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“Creating inclusive processes to address Climate Change and Environmental Issues in the MENA region”

On April 7, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted an interactive, online round table discussion on the theme of *“Creating inclusive processes to address Climate Change and Environmental Issues in the MENA region”*. The gathering brought together over 60 people from across the MENA region and beyond, representing governments, civil society, academia, the private sector, donors, and international organizations. Key recommendations included pushing for the inclusion of more women and youth at policy, negotiating, and decision-making levels; seeking greater inter-generational and inter-sectoral exchange; prioritizing educational efforts and adapting language and messaging to the local context; pursuing decentralized solutions and involving local government in policy and implementation; engaging the private sector; leveraging the knowledge and experience of academic institutions and think tanks; and gathering more robust and relevant data and evidence of climate change.

On April 7, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted an interactive, online round table discussion on the theme of *“Creating inclusive processes to address Climate Change and Environmental Issues in the MENA region”*. The gathering brought together over 60 people from across the MENA region and beyond, representing governments, civil society, academia, the private sector, donors, and international organizations.

The event began with remarks by Mrs. Jenny Ohlsson, Sweden’s State Secretary for International Development, Dr Johan Schaar, Associate Senior Fellow at SIPRI, and Dr Omar Rifai, Director-General of the WANA Institute. A panel discussion followed, featuring Manar Elkebir, the founder of EcoWave, a Tunisian environmental NGO, Dr. Marisa Ensor, Georgetown University,

Khaled Irani, former Jordanian Minister of Environment, and Shady Khalil, Co-founder and Director of Greenish, an Egyptian environmental NGO.

Participants then discussed the opportunities and challenges in addressing climate change, in smaller groups, putting forward recommendations (link) that will feed into the Stockholm+50 meeting ([Stockholm+50](#)) in early June.

In her opening remarks, Mrs. Jenny Ohlsson, Sweden's State Secretary for International Development, highlighted the urgency of the green transition and of the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation in the MENA region, "where the effects of conflict in many places add to the struggle of securing sustainable livelihoods for many people". To deal with these issues, the State Secretary called for an inclusive approach, bringing in different groups in society, and underscored the importance of political will. She also emphasized that Swedish development funding is intended to function in a catalytic way, to add value to other efforts with a focus on green transition and transformation.

Dr. Johan Schaar, Associate Senior Fellow at SIPRI, who has a long background in the climate change field and with development work in the MENA region, provided an overview of the climate change occurring in the region. He reminded the audience of the findings of the recent IPCC report: that changes, some of which are irreversible, are happening rapidly and extensively, but that technical solutions are available to mitigate the situation. Dr. Schaar laid out the drastic consequences for MENA, including higher temperatures, unexpected floods, fires and storms, which are amplified by limited adaptive capacities and inadequate transboundary water agreements.

Dr. Omar Rifai, the Director-General of the WANA Institute and speaking on behalf of HRH Princess Sumaya bint El Hassan, the President of the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan, also stressed the impact of global warming on the MENA region, and in particular the negative effects on food security, access to water, and human security. He reminded the audience that "everyone is a stakeholder in our shared future" and that "we must value the knowledge and experience of all people as we tackle climate change." Dr. Rifai added that the impacts of COP 27 and 28 must be deep and inclusive, enabling involvement through engagement and education.

In the panel discussion, both Shady Khalil and Manar Elkebir emphasized the importance of education and adapting messaging to a local context. They said that the subject and science of climate change needs to be taught at an earlier

age in schools, with informed teachers and relevant teaching materials. Khalil pointed to the imperative of working and communicating with local farmers and communities in their own language, to explain the impact of climate change on crops and their livelihoods. Elkebir explained that “the only way to engage people is to focus on local environmental issues that they can relate to”.

They also recounted their personal stories of getting involved in climate and environmental issues at an early age. Elkebir’s engagement stemmed from seeing the plastic pollution in the oceans and on her local beaches, researching the issues, and feeling a need “to do something”, which led to the creation of EcoWave, climate strikes, and beach clean-ups. Khalil told the audience how Greenish ([GREENISH | Home \(green-ish.org\)](https://www.green-ish.org)) is gradually involving youth, students, and NGOs across Egypt, how they have developed a manual in Arabic, and how art, theatre, and culture is used to raise awareness.

Dr. Marisa Ensor spoke of the particular obstacles, including structural factors, facing women climate activists in the region, and how these can be overcome through structural inclusion, networking, solidarity, and capacity building: “It is imperative that women with a diversity of backgrounds are in the discussions on water issues, food, health, and security.” She also talked about the promotion of global and regional collaboration to address climate change, given the transboundary nature of the challenges.

Former Jordanian Minister of Environment Khaled Irani echoed the previous panellists regarding the need to include women and youth, and also focused on the role of the private sector and NGOs as key forces to tackle climate change. In Jordan, renewable energy initiatives have benefitted the environment, and created jobs, including for youth, in rural areas. He also pointed to eco-tourism as another opportunity, which began as an ambition to make climate change relevant, but has successfully provided income to local populations, in particular women, who have also been given a voice in relation to the environment and their livelihoods. Irani, who currently serves as President of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, a Jordanian NGO, further explained that the annual reports produced by NGOS, are becoming key points of reference and help to provide a crucial feedback loop between governments and local communities.

After the panel, Tarek Alkhoury, Regional Coordinator at UNEP’s West Asia Office, provided an update from the first ever MENA climate week ([Middle East and North Africa Climate Week 2022 | UNFCCC](https://www.unfccc.org/press-releases/2022/04/2022-mena-climate-week)), which took place in Dubai the week preceding the round table. Discussions had focused on the

massive adaptation needs in the region and the importance of an integrated capacity building approach, which must include women. Encouragingly, many youth leaders were present at the climate week and interacted with senior members of delegations.

In the group sessions, participants expanded on the opportunities and challenges in creating more inclusive processes to address climate change in the region, raised by the panellists. The lack of inclusivity and country-specific content, the linguistic obstacles, the absence of relevant data and effective monitoring, and the disconnect between populations and their institutions were all highlighted as very salient issues.

More importantly, they considered the opportunities available and to that end made a number of recommendations that will be fed into the Stockholm+50 meeting and the COP-process beyond, with a view to contribute to greater inclusivity in climate change discussions, particularly in the MENA region. Some of the key suggestions comprised:

- Pushing for the inclusion of more women and youth at policy, negotiating, and decision-making levels
- Seeking greater inter-generational and inter-sectoral exchange wherever possible
- Prioritizing educational efforts and adapting language and messaging to the local context, especially by using Arabic and framing climate change so as to be relevant for average citizens (eg., farmers, fishermen, persons employed in tourism etc)
- Pursuing decentralized solutions and involving local government in policy and implementation discussions
- Engaging the private sector, so as to harness its innovation, while still ensuring effective and appropriate regulatory frameworks
- Leveraging the knowledge and experience of academic institutions and think tanks
- Giving a real voice to indigenous people and other vulnerable communities
- Gathering more robust and relevant data and evidence of climate change and environmental degradation in the global south, including gender-disaggregated data
- Strengthening advocacy through, for instance, story-telling and by highlighting success stories and by identifying and supporting male, female, and youth “champions” – change agents who can help drive meaningful transformation

- Maximizing the impact of international organizations and donors through, for instance, joint programming
- Strengthening national and international coordination and institutions, by broadening climate change discussions beyond Ministries of Environment

For the full set of recommendations, see [recommendations-from-round-table-april-7-final.pdf \(swedenabroad.se\)](https://www.swedenabroad.se/recommendations-from-round-table-april-7-final.pdf).

At the end of the round table, Deputy Director Jerzy Makarowski, representing the Stockholm+50 secretariat at the Swedish Ministry of Environment, thanked the participants for a very impressive set of recommendations and conversations. He also pointed to the broad and holistic role of Stockholm+50, the bridging and accelerating effect that was desired, and the importance of youth participation.

Summarizing the event, Ambassador Sparre, the Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute, emphasized the recommendations coming out of the breakout groups, in particular the importance of “nexus-thinking” – the interrelationship of many factors – of breaking silos and of seizing the potential of the “green transition”, but without designing programmes that create new inequalities