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Press Release

United Nations Secretary-General on COVID-19 and the Arab region: recovery is an opportunity to build back better

Beirut, 23 July 2020--The COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc on an Arab region struggling with decades-long development challenges, including occupation and conflict but also a dire economic situation, which have limited States' capacity to mitigate the impact of the virus.

However, the Arab region can leverage recovery plans as a means to build back better, tackling new and long-standing obstacles in tandem. That is the proposal made by the United Nations Secretary-General's policy brief launched today on "The impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region: An Opportunity to Build Back Better".

The brief argues that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic represents an important opportunity to address some of the structural weaknesses of the Arab region. Conflict, weak public institutions, undiversified economies, inadequate social safety nets, and high unemployment and inequality levels are some of the region's long-standing vulnerabilities outlined the brief.

Not only have these vulnerabilities been exposed by COVID-19, they have also been exacerbated by its dire repercussions. The brief highlights alarming numbers: an estimated 5% contraction in the economy; one quarter of the population falling into poverty; 17 million jobs lost when 14.3 million adults of working age were already unemployed; and heightened risks for the 55 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including the 26 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

"Now is the time to take immediate measures to slow the spread of the disease, end conflict and meet the urgent needs of the most vulnerable," said António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations. "We must deepen efforts to address inequalities, boost economic recovery through reimagining the region's economic model, and prioritize human rights," he affirmed.

The brief also underlines the strengths and opportunities that Arab countries can leverage to build back better. Those include a determined young population that should be further empowered; educated women and girls whose equal rights should be upheld and participation ensured; and an active private sector that can become a recovery booster, namely through further investment in human capital, technology and innovation.

The Secretary-General also invited Arab States to "ensure a vibrant civil society and free media and create more accountable institutions that will increase citizen trust and strengthen the social contract".

According to the brief, for the region to build back better, health-sector and social protection reforms should be widened; provisions for continued access to education should be adopted; and steps to ensure Arab countries' greater access to funds, such as a regional solidarity fund, could be taken.

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