Regional Round Table Conference on
Inclusivity in Peace and Development in the MENA region

Amman,17 November 2022

Executive Summary

In connection to the formal inauguration of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa, the Institute hosted its first large in-person conference on the theme of "Inclusivity in Peace and Development in the MENA region", on 17 November 2022. It was a one-day regional round table conference, which brought together some 50 participants and thought leaders from across MENA and Europe representing diverse parts of society – public sector, civil society, private sector, academia, think tanks, media, international organizations, and other experts. Members of the Institute's Advisory Committee played key roles, as speakers or moderators

Through solution-oriented and interactive set of conversations, the conference aimed at exploring how to create more inclusive and participatory processes and enhance interdisciplinary collaboration between diverse sectors of society in work on peace and development, in the MENA region and between the region and Europe. This included discussions on addressing the underrepresentation of women and youth in policy and decision-making processes and by promoting intergenerational and gender sensitive dialogues. The discussions highlighted the need for safe and conducive spaces for sharing information, experiences and ideas regarding the challenges and opportunities in these fields, as well as the need to strengthen connectivity and networks amongst professionals and organizations, from different parts of society and from across the region.

Participants shared insights and reflections and the conference resulted in a set of **policy recommendations** and ideas on how to implement these recommendations. Key reflections included highlighting:

- **The need to bridge existing multiple trust gaps** (between generations, between state and citizens, etc.) and **creating spaces for genuine dialogue** and inclusion.

- **The importance of placing people at the center** when designing and implementing programs - including youth and women.

- **The need to break silos between different sectors of society**, as participants pointed to the necessity of diverse perspectives in addressing political, economic, and societal challenges.

- That the **EU-MENA relationship requires transformative dialogues to foster better mutual understanding** and spaces for jointly developing new ideas on how to address mutual challenges, with a people-centered approach.

Background

Peace and development are intrinsically inter-linked. It is common to say that peace, development, and human rights are three faces of the same reality. As late former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan would often affirm *"there is no peace without development, there is no development without peace, there is neither peace nor development without human rights"*.

A key ingredient in this equation is inclusivity. Without genuinely aiming for inclusive processes, which ensure representation of a broad spectrum of society and consideration of different perspectives, the road to peace and sustainable development is difficult, if not impossible.

To date, significant parts of society - in particular women and youth - tend to be underrepresented both in policy elaboration and decision making, including on issues related to peace and security and on sustainable development, including environment and climate change. This reflects several factors, including limited resources, traditions, and norms. A variety of solutions to increase inclusivity, in a range of policy areas have been suggested, including by creating safe spaces for engagement, by improving outreach, and by further strengthening leadership development.

Furthermore, the contacts, synergies, and collaboration between diverse sectors of society (public sector, civil society, private sector, academia, media etc.) are often limited. Enhancing interdisciplinary collaboration between diverse stakeholders will be important in addressing challenges facing the MENA region, including on issues such as conflict resolution and reconstruction, environment and climate change, and sustainable economic growth and job creation. To advance the agendas on peace and development, more collaborative approaches are needed at local, national, regional, inter-regional and global levels.

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Kofi Annan, late former Secretary General of the United Nations

Detailed report

Opening Session:

The conference started with opening remarks made by Charlotta Sparre, Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa. In her remarks, she presented the mandate and thematic focus areas of the Institute. With reference to the Agenda 2030[1] and she reminded that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are integrated and that action in one area will affect outcomes in others. She highlighted that the world is increasingly interconnected and that many challenges are both transboundary and interrelated. *"We are facing converging crises"*, she said and as example she mentioned how environmental degradation and climate change are affecting human security and risk generating or amplifying local grievances, in particular in fragile and conflict-affected countries. However, she reminded that the increased global interconnectivity also means greater possibilities to connect, to learn from each other and to work together in addressing the challenges and contribute to development of policies for social, economic, and environmental sustainability. She concluded by saying that *"it is crucial to enhance contacts and collaborations between local, national, regional, and international levels and we need to explore better methods in working together through involving a diverse range of stakeholders"*.

In his keynote speech, **H.E. Dr. Omar Razzaz**, Former Prime Minister of Jordan, and chairman of the Dialogue Institute's Advisory Committee, stressed the importance of addressing the region's conflicts and security challenges and work for peaceful solutions, including by solving the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He underlined the close links between peace and development and dialogue as an essential element, both as an end in itself and as a mean to address challenges. *"By networking,*

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[1] Sustainable Development Goals | United Nations Development Programme (undp.org)

humanising, learning and understanding we are more likely to find common ground, develop solutions and build visions for the future", he said and added that *"We do not need to agree on all issues, but we need to understand different perspectives"*. Dr. Razzaz also highlighted the crucial importance of inclusivity. Furthermore he underscored the necessity of dialogue between the MENA region and Europe on multiple areas of common interest, such as climate change and food security.

The speech by Dr. Razzaz was followed by a **panel discussion,** moderated by Charlotta Sparre, Director of the Dialogue Institute. Panelists were the following members of the Dialogue Institute's Advisory Committee:
- H.E. Dr. Nassif Hitti, former Foreign Minister of Lebanon
- Dr. Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary UN ESCWA
- Mr. Nadim Houry, Executive Director of Arab Reform Initiative
- Ms. Asma Khalifa, Co-founder of Khalifa Ihler Institute
- Dr. Noha ElMikawy, Dean of the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at AUC
- Dr. Rouzbeh Parsi, Head of the MENA Program at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

The aim of the panel discussion – and the following round table discussion - was to reflect on what inclusivity in peace and development really means, and exploring its importance in shaping a sustainable, more diverse, and inclusive future.

With their different backgrounds and experiences the panelists gave diverse responses on how they view inclusivity. Elements that were highlighted include:
- Peace and development are closely intertwined, and all efforts must be done a comprehensive way, taking political, economic, social, and cultural factors into consideration.
- There is a need to develop more thinking around inclusive participation in terms of gender, age, background, perspectives etc. The current lack of inclusivity and too restricted participation (including in negotiations) has led to "broken structures" and leaving social grievances unaddressed.

- The trust-gaps need to be bridged and the fractured relationship within societies and the top-down approach needs to be replaced by more inclusive processes of dialogue and cocreation.

Key contributions by the panelists:

Dr. Nassif Hitti, former Foreign Minister of Lebanon and for many years senior official with the League of Arab States, shared reflections from a long diplomatic career. He stressed that peace and development work need to go hand in hand and need to be dealt with in a comprehensive way, taking political, economic, social and cultureal elements into consideration. He highlighted the important role of diplomacy in contributing to peace and development in MENA region and to the dialogue between the region and Europe. He described diplomacy as *"the art of managing diffrences"* but given the complexity of issues there is a need for a diplomacy that goes beyond defining areas of agreements, and disagreements.

Traditional diplomatic work of state-to-state contacts remain relevant, but a new layer of public diplomacy and connecting with non-official actors is needed to address key issues linked to peace and development. Dr Nassif highlighted the important role of dialogue with and inclusion of non-official actors in addressing existing political, economic and societal challenges. In this regard multitrack-diplomacy (track I, track 1,5, track II) can be valuable.

Dr. Rola Dashti, head of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and a Kuwaiti economist and business executive and former minister, summarized inclusivity in peace and development was central elements for prosperity, stability and restoring hope. Asked about the role of women and how to work on inclusion with a more gender equal approach, she noted a need to reshape the narrative regarding women's engagement in politics and public life, and to with a stress on concepts of citizenship, and normative narrative of human rights. Bringing up economic dimensions and mentioning that arguments of economic feasibility could be better used as selling points, she pointed to gender equality driving foreign direct investments. She argued that this should be highlighted and used as an incentive to change the current narrative and reshape the future.

Asma Khalifa, Libyan researcher, activist, and peacebuilder, reminded that inclusivity does not equate representation. She underlined the importance of addressing social grievances and pointed to a need to rethink "the broken structures" and working methods. She pointed to the lack of trust that many in the younger generation have for a political system, that is not open to many of them and that is seen as closed, bureaucratic and non-transparent. Instead, many young people tend to create their own opportunities in business, arts, and culture, where there is a vibrant activity, despite a non-enabling environment. Asma highlighted a need to bridge the intergenerational gaps, that often start already at home where young boys and girls are told to obey and to learn, adding: *"but what can we learn from an older generation that has made this region crumble?"* She called for opening spaces "and hearts" to have conversations to bridge these gaps.

Nadim Houri, Executive Director of the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), stressed that without accountability there can't be inclusivity. He highlighted some of the region's challenges to inclusivity, including the lack of civic space and reminded that even in countries that are considered more open, key segments of society are not able to organize. Another point he raised was the structure of powers, including both questions on who sits on the table and on who is benefiting from this representation. In this context, he elaborated on the notion of who is being included or excluded and said it must go beyond including women and youth and into analyzing "which women and which youth". And he pointed to the need to "unpack identities" when working on inclusivity, by raising the awareness about those who are missing at the table (e.g. grassroot organizations, rural population, conservative voices).

Furthermore, he pointed to the lack of trust and said that "*without thinking about how to reestablish trust, we will continue to have legitimacy crises".* Nadim pointed to two positive trends in the MENA region: 1) the emergence of a new feminist movement in the region, challenging who is at the table and looking at who is benefitting from the table; and 2) the emergence of a new generation of organizations speaking on their own behalf, not representing others (e.g. migrant organizations in Lebanon).

Dr. Noha ElMikawy, Dean of the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at AUC, highlighted the regions enormous complexities - *"this region is a tapestry of hope and despair"* – which requires awareness and ability to see parallel trends. She spoke about how the MENA region is witnessing a redefinition of what is a public sphere, and resilient youth movement and a rising role of private wealth in the region are trying to influence the agenda of development and peace – *"sometimes positively, sometimes negatively"*. This is coupled with huge IT and technological revolution. In parallel the region sees a high urbanization, combined with serious effects of climate change. Dr. Noha also raised the region's intricate relationship with Europe and the rest of the world, made even more complex in the current geopolitical situation, leaving the region *"stuck between liberal democracy and authoritarianism"*. Finally, she highlighted the region's many *"heroes who have helped pushing the envelope, but whose stories have not been told"* and pointed to the need for the region to reflect on its own failures – and success stories.

Dr. Rouzbeh Parsi, Head of the MENA Program at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, noted that inclusivity entails transformation and humility – *"we need to go beyond making others change and learn to change ourselves"*. This also relates to the relationship between EU-MENA, which requires transformation, in terms of better understanding each other and to learning from our past failed policies. He stressed that the EU-MENA relationship goes beyond being neighbours and rather being part of the family, he said with a reference to the role that the MENA diaspora in Europe plays. Dr Parsi also underlined that the EU-MENA relationship goes beyond aid. Trade, investments and economic policies (incl. good governance, transparency and accountability) are event more essential for sustainable development.

Plenary discussion

The panel discussion was followed by a candid and constructive open plenary discussion on inclusivity in peace and development work in the region. It was moderated by Ms. Hafsa Halawa, independent analyst and consultant and member of the Advisory Committee.

Speakers touched upon the global trends of distrust in governmental institutions, democratic values and practices, where the MENA region is no exception. Others noted a lack of sense "ownership of change" due to lack of inclusive processes for policy development and decision-making. In the same vein, participants also reflected on the lack of gender equality, and gender inclusion by many, is being looked at as a "threat" and not as an essential element for advancement. Examples of the challenges to create inclusive peace processes were mentioned, e.g. in war-torn countries such as Yemen and Libya. Several participants to the lacking respect and consideration of human rights as a key obstacle to inclusivity.

Throughout the discussion participants stressed the need to bridge the gaps of distrust that exist in the region. They highlighted the essential role of good governance as an overarching prerequisite for change and where inclusivity is key.

The crucial role of civil society in the democratization in MENA region was raised by many participants, who pointed to the risks of the shrinking civic space that limited the possibility for the civil society to have a real impact. Another challenge that was mentioned, as regards civil society was a donor driven competition that risks contribution to lack of cooperation between civil society actors, and which often favors "capital based" organizations, rather than representing grassroots demands.

Participants also stressed on more clearly putting society at the core of the political systems, by engaging in social transformation processes. Some participants pointed to a need to rethink indicators assessing inclusivity and argued that those linked to women's participation are insufficient and limited. The situation of youth activism in the MENA region was also highlighted, specially in light of the limited and shrinking civic space and lack of security protection mechanisms, as well as language barriers.

Participants also reflected on the development agenda in MENA continuously changing as an effect of international developments and stressed that in parallel to strengthening dialogue platforms and mechanisms in the region, it is also essential to work on increasing and enhancing the exchanges and dialogues between the region and the rest of the world, not least with Europe.

Participants provided several specific insights to the importance of unpacking inclusivity, while stressing that without respect to human rights and accountability there is no inclusivity. Below are some of the insights, reflections, recommendations, and ideas on how to implement these recommendations:

- **Breaking silos and connecting people is crucial to address challenges in MENA region**. The challenges (related to peace and security and sustainable development) in the MENA region are complex and multi-faceted. To solve them a variety of actors across the society must be involved and engaged, including EU-MENA. This requires dedicated efforts to break silos and connecting people and "connecting the dots". Different parts of society play important roles – also outside of their direct sphere of influence.

- **Inclusive participation is essential** to create stable, prosperous, and democratic societies: People from different walks of life and diverse identities must be included in and have opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision and policy making in society.

- There is however a **need to unpack "inclusivity"**. While awareness may be growing in policy circles that exclusion can be a catalyst for conflict, "inclusion" has become a buzzword in policy, development world - yet a definition remains elusive. This leads to a need to develop thinking on definitions such as "inclusivity" and "intergenerational". If better understood these concepts could have a potential to better contribute to development and peace and to the interaction between humanitarian, peace and development actors.

- Participants underlined that the **nexus between inclusivity, peace and development** is obvious, when looked at from a human security perspective of people. However, in practice the nexus thinking remains underdeveloped. Parallel processes are needed to advance the nexus thinking, i.e. both top-down and bottom-up. Voices of different segments of society should be taken into the processes of defining and developing collective outcomes. This can be achieved by emphasis on dialogue and engagement of national, local, regional, and international actors in building initiatives for the future.

- Throughout the meeting participants highlighted the importance of placing people at the center when designing and implementing programs, where communities' needs are considered through a **people centered approach**. Given their underrepresentation to date, special consideration needs to be made on increasing the participation and inclusion of women and of youth.

- The **challenges that face the MENA region and Europe are of transboundary nature and can only be solved by collaboration and cooperation. Trust building is key** and for this it is essential to better understand different needs and interests – both by states and people - and to identify areas of common concern and develop approaches based on mutual development interests.

- **Dialogue is a key component for enhancing stability in the region**. Dialogue is both a means and an end in itself. Intersectoral, intercultural and intergenerational dialogues are important tools to bridge gaps, to develop ideas and policies and to reconcile grievances and build peaceful and sustainable societies. For the dialogue to bridge gaps and be transformative it must be characterized by the sincere willingness to listen and respect others concerns and suggestions.

- Safe and open spaces are essential for dialogue. This is true for all, but often a particular challenge for young people who often have less access. There is a need to support for platforms (physical and digital) for youth to come together, build long-term relationships, collations, alliances and for them to get access to engage with other key stakeholders. Participants also pointed to a need to provide young women and men alike with more opportunities to be engaged in public policymaking and in governance in the region, including through more open public discussions.

- Several participants pointed to the need to build and strengthen networks and alliances at local, regional, and global levels. A positive example given was developments amongst women's networks, where there in recent years have been an ongoing process of alliance-building at regional and global levels, including through securing the buy-in of international actors for more inclusive peace.

Breakout Sessions

The open plenary discussion was followed by group discussions in smaller format. Participants were assigned to three different breakout groups addressed the following themes:
- Gender equality in advancing agendas on peace and development
- Intergenerational dialogue for advancing agendas on peace and development
- Collaborative approaches to advancing agendas on peace and development

Breakout Session I: Gender Equality in Advancing Agendas on Peace and Development

The session tackled the topic of gender equality in advancing agendas on peace and development. Participants stressed that sustainable solutions require political will, which is not always forthcoming and therefore further efforts are needed in this regard. They also highlighted the importance of partnerships between various stakeholders, including facilitating further connectivity between e.g. civil society and private sector, who are seen as key drivers for change. Intersectional approaches were deemed necessary to curate the space of new voices and to address the underrepresentation of women and youth.

The discussion also touched upon generational gaps between "older" feminist organizations and a new generation of feminist movements and stressed on the need to try to bridge these gaps. While it is important to evaluate and appreciate progress made in the past decades when it comes to gender, peace, and development, there is also a need to capitalize on the efforts driven by a younger generation, who are often more ambitious and radical in their demands and who partly are facing other challenges than the previous generation.

Key insights that emerged, included:

1. More focus should be given on the structures driving inequality rather than placing the burden of empowerment on individuals, many of whom are limited by legislations (e.g. family law, personal status law) and political and economic etc. structures.

2. Previous mild progress on political and economic participation of women in the region had been undermined by the pandemic, which also had led to an increase in domestic violence.

3. Some raised concerns on UN resolution 1325, saying that it focuses too much on security and not enough on "real" needs of women in many countries, where security is not the main challenge. Others stressed that it is crucial to have more

forceful monitoring of the resolution, especially after the pandemic, while in parallel working on integration of gender aware policies throughout society.

4. The donor community needs to be careful on whom it empowers, said participants, reminding both of the risk with tokenism and the risk of money ending up with organizations that can present a proposal, but not necessarily aim for a transformative change and gender equality.

5. Private sector is an important avenue for women and plays a key role in society and for the prospect of creating more gender equal structures. Focus on women entrepreneurial initiatives can play an important role.

6. There is a need to overcome the segregation of gender as a topic of its own, often seen "only" as an issue for women, not as a chance to improve the whole society. To advance the agenda it would be useful to embed gender issues in the broader concept of "equality". This would also help up to overcome focus on cosmetic changes on gender and inclusivity (such as inviting women and youths only for the sake of visibility) and refocus on a change of the rules of the game, able to offer equal opportunities to all. This could also help in creating greater connectivity among women of different origins and different generations around a common cause.

7. Efforts should be made to break the "isolation" of gender (as a separate topic) and focus on mainstreaming gender in all work and activities, incl. in male-dominated domains such as politics, diplomacy, economics and inter-faith dialogue.

8. Existing exclusion is motivated by political elites (not wanting to share power) and by narrow political and economic interests. Tackling resistance to inclusion requires a new approach that more clearly addresses the potential societal "gains" by developing more (gender) inclusive societies.

As one participant put it: *"Inclusion is not a threat; inclusion is a necessity".*

Breakout Session II: Intergenerational Dialogue for Advancing Agendas on Peace and Development

Participants in the second group addressed the question of intergenerational gaps and how these gaps hinder advancements of the agendas on peace and development. Challenging elements that were mentioned included lack of governance, high unemployment, unequal gender roles, and the prevalence of a narrative framing youth as "unexperienced" and "untrustworthy", along with language barriers and fragility of educational systems, as well as generational gaps linked to a lack of understanding of what a generation is. In addition, conflicts and wars in the region has a direct impact on the youth and on youth activism.

Participants underlined the importance of creating coalitions and adopting the collaborative approach in building effective participation of youth and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life; a participation that is tailored to prepare young women and men to find solutions for the challenges of today and the future.

Key insights that emerged, included:

1. On a structural level there is a need to work on fostering good governance and on building trust between on one hand the public and governmental institutions and on the other hand young people. This should include developing bottom-up approaches by involving youth in policy-development and in decision-making processes and thereby create a shared ownership and accountability.

2. Youth unemployment is a key challenge in the region. More focus and efforts are needed in making the job-market more accessible to youth, incl. by facilitating entrepreneurship and other private sector initiatives.

3. Capacity building can play an important role in enhancing and increasing youth inclusion. Participants highlighted the value of providing training in e.g. proper communication skills and political education and to help youth be well prepared for policy negotiations. Capacity building can be a catalyst for change in transforming youth power in negotiations and creating the desired change where a bottom-up approach can be facilitated in addressing issues linked to peace and development.

4. There is a need to better understand intergenerational gaps and how these gaps hinder advancements of the agendas on peace and development, and to develop thinking on how these gaps can be bridged and how intergenerational dialogues can be developed.

5. Participants underlined the crucial importance of creating and providing safe spaces both for youth-led initiatives, but also for helping to link these initiatives to ongoing policymaking processes, through intergenerational dialogues.

6. Participants also stressed the value of networking and coalition-building and to develop good practices for intergenerational dialogues, incl. as a tool to contribute to better inclusion of youth.

7. *"Intersectionality is essential in the creation of inclusivity"*. Participants argues that to create inclusivity in policy- and decision-making, representation of the different voices is key and various forms of dialogue are needed, incl. intergenerational, interclass, interculture and interfaith dialogues.

8. Media's role and importance in spreading awareness on inclusive participation, was brought up by participants, who stressed that media can play a key role both in influencing and raising awareness at formal levels, but also by reaching broader parts of society, incl. at grassroot level.

Breakout Session III: Collaborative Approaches to Advancing Agendas on Peace and Development

In the third group, participants discussed the need to strengthen collaboration, coherence, and complementarity across different parts of society (public sector, civil society, private sector etc.), as well as between the respective mandates of humanitarian, development, and peace actors, at all levels. Participants pointed to a need to promote simultaneous engagement and shared responsibility amongst professionals and organizations across the region, to reduce the likelihood and impact of recurrent crises. This was seen as particularly important given the many conflicts and crises in the region, as well as in light of the major geopolitical shifts that the world is witnessing.

Key insights that emerged, included:

1. There is a need for mapping urbanism to better understand its consequences on societies in the region.

2. The private sector is and will play a key role in the developments in the region. More attention should be given to see how the private sector can play an integrated role in long-term societal development, in dialogue with other parts of society.

3. Good governance is key. Participants underscored the crucial importance of investing in institutional development that matter for the prosperity of societies, and in this work emphasize the importance of accountability mechanisms.

4. There is a need for better recognition of the power of local indigenous knowledge production in the region and to explore how this knowledge can contribute to developing alternative policy solutions.

5. A key challenge in the region - "and possibly globally" – is the lack of hope that many people feel as regards the future. In parallel, however, there are plenty fold of creative and constructive initiatives that are ongoing in the region. Participants discussed the possibility of developing a "menu of hope", by mapping successful positive initiatives to induce change. An idea was presented to build cross-sectoral "schools of learning" to institutionalize incubators for positive change. It was also mentioned that community-based initiatives could serve as key avenues as "schools of learning".

6. The Arab Gulf states are playing an increasing regional - and global - role, incl. through their economic power. For the MENA region as a whole, this entails both opportunities and risks. While participants differed in their assessments, they agreed that there is a need to better understand the role that the Arab Gulf states and societies will and could play.

Key quotes from the discussion:

"Inclusivity in peace and development is key to reaching prosperity and stability and in restoring hope."

"Without accountability, inclusivity doesn't have a meaning."

Many thanks to all participants for contributing by sharing insights, experiences and recommendations!