

World Conference Rio +20 - North Africa is Getting Ready

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Rabat, 01 March 2012 (ECA) – One of the highlights of the 27th session of ICE to be organized by the Office for North Africa of ECA (Rabat, 6- 9 March 2012) will be the Expert Group Meeting on "Rio + 20: Progress and Challenges for North Africa". Scheduled to convene on March 7, one day after the ICE kick starts, this meeting has two major objectives: i) to assess the nature and extent of progress the sub region has made in the area of sustainable development, and ii) to build consensus on what North Africa can expect from Rio +20 Conference due to be held in June 2012.

This Conference will take stock of progress made twenty years after the holding of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development also known as the "Earth Summit" (Rio de Janeiro, June 3 to 14, 1992). It will cover two main topics: the promotion of green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and the institutional and strategic framework for sustainable development.

The Expert meeting expected in Rabat echoes the African Regional Preparatory Meeting of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20) ECA has organized back in October 2011 in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), leading to the adoption of The African Declaration on Rio +20. This preparatory meeting was also an opportunity to examine the new and emerging issues and to identify potentials for the green economy within the context of sustainable development in Africa.

The relevance of all these issues in the specific context of North Africa is well established; and the expected Expert group meeting RIO + 20 will primarily aim to strengthen the commitment to the priority issues of sustainable development, and to define a better approach to development. This approach will no longer be limited to only environmental issues but shall also take into consideration yet another important pillar of sustainable development which is the human dimension. This will be one of the biggest challenges for Rio +20, especially if progress towards the MDGs is to be accelerated, with only three years left to 2015.

As far as North Africa is concerned, and in order to ensure that the sub region's priorities and expectations will be taken into consideration in Rio+20 outcomes, ECA and ADB have provided financial and technical support to the Arab Maghreb Union to undertake a sub regional review of the implementation of agreed recommendations and action frameworks related to sustainable development in North Africa.

A critical analysis of performance related to sustainable development in the sub region shows that despite progress achieved over the past two decades, serious challenges remain. Indeed, the undiversified economies of North Africa countries have proven to be vulnerable to many internal and external shocks. The average unemployment rate is estimated at 9.8%, and youth unemployment is one of the highest (near 23.6% in 2010). The sub-region is also witnessing a high unemployment rate among women (15% against 7.8% for men). The second major challenge for the sub region is relative poverty and spatial inequalities. With relation to the environment, North Africa is marked by the depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation.

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However, there are ways to address these challenges, including through green economy. This has been demonstrated in a number of studies carried out by specialized agencies namely ADB, FAO, UNCTAD, ILO and UNPE, according to which the transition to a green economy and the fight against climate change could help protect the environment, create sustainable jobs, promote economic diversification and enhance industrial competitiveness.

Promoting the green economy in the sub-region will require adjusting public policies and increasing investments among a number of other adjustments that the Rabat Expert group meeting will try to identify. Together, participants will agree on adequate strategic directions for the formulation of a Roadmap for North Africa, to better understand and exploit the prospects and the potential linked to the transition to a green economy.

As pointed out by Ms Karima Bounemra Ben Soltane, Director of the ECA North Africa Office, this potential will be capitalized only "if regional integration and international partnerships joined efforts to better underpin this new approach, and make sustainable development in the region an achievable goal for the good of all."

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