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The Future of Governance and Development Policymaking in the Global South

Perspectives from the Arab Region

2-3 November 2026

Concept Note

Arab countries are facing mounting challenges imposed by rapid transformations at the international level, whose geopolitical, environmental, and technological impacts are placing ever-increasing pressure on development programmes and policies. Just as these transformations have raised questions about the future of development globally, they have also cast doubt on the state of development in Arab countries, and on the ability of the region's governments to respond effectively to growing challenges within still-fragile political and social environments.

Studies on development in the region indicate that the majority of Arab countries face major structural obstacles that are hindering their ability to enhance their scores on various development indicators and achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015. These obstacles are particularly evident in areas related to the eradication of poverty, reduction of inequality, combating hunger, and improvements in health and education metrics – key objectives the region seeks to achieve within the framework of sustainable development.¹

One key factor among these obstacles is climate vulnerability. The Arab region is facing an unprecedented rate of climate change, the effects of which are intensifying year after year, to the level of natural disasters in several countries of the region. In recent years, severe droughts have affected numerous countries, while floods and cyclones have further exacerbated the situation. The impacts of these phenomena are worsened by inadequate preparedness and insufficient policy responses, and are further compounded by a serious decline in food security in some countries of the region – as well as the dangers posed by a worsening water supply crisis. The effects of climate change are also exacerbated by the increasing pressures exerted by global crises on the region's economies, which have not yet fully recovered from the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which has also contributed to this deterioration. All of this has been clearly reflected in social inequalities, whereby income and living standards are rapidly declining, poverty is spreading,² and the middle class is facing marked setbacks in many countries.

Instability and persistent armed conflicts also stand out as major harmful factors, turning promises of development and good governance into unattainable goals amidst persistent crises of governance and escalating internal divisions. There can be no doubt of the difficulty of fostering development in unstable environments, as they make it extremely challenging to implement sound social protection policies, let alone execute impactful development programs capable of reaching all segments of society. Conflict-driven environments make states increasingly fragile, turning a dignified life into a distant dream, while marginalized groups suffer ever-compounding risks due to insecurity.

The poverty of such groups is growing in direct proportion to their sense of inequality in all its forms.³ These conditions are compounded by other institutional and structural factors, most notably an

1 For more information on how the Arab region scores in terms of the SDGs, see: Lama Zakzak et al, *The Arab SDG Index and Dashboards 2025: Building Resilience* (Dubai and Paris: Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government and Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2025).

2 See: World Bank, *Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024: Pathways Out of the Polycrisis* (New York: World Bank, 2024), accessed 31/12/2025, at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-prosperity-and-planet>; Food Security Information Network, Global Network Against Food Crises, *Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC) 2025* (Rome, Italy: FSIN/GNAC, 2025), accessed 31/12/2025, <https://www.wfp.org/publications/global-report-food-crises-grfc>.

3 The issues of fragility and the pressures imposed by conflicts and other risk factors, including those emanating from outside the states in question, are fundamental to discussions about development, both in its domestic and international aspects. See, for example: The Fragile States Index, "E2: Uneven Economic Development," at: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/e2/>.

absence of the rule of law and of policies that uphold the values of justice and equitable distribution of resources.

In this situation, concerns about the continued fragility of the state necessitate a rethinking of the development models that are suited to Arab societies that have suffered from civil wars and deep divisions. This question is particularly relevant to Palestine, which continues to suffer under the brutality of the Israeli apartheid regime, and whose fate remains subject to harsh policies that threaten the overall human security of its citizens, including environmental, food, health, and water security. This colonial system imposes a grim reality, deliberately undermining the fundamental underpinnings of human security and rendering sustainable development impossible.⁴

The weakness of the current economic model is another key obstacle hindering development. The scarcity of resources, a structural factor, is exacerbated by the dominance of unsustainable patterns of administration and the persistence of practices of waste and corruption. These factors present their own challenges, weakening the impact of existing economic and social reforms, thus negatively impacting the effectiveness of public policies and constraining prospects for future growth and development.

To avoid portraying this situation solely as the direct result of contemporary political and economic conditions, it is important to note that these challenges have deeper historical roots. During the 1990s, the Arab world witnessed a wave of political liberalization, during which many Arab governments adopted reform programmes that placed comprehensive development at the forefront of official state discourse, pledging to improve living standards for their citizens under the principles of good governance. These agendas focused on improving the performance of government and enhancing social participation. However, in light of factors related both to domestic political structures and the international context, these efforts yielded mixed, limited results.

As trust in governments declined, popular anger escalated, culminating in the uprisings of 2011 and 2019. The Arab world underwent an exceptional moment of change, during which citizens expressed their aspirations for development and liberation through demands for social justice and democracy, recognizing that achieving these goals required a fundamental shift in the relationship between society and the state.

This experience, and the accompanying efforts to establish democracy, demonstrated that the challenges were far greater than they had first appeared, particularly in countries that had embarked on genuine paths of transition. Many of these countries regressed, while those that persisted continued to face immense pressures. Tunisia stands out as a pertinent example of these additional challenges, struggling with the difficulties of transitioning to democracy then eventually regressing with the failure of efforts to institutionalize it.

Part of the challenge lies in the gap between democracy and development. In this context, some point out that development is not a prerequisite for initiating a democratic transition. Conversely, sustaining a democratic experiment becomes extremely difficult in the absence of sustainable

⁴ Laurent A Lambert, "Ecocide as Genocide: A Human Security Approach to 'Utter Annihilation' in Gaza," Strategic Paper no. 23, Strategic Studies Unit (ACRPS), 6/10/2024, accessed 17/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Bajz>.

economic growth leading to genuine development, or without achieving adequate standard levels of education. From this perspective, education is the developmental factor most closely linked to democracy, and the most impactful in consolidating it.⁵

Over the past two decades, this connection between the aspirations of Arab peoples and the growth and increasing severity of these challenges has given rise to a new Arab research agenda. This trend has placed increasing emphasis on the study of the state and its institutions, and on the evaluation of existing governance models, in search of formulas capable of fulfilling the promises of sustainable development. These research efforts have focused on fundamental issues, including strengthening human capital, building resilient institutions capable of adapting to crises, and developing mechanisms for planning and public policy-making that align with the principles of sustainable development. Much of this research has drawn inspiration from the conceptual framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16,⁶ which focuses on strengthening the capacity of societies to achieve such development by promoting peace, ensuring access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. In this sense, these goals have redirected research attention toward critical issues related to public policies and their governance mechanisms.

The most pressing issues on the path to achieving social justice, first and foremost by combating poverty and reducing unemployment, necessitate a genuine economic transformation. Despite indicators suggesting that economic growth improved in the Arab region in general in recent years – reaching approximately 2.2% in 2024 after the downturn triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, then rising to around 3.8% the following year, with projections that it will hit reaching 4.3% in 2026⁷ – there is still a need to move beyond traditional Arab economic structures, especially given the fragility of this improvement and the lack of guarantees that it will last. The international context continues to be characterized by uncertainty; reports from global economic institutions suggest that a global economic slowdown is possible,⁸ despite the relative post-COVID recovery of supply chains. Signs of such a slowdown had already begun to emerge in 2025, driven by US tariff policies and escalating geopolitical tensions in various parts of the world. This has placed additional pressure on Arab economies and stymied their ability to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth.

The structural transformation that is needed would necessitate the adoption of new, more effective strategies. The wealthiest Arab countries remain heavily dependent on oil, while other

5 Azmi Bishara, “Democratic Transition and its Problems Theoretical Lessons from Arab Experiences,” keynote lecture at the conference “Democracies in Formation: Arab Countries as a Test Ground for New Political Developments,” at the Collège de France, Paris, 28 November 2019. See full text <https://acr.ps/1L9BaaU>.

6 Goal 16 encourages the establishment of peaceful and inclusive societies in which no one is marginalized, justice is accessible to all, and effective and accountable institutions serve everyone at all levels, without exclusion. This goal is based on a principle of liberation: people everywhere should be free from fear of all forms of violence and feel safe throughout their lives. The United Nations believes that “...high levels of armed violence and insecurity have a destructive impact on a country’s development, while sexual violence, crime, exploitation and torture are prevalent where there is conflict or no rule of law, and countries must take measures to protect those who are most at risk.” This necessitates concerted efforts to find lasting solutions to conflict and insecurity, particularly by strengthening the rule of law, preventing violence, and promoting participation and human rights. See: “Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions,” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>.

7 Arab Monetary Fund, *Taqyir al-afaq al-iqtisadiyya al-‘Arabiyah - Aghustus 2025 [The Arab Economic Outlook Report: August 2025]* (Abu Dhabi: Arab Monetary Fund, 2025) (in Arabic), <https://www.amf.org.ae/ar/publications/tqyir-afaq-alaqtsad-alrby/tqyir-afaq-alaqtsad-alrby-aghsts-2025>.

8 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Economic Situation and Prospects as of mid-2025* (New York: United Nations, 2025), <https://acr.ps/1L9Babu>; IMF, *World Economic Outlook: A Critical Juncture amid Policy Shifts, April 2025*, <https://acr.ps/1L9BaIF>; World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects, June 2025* (New York: World Bank Group, 2025), <https://acr.ps/1L9B9ZA>.

Arab economies are also reliant on models primarily based on the export of raw materials and agricultural products. New strategies are therefore essential to achieving a genuine balance between economic growth objectives and the needs for environmental protection, in line with the principles of sustainable development.

In this context, some Arab models that have made significant strides toward achieving the SDGs. Notable here are the models adopted by the Gulf states, which have demonstrated an ability to accelerate progress on development indicators; the past two decades have seen a marked improvement in education, health, and the quality of government services, as well as in terms of the environment and in developmental innovation, thanks to ambitious programmes that have benefited from these states' abundant financial resources.

However, the sustainability of these achievements remains questionable, as a continued, heavy reliance on oil-based economies leaves their development paths vulnerable to fluctuations in global energy prices. This makes clear the importance of a serious move toward economic diversification, as it is a prerequisite for enhancing sustainable development and reducing structural vulnerabilities in Arab economies.

There are several related issues, most notably concerning the building of institutions in the developing countries of the Global South, particularly those attempting to rebuild their societies and state systems after armed conflicts. This necessitates a critical examination of approaches to international cooperation, which face numerous challenges due to bias and the imposition of "prefabricated" agendas on the Global South, including with conditionalities that diminish the value and positive outcomes of this cooperation.

Despite widespread perceptions that foreign aid is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and achieving sustainable development, doubts persist over the effectiveness of current approaches to international cooperation. In addition to the dependency and corruption it promotes, there are serious doubts about its effectiveness, as it is generally subject to the strategic interests of donor countries, which may come at the expense of the development priorities of recipient countries.⁹

This problem is inseparable from efforts to address the current technological gap, especially in light of the rise of AI technologies, which many fear will exacerbate the technological marginalization of the world's most vulnerable, to the benefit of a limited number of wealthy, technology-producing countries. This will reinforce inequality in development and limit the opportunities for developing countries to catch up with global technological transformations.

These complex challenges add urgency to the adoption of a new approach and a forward-looking system of governance that transcends traditional Western perspectives and establishes a "Southern" vision that takes into account the specificities of local contexts in the Global South. In this regard, the academic and research community must play a pivotal role in formulating innovative and

9 Roger Riddell, *Does Foreign Aid Really Work?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 92.

forward-looking strategies that respond to these challenges, drawing on the lessons learned from institutional frameworks that connect countries of the Global South, such as BRICS and others.¹⁰

There are successful models in this context that reflect the diversity of international approaches to development in a multipolar world, which can be drawn upon to bring their economic and political provisions into closer alignment with the realities of the region. This necessitates the strengthening of research cooperation among developing countries, developing a shared academic agenda that addresses development issues through a critical and forward-looking perspective, and launching a broad dialogue that includes experts and policymakers.

This is the basis for this conference, addressing the theme of **The Future of Governance and Development Policymaking in the Global South: Perspectives from the Arab Region**. Jointly organized by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the conference invites researchers and others concerned with development and governance issues to present their contributions. Our hope is that this gathering will provide a space for creative thinking about the future, by presenting critical perspectives and practical solutions based on evidence-based knowledge and experience from the field, from the Arab world and the broader Global South. A successful conference is also expected to open new horizons for cooperation and reform, contributing to the achievement of sustainable development, a pressing need for developing countries. Papers accepted following peer review will be published in a special issue of *Hikama* and in ESCWA publications, subject to the relevant editorial policies.

Conference Themes

Public governance in the Arab region has arrived at a decisive turning point. Over the past decade, Arab governments have faced a series of overlapping, escalating crises including uprisings, protracted conflicts, economic shocks, fiscal pressures, climate vulnerability, demographic pressures, rapidly accelerating digital transformations, and declining trust in public institutions. These crises are no longer circumstantial or transient, but rather structural in nature. Diagnostic evidence from studies and assessments of governance – such as performance gaps in public service delivery, the narrowing of fiscal space, disparities in institutional capacities, and persistent patterns of social exclusion – indicates that partial or incremental reforms alone will no longer suffice to tackle these issues. Instead, governments in the Arab region face a fundamental question: **What type of institutions and governance systems will be able to achieve stability, prosperity, and sustainable development in an era marked by multiple crises and a pervasive state of uncertainty?**

This conference aims to adopt a forward-looking perspective on public governance in the Arab region. Instead of assuming that reform must follow a single path, it explores a number of possible future scenarios, shaped by the choices made today in areas such as crisis management, the relationship

¹⁰ For more on the group and its impact on the economies of the Middle East, see: Vincent Castel, Paula Ximena Mejia and Jacob Kolster, “The BRICs in North Africa: Changing the Name of the Game?”, *North Africa Quarterly Analytical – African Development Bank*, 2011; Muhammed Kümead Özekin and Engin Sune, “Contesting Hegemony: The Rise of BRICS and The Crisis of US-led Western Hegemony in the MENA Region”, *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 21, No.3 (December 2023).

between citizens and the state, public finances, digital government, and administrative capacity. The aim is to shift the focus from “what is” to “what could be” and “what should be done,” in order to guide governance systems toward more resilient, inclusive pathways that are more adaptable to emergencies and crises, thereby achieving flexibility, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Based on the above, the conference welcomes research contributions within the following themes:

1. The Theoretical Framing of Governance and Development Issues from a Global South Perspective

This theme discusses the theoretical frameworks and methodologies used to study governance and development policies, focusing particularly on the debate around the efficacy of dominant Western perspectives in addressing these issues. A central question arises in this context: Can we claim that there is a “Southern” approach to these issues, which differs in its theoretical foundations from those promoted by Western methodologies? Are there indeed “Southern concepts” in this context, which reflect a different reality in addressing development and governance issues?

The question then arises as to how such approaches could impact issues of governance that are prevalent in the Arab region and in many other countries of the Global South. Can such concepts and theories provide stronger explanations that are more in keeping with our reality, especially concerning the problems of equitable and sustainable development? Moreover, how can these approaches contribute to providing solutions or guiding more effective strategies for addressing the challenges facing the Global South under the current political, social, and economic conditions?

2. The Reality of Arab Development: A Forward-Looking Perspective on the Future of Governance and Public Policies

This section examines a set of pivotal questions regarding the dominant governance models in Arab countries and their various forms. For example: Is there a viable alternative model for governance? Could such a model be more compatible with the challenges facing the region?

This axis also seeks to evaluate the development trajectory of the Arab countries in light of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as an assessment of the legacy of the Arab reform programmes of the 1990s, while attempting to understand the lessons learned from these experiences.

In parallel, this theme examines the impact of the 2011 uprisings on transformations in Arab development, highlighting the effects of these evolutions on development policies and reforms over the last decade. It further studies national development plans and their pathways to implementation, seen as one of the main frameworks for sustainable development in the Arab region.

This theme also covers the evolution of development indicators in Arab countries, including progress achieved in the areas of health, education, and the economy. Studies here also include those that

discuss the impact of geopolitical shifts – particularly since the start of the war on Gaza – on development trends in the region, and how these shifts might reshape development priorities in light of current regional and international challenges.

3. Institution-Building, Administrative Reform, and the Effectiveness of Government Activity

This rubric addresses approaches to institutional reform, with a particular focus on those that place the citizen at the centre of the reform process and enhance their active participation in decision-making. It also delves into the factors that have until now hindered such participation, and offers insights into overcoming them.

Studies within this theme will address the technical aspects of institutional reform, such as government structure and organization, different models of government administration, and the standards of quality and effectiveness by government performance is judged. They will also include topics related to the privatization of public services and the diversification of service providers, as well as issues related to administrative decentralization and governance at the local level.

This rubric also provides ways into the issue of dismantling authoritarianism from below, through a focus on development initiatives and local governance models that enhance community participation in directing the work of government. This includes initiatives for popular oversight and societal action in promoting transparency and accountability in government agencies.

4. Governance in Contexts of State Reconstruction and Peacebuilding

This axis addresses the challenges of reconstruction and rebuilding the state following armed conflicts. It discusses the possibilities for developing governance approaches that are appropriate to the situations of countries that have experienced armed conflict, and asks whether it is possible to develop a “Southern model” for these issues that aligns with local contexts. This rubric explores how governance can be used to promote resistance and self-governance in societies under colonial rule or in the grip of civil wars, while presenting models applicable to other regions. It devotes particular attention to the context of the apartheid regime in Palestine, highlighting the knock-on effects of the war on Gaza and the West Bank, with its impact on governance practices and the challenges of reconstruction at the political, economic, and social levels. The theme also discusses the effects of this protracted conflict on the institutional capacity of the occupied Palestinian territories and on the ability of civil society to adapt under the harsh conditions imposed by the Israeli apartheid regime.

In addition to its focus on Palestine, this thematic axis extends to other cases in the Arab region that have witnessed bloody conflicts and devastating crises, such as Syria, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Somalia. These countries have faced similar challenges related to rebuilding state institutions and establishing civil peace. In such contexts, local governance must be viewed as a

vital tool for addressing domestic divisions, rebuilding unified states, and promoting stability in fragile environments by engaging communities in reconstruction processes. It also emphasizes the importance of finding a balance between central authority and local governance to achieve transparency and accountability.

5. International Cooperation and Trends in Global Governance

This theme addresses issues related to the marginalization of developing countries, particularly in the context of international development cooperation. It examines studies that evaluate the programmes of international development and finance organizations and their effectiveness, and explores their impact on development plans in Arab countries. It also discusses new approaches that enhance the participation of Global South countries in the management of international development institutions and strive to reduce the dominance of major powers in the development landscape, such as the BRICS group. It delves into how developing countries can benefit from this bloc, and whether this mechanism offers alternative models that are better suited to the economic and social challenges these countries face.

The axis also addresses the issue of conditionality in international cooperation policies, especially regarding financing and the development priorities imposed by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. It considers the extent to which conditionality infringes on national sovereignty, and the relevance of these organizations' priorities to the actual problems faced by developing countries.

Finally, this axis examines questions about the cultural aspects of international cooperation policies, and how these policies affect cultural diversity and the specificities of development in the countries of the Global South. It considers critical studies of the development doctrines promoted by international and regional development institutions, and assesses the role of these institutions in shaping national development agendas.

6. The Technological Divide and the Challenge of Artificial Intelligence

This axis addresses the technological gulf separating the countries of the developed Global North and those of the Global South, and examines the impact of this gap on development in Arab countries and the Global South in general. It includes studies that focus on evaluating the impact of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), blockchain technologies, and the Internet of Things on the economies and societies of Arab countries, asking how these technologies can contribute to addressing certain developmental challenges.

This theme also addresses the response of governments in Arab countries and the Global South to AI and its economic and social imperatives, as well as issues around the governance of AI systems, especially

in light of the dominance of large technology companies. It explores how governments in the Global South can benefit from AI while addressing the risks posed the monopolies of vast corporations.

Furthermore, this theme discusses the role of technology in promoting good governance models that are centred on citizens, ensure their active participation in decision-making, work to improve public services, and increase government transparency and accountability, thereby strengthening trust between citizens and the state. Finally, it considers studies examining the impact of AI on privacy and civil rights, as well as examining the importance of developing legal and regulatory frameworks that protect citizens' interests.

Participation Guidelines and Deadlines

- The Academic Committee is accepting proposals for research papers in two formats: Studies and Policy Papers. Proposals of 300 - 400 words, accompanied by a Curriculum Vitae, should be submitted by April 30, 2026.
- If an author's research proposal is accepted, they should submit their Study (6,000-10,000 words) or Policy Paper (3,000-5,000 words), including footnotes and references, **by the end of August 2026**, in accordance with the publication guidelines set by ACRPS (see: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9LA>).
- Policy Papers must include an in-depth diagnosis of a specific issue or problem related to the above theme, clarifying its various aspects, proposing a specific approach to addressing it, and reviewing other possible alternatives and solutions. The proposed policy must be feasible for decision-makers, and the paper should make clear its validity and realism within the broader context of the sector or field in question, as well as outlining the expected results.
- A conference will be convened in Morocco on **Monday and Tuesday, 2-3 November 2026**, to present studies and policy papers that have successfully met the peer-review criteria, to discuss their content, and to present their main findings. The conference will cover travel and accommodation expenses for researchers whose papers are accepted.
- All conference papers are subject to peer review. Acceptance of a proposal does not imply automatic acceptance of the final draft of a paper for publication.
- Papers accepted after peer review will be published in a special issue of the *Hikama* journal, in accordance with established editorial policies.
- Research proposals should be submitted via the Researchers Portal.

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