



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
4 February 2004

Original: English

Commission on Sustainable Development

Twelfth session

14-30 April 2004

Item 3 of the provisional agenda*

Thematic cluster for the implementation cycle 2004-2005

Regional Implementation Forum of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

I. Introduction

1. The Regional Implementation Forum, organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), was held at the headquarters of the League of Arab States in Cairo, from 19 to 21 October 2003, back-to-back with the fourth session of the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region (JCEDAR). The Joint Committee is composed of representatives from ESCWA, the technical secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers responsible for the Environment (CAMRE), the Department for Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and the United Nations Environment Programme/Regional Office for Western Asia (UNEP/ROWA).
2. Fifty participants from 14 Governments, joined by representatives from intergovernmental and academic organizations, industry and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), attended the Forum.
3. The Forum aimed at providing input on the thematic focus of the twelfth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, namely: (a) water; (b) sanitation; and (c) human settlements.

II. Review of overall activities

4. Delegates met in plenary sessions to review reports on follow-up activities to the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Abu Dhabi Declaration on the Future of the Arab Environment Programme. Delegates also considered a proposal that CAMRE produce a work programme on the environment for the period up to 2005. The renewal of the

* E/CN.17/2004/1.

Executive Committee of the JCEDAR was discussed and proposals regarding incentives to the private sector to invest in the field of environment were considered. The idea of establishing an Arab fund for environmental projects was also discussed.

A. Activities related to the Regional Implementation Forum

1. Preparations for the twelfth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development: reports on the state of implementation in the Arab region: water, sanitation and human settlements

5. The General Assembly of the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region reviewed memorandums and clarifications on preparations for the twelfth session of the Commission submitted by the technical secretariat of CAMRE and members of Joint Committee in charge of follow-up to the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Arab Initiative for Sustainable Development.

6. Arab experts, assigned to prepare three reports on the state of implementation on water, sanitation and human settlements in the region, reviewed their reports, in which they identified obstacles and challenges and proposed visions for enhancing the executive programmes.

2. Report on the state of implementation of goals and commitments on water

7. Recalling the relevant commitments contained in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, the expert's report noted main constraints to their achievement in the Arab region, including: poor governance; weak legislative and institutional frameworks; and lack of public awareness. The report also stressed the need for strategies for shared river basins and a holistic approach to planning and implementation. Achievements regarding the integrated management of water resources in the region were also mentioned in the report, including: the establishment of effective national institutional frameworks; the adoption of national water plans; the improvement of irrigation systems; and the cooperation in shared river basins. Concerning water resources assessment, the report stressed the creation of monitoring networks and databases in several countries. For the protection of aquatic ecosystems, it highlighted measures to: address pollution and increased salinity; treat and reuse wastewater; and harvest water. The report underscored the need for sufficient funds, training and credible information and recommended: establishing an Arab fund to finance, prepare and implement water development projects; draw up a regional programme for education, training and awareness-raising; and create water monitoring and regional information networks.

3. Report on the state of implementation of goals and commitments on sanitation

8. The expert's report described the dire sanitation situation in the Arab world and identified actions to improve it, including: increasing participation of civil society and the role of women; encouraging recycling practices; and applying the "polluter pays" principle. The report stressed the problem of poor solid waste management and described the benefits of privatization and the adoption of environment-friendly practices. The report also noted aggravating factors of pollution in over-populated cities, including: lack of awareness; poor segregation of regular and hazardous solid waste; lack of recycling; and inadequate maintenance of sanitation networks. The report recommended making use of local workforces and

technology for better and more affordable maintenance of sanitation networks, as well as establishing a central authority and developing Arab standards for sanitation.

4. Report on the state of implementation of goals and commitments on human settlements

9. The expert's report stated that achievements pertaining to improving the life of the rural and urban poor should include: the development of national urban development programmes and plans to address spontaneous settlements; the setting-up of programmes securing land tenure and housing; partnerships for housing provision; strategies to combat rural poverty; and support for entrepreneurial building activities. The report also stressed the need to balance privatization and the role of the State; understand spontaneous settlements as an economic phenomenon; reform quality control of the housing stock; rationalize housing costs; and orient cities towards the knowledge-based economy. Regarding the provision of adequate environmental structures, the report highlighted efforts to: develop integrated environmental legislative and institutional frameworks; build awareness; promote renewable energies; and address transport-related air pollution. Recommendations included: expanding the role of the private sector in providing municipal services; developing environmental monitoring and data-management systems; decentralizing environmental management; and adopting land use and zoning legislation. Regarding planning and managing sustainable human settlements, the report stressed the need to develop national land use and population distribution strategies, including the creation of new cities, as well as the design of institutional frameworks for environmental safety.

5. Institutional framework for sustainable development

10. ESCWA's series of innovative, appropriate, comprehensive, gradual and culturally sensitive recommendations for sustainable development governance focused on: (a) strengthening institutional arrangements; (b) improving operational mechanisms; and (c) adopting regional approaches to sustainable development governance. The study explained how a narrow concept in the Arab region has led to failure to involve those who have an impact on sustainable development. Regarding the institutional aspect, the study underscored a high level of centralization in the Arab world and stressed the need to include, at both national and regional levels, the concept of sustainable development as it emanated from the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The study also stated that the low level of civil society participation in the region was due to a patriarchal mentality, a strong resistance to creating new bodies and the priority given to individual over community interests. The study noted the success of the Tunisian sustainable development model and recommended that it be studied and reproduced. At the national level, the study suggested: the creation of a high council for sustainable development (including various ministries); a national council for sustainable development (including NGO and civil society representatives); and the appointment of a sustainable development adviser to the Prime Minister. The study underscored that its proposal was presented as a practical model for Arab countries that could readily make use of existing national institutions, political realities, and the current cultural context. Thus, the recommendation in the study was not intended as an ideal, permanent structure, but rather a transitional institution, giving non-governmental stakeholders an important but indirect role.

11. As a result, the delegates hailed efforts exerted by ESCWA in the above-mentioned study and requested the integration of comments made by member

countries during the Forum. The delegates further proposed that CAMRE expand its objectives and mandate to include aspects of sustainable development, as well as to expand its technical secretariat to include UNEP/ROWA and the secretariats of ESCWA and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

6. Follow-up to the transformation of the 2001 Abu Dhabi Declaration on the Future of the Arab Environment Programme into applicable programmes and activities

12. Follow-up measures to the 2001 Abu Dhabi Declaration on the Future of the Arab Environment Programme, highlighting projects on the coastal environment, land degradation and marine and freshwater water resources, were introduced. However, it was stated that funding for these projects remained an issue, and suggestions were made that JCEDAR propose the convening of a meeting to further the realization of projects in this field. In turn, the delegates agreed to convene workshops on integrated water resources management, desertification, land degradation and integrated coastal areas and marine resources management to: (a) complete the preparation of projects in these areas; (b) identify implementation priorities; and (c) mobilize potential donors to finance feasibility studies.

7. Incentives to promote private sector investment in the field of the environment

13. Lebanon, supported by Syria, stressed the role of the private sector in environmental protection, and presented a proposal to be included on the agenda of CAMRE. Suggestions were also made to convene a workshop to further study the role of the private sector and identify relevant actions, prior to discussing the issue at a higher level. As a result, JCEDAR assigned the secretariat to follow up the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development by communicating with the General Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture in Arab countries and by organizing a workshop on private sector incentives to encourage investment in the field of the environment.

8. Consideration of an Arab fund for environmental projects

14. Lebanon, supported by Syria, proposed the creation of an Arab fund for environmental projects. Also, noting the need to reduce reliance on foreign aid, Egypt recommended developing a regional market for environmental goods and services. As a result, JCEDAR assigned to the secretariat the task of organizing roundtable discussions on the possibility of establishing an Arab fund to finance environmental projects.

III. Summary of the outcome of the Regional Implementation Forum

15. Participants adopted decisions on: follow-up measures to the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Initiative in the Arab Region (which was launched at the World Summit on Sustainable Development); follow-up activities to the Abu Dhabi Declaration on the Future of the Arab Environment Programme (2001); incentives to the private sector to invest in environmental projects; and the establishment of an Arab environment fund.