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### RESEARCH

# A Voluntary National Review-Based Comparative Assessment of Sustainable Development Goals Progress across Arab Countries: A Cross-Regional Performance Review

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### ABSTRACT

**PURPOSE:** This paper evaluates progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across Arab countries using Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to identify regional leaders, laggards and priority policy gaps.

**DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH:** A comparative assessment was conducted using a standardised 0-5 scoring framework applied to 17 SDGs across 21 Arab countries, combined with an analysis of VNR submission patterns from 2018-2025.

**FINDINGS:** The results reveal a clear divide between high-performing Gulf states and conflict-affected or fragile countries. Qatar, Oman and the UAE demonstrate strong performance, while Yemen, Syria and Somalia remain severely off track. SDG 16 and SDG 2 emerge as the weakest goals across the region.

**ORIGINALITY/VALUE:** This study makes an original contribution by linking SDG performance with VNR engagement through a regional framework. To the authors' knowledge, this type of comparison has not been carried out in previous research and therefore represents a first attempt to analyse both dimensions together.

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**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS:** Findings support targeted reforms, institutional strengthening and regional co-operation to accelerate progress towards the United Nations 2030 Agenda.

**KEYWORDS:** *Sustainable Development Goals; Voluntary National Reviews; United Nations; Comparative Assessment.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal framework to address global economic, social and environmental challenges. The SDGs aimed to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality, protect the planet and promote peaceful and inclusive societies by 2030. The UN plays a central co-ordinating role by setting global targets, monitoring progress, supporting national implementation and fostering international co-operation among its Member States (UN, n.d.).

A Voluntary National Review (VNR) is the primary reporting mechanism through which countries present their progress in implementing the SDGs to the UN. VNRs are voluntary, country-led and participatory, enabling governments to evaluate achievements, identify implementation gaps and share good practice. They also inform discussions at the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and strengthen accountability at both national and international levels.

This study is important because it provides a regional comparative assessment of SDG implementation across Arab countries, highlighting patterns of progress, inequality and institutional capacity. By examining VNR submissions and SDG performance together, the analysis offers insight into how governance, stability and resources influence sustainable development outcomes.

The objectives of this study are to assess SDG progress across Arab states, compare performance across countries and goals, identify major challenges and highlight policy priorities to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of sustainable development first emerged prominently in the 1987 Brundtland Report; (UN, n.d.), this report defined development as meeting present needs without compromising future generations. This idea evolved through major global agreements, including the 1992 Earth Summit and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000 by the UN, which laid the foundation for global development co-operation.



In 2015, the UN introduced the 17 SDGs as an expanded and universal framework addressing poverty, inequality, health, education, climate change and governance. Literature on the SDGs has since grown rapidly, focusing on implementation challenges, national adaptation, monitoring systems and the role of institutions in achieving measurable progress.

The VNR mechanism was established as the main reporting tool under the 2030 Agenda. Existing studies largely examine individual country reports, institutional arrangements, or thematic progress, while comparative regional analyses remain limited, particularly for the Arab region.

Regional studies by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and UN agencies highlight persistent challenges including data gaps, institutional weaknesses and conflict-related disruptions. However, few studies have systematically compared SDG performance using a unified scoring framework across multiple Arab countries.

Recent studies on VNRs emphasise both their value and their limitations as tools for monitoring SDG implementation. Research highlights that VNRs often reflect political commitment more strongly than legal accountability, with the rule of law insufficiently embedded in reporting frameworks (Capp, 2022). Evidence from East Africa shows that while VNRs improve national co-ordination and policy learning, they frequently lack measurable targets and follow-up mechanisms (Chisika and Yeom, 2024). At the regional level, institutional guidance has emphasised strengthening post-VNR planning and ensuring policy continuity, as highlighted by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP, 2021), while analysis of the G20 has focused on broader co-ordination and implementation challenges. VNRs demonstrate substantial variation in the alignment of budgets and policies with SDG priorities (Elder and Newman, 2023). In contrast, the current study differs by applying a comparative, outcome-focused assessment across Arab countries using SDG performance indicators, rather than examining reporting processes alone. It shifts attention from VNR narratives to measurable results, enabling cross-country benchmarking, identification of regional leaders and lagging areas, and clearer policy implications for accelerating SDG implementation.

This study is unique in integrating VNR participation data with SDG performance scores in a single regional analysis. It provides a structured comparative framework that has not previously been applied across the Arab region, generating new insights into institutional effectiveness and policy outcomes.

By quantifying progress and linking performance to governance and stability, this study adds value by offering evidence-based recommendations, improving regional benchmarking and strengthening policy relevance in SDG implementation.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a comparative, descriptive research design to examine progress towards the SDGs across Arab countries using VNRs as the primary data source. The analysis focused on evaluating national performance across the 17 SDGs using both quantitative indicators and qualitative evidence reported by governments.

### Data Sources and Sample

The study sample includes all Arab countries that have submitted VNRs to the UN between 2018 and 2025. Data was extracted from official VNR documents, national statistical reports, and UN databases. Only publicly available and nationally endorsed reports were used to ensure the credibility and comparability of the dataset.

### Research Tools and Scoring Framework

A standardised 0-5 scoring framework was applied to each SDG to classify national progress as: achieved, on track, moderately off track, off track, severely off track, or showing no progress. The scoring system enabled consistent comparison across countries and goals, and covered economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions. Where data were incomplete, proxy indicators and qualitative policy assessments were used to ensure continuity of analysis.

- 0 – No Progress: No measurable progress or data available.
- 1 – Severely Off-Track: Very little advancement; major gaps persist.
- 2 – Off-Track: Limited progress with minimal improvement.
- 3 – Moderately Off-Track: Some progress achieved, but key challenges remain.
- 4 – On-Track: Noticeable progress made; close to achieving the target.
- 5 – Achieved: Goal fully met with sustained performance and monitoring in place.

This scale helps to quantify countries' SDG performance, showing where strong progress exists and where further policy actions are needed. VNRs are vital tools for evaluating and accelerating progress towards the 2030 Agenda. They enable countries to reflect on achievements, recognise shortcomings, and strengthen collective action for a more sustainable and equitable world.



## Data Analysis Process

Scores for each SDG were aggregated to calculate average national performance and regional rankings. Comparative tables and rankings were then produced to identify leaders, laggards and cross-cutting challenges. Repeated VNR cycles were analysed separately to assess institutional improvement and policy continuity.

## Ethical Statement

This study is based entirely on publicly available secondary data from official UN and government sources. No personal data were collected, and no human subjects were involved. There are no conflicts of interest, and no financial or institutional bias influenced the analysis. The research complies fully with academic ethical standards and poses no privacy or consent concerns.

## RESULTS

The SDGs provide a universal framework for addressing the world's most pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. They serve as a shared blueprint for peace, prosperity, and sustainability, guiding countries towards long-term progress that benefits all segments of society.

For Arab states, the SDGs are especially significant. They help align national development strategies with global standards, ensuring that economic growth is inclusive, environmental resources are protected, and social well-being is prioritised. By adopting the SDGs, governments can strengthen resilience to external shocks, improve human development outcomes, and enhance regional stability. The SDGs also promote greater transparency, accountability, and partnership. Their implementation encourages collaboration between government institutions, civil society, the private sector, and international organisations. This integrated approach supports evidence-based policy-making, encourages innovation, and helps countries mobilise the resources needed to address complex development challenges. Ultimately, the relevance of the SDGs lies in their ability to provide a coherent and forward-looking roadmap. They help countries move towards a more equitable, sustainable, and secure future, ensuring that no one is left behind.

The study highlights each country's relative progress in eradicating poverty, fostering inclusive and sustainable growth, strengthening governance, and protecting the environment, while identifying key structural challenges and opportunities for acceleration. By comparing outcomes across successive VNR cycles, this report provides a regional perspective on how Arab states are advancing towards the 2030



Agenda for Sustainable Development. There are 17 SDGs of the UN for 2030 Agenda. Table 1 shows the information on these 17 SDGs and Table 2 presents the scoring for SDGs from 0 to 5.

**Table 1: SDGs nomenclature from 1 to 17**

SDG 1: No Poverty
SDG 2: Zero Hunger
SDG 3: Good Health and Well Being
SDG 4: Quality Education
SDG 5: Gender Equality
SDG 6: Clean Water Sanitation
SDG 7: Affordable Clean Energy
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
SDG 9: Industry Innovation and Infrastructure
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
SDG 12: Responsible Consumption & Production
SDG 13: Climate Action
SDG 14: Life Below Water
SDG 15: Life on Land
SDG 16: Peace, Justice & Institutions
SDG 17: Partnership & means of Implementation

Source: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>



Table 2a: SDG Scores (0-5) for 21 Arab countries for VNR analysis

SDG	Qatar	KSA	Oman	Iraq	Libya	Sudan	UAE	Bahrain	Comoros	Egypt
Latest VNR Report	2025	2023	2024	2025	2024	2025	2021	2023	2023	2021
SDG 1	5	4	5	3	2	1	4	4	2	2
SDG 2	4	3	4	2	2	2	4	3	2	3
SDG 3	4	3	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	3
SDG 4	5	4	4	3	2	2	4	3	3	3
SDG 5	3	4	3	3	2	1	4	3	2	3
SDG 6	4	3	4	2	2	2	4	3	2	3
SDG 7	4	4	4	2	3	2	3	3	3	3
SDG 8	4	3	3	3	2	1	3	3	2	3
SDG 9	4	3	4	3	3	1	4	3	2	3
SDG 10	3	3	4	3	2	2	3	3	2	3
SDG 11	5	4	5	3	2	1	4	4	3	3
SDG 12	3	3	3	2	2	1	3	3	3	3
SDG 13	4	3	3	1	2	2	4	3	3	3
SDG 14	4	2	3	1	2	2	4	3	3	3
SDG 15	3	2	4	2	3	2	4	3	3	3
SDG 16	4	3	3	3	2	1	3	3	3	3
SDG 17	4	4	5	3	2	2	4	3	3	3

Source: Measured by authors from VNR submitted by respective countries on: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>



Table 2b: SDG Scores (0-5) for 21 Arab countries for VNR analysis

SDG	Djibouti	Jordan	Kuwait	Mauritania	Somalia	Syria	Tunisia	Yemen	Algeria	Morocco	Lebanon
Latest VNR Report	2022	2022	2023	2024	2022	2024	2021	2024	2019	2020	2018
SDG 1	2	2	3	2	0	0	2	1	4	3	2
SDG 2	2	2	3	2	0	1	3	1	4	3	2
SDG 3	3	3	3	3	0	1	3	1	3	3	3
SDG 4	3	3	3	3	1	1	2	1	3	3	2
SDG 5	2	3	3	3	0	1	3	2	3	3	2
SDG 6	2	2	4	2	0	1	3	1	4	3	2
SDG 7	3	3	3	3	1	1	3	1	3	3	3
SDG 8	2	2	3	2	1	0	2	1	3	2	2
SDG 9	3	3	4	3	1	1	2	1	3	3	3
SDG 10	2	2	3	2	N.D.	1	3	1	3	2	2
SDG 11	2	2	3	2	N.D.	1	3	1	3	3	2
SDG 12	2	3	3	3	N.D.	1	3	0	3	3	2
SDG 13	2	2	2	3	1	1	3	1	3	3	2
SDG 14	3	3	2	3	1	1	3	3	3	3	3
SDG 15	2	3	2	3	1	1	3	2	3	3	3
SDG 16	3	3	3	3	0	1	3	1	3	3	2
SDG 17	3	3	3	3	N.D.	1	3	2	3	3	3

N.D. Not Done

Source: Measured by authors from VNR submitted by respective countries on: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>







## Comparative Overview

Table 3 presents a comparative overview derived from the measurement of average scores across all 17 SDGs for each country under review. The average score serves as an aggregate indicator of national progress and reflects relative performance across the economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions of sustainable development.

The average score for each country was calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Average SDG Score} = \sum_{i=1}^{17} Si / 17$$

Where  $S_i$  represents the score assigned to each SDG (ranging from 1 = low progress to 5 = high progress). This standardised approach ensures comparability across the Arab countries by providing a consistent numerical basis for assessing progress towards the UN 2030 Agenda.

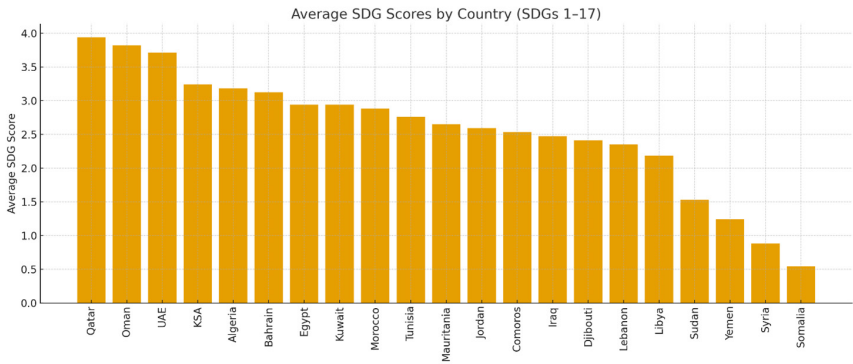
**Table 3: Comparative Overview of Average SDG Scores (SDGs 1-17)**

Country	Average SDG Score	Overall Ranking	SDG Performance Summary
Qatar	3.94	1st	Strong progress across most SDGs; advanced governance, infrastructure and social services.
Oman	3.82	2nd	Balanced performance; steady reforms and sustainability initiatives.
UAE	3.71	3rd	High institutional capacity with strong results in innovation and public services.
KSA	3.24	4th	Economic diversification and major social reforms driving improvement.
Algeria	3.18	5th	Stable social development; moderate environmental and economic outcomes.
Bahrain	3.12	6th	Solid performance in social sectors with continued governance reforms.
Egypt	2.94	7th	Strength in education and infrastructure; social pressures remain.
Kuwait	2.94	7th	Reasonable social performance; further progress needed in environmental SDGs.
Morocco	2.88	8th	Steady results in health, education and climate action; economic inclusion remains challenging.
Tunisia	2.76	9th	Moderate advancement despite fiscal and political constraints.
Mauritania	2.65	10th	Gradual improvement; poverty and inequality persist.
Jordan	2.59	11th	Consistent but constrained by economic pressure and refugee burden.

Country	Average SDG Score	Overall Ranking	SDG Performance Summary
Comoros	2.53	12th	Moderate progress; major gaps in health and infrastructure.
Iraq	2.47	13th	Post-conflict recovery limits sustainable development performance.
Djibouti	2.41	14th	Infrastructure improving; social outcomes lag behind.
Lebanon	2.35	15th	Economic crisis and institutional weakness constrain development.
Libya	2.18	16th	Political fragmentation severely weakens SDG implementation.
Sudan	1.53	17th	Conflict, institutional collapse and economic crisis dominate outcomes.
Yemen	1.24	18th	Ongoing conflict has reversed development across nearly all SDGs.
Syria	0.88	19th	Protracted war results in extremely low SDG performance.
Somalia	0.54	20th	Very limited capacity and insecurity restrict all development efforts.

Source: Measured by authors from VNR submitted by respective countries on:  
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

The ranking reveals a clear divide between the high-performing Gulf states and countries affected by conflict or economic fragility. Qatar, Oman, and the UAE lead in SDG achievement, reflecting strong governance, sustained investment, and robust institutional capacity. Saudi Arabia (KSA), Algeria, and Bahrain follow closely, demonstrating the positive impact of economic reform and social-sector development. In the middle tier, performance is more mixed, with Egypt and Kuwait sharing the same position, indicating comparable development outcomes despite differing policy contexts. Countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan show steady but constrained progress, largely influenced by fiscal pressures and rising social demand. At the lower end, conflict-affected states including Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia record the weakest outcomes, highlighting the severe impact of prolonged instability on sustainable development. Figure 1 illustrates the overall comparative analysis of Arab countries, based on their average performance across the 17 SDGs. The figure highlights variations in national progress, reflecting differences in institutional capacity, economic diversification, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability.



**Figure 1: Overall Comparative Analysis of SDG Performance (SDGs 1-17) for Arab Countries**

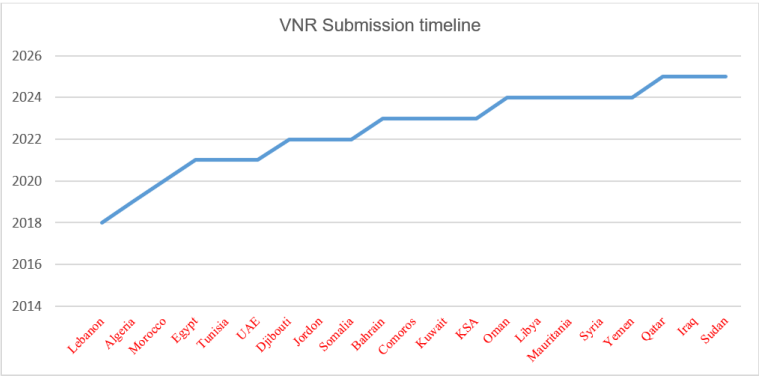
Source: Measured by authors from VNR submitted by respective countries on:

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

The analysis of VNRs across the Arab region shows increasing engagement with the SDGs over time, with a clear acceleration in reporting during the period 2023-2024. Countries with stronger institutional frameworks and more stable political environments tend to demonstrate clearer strategies, stronger monitoring systems, and more consistent data reporting. In contrast, conflict-affected and economically fragile states often present more limited coverage, reflecting capacity constraints and governance challenges rather than low commitment. Overall, the findings indicate growing regional ownership of the SDG agenda, alongside persistent disparities in implementation capacity.

**Key Observations on VNR Timelines**

The timeline of submissions reveals that VNR engagement intensified after 2021, with a pronounced peak in 2024, when the largest number of Arab countries submitted reports. This suggests renewed political commitment to sustainable development following the COVID-19 period, alongside increasing international emphasis on SDG accountability and reporting. Early submissions (2018-2020) were concentrated among a smaller group of countries, while later years reflect wider regional participation. The pattern indicates gradual institutional learning, with more countries incorporating the VNR process into their national planning cycles over time. Figure 2 shows the timeline on VNR submission by Arab countries from 2018 to 2025.



**Figure 2: VNR submission by 21 Arab countries from 2018 to 2025**

Source: Measured by authors from VNR submitted by respective countries on:  
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

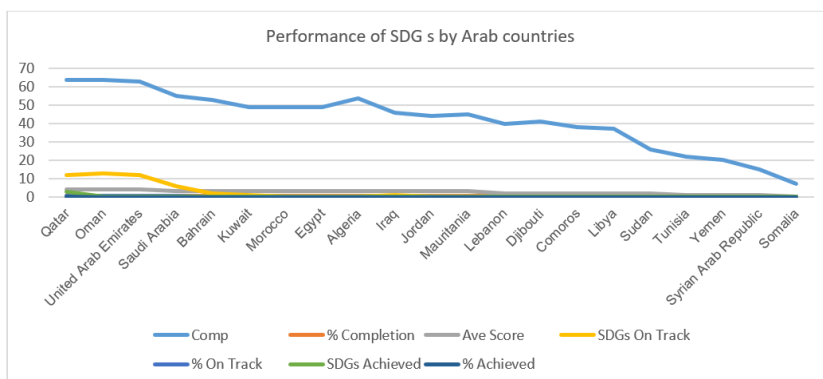
A number of countries have submitted more than one VNR, signalling sustained engagement with the SDG process rather than one-off participation. These include the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, KSA, Qatar, Oman, and Iraq, which have demonstrated continuity in reporting and policy refinement. Repeated submissions reflect stronger national co-ordination mechanisms, improved data systems, and institutionalisation of the SDG process. In contrast, countries with only a single submission or delayed reporting highlight the need for capacity strengthening and long-term integration of sustainability frameworks into governance systems. Table 4 gives information on the comparative SDG performance for Arab countries, and graphical representation is shown in Figure 3.



Table 4: Overall SDG performance by country

Country	Composite SDG Score	% Completion	Ave Score	SDGs On Track	% On Track	SDGs Achieved	% Achieved
Qatar	64	75%	4	12	71%	3	18%
Oman	64	75%	4	13	76%	0	0%
UAE	63	74%	4	12	71%	0	0%
KSA	55	65%	3	6	35%	0	0%
Bahrain	53	62%	3	2	12%	0	0%
Kuwait	49	58%	3	1	6%	0	0%
Morocco	49	58%	3	0	0%	0	0%
Egypt	49	58%	3	0	0%	0	0%
Algeria	54	46%	3	0	0%	0	0%
Iraq	46	54%	3	1	6%	0	0%
Jordan	44	52%	3	0	0%	0	0%
Mauritania	45	53%	3	0	0%	0	0%
Lebanon	40	47%	2	0	0%	0	0%
Djibouti	41	48%	2	0	0%	0	0%
Comoros	38	45%	2	0	0%	0	0%
Libya	37	44%	2	0	0%	0	0%
Sudan	26	31%	2	0	0%	0	0%
Tunisia	22	26%	1	0	0%	0	0%
Yemen	20	24%	1	0	0%	0	0%
Syrian Arab Republic	15	18%	1	0	0%	0	0%
Somalia	7	8%	0	0	0%	0	0%
State of Palestine	—	—	—	—	—	—	No VNR

Source: Measured by authors from VNR submitted by respective countries on: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>



**Figure 3: Overall SDG performance by country**

Source: Measured by authors from VNR submitted by respective countries on:

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

## Overall Regional Performance

The Arab region's overall SDG Index score is estimated at the low-to-mid 60s, indicating performance below the global average. This reflects uneven progress across countries and goals, with persistent structural, institutional and development challenges limiting acceleration towards the 2030 targets.

The results reveal a clear performance divide between high-income Gulf states and conflict-affected or lower-income countries. Qatar, Oman and the UAE lead with completion rates of around 74-75% and an average score of 4, reflecting strong institutional capacity, investment in infrastructure, and relatively advanced service delivery systems.

A clear divide exists between high-performing and vulnerable countries. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and the UAE perform above the regional average, benefiting from stronger institutions and development frameworks. In contrast, Syria, Libya, Somalia and Yemen record the weakest outcomes, with conflict, fragility and weak data systems severely constraining implementation.

Qatar ranks first in the region by average SDG score and places second on the composite 'on-track' measure, followed by Oman. Qatar is also the only country in the dataset with SDGs already achieved (18%), reflecting progress beyond implementation into final outcomes. Oman leads in delivery momentum, with the highest share of SDGs on track (76%), closely followed by Qatar (71%) and the UAE (71%).



KSA, Bahrain and Kuwait form a middle tier. KSA records a comparatively strong 65% completion, but a lower proportion of goals on track (35%), suggesting uneven progress across sectors. Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Jordan display moderate averages (Ave = 3), but report no SDGs on track, highlighting implementation and delivery gaps despite policy frameworks.

Countries affected by conflict and fragility – notably Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and Sudan – show the weakest outcomes, with completion rates below 31% and minimal or zero goals on track. These results underscore the impact of instability, humanitarian crises and institutional erosion on sustainable development efforts.

### SDGs Most Off Track

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) remains the most critical weakness across the region due to poor performance in governance and the rule of law. SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) shows persistent challenges in food security and agriculture, while SDG 14 (Life Below Water) remains weak due to environmental stress and limited marine governance.

### Areas of Progress

Several countries demonstrate progress in SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities) and aspects of SDG 7 (Clean Energy), particularly among high- and middle-income states, although access and outcomes remain uneven across the region.

### Data and Monitoring

Significant data gaps persist, especially for SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and environmental indicators. Weak statistical systems continue to limit accurate measurement and effective policy-making.

### Global Context

Globally, fewer than half of SDG targets are on track, with some estimates suggesting fewer than one-third. This underscores the urgency for intensified regional action. The pattern emphasises that governance quality, fiscal space and stability strongly influence SDG progress. High performers combine strategic planning with sustained investment, while fragile states require scaled international support, financing and capacity-building to close widening development gaps.

## Performance varies sharply by goal.

The Gulf states – led by Oman, Qatar and the UAE – consistently perform best on SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Health), SDG 4 (Education), SDG 6 (Water), SDG 9 (Infrastructure) and SDG 11 (Cities), reflecting strong public services and infrastructure investment. Energy transition (SDG 7) is uneven, with Qatar underperforming relative to peers. Environmental goals – especially SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 14 (Life Below Water) – remain weaker across much of the region, including middle-income countries such as Egypt, Morocco and Algeria, indicating structural challenges in resource efficiency and climate governance. Fragile states lag across almost all goals, particularly SDG 1, SDG 2 (Hunger), SDG 3 and SDG 8 (Jobs), showing the combined effects of conflict, food insecurity and limited fiscal capacity. Overall, the results confirm that prosperity alone is insufficient: policy coherence and institutional effectiveness are critical to turning resources into sustainable outcomes.

## COMPARATIVE CHALLENGES

### Economic and Structural Challenges

Many Arab economies remain highly dependent on hydrocarbons, reducing economic diversification and increasing vulnerability to external shocks. In conflict-affected countries, production systems, infrastructure and trade networks have been severely disrupted, limiting recovery and investment. High unemployment, particularly among young people, combined with weak private-sector development, continues to constrain economic growth. In addition, fiscal pressures and volatile oil revenues reduce governments' ability to plan and finance long-term development strategies.

### Environmental and Resource Constraints

Environmental pressures present significant challenges across the region. Water scarcity, desertification and limited arable land restrict agricultural productivity and food security. Rising temperatures and climate-related disasters place increasing strain on health, energy and water systems. Rapid urbanisation further intensifies demand for infrastructure and public services, while weak environmental regulation contributes to pollution, biodiversity loss and land degradation.

### Governance and Institutional Gaps

Weak institutional co-ordination hinders effective SDG implementation and monitoring. In several countries, limited data availability and inconsistent reporting undermine evidence-based policy-making. Corruption, political instability and





fragmented governance structures further weaken policy enforcement. At the same time, shortages of skilled personnel within public institutions slow reform efforts and reduce service delivery capacity.

## Social and Inequality Issues

Persistent poverty, gender inequality and youth unemployment continue to threaten social cohesion and stability. Refugee movements and internal displacement place heavy pressure on education, healthcare and social protection systems. Large disparities between urban and rural areas restrict access to opportunity and services. Vulnerable populations remain disproportionately excluded from economic participation and basic rights.

## Why Qatar and Oman Lead in SDGs Implementation

Qatar and Oman have emerged as regional leaders in advancing the SDGs due to a combination of strong governance, strategic investment and long-term national planning.

**Robust governance frameworks:** Both countries have established well-co-ordinated national SDG mechanisms that integrate data systems, align ministerial efforts and ensure regular monitoring of progress. This coherent approach enables timely decision-making and effective policy implementation.

**Strategic economic strength:** Sustained investment in infrastructure, education, healthcare and innovation has strengthened delivery capacity. Economic diversification and knowledge-based development models further support long-term sustainability and resilience.

**Commitment to social inclusion:** Strong emphasis is placed on social protection, labour-market reform, gender empowerment and access to quality public services. These policies contribute to improved human-development outcomes and inclusive growth.

**Environmental ambition:** Qatar and Oman have advanced renewable energy deployment, improved water management and promoted sustainable building standards. Their focus on environmental stewardship closely aligns with global sustainability priorities.

**Active global partnerships:** Both countries engage widely in international development, climate action and humanitarian co-operation. Their commitment to multilateral partnerships enhances resource mobilisation and knowledge sharing.

These strengths position Qatar and Oman as leading models for SDG implementation in the Arab region, demonstrating how effective governance, strategic investment and inclusive policies can accelerate sustainable development.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Arab countries should link VNR reporting to clear short-term policy targets and financing strategies, prioritise governance reform and food systems, invest in national data systems, and adopt flexible financing models to support fragile states and reduce development disparities. Table 5 presents targeted recommendations across critical focus areas to support the achievement of SDGs, emphasising economic growth, social equity, environmental resilience, and regional co-operation.

**Table 5: Key Recommendations for Advancing SDGs in the Arab Region**

Focus Area	Recommended Action
Economic Diversification	Expand non-oil sectors including renewable energy, manufacturing, technology, and knowledge-based industries.
Institutional Strengthening	Improve transparency, data quality, governance efficiency, and inter-ministerial co-ordination for SDG implementation.
Social Equity	Increase investment in education, gender equality, health systems, and comprehensive social protection programmes.
Environmental Resilience	Scale up renewable energy deployment, enhance water conservation, and strengthen climate adaptation and mitigation measures.
Conflict Recovery & Stability	Prioritise peacebuilding, infrastructure reconstruction, service restoration, and social cohesion in conflict-affected states (Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia).
Regional Cooperation	Promote shared data platforms, cross-border environmental initiatives, joint SDG monitoring systems, and collaborative development programmes across Arab states.

*Source:* Analysis is done by the authors

## Strengthening Institutional Co-ordination

Countries should establish integrated national SDG frameworks that improve co-ordination between ministries, public agencies and local authorities. Strong institutional alignment ensures clearer responsibilities, reduces duplication, and enables more effective policy implementation.



## Improving Data Quality and Monitoring Systems

Investment in national statistical systems, digital platforms and transparent reporting mechanisms is essential. Reliable data allow governments to track progress accurately, identify gaps and make evidence-based policy decisions.

## Promoting Economic Diversification

Reducing dependence on volatile sectors requires investment in renewable energy, technology, manufacturing and knowledge-based industries. Economic diversification strengthens long-term resilience and improves employment opportunities.

## Enhancing Social Protection and Inclusion

Targeted social policies should prioritise vulnerable groups by strengthening healthcare, education and employment systems. Addressing gender inequality and poverty is essential for inclusive development.

## Accelerating Environmental Sustainability

Governments should prioritise renewable energy, water management and climate adaptation strategies. Protecting ecosystems and promoting sustainable resource use will reduce future environmental risks.

## Building Resilience in Conflict-Affected States

Reconstruction efforts should focus on restoring essential services, strengthening peacebuilding initiatives and supporting community recovery. Stability is fundamental to sustainable development.

## Deepening Regional Co-operation

Arab countries should strengthen cross-border collaboration through shared data systems, joint environmental initiatives and regional research programmes to advance common development goals.

## Mobilising Sustainable Financing

Long-term SDG success requires diversified financing. Governments should expand public-private partnerships, promote green finance and strengthen international co-operation to secure sustainable funding streams.

## CONCLUSIONS

The overall assessment of SDG performance across Arab countries shows a mixed picture of notable achievements alongside persistent structural challenges. While Qatar, Oman and the UAE demonstrate stronger outcomes through effective governance, strategic investment and comprehensive social policies, many other countries continue to face economic constraints, environmental pressures and institutional weaknesses that slow progress. Fragile and conflict-affected states, in particular, require sustained international assistance to restore core services and rebuild governance systems. Accelerating progress across the region will depend on deeper regional co-operation, inclusive and diversified economic growth, stronger climate resilience and continued investment in institutional capacity. A long-term commitment to these priorities remains essential to achieving a more equitable, resilient and sustainable future for all Arab countries.

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