

UN Women

Expert Group Meeting

‘Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes’

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**Environmental policy and advocacy for sustainable resource management**

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\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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“Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes”

Discussion: Natural resource management, gender-based violence, migration

**"Environmental policy and advocacy for sustainable resource management"**

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[INTRODUCTION]

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Nile delta is in the top three highly vulnerable spots threatened by rising sea levels. A massive portion of the population lives nearby;<sup>1</sup> throughout Egypt's extensive history, its inhabitants have relied heavily upon the Nile and the productive agricultural sector it nurtures. The climate projections in Egypt suggest that the average annual temperatures will rise by 2-3°C by 2050. By 2085, heat waves are estimated to last for longer durations of 9-77 days, and cold spells are estimated to decrease where they would last 3-6 days. The sea level is estimated to rise between 3 cm and 61 cm by 2085, affecting the Nile delta. There will likely be an increase in heavy rains, and there is potential for growth in drought by 2050. The frequency and intensity of sand storms and dust storms are also likely to increase.<sup>2</sup> The climate risks will have extreme impacts on infrastructure, fertile land, and beaches, putting Egypt's food security, economy, health sector, and ecosystem at significant risk.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted several vital vulnerabilities of societies and economic systems, manifesting that the crisis goes further than a health crisis, increasing poverty and inequalities on a global scale. These two crises stress how far the built environment is prepared to address the risks and provide solutions to protect the environment and its inhabitants, demanding more sustainable and resilient communities.

As the global population rises, the need to expand housing and infrastructure creates a more extensive market demand for immediate housing solutions. There are now over 100 million inhabitants in Egypt, with nearly one million new citizens born each year. The high population growth, coupled with only 6.8 percent of land being inhabited, has deteriorated the quality of urban life and the environment. The search for better job opportunities, health care, and education has led many Egyptians away from rural lands and into major cities like Cairo and Alexandria, significantly contributing to a historically high

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<sup>1</sup> 2018. National Adaptation Plans in Focus: Lessons from Egypt. [ebook] UNDP-UN Environment. Available at: <[https://www.adaptation-undp.org/sites/default/files/resources/naps\\_in\\_focus\\_lessons\\_from\\_egypt.pdf](https://www.adaptation-undp.org/sites/default/files/resources/naps_in_focus_lessons_from_egypt.pdf)> [Accessed 6 May 2021].

<sup>2</sup> 2021. Climate Risk Profile Egypt: Country Risk Profile. [ebook] USAID. Available at: <[https://www.climatelinks.org/sites/default/files/asset/document/2018\\_USAID-ATLAS-Project\\_Climate-Risk-Profile-Egypt.pdf](https://www.climatelinks.org/sites/default/files/asset/document/2018_USAID-ATLAS-Project_Climate-Risk-Profile-Egypt.pdf)> [Accessed 6 May 2021].

population density.<sup>3</sup> This, in turn, creates condensed high emission municipalities mostly made of rural-to-urban migrants living in informal settlements. By strengthening rural communities and transforming how the built environment is designed, planned, and developed, it is possible to stop the rural-to-urban migrations and create communities that pursue the sustainable development core dimensions. The creation of these communities contributes to a higher quality of life, ensuring the effective use of natural resources and promoting social cohesion and inclusion. Affordable housing, qualitative urban planning, and providing management in a participatory and inclusive way creates a more prominent post-pandemic future and builds resilience to mitigate present challenges.

Inhabitants of rural communities are among the most vulnerable groups to suffer from extreme heat conditions. Temperatures can easily reach numbers over 40 degrees Celsius in the summer and down to 10 degrees Celsius in the winter. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services."<sup>4</sup> But for many Egyptians living in impoverished communities feeling the trickle-down benefits of living in an adequate house has yet to be realized. For example, up to 30% of these household incomes are spent on thermal cooling and heating that could otherwise contribute to a worthy education, nutrition or savings. Additionally, the health risks associated with extreme heat in homes can be dangerous to one's health and could even be fatal. Extreme heat events can trigger various heat stress conditions ranging from cardiovascular, to respiratory, to mental illnesses, appearing most vividly in small children, the elderly, women, and low-income populations. Everyone has the right for their families to live in a way that increases the quality of their livelihood and live knowing that their home operates for them and not against them.

Gender inequality continues to hinder the world's ability to become peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable. Half of the world's population is represented by women and girls; therefore, any action that curtails women's rights and empowerment suppresses progress for half of the world's potential. Achieving gender equality and women and girls' empowerment is crucial towards economic expansion and building a more skilled labour force and market that would grow GDPs.

Climate change and a built environment that is not ready to adapt and mitigate its impacts affect low-income communities, aggravating the divide between socioeconomic status and increasing existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities. Women and girls are structurally and systematically more vulnerable to disasters, being at higher risk and reducing their ability to manage climate threats. Equitable actions to strengthen rural communities to mitigate the climate crisis are urgent worldwide.

Challenges for women and girls include lack of access to nutrition, clean water, menstrual hygiene management, sexual and reproductive health services and education. In rural communities, women are responsible for household responsibilities. As heatwaves and floods become more frequent and food insecurity become the norm, women will need to travel further distances to acquire food and water, having, as a result, less time to pursue outside sources of income, preventing them from becoming economically independent. With less access to education and financing than their male counterparts,

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<sup>3</sup> "Egypt's Voluntary National Review 2018." *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development*, [sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20269EGY\\_VNR\\_2018\\_final\\_with\\_Hyperlink\\_9720185b45d.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20269EGY_VNR_2018_final_with_Hyperlink_9720185b45d.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 1948.

difficulties in finding jobs and low paid or unpaid work trigger gender-based violence, including abuse and child marriage, leaving women unable to build resilience and capacity to manage shocks and stresses.<sup>5</sup>

Women are often underrepresented in decision-making processes and excluded in their efforts to ensure their needs and wants are heard and considered. Including women's voice in policy and planning builds a more gender-sensitive response to the impacts of climate change, empowering the community to adapt and mitigate the climate emergency.

The built environment must prioritize full gender equality in rural communities to ensure that what is constructed does not obstruct social or economic advancement. Public spaces must respond to women's needs, such as maternity clinics, secure public bathrooms, and safehouses, as these are not for leisure but are just as mandatory as having a market or hospital. Working women should not have to sacrifice holding a job or getting an education over raising a family if the built environment works in their favour; for example, nurseries could be attached to workplaces or educational spaces. Secure and accessible public transportation combined with adequate street lighting are invaluable measures that vastly reduce the risk of abuse of women as they move from one place to another. Buildings designated for health and reproductive education empower women to gain crucial knowledge to be self-supporting. School infrastructures can also advance gender equality by providing sanitation and hygiene facilities so young girls do not need to go back home for personal hygiene needs. And just as importantly, quality outdoor spaces such as public parks and playgrounds should offer girls equal access to physical exercise and sporting activities. In essence, the built environment has a tremendous role to play in achieving gender equality by ensuring that healthy societies are built considering everything "from reducing poverty to promoting the health, education, protection and the well-being of girls and boys".<sup>6</sup>

"A green building is a building that in its design, construction, and operation, reduces or eliminates negative impacts, and can create positive impacts on our climate and natural environment."<sup>7</sup> Green construction methods respond immediately to the surrounding contextual conditions and have a more holistic approach in their designs by considering social, cultural, and final user intentions. In Egypt, these methods are not considered mainstream and have a perception that they are expensive, difficult to implement, and reserved only for elite social groups that can afford the technologies. While on the contrary, they have the potential to be affordable, adaptable, and low-tech, rooted in vernacular architectural approaches that have been lost over time due to its lack of practice in modern architecture. Currently, architects and contractors of low-income housing projects lack the incentive to change how they work. The terms of references they receive from ministries, intergovernmental organizations, and aid agencies who design, fund, and manage these projects lack social and environmental requirements. There is a clear gap between the commissioning of low-income housing projects and the dwellers' social, economic, and ecological needs.

Government action to accommodate growing housing needs results in large low-income housing projects with inadequate designs that do not support sufficient quality living concerning heat mitigation and

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<sup>5</sup> Freebairn, A., Turmine, V. and Singh, R., 2020. *World Disasters Report 2020 Come Heat or High Water*. [ebook] Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, pp.116-167. Available at: <<https://oldmedia.ifrc.org/ifrc/world-disaster-report-2020/>> [Accessed 3 October 2021].

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development. 2020. *Gender equality and women's empowerment*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>> [Accessed 3 October 2021].

<sup>7</sup> "What is Green Building?" *World Green Building Council*, [www.worldgbc.org/what-green-building](http://www.worldgbc.org/what-green-building).

adaptation. This is because the number of units, time, and budget precedes actual social and environmental impacts. Women are directly affected by inadequate building conditions such as lack of natural light, restricted air circulation, absence of insulation, and presence of toxins in construction materials as they are traditionally in charge of unpaid domestic work, spending more time indoors, affecting their health, sleep, and productivity. These housing conditions are associated with a wide range of health conditions, including infectious diseases, chronic illnesses, injuries, and mental disorders.<sup>8</sup>

### **Policy:**

As economies grapple with the shock of covid19, policy making has shifted efforts to recovery and assessing the potential damages of prolonged and reoccurring waves. Given the weaknesses exposed by the pandemic in communications, healthcare and management of changes, it is becoming more and more obvious that a holistic framework for policy development is the only option to protect communities from further vulnerability. Policy for better health and education should not be decoupled from climate change protection because the intertwining of the impacts of climate crisis on communities is a threat.

Food security, land degradation, immobility and rising temperatures are no longer detached phenomena from economic development as they reach grassroots of livelihoods. In order for the reform policies in economics and social protection to be efficient there is a need to incorporate climate action. In the MENA region there is a healthy migration of advocacy and scientific data into policy making, and the inaction and it's consequences apply further pressure to act. Today, this should be seen as an opportunity to invest in all aspects of these nations' 2030 agenda.

Advocating a new shift in policy making which is more inclusive of people and their needs and what effects them is making the process more relevant.

### **Perceptions**

Climate action should be perceived as basic management in its very classical form. However there is a deeper and more complex in the formation of policy making with respect to the environment because it is not simply about humans, or a community. Environmental policy extends beyond borders and to nature and biodiversity and the oceans, hence the economic and social dimensions are enriched with this extension of relevance to protect the planet. Empathy is a powerful tool

### **Threat and Risk**

Everyday governments incur the cost of climate related disasters. This visibility in the media and the staggering loss of lives and financial losses has been a wakeup call for governments in MENA who have delayed or prolonged climate action because of these reasons:

Lack of scientific data and linkages between impact of climate change in the economy. Through developing a holistic approach this is no longer the case. A dialogue of inclusion between scientist, private sector and public sector can assist better and more informed policy making that is targeting measureable impacts and accessible solutions

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<sup>8</sup> Krieger, James, and Donna L Higgins. "Housing and health: time again for public health action." *American journal of public health* vol. 92,5 (2002): 758-68. doi:10.2105/ajph.92.5.758.

Lack of forecasting and technology to simulate what trajectory the region is headed towards specifically with rising heat stresses and erratic patterns in seasonality. Policy here should propagate investment in technologies that can inform decision makers.

A culture of top down policy making is contributing to not only the alienation of this deeply affected by climate challenges. It is also hindering governments from being relevant to these communities and benefitting from their local knowledge and indigenous solutions. Policy makers should employ an inclusive and participatory methodology that benefits marginalized groups thus serving development as a whole.

As temperatures rise and longer, hotter summer months become the norm, there are no pathways to control and aid extreme heat. Air-conditioning remains the go-to solution for cooling, a costly and polluting measure. Even though green building codes are being developed, such regulations rely on imported western techniques, materials, and certification bodies void of local benchmarking. Climate change and the discomfort it brings has not been addressed in conventional methods used in project commissioning processes and implementation, therefore not recognized as a key indicator of success or failure in rural housing projects. In Egypt, low-cost cooling is a critical factor needed. For years, development projects have focused on providing infrastructure, electricity, clean water, and sanitation to rural communities. However, a more comprehensive framework including climate change adaptation and mitigation as a priority is needed to achieve sustainable development and provide a quality-built environment leaving no one behind.

Improving citizens' quality of life and creating a built environment prepared to develop climate resilience responding to the present crisis is a huge undertaking that can only be successful on a large scale when multiple cross-sectors partners are engaged in the process. Egyptians living in rural communities are an integral part of the country's societal culture, heritage, economy, and national security. The global health and economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reinforces this urgent need for more collaborative action for rural Egyptians' better quality of life.

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