

Who's been left behind? Why sustainable development goals fail the Arab world



Abbas El-Zein, Jocelyn DeJong, Philippe Fargues, Nisreen Salti, Adam Hanieh, Helen Lackner

Introduction

A set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in September, 2015. The Arab world, alongside other regions, has problems of poverty, poor health, and substantial environmental degradation—ie, the kind of problems that the SDGs aim to address.¹⁻⁵ Evidence of persistent infectious disease in low-income and middle-income Arab countries exists, alongside increased prevalence of non-communicable diseases in all Arab countries,^{6,7} high out-of-pocket health expenditure,⁸ poor access to safe water, as well as violent conflict, persistent foreign interventions, and high levels of social and political fragmentation that result in weak health systems and diminished rights to health.⁹

Two sets of indicators, with important implications for health and development, are strikingly extreme in the Arab region (appendix). First, the Arab world has ten times the per person world average number of refugees and, in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the highest number of international migrant workers as a percentage of the population at more than ten times the world average. Second, the Arab world has high levels of militarisation, with weapons imports per person at more than four times the world average. Additionally, the Arab world has the lowest ratios of health to military expenditures at less than one-fifth of the world average.⁹ The state plays a pivotal part in determining human development pathways in relation to these issues—ie, in terms of rights and protections offered to non-citizens and resources allocated to meet military, health, and social needs, and who has the right to define these needs.

In this Viewpoint, we argue that the SDGs do not adequately address the effects of conflict, militarisation, labour migration, and war-driven displacement on development. Although these issues are particularly important in the Arab region, they are highly relevant in other parts of the world. Additionally, we question a fundamental, usually unstated, assumption of the SDG literature, that the state can and should be the primary custodian of any sustainable development agenda. We view the state as a political entity that is a part of, and partly constrained by, a broader geopolitical and economic world order characterised by power asymmetry between local and global players. In doing so, we highlight the part that western countries sometimes play in perpetuating commercial, economic, and political practices that run counter to human development needs in the region. While we recognise that the issues we raise cannot be resolved by the SDGs alone, we suggest ways in which the new SDG agenda can help to address these problems.

Non-citizens: refugees and migrant labour

The Arab world is a major crossroads of labour migration, and is the region from which the highest number of refugees originate and in which the largest number of refugees reside. In GCC countries today, 49% of the total population of 51 million people are non-citizens.¹⁰ Furthermore, Arab nations that do not produce oil are among the world's largest source of labour emigrants per person, and migrant remittances represent a substantial proportion of GDP in these countries.

While labour laws and conditions vary between different professions and different Arab countries, working conditions can be dire and, given the extent to which the labour market is stratified by ethnic origin, ill-treatment and racism are rife. For example, through the *Kafala* system—in force in all GCC countries and some non-GCC countries—foreign workers are susceptible to exploitation and abuse by local sponsors and employers.¹¹ Long-term residents, including second generation non-citizens born in the Gulf, have little prospect of gaining citizenship and have poor access to basic rights such as family reunion, public education, and labour or retirement rights.

The Arab world accounts for 45% of all cross-border refugees worldwide and 42% of all internally displaced populations (appendix).¹² In mid-2014, the Mashreq region alone (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and West Bank and Gaza Strip) was estimated to have 18% of all cross-border refugees worldwide and 31% of internally displaced refugees. Refugees are estimated to constitute 32% of the population of Lebanon and 38% of the population of Jordan, and are mostly from Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. Refugees often have short-term and long-term problems associated with settling in a new environment where the law provides them with no rights to employment, health care, education, property, or social services. Morocco is a notable exception where the constitution grants foreign residents rights similar to those of citizens. The problems experienced by refugees are partly due to the fact that 14 of 22 Arab countries have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, often because of the fear that granting rights to large numbers of refugees might destabilise fragile political systems. On the other hand, the scale and rapid emergence of the Syrian and Iraqi refugee problems are such that the capacities of host governments and societies are overwhelmed, irrespective of their commitment to treaties.

The experience of migration driven by labour and war differs for men and women, with female migrants exposed to different kinds and levels of risk compared

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School of Civil Engineering, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia (A El-Zein PhD); Faculty of Health Sciences, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

(Prof J DeJong PhD); Migration Policy Centre, European

University Institute, Florence, Italy (P Fargues PhD);

Department of Economics,

Faculty of Arts and Sciences,

American University of Beirut,

Beirut, Lebanon (N Salti PhD);

Department of Development

Studies, School of Oriental and

African Studies, University of

London, London, UK

(A Hanieh PhD); and

Independent researcher,

Oxford, UK (H Lackner MSc)

Correspondence to:

Dr Abbas El-Zein, School of Civil

Engineering, University of

Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006,

Australia

abbas.el-zein@sydney.edu.au

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with male migrants. For example, female domestic workers often suffer from abuse because they are poorly protected and their working conditions are subject to little public scrutiny.¹³ In conflict settings, women are particularly vulnerable and at risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation. This increased risk is made worse by highly gender-biased social norms and labour relations in the Arab world, where female labour participation rates are the lowest in the world despite major progress in female literacy and education.¹⁴

An urgent question hence arises as to whether the SDGs should be intended only for citizens or should apply to non-citizens as well? If only applicable to nationals, who is accountable for the wellbeing of those who reside outside their country of citizenship? The SDGs document scarcely mentions refugees, foreign workers, non-citizens, or people who have been internally displaced.¹⁵ Therefore, the SDGs might overlook some of the most disenfranchised populations living in the Arab world today, who represent more than 10% of the total populations of Arab countries—8 million refugees, 29 million foreign nationals, and 10 million people who have been internally displaced in nations where war-torn societies and institutions have little capacity to provide for them.

How can the SDGs address these issues? Three sets of actions are possible. First, countries should be required to report separately on their citizen and non-citizen populations for all relevant SDGs. Second, recognition of basic social and economic rights of non-citizens, with a reasonable expectation of citizenship for long-term residents, should be promoted by the body overseeing SDG implementation as a key element of the strategy for achieving SDGs 1–8 (poverty, hunger, health, education, gender, water, energy, and employment), SDG 11 (urban sustainability), and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and governance). Commensurate, long-term financial instruments to help countries with disproportionate shares of refugees should be put in place for this to happen. Third, the international community needs to take responsibility for war-driven refugees, especially those countries that are involved in the wars. The global consequences of the continuing Syrian refugee crisis should compel European, North American, and Arab countries to develop joint policies on the sharing of refugee burdens, through new, effective multilateral organisations. Priority should be given to help refugees return to their homes, if they wish and it is safe to do so, and if not, integrate in host societies.

Silenced citizens: armed conflict and militarisation

In the past 25 years, almost half of all Arab countries (Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Kuwait, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Yemen; home to more than half of total Arab populations) have experienced conventional wars, civil wars, or both. Almost all of these wars involved foreign intervention.

Additionally, violent unrest has taken place in Bahrain, Egypt, and Tunisia, and the armies of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Sudan, and Egypt have become involved in conflicts outside their borders. Conflict has been shown to slow down and reverse human development, and undermine health and health systems.¹⁶ Levels of militarisation have reached record highs in the Arab region. Military spending by Arab nations in 2004–14 was almost US\$1.2 trillion—a yearly average greater than the combined GDPs of the five poorest Arab nations. High levels of military spending in the Arab world raise questions about the relative significance of the flow of aid from North to South (ie, from rich countries to poor countries) when financial flows from the Arab region to the west are bigger. For example, in 2011, Saudi Arabia purchased \$44 billion worth of weapons from the USA, 1.5 times the entire foreign aid budget of the USA for that year, the USA being the largest foreign aid donor worldwide. High opportunity costs are incurred by militarisation and the estimated cost of poverty reduction or sustainable water management policies is often a small proportion of that of military budgets (appendix).

Beyond weapons purchases, 57% of total expenditure by GCC countries in 2002–06 was investment made in the USA and 19% in Europe.¹⁷ By contrast, only 11% was invested in the Middle East and north Africa. Although 11% worth of investment is substantial, many of these funds go into sectors such as real estate, finance, and telecommunications, rather than employment-generating sectors.¹⁸

Little opportunity exists in the Arab world for debating issues of fiscal priorities and the role of the military in determining state budgets. Decisions are often made by small, unelected elites, usually with the tacit or explicit support of western governments eager to boost their military exports and promote trade liberalisation. The non-democratic contexts of militarisation, in which transactions are typically done in secret, make it difficult to establish who makes the decisions, who benefits from them, and the roles of export firms and governments. The new Arms Trade Treaty, which came into force in December, 2014, is an important achievement that withdraws legitimacy from international weapon transfers to parties that violate human rights. However, five major exporters, including China, Russia, and Israel, have not signed the treaty, the US congress has not yet ratified it, and exporter governments can use a wide latitude to determine what constitutes human rights abuses. More importantly, the treaty does not specifically address militarisation.

The SDGs document refers to the important issue of illegal arms transfers once, but not to militarisation or state-to-state weapon sales.¹⁵ SDG 16 (the promotion of peaceful societies) calls for elimination of violence, establishment of the rule of law and participatory government, and building of accountable, transparent,

and effective institutions. There is serious doubt as to whether this ambitious goal can be achieved at all. However, SDG 16 can be used as a starting point to address militarisation—eg, by advocating restrictions on ratios of military and social spending, caps on weapon sales to developing countries, and protocols to encourage more transparency of military budgets and sales. Attempts to place constraints on national military budgets would no doubt be met with fierce resistance by powerful exporter and importer governments. Only strong advocacy and coalition building with non-exporter countries would give such an agenda the serious consideration that it merits. Actions that encroach on the fiscal sovereignty of nations are not without precedent: in 1995, heads of states at the World Summit of Social Services agreed that 20% of foreign aid should be matched by 20% of national budgets of aid recipients to be spent on social services, although this agreement was never enforced.¹⁹

States, citizens, and global partnership

Is the state the right custodian for a sustainable development agenda? In countries with continuing violent conflict (Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Somalia), the state can be too weak or too corrupt to implement sustainable development policies. In 2014, these five countries, alongside Sudan, were ranked in the top 20 nations with most corruption in public services, with Somalia ranked first, Sudan third, and Iraq sixth.²⁰

Equally important is the frequent unwillingness of states to pursue certain policies, at least on issues related to non-citizens and militarisation. However, only inability, corruption, and poor capacity are typically addressed in official SDG documents. The assumption underlying SDG discussions is that the state is a willing agent of change and that the question is essentially technical—that is what kind of SDG structure of goals and targets, and implementation mechanisms, will enable this change? Hence, a discussion of the politics of change is usually absent from the drafting process and assumed to belong to the subsequent, high-level negotiation stage. This approach might be pragmatic, but could leave a gap in the analytical network supporting the SDGs.^{21,22} Hence, it is important to ask whether a given SDG can be achieved despite the state's disposition and global politics. The answer to this question partly depends on whether an effective global partnership, which can tackle the structural and geopolitical constraints we have discussed in this Viewpoint, can be advocated and put in place.

Past and present development goals have recognised the important roles of rich countries of the North. SDG 17, similar to Millennium Development Goal 8, still views global partnership through the important, but incomplete, lens of improved market access to countries in the global South, technological transfer, debt relief, and the flow of aid from North to South.^{23,24} However, militarisation in the Arab world shows that

western powers play an important part in the promotion of practices that place formidable obstacles along the path to human development in poorer parts of the world and provide benefits to western governments and corporations.²⁴ Any global partnership that aims to address militarisation and the refugee crisis in the Arab world needs to promote the rights of all people to be free of violence and abuse, and ensure accountability of governments and corporations for actions that cause widespread suffering. Such a partnership can only arise through concerted global action and should be part of a wider effort to address “systemic global governance dysfunctions” that, according to *The Lancet–Oslo University Commission on Global Governance for Health*, reinforce global power asymmetries and health inequities and, in the Arab world, a state of semi-permanent warfare.²⁵

Conclusion

The UN has declared that the SDGs will “leave no one behind”.²⁶ However, we argue in this Viewpoint that some of the most marginalised people around the world—refugees and international migrant-workers, especially women—are at serious risk of being excluded from the SDG process.

States can often be complicit in the creation of policies that run counter to sustainable development. In today's globalised world with vast flows of people, capital, technology, and weapons across country borders, focusing exclusively on goals to be pursued by individual countries does not take into account powerful, political, and economic pressures and interests. Such a focus could either impose unrealistic demands on dysfunctional, corrupt states or fall on deaf ears, especially when local and global interests coincide. The situation in the Arab world makes these dilemmas more sharply visible. Unless these issues are prioritised in the post-2015 debate and a real global partnership committed to addressing these issues is developed, the new SDGs will have little chance of success.

Contributors

AE-Z and JD conceptualised and contributed to the writing of the main text. AE-Z was the main contributor and led the writing, editing, and discussions of the paper. PF developed the table in the appendix on immigrants and refugees. NS developed the table in the appendix on opportunity costs of militarisation. All authors contributed to discussions and comments around successive drafts.

Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

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