion of the population do not have access to safe water and adequate sanitation
- Lack of efficiency and adequacy of public transport and road networks

2.2 Urban Demographics

Some Arab States set strategies to dedicate investments for secondary and new cities to improve urban-rural economic links and achieve equitable economic development across countries. However, uneven development persists as a major challenge facing most countries of the region, given the limited outcomes of the formal rural development plans. Most of the urban dwellers in Arab states live in major urban communities that offer job opportunities and social services, resulting in rural migration and people movement from small cities to medium and large cities. Social transformations and uneven economic development have led to an increase in labor migration within and across the Arab countries, in addition to displacement induced by political instability or climatic conditions as the natural and manmade disasters, as well as foreign occupation, degradation of security in numerous Arab and neighboring countries. Immigration within and across the countries has ensued the spread of informal settlements on urban peripheries, urban encroachment on agricultural land and growing urbanization rates that breach the balance in the distribution of population density. Moreover, social inequality is another challenge in the region, mostly in Arab cities, with the high unemployment especially amongst females, the marginalization of groups like the elders, the persons with disabilities, and the limited education options for low-income due to the low government expenditure on education. With approximately 60 per cent of the population below the age of 25, most Arab countries suffer from limited employment opportunities for youth, lack of resources and supporting mechanisms, besides exclusion from decision-making processes. Hence, strengthening youth role should be reconsidered to empower them to participate in development and decrease the negative effects such as the spread of violence and terrorism, and also encourage women role in development.

Important urban demographic issues can be summed up as follows:

- Imbalance in population density distribution.
- Increase in rural-urban immigration.
- Displacement caused by occupation, security issues, and natural and manmade disasters
- Limited women and youth contribution to the development process.
- Rural-urban imbalance in the development process.
- Increasing poverty rates in urban areas.
- High rates of population growth.

2.3 Land and Planning

Some Arab countries have implemented inclusive and integrated approach for the planning of new cities as a driver for economic development. They started to connect housing with employment and provide sustainable transportation through metropolitan planning. They attempted as well to prepare strategic urban planning plans for cities with thorough consultation of development partners to achieve local development objectives, empower civil society organizations and increase the participation of the private sector in implementing cities, settlements and regional plans, and ensure their sustainability taking into consideration historical and archeological sites. Research in some countries revealed the need to connect the economic planning with the sustainable urban planning, urban management and basic services.

The discrepancy between the institutional structures and the theoretical curricula for sustainable urban planning remains problematic. Arab countries suffer usually of lack of integrated systems for land and property management, affordable land prices, and protection of natural resources for hazardous encroachment on agriculture land in some countries.

The LAS in its Charter on Human Rights (Article 2004 ,31) states that “everyone has a guaranteed right to own private property, and shall not under any circumstances be arbitrarily or unlawfully divested of all or any part of his property”

With the horizontal expansion of urban communities, population density decreases, class stratification increases as the low-income people move to the informal and slum areas lacking formal tenure, basic services and adequate infrastructure.

Important land and planning issues can be summed up as follows:

- Expansion of big cities
- Diminishing of agricultural land as a result of urban growth
- Urban mutilation
- Spread of slums and informal areas
- Lack of conservation of archaeological and heritage sites
- High land prices
- Deterioration of old neighbourhoods
- Lack of national and regional plans at some countries

2.4 Urban Administration and Legislations

The shortage of institutional and legislative structures in many Arab countries is one of the reasons behind the increase of unplanned urbanization effects, given the limited coordination between the different ministries and institutions relevant to urban development, at the central and local levels.

Efforts to strengthen the capacity of local authorities to enhance decentralization are still restrained. Usually, the central technical bodies in the Arab states develop urban policies and plans while local authorities are concentrated on the implementation of local plans only. The latter usually lack the human resources necessary to plan and manage urban growth.

Local authorities also rely on funds from central or regional governments to finance their investments and activities. This leads to partial erosion of the benefits of participatory local administration.

The deficit of accurate and comparable data for urban development trends at the regional level confines the vision for regional development. There is also a need for necessary analyzes to support decision-making process.

Other challenges include the underdevelopment of planning and construction legislations to adapt to the changing urban context in the Arab region, the inadequate institutional capacities and financial resources in addition to the lack of monitoring and supervision capacities of local administration.

Important administrative and legislations issues can be summed up as follows:

- Poor coordination and overlap between the different levels in development and planning fields
- Poor monitoring and enforcement of legislations
- Planning legislations lagging behind urban developments
- Shortage of urban, housing and environmental observatories, and difficulty of information management
- Limited implementation of participatory approach in legislation, construction laws and urban planning systems,
- The importance of enacting legislation for planning and sustainable building systems.
- Sustainability not taken into consideration in legislation, construction laws and urban planning systems.
- Lack of trained calibres in urban and environment fields

2.5 Environmental and Urban Sustainability and Climate Change

Hitherto, environmental awareness has not been widely spread across the Arab region, echoed in poor response to international environment standards. Furthermore, there is a lack and weak enforcement of environmental legislations and regulations for the protection of natural environment and biodiversity.

Water scarcity is also threatening the Arab region as it has the least water resources per capita in the world. Groundwater reserves and aquifers are depleted at alarming rates. Sea level rise could affect many coastal cities. The temperature increase caused by the climate change may also decrease precipitation and aggravate water scarcity droughts and severe droughts, with adverse impact on agricultural production. The main challenge of water resources scarcity and desertification is the shortage of food security. Although greenhouse emissions in the Arab Region are not more than %4.8 of the total world emissions and Arab states are not historically responsible for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, they seek to reduce emissions by diversifying their energy sources and the use of renewable sources, despite their increasing burden and in line with joint responsibility principle as well as burdens disparity. Nevertheless, Arab countries are challenged by other priorities such as the development through industrial expansion, population growth, and improvement of livelihoods leading to the growth of vehicles use compounded by poor public transport and ageing vehicles in some countries.

Energy consumption has also increased as a result of population and economic growth, industrial development, rising standards of living and urbanization, with no sufficient generation of clean energy, or utilization of local and environmentally sustainable building materials. Besides, the absence of an integrated system for solid waste and wastewater collection, treatment and safe disposal in a number of Arab states has led to health and environmental problems.

Important environmental urban sustainability and climate change issues can be summed up as follows:

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2.6 Productivity and Urban Economy

Arab countries have undertaken coherent national policies to enhance the competitiveness of cities as engines of economic growth, with emphasis on secondary cities to alleviate pressure on the primate cities. All Arab governments recognize the importance of the city as a magnet for investment and a source of job creation and poverty alleviation. Moreover, many Arab cities have promoted their potential as destinations for international tourism based on their natural and cultural heritage assets, and their role as education hubs, scientific research centers or financial capitals. Cultural heritage initiatives seek to reinforce the cultural identity of Arab cities and maximize the cultural tourism potential to generate economic growth and create jobs. Drawing on these investments will boost city competitiveness and contribute significantly to economic growth and job creation. However, poor organization and management in infrastructure and housing projects, in addition to the urban sprawl, is changing the landscape of Arab cities at the expense of cultural and natural heritage. Even though recent economic growth rates in a number of Arab countries have exceeded the global average, national economies are currently highly non-diversified. Furthermore, the political instability in the region, and insecurity are affecting foreign direct investment. Arab states are incapable of providing employment opportunities for large sections of the population. Hence, employment became a strategic objective for most countries, with a focus on youth, as there is often a mismatch between educational qualifications of young graduates and available opportunities within the labor market. The informal sector represents one of the sources of local resources if adequately integrated in formal systems. Still, low property registration rates and high levels of informality have prevented local authorities and central governments from deriving property related resources.

The economic dependency on natural resources, especially oil and gas as well as the reliance on imported food imports and global food chains increases the vulnerability of the region to economic shocks given the fluctuations in international prices; with severe repercussions on employment, economic growth and stability and the environment, which in turn affects the housing sector. At the regional level, regional trade and economic complementarity are underdeveloped, as well as technical and financial regional cooperation.

Productivity and Urban Economy Issues can be summed up as follows:

- Inefficient utilization of available resources
- Poor economic diversity
- The growth of the informal economy with no proper government consideration
- Poor intra trade and economic integration
- High unemployment rates, especially among females and youth
- The limited developmental role of the banking sector
- The mismatch between graduates' qualifications and available job opportunities