Sustainable development in the Arab Region: Achievements, constraints and opportunities

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The process of rural development is considered an important priority for any society that seeks economic, social and cultural development, especially in the developing countries. Rural development aims to make a planned change evolutionary for the advancement of local communities in the countryside economically, socially, culturally and environmentally with democratic approach ensure broad participation in planning, implementation and assessment, and is targeting an integration between the official and popular efforts to make the required changes for the development of natural and human resources, and the spread of justice in the distribution of development returns and reaping the benefits in the communities, and the integration of development efforts at the national level, Therefore, this paper will review the current status for rural development in the Arab region and also the assessment of progress in the Arab region in addition the constraints and challenges after that the opportunities and outlook of the future and finally the recommendations regarding the policies and proposed programs for future work in the Arab region.

Key words: Community development, integrated rural development, rural development.

INTRODUCTION

As the rural communities in most of the Arab countries are considered as agricultural communities, the content of rural development in these countries includes the agricultural development plus the other aspects of life in rural areas. As stated in the definition adopted in a joint study by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO (2003), rural development interests and contains agriculture, education, infrastructure, health and building rural capacities and institutions. And rural development, in its broad and integrated concept has many of the core dimensions that must be integrated to bring about sustainable rural development in the Arab region, and these dimensions are the economic dimension, the social dimension, the human resources dimension and the Environmental dimension. The concept of rural development has been developed historically across several eras and stages from the domestic limited concept of the development of society which is founded on the idea of encouraging self-help to provide social services in communities across the concept of integrated rural development to the overall concept of sustainable rural development that has emerged and found growing interest and support from all development organizations in recent days, so the rural development is considered
more than a concept since it contains all aspects of development.

CURRENT STATUS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARAB REGION

The current situation of rural development in the Arab region have been studied in light of the studies available for rural development activities in 13 countries in the region, namely Sudan and Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic, Bahrain, Oman, the State of Palestine, the State of Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, the Republic of Tunisia, and the Algerian People's Democratic Republic (United Nations, 2002).

Rural development policies in Arab predominantly aims to the development of natural and human resources and improve the economic and social level of the population. The available studies show that the policies and programs of rural development in Sudan, for example is based on giving priority to the development of the agricultural sector, vegetable and animal, especially the traditional sector and food security, and seeks to improve the social and economic conditions in the countryside and reduce migration from the countryside to the cities through the expansion of integrated rural development programs supported by international organizations, and to ensure proper utilization and development of natural resources, and improve the mechanisms of partnership between the public and private sectors and civil society organizations and voluntary organizations in development work in the countryside, and the empowerment of women to the comprehensive development.

In Saudi Arabia, programs and policies focus on the phenomenon of poverty radical and permanent treatment through supporting programs which give poor people the chance to rely on themselves. Rural development programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular aims to improve the productivity of agricultural crops by adopting latest farming techniques, and state interested in rural women's empowerment programs and the development of her capabilities and remove barriers to their participation in development activities.

In Iraq, the focus is in rural areas to supply farmers agricultural inputs subsidized prices, and provide small-scale farmers in countryside soft loans for the development of agricultural production and increasing income, and state facilitate marketing operations and works to ensure that farmers get the prices of their products parallel to the international prices and provide loans to small farmers through the Agricultural Bank to invest in the development of the agricultural work and increase production and income. In Jordan, state supports small projects financing programs and improve economic security for working families which have low income, and work to increase employment opportunities in rural areas and secondary municipalities through the development of rural communities and shared village councils, and infrastructure development, and implementation of income-generating projects and environmental activities, and capacity building of human resources.

In Syria, rural development policies aim to develop agricultural production and improve the incomes of producers, and poverty reduction, and food security, and to ensure the provision of needed national consumption of food commodities. The policy aims to ensure development of economic investment for natural resources and benefit from them in order to achieve and maintain sustainability of degradation, depletion and pollution. Particular attention is given to the agricultural manufacturing, and to train cadres to keep pace with the development of production process, and the banking system contributes to the development and modernization of agricultural production, and state adopts pricing and marketing policies to encourage increased agricultural production and improve quality. And State gives special attention to women's empowerment programs and enhances their participation in development work by providing training services and the provision of credit.

In Bahrain, development programs are targeted at improving the level of social services available in rural generally, and the development of agricultural production by entering good high-yield varieties and breeds, and provide inputs at subsidized prices, and providing soft loans without interest to encourage production, and state interested in widening the circle of popular participation in rural development programs.

In Oman, special attention is given to develop agricultural, animal, fisheries wealth on a sound footing and using the latest technology available, and to the spread of the modern education methods of honeybees in rural areas, and to raise the efficiency of artisanal fishing and provision of soft loans for young people in the field of fish production, and are enhancing and activating the role of rural women in various agricultural areas.

In the State of Palestine, rural development programs aim to raise the efficiency marketing agricultural crops to maximize profitability for farmers, and to develop the skills and abilities of the unemployed and the poor to enable them to work to improve their living conditions, and state interested in promoting opportunities for the participation of the poor in the economic process through the provision of land and capital and other elements of commodity production. In the State of Qatar, rural development programs directed to support the agricultural sector by research and extension services and providing production supplies, and special attention is given to encourage national initiatives and community participation in the development business, and support women's productive activities.

In Kuwait, the state give special attention to the development of natural resources and improve
agricultural productivity, and expand popular participation in rural development programs, and the creation of jobs for all who are able to work in the state, and provide free various facilities for citizens including treatment, education, and soft loans for those wishing to marry or construction from the citizens.

In Egypt, rural development programs are interested in spreading techniques of modern agricultural production to raise the level of productivity and profitability of agricultural producers, and to revitalize and activate the role of NGOs and coordination between them and the government authorities in the fight against poverty and to provide direct assistance to the poor through social aids and subsidized loans for unemployed youth to finance their small activities aiming to generate income. The state pays special attention to the economic empowerment programs for rural women and the provision of social services, including education and free health services.

In the Republic of Tunisia, rural development programs focus on the rehabilitation of farmers and workers in agriculture technically and socially to develop their knowledge and skills to contribute in agricultural development, and to promote social programs and solidarity in the areas of health, education, housing and food to raise the living standards of the poor.

In Algeria, rural development programs is given special attention to the goal of ensuring sustainable use of natural resources and maintaining ecological balance, and activate the participation of communities in the process of sustainable economic development, and enable the poor to have access to credit and support their productivity (United Nations, 2002).

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS IN THE ARAB REGION

Arab countries varies among themselves and internally in terms of available resources to bring about sustainable rural development and the provision of its components, and therefore in terms of the possibility of making the desired progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the expected time frame. There have been remarkable achievements in the last decade in the Arab region, including many aspects of economic and social development in rural areas and environmental sanitation aspects, especially in the countries most developed in the region, but the rates of development in many countries of the region may become low due to weak possibilities and threats to social stability resulting from high rates of displacement population due to disasters and conflicts from the countryside to the other rural areas suffer from lack of the elements of sustainable development or to urban areas. And it has resulted from population movements in some countries in the region much deteriorated in the social and economic services and significant increases in the rates of poverty, especially in rural areas.

The Arab region which is rich by land resources have achieved remarkable achievements in the field of sustainable development - especially the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) - which resulted in an improvement in the lives of citizens, rising per capita income and improved health and education services and capacity-building programs, and the growing role of the private sector and public participation in a lot of countries in the region. But on the other hand, some countries in the region have continued to suffer from lack of security, political instability and poor infrastructure. As a result, the inability to make any significant progress towards the goal of poverty reduction, but there are indications of a serious problems resulting from low incomes and widespread unemployment and poor nutrition in rural and urban areas alike, and the displacement of large numbers of the rural population to cities as a result of poor service and lack of development, especially in remote areas, which have been suffering from marginalization and neglect. And assigned the decline in fighting poverty rates in some Arab countries in the region to overall policies and structural reform pressing programs, as is the case in Sudan, for example. And it is not expected that developing countries in the region will be able to make significant progress in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the absence of assistance and support required by rich nations in the region and other donors and international development organizations. But as reflected in the report of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia - ESCWA (2005), providing financial assistance alone is not a guarantee to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in those countries unless it have the elements of good governance.

Arab region is still in need of further efforts to establish strategic partnerships at the regional and global levels and to adopt economic and social policies that would provide climate supportive of the efforts required to bring about sustainable development.

Progress in achieving the goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger

Based on the data contained in the ESCWA (2005) report on the state of poverty in ten (10) countries of the Arab region, which includes about 64% of the population of the region, the poverty rate has nearly doubled in developing countries in the region, and this foretells the impossibility enable these countries to achieve the first development objective of the millennium (the elimination of extreme poverty and hunger). And also came in a recent study, ESCWA (2007) that proportion of people living below the minimum poverty level in the countries of the Arab region do not suggest the possibility of progress towards poverty reduction, where it was shown that the proportion of poverty in the Arab countries combined declined slightly
from 19.5% in 1990 - 1995 to 18.2% in the period 2000 to 2004. In developing countries poverty rate fell from 46.8% in the period 1990 - 1995 to 37.1% in the period 2000 - 2004. It turns out that the poverty rate has fallen in Mashreq and the Maghreb Arab countries by 3.5% points respectively during the same time period. There are no statistics can be built upon to estimate the proportion of poverty that are believed to be low based on national poverty lines in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As for the goal of reducing the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by half by the end of 2015, the available data do not indicate the possibility of being able to do that at the level of the Arab region, where the number of those who had not had the minimum needs of required food energy in 2004 was 23.3 million or equivalent to 8.6% of the population in the Arab region, and the number of people in this category 20 million in 1991 (8.8%). Data on the nutritional status of the population in the Arab region for the last three years are not available (United Nations, 2005).

**Progress in achieving the goal of popularization of primary education**

It is seen from the figures obtained from ESCWA (2007) report that most of the Arab countries in the region have made significant progress towards achieving popularization of primary education by 2015, as the statistics shows an increase in the ratio of tangible inflict students in primary education in the Arab region as a whole amounted to 80.5% on average, an increase of about 10% of the placement, which achieved 15 years ago. The statistics shows that the placement rate in primary education in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Middle East and Maghreb currently stands at about 90%, and it is expected that these countries can achieve the goal of popularization primary education by the end of 2015. By contrast statistics shows that more than half of the children of developing countries in the region not ripe opportunity to engage in formal primary education, and the proportion of the prevailing conditions, the inability of these countries to achieve popularization primary education during the specified period is the expected outcome; it is also expected to remain illiteracy prevalent more in these countries. Therefore efforts must be intensified in developing countries by the developed nations to help achieve the goal of popularization primary education, as well as working with countries in the region to upgrade the quality of education in order to cope with the economic and technological changes in the world (FAO/UNESCO, 2003).

**Progress in achieving the goal of promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment**

It is expected that if progress rates continue towards promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, the Arab countries will be able to achieve the goal of gender equality at all levels of education by the end of 2015. The available statistics are signs of tangible progress in the Arab region in the direction of empowering women to participate in agricultural activities and business income-generating economic. But countries in the region vary in the degree of progress towards the goal of integrating women in public economic and social activities, as there are several factors that could lead to perpetuate economic inequality between the sexes and inequitable access to basic social services in some countries. The rates of women’s participation in political activities are limited, compared to rates of participation in productive activities. As evidenced by the data ESCWA (2007) report, the proportion of women for jobs in the industrial sector and the services sector amounted to 18.3% in 2004, women held only 8.7% of the seats in the parliaments of the Arab region in April 2007. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Reports indicates that illiteracy rates among women in the age groups 15 years and older compared to men is still high in the Arab countries in the region United Nations (New York, 2007).

**Progress in achieving the goal of reducing child mortality**

ESCWA Reports indicated that Arab countries had made significant progress towards the goal of reducing mortality rates of children under five, which has thanks to popularization of immunization programs and reproductive health in a lot of countries in the region. According to data from ESCWA (2005) report, there has been a decrease in the number of deaths of children under the age of five in the Arab region per thousand births from 91 in 1990 to 70 in 2003. And from ESCWA (2007) report data, the mortality of children under the age of five has declined by 27% in 2005 from the 1990 estimate. Therefore it is expected that the Arab region can achieve the goal of reducing child mortality by one-third by the end of 2015 like Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Qatar and Maghreb, with the exception of developing countries in the region as Alkmuruz, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

There has been a decline in the number of child deaths by more than 50% of the 1990 estimate, which fell to 37 in 2003 achieved in the Maghreb. The ESCWA (2005) data indicate that the largest decrease in the number of deaths of children under five years of age has been achieved in GCC from 39 in 1990 to 23 in 2003. The available statistics shows that mortality rates of children under five years of age is higher in countries that suffer from economic and social underdevelopment and armed conflict including Djibouti, Iraq, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, in these countries die more than 10%
of the children by their fifth. And statistics show that more than half of the children who die in the Arab region are children in this developing countries (Alkmuruz, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen), and children are dying in these countries due to malnutrition, poor health services and low awareness and education level (United Nations, 2007).

**Progress in achieving the goal of improving reproductive health**

Some progress has been made towards the goal of improving reproductive health in the Arab region, but the death rates of women in childbirth is still high in many countries of the region and it indicates to the impossibility of achieving the Millennium Development Goal of reducing the number of deaths by three quarters by 2015. According to available databases the average number of women who die in every thousand births in the Arab region has dropped from 465 in 1990 to 337 in 2002, and in the GCC from 29.8 in the Arab East to 144.8, and in the countries of the Maghreb to 165.5 but In developing countries the average number of women who die in every thousand births is very high, with a 716.7 and this is assigned to the weakness of maternity care services in these countries (United Nations, 2004).

**Progress in achieving the goal of combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases**

Available statistics on the incidence of AIDS in the Arab countries region indicate that HIV spread to the Arab countries region, where they were monitoring 42% increase in the number of cases of the disease between 1990 and 2003, which the number of people living with HIV amounted to 13.865 inhabitants, most of the injuries were at the least developed countries in the region and it is believed that 1% of the population in the age group 15 to 45 years old with HIV. And about the malaria disease, there are signs that there is a decline of infection in the Arab region. The ratio of the spread of HIV and other diseases as malaria and tuberculosis larger than the observed ratios in the Arab countries region, and this because of weak monitoring and treatment possibilities that need to be further developed (United Nations, 2007).

**Progress in achieving the goal of ensuring environmental sustainability**

Some Arab countries have made significant progress since 2000 in efforts to meet the challenges of sustainable development. However, there is still a need in many countries of the region to the laws and policies of development to adopt ways and means of sustainable use of natural resources, especially land, water and energy resources in the region. According to a study prepared by the United Nations Development Program (2003), only five countries have adopted strategies to protect the environment in the Arab region. And it is clear from ESCWA (2005) Reports that the rate of desertification is increasing in Arab countries region, due to the lack of adoption of policies to rationalize the use of natural resources, and weak commitment to the development and implementation of laws required for environmental protection in many countries of the region (United Nations, 2005).

**Progress in achieving the goal of establishing a global partnership for development**

The achievement of the Millennium Development Goal concerned with the development of global partnerships for development in the Arab region is depending on the cooperation of developed countries and international organizations with the countries of the region and with each other to provide the necessary support the operations of the economic and social development and the creation of the elements of integration regional and global development and sustainability. It turns to the observer that there are still obstacles to achieving this goal in the Arab region, due to lack of commitment of rich countries in providing support to many countries of the region, and because of external debt remained restricts some countries and cause the economic blockade on it, in addition to internal instability resulting from the lack of adoption policies concerned with the equitable distribution of power and wealth to bring about economic integration and social stability. All these factors have weakened the possibility of countries in the region and particularly the developing ones to create the environment required for the establishment and development of regional and global partnerships to serve the goals of sustainable development in the region (United Nations, 2007).

**CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES**

There has been a significant progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals in some countries in the Arab region, but achieving these goals has been impossible in some Arab countries, especially in developing countries of the region, due to many factors which include high foreign debt, low rates of economic growth, weakness of project financing, lack of exercise of justice in the distribution of resources and benefits of development, spread of conflict and persistent political instability, lack of commitment to implement policies and strategies that would increase the capabilities of the poor and preserve the environment and ensure sustainable
use of resources and the balance in the development of rural and urban areas and to ensure the provision and improvement of services health and education for the entire population.

There are many obstacles and challenges that have the potential to adversely affect the rural development programs and their contributions to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the Arab region if it is not addressed by the corrective optimal way, including

1) High rates of poverty, particularly in developing countries in the region that are associated in some cases with high rates population growth.
2) National laws and development policies that impede the development of equitable distribution of access to resources and development services in some countries in the region.
3) The spread of ways to use the natural resources reduce the sustainability of its bid, with the subsequent damage to the environment, and this related to the spread of poverty and land tenure policies that lead to the degradation of resources and poor utilization, and the change in the weather.
4) Poor infrastructure in rural areas and lack of employment opportunities for the growing numbers of the population.
5) High rates of migration from rural to urban areas, especially among the educated categories of rural youth.
6) The policies that limit the participation of rural women in economic, social and political activities.
7) Lack of financial and technical support to rural development programs of local, regional and global resources, and in particular in developing countries in the region, as detailed below.

i) the main challenge facing the tasks of bring about sustainable rural development is the continuing high rates of poverty in many countries of the region, and it has resulted to a bad dealing with available resources and practices that increase the deterioration of its components. This calls for devising policies that encourage the best use of resources that will ensure the sustainability of the use of them, and create attractive climate for investment activities, especially among small-scale producers, and contributes to the creation of economic and social balance between rural and urban areas to ensure social stability in the Arab countries region.

ii) The second source of challenge to the tasks of sustainable development is the growing in population in the poorest countries in the Arab region, which suffers from deterioration and decline in natural resources as a result of climate change and natural abuse and policies that have increased rates of desertification and lack of suitable alternatives to make a living in rural areas.

iii) The third challenge facing the tasks of making sustainable rural development countries in the poor Arab region is to increase the number of learners among rural youth and the growing of their aspirations and lack of employment opportunities, as well as the absence of policies and programs that will direct energies of young people to contribute to the development work volunteering in the rural areas.

iv) The fourth challenge that negatively affect opportunities to bring about sustainable rural development in many countries in the Arab region with a rural nature is increasing rates of migration to urban areas by young people and especially those who are educated, which negatively affect the programs directed to the development of rural communities.

v) The fifth challenge harmful to rural development in many countries of the Arab region, especially the poor ones are in the country adoption of policies that sustain development work for the service of categories which are able in rural communities and neglect clearly the needs of small producers which weakens their access to production services and their active opportunities participation in programs Community Development.

vi) The sixth challenges that still hamper the efforts of sustainable rural development in many countries of the Arab region is weak mechanisms and programs of integrate women in productive activities, and the relatively low rates of education, capacity building and access to productive services among women, especially in rural areas.

vii) The weakness of international support is considered the biggest obstacle facing the rural development programs in the Arab region, especially in the least developed countries in the region.

OPPORTUNITY: OUTLOOK

The goals of sustainable development in the Arab world can be achieved in the future by working together as follows:

i) The pursuit of sustainable peace and security in the Arab region on the basis of fairness to create the perfect climate for development programs.

ii) Enhance the Arab cooperation and coordination with the regional and international organizations and also with the countries of the world, especially the Islamic countries and Group of the 77 and China in order to achieve better opportunities to negotiate in international forums and to seek support of these groups to the efforts of the Arab countries to achieve security and just and comprehensive peace in the Arab region and the world, according to international legitimacy.

iii) Take advantage of opportunities to attract capital to the region by encouraging investment, taking into account the social and economic returns and environmental investment projects.

iv) Take advantage of opportunities to join multilateral
international and regional conventions to serve Arab interests, and to promote regional cooperation in the field of preservation of the environment.

v) Use of available services to the United Nations organizations and non-governmental organizations working in the region in training and capacity building at all levels (UNDP, 2003).

RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE POLICIES AND PROPOSED PROGRAMS FOR FUTURE WORK IN THE ARAB REGION

i) Working on reducing the degradation of the environment and natural resources, and work on the management of it by a sustainable method which achieve water and food security, and the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity, and combating desertification.

ii) Support the role of the private sector and civil society organizations and its groups and encourage their participation in the development and implementation of sustainable development plans and strengthen the role and status of women in society.

iii) Develop national strategies to combat poverty, and the preparation of projects for capacity building and integration of vulnerable groups in development projects.

iv) Attention to the training and capacity building of rural women and enhance their participation in development projects, particularly in the business within the family income-generating activities, and labor-intensive development projects in rural areas.

v) Attention to training executive and supervisory cadres on the national and local levels and coordination to bring the sectoral integration in development programs.

vi) Training of local communities to raise the administrative capacity to deal with natural resources available to ensure their sustainable utilization.

vii) Employ resources in labor-intensive development projects, especially in the countries of the region with heavy-weight population in rural areas.

viii) Involve citizens in the planning and implementation of projects in rural areas.

ix) The development of infrastructure and development services in rural areas and adopt policies that ensure equity in the provision and delivery of services to all categories of producers in rural areas.

x) The development and application of sound development policies that take into account the limited availability of natural resources and the need to adopt appropriate usage patterns to ensure sustainable utilization.

xi) Strengthen cooperation among Arabic States in the fields of planning and implementation of natural resource development programs and human capacity with countries in the region.

xii) Coordination between Arab countries to seek international organizations and institutions that can give support for the development and sustainability of rural development programs in the region.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES


