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Middle East Position paper #UCLGCongress

Local Action For the People
Assembly Track

UCLG WORLD CONGRESS 2019 ASSEMBLY TRACK MIDDLE EAST POSITION PAPER

1. Key messages

The Middle East and West Asia (MEWA) Region is a region characterized by **extreme heterogeneities and diversities**. Economic, administrative environmental, socioeconomic, as well as social differences and distinctnesses of the region negatively affects the local implementation of global agendas. Therefore, heterogeneity -and therefore the need for case-specific approaches- raises as the main challenge of the MEWA Region.

This geography is also highly characterized by **wars, conflicts, political instability, and civil unrest**. Stemming from these regional questions, MEWA Region is a center of migratory movements and therefore more vulnerable to national and regional instabilities arising from the **migratory influx**.

In addition to man-made disasters above, MEWA Region suffers from **a vicious cycle** between natural disasters, limited, mismanaged and misused resources, and therefore renewed conflicts. Within this context, the water-stressed character of the region and its fragile ecosystem leads to continued social and environmental tensions.

2. Current context and state of challenges

i. Regional Challenges and Heterogeneities

Relevant with the key messages, one of the main challenges that local government face in the region is the heterogeneous and diversified structure of the geography. This intertwined character of the Region can be addressed under three main headings.

- Economic Diversities

MEWA Region is a home for varied economic structures, where wealth sits side-by-side with poverty. The geography hosts countries where the national income per capita is less than 1.000 dollars, while some others have income per capita over 100.000 dollars. Among the countries of the region, Yemen and Afghanistan -countries listed in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs)- are among the poorest around the world, while Gulf monarchies are among the wealthiest countries regarding their per capita GDPs. Not only between the countries in the MEWA Region, these economic heterogeneities, and therefore socioeconomic fragmentations, can also be observed within the countries itself.

- Administrative Challenges

The Region has a weak tradition of sustainable and deep-rooted governance at either the regional (if any) or local level. Therefore and in relation to this highly centralized government structures, local governments' lack of financial and administrative autonomy and formulation of urban policies exclusively at the national level are among the challenges faced by local governments in regards to administration-related difficulties. This has a direct negative effect on the financial and jurisdictional power of local government.

- Social Heterogeneities

This Region is also highly characterized by ethnic, national, religious and linguistic differences and distinctnesses, which mostly require the development of unique responses to challenges faced by local

governments. The regions, as its name suggests, can be divided into two sub-regions: (i) Middle East (ii) West Asia, which may be quite different in some aspects. There may be a certain level of homogeneity between the Middle Eastern countries regarding their shared language, culture, and history; while West Asia represents a different geography. This argument of regional diversity may be employed even for the Middle Eastern sub-region itself since the sectarian and ethnic orientations have a direct impact on political and social life. Therefore, social heterogeneity raises one of the main challenges of the MEWA Region.

- ii. Wars, Conflicts, and Migratory Movements

Since the beginning of the century, parts of the region have been plagued by wars and recurring conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and now today in Syria and Yemen. While the Region currently experiences one of the biggest humanitarian crisis ever, migratory movements led by the aforementioned challenges as well as political instability represent another challenge for local governments to run their activities effectively.

- Migration Management

MEWA Region is one of the leading geographies in the world that has high statistics for both immigrations and emigrations. Today Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, are hosting about 6 million Syrian refugees most of them are living outside of camps, not necessarily registered by relevant authorities. In Turkey, only 6% of refugees are living in camps, while the remaining 94% lives in urban areas with the local population. Similarly, Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon mostly reside in cities.

Considering these numbers with the urban aspect of migratory movements effective provision of basic services, access to the rights in the cities and the need for social cohesion policies at the local level arise as the forefront challenges faced by local governments in the Region, especially for the development of regional peace and development.

- Humanitarian Crisis in the Region

Due to civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, the Region currently experiences one of the biggest humanitarian crisis ever. War in Yemen has cut transport routes for aid, fuel and food, reduced imports and therefore caused the most severe famine of recent history. Together with the limited number of treatment centers, starvation and malnutrition in Yemen have killed many women and children.

Similarly, some other countries in the Region suffer from diseases and severe living conditions, where their citizens are struggling to survive.

- iii. Vicious Cycle between Limited Resources and Renewed Conflicts

The Region is also highly diversified from the perspective of possession of resources. Some countries in this geography are characterized by rich underground resources such as petroleum and oil, while some others such as Jordan suffers from limited water resources. Combined with the environmental fragility, limited, mismanaged and misused resources feed renewed conflicts in the Region in a way to create a vicious cycle, since conflicts creates a disabling environment to address climate

challenges. Climate impacts in the coming decades are likely to add stress to existing resource challenges, with serious potential consequences for the economy, and for social and political stability.

- Environmental Challenges and Vulnerabilities

Environmental issues have historically ranked quite low on the list of public priorities for the Region due to aforementioned questions with prior importance, however, climate-related fragilities represent an alarming obstacle for the Region. MEWA is a geography predicted to be affected by significant heating and drying trends over the coming decades due to climate change. Extreme weather and climate events make some regions unlivable and reducing growing areas for agriculture. Rising temperatures put intense pressure on crops and already scarce water resources, and potentially creating higher numbers of migrants, and the risk of conflict.

- Tension between Growing Population, Rising Demands, and Limited Resources

One of the greatest challenges to the region is the increasing demand with limited resources. Regarding this, the Region is suffering from dwindling water supply. As most areas are arid and receive little rainfall, the supply of freshwater has always been a challenge. Rising demand from growing populations is only increasing the strain on rivers and aquifers, many of which are depleting faster than their natural recharge capacity. Together with the environmental vulnerabilities discussed above, drier areas becoming drier and precipitation events more intense. Natural disasters such as flooding and earthquakes affect the dense and continuously growing populations of cities severely and will continue to be a source of concern as urban areas expand.

iv. Other Relevant Challenges and Concluding Remarks

In addition to the regional challenges and heterogeneities; wars, conflicts, and migratory movements; and the vicious cycle between limited resources and renewed conflicts, another challenge faced by local governments is the lack of intergovernmental union that speaks the same language on behalf of the whole region.

There is also a limited number of regional organizations such as Organization of Developing Countries (D-8) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) but they are mostly ineffective to embrace the whole region due to differences in their geographical working areas and varied organizational aims and targets. Besides this, inadequate coordination between central and local authorities has often resulted in imbalances in the coverage and quality of urban services.

Under these circumstances, the regional priorities tend to focus on the provision of basic services and fulfillment of essential rights. This causes, over time, deprioritization of other agendas, such as environmental concerns and gender-sensitive approaches, since the funds are also mostly addressed for the provision of basic needs and rights.

Therefore, these challenges gathered under the mentioned headings require diversified and crosscutting responses since they all have case-specific characteristics. This heterogeneity negatively affects UCLG-MEWA to determine a general action plan to address these difficulties. Combined with the fact that lack of international union and national municipal associations in the region, these diversities represent an obstacle for UCLG-MEWA in its quest to become united voice of its members in the region.

3. Key policy priorities in the following areas

Deriving from the aforementioned key challenges, UCLG-MEWA has identified four strategic priorities for the 2018-2020 period, these priorities are;

- **Migration & Social Cohesion,**
- **Local Development & Governance,**
- **Fighting Against and Adapting to Climate Change and,**
- **Urban Resilience**

In the process of determination of mentioned priorities, UCLG-MEWA considered the relevant mechanisms of the UCLG World Organization, which are mostly embodied in the form of policy councils. Within this context, every strategic priority, as well as identified challenges, directly or indirectly refer to at least one of the policy council of the UCLG World Organization.

i. UCLG Policy Council on Right to the City and Inclusive Territories

When it is considered under **inclusion** as the main theme, this Policy Council directly addresses the difficulties that local government faces especially in the management of migration-related challenges. Counting the fact that around 92% of migrants and refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan are living in urbanized areas, the urban aspect of migration and the concept of the **right to the city** forms a cornerstone for responding to the migration-related urban challenges.

Within this regard, migrants' access to basic services in urban space and their participation in decision-making processes for urban management arises as two pressing questions, which are also evident in the briefing document of this policy council. This is because, social exclusion is considered as the major cause of different social challenges that present themselves in the form of poverty, unemployment, low literacy levels, violence, crime, and isolation. Therefore, the need for sound migration policies developed for social integration, social exclusion, social cohesion, civic engagement, and democratic participation, become more visible in the Region every passing day.

This is also particularly relevant with the inclusive territories through a specific reference to the intermediary cities in the Region. Reinforcing i-cities for developing human-centered counter policies for challenges stemming from migration movements, countries in this Region has financial and administrative inadequacies to use the advantages of i-cities for their ideal size and human scale, which will contribute to the balanced distribution of population in the region and well-functioning urban systems in the long-term.

Besides migrants and refugees, participatory urban life and inclusive territories also require full and active inclusion of youths, women, as well as disadvantaged and marginalized groups. While these social urban actors, especially youths and women, have shown a great interest in shaping the future of their communities, there remain few formal platforms and institutions for them to expand their voice and translate it into positive changes for their societies in this geography.

As related to this, there are examples of multiple discrimination and exclusion in the urban areas in the region, which are particularly clear in the case of young women, who have fewer legal protections and rights than men. Although there has been a considerable improvement in the situation of women in the region over the past years, especially in the Gulf states, access to the labor market remains limited in cities mostly due to cultural barriers and the role women are expected to play in society.

Another vulnerable group that is challenged by multiple exclusions in urban are persons with disabilities. These are one of the most vulnerable groups in the region as their exclusion is present at all levels of society.

Moreover, the Region has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world. The inability to find decent and stable jobs is preventing young people in the region from establishing themselves in society as these jobs do not enable them to acquire their own housing, as also underlined in the introductory document of this policy paper, under the concept of “right to housing”.

ii. **UCLG Policy Council on Territorial Multilevel Governance and Sustainable Financing**

The Region strongly needs a pragmatic approach and fruitful cooperation between already weak local governments in order to better channel the sharing of best practices on multi-level governance in this geography. As related to this, ensuring political stability and eliminating socio-economic imbalances in the region require more **effective multilevel governance** with empowered local governments. This, in the long-term, contributes to the development of response for another challenge of the local governments in the region, namely **lack of horizontal and vertical cooperation between governmental levels**. In the MEWA Region case, restricted horizontal and vertical collaboration is evidenced not only between governmental levels but also among different actors, as embodied in the weaker partnership with the private sector. This sometimes leads to inadequacies in providing innovative local solutions.

Last but not least, local governments in the also Region suffers from fragile representation before national governments due to a limited number of national local government associations (LGAs). This situation, adversely affects the work of UCLG-MEWA, since it seeks to develop regional cooperation through the facilitative role that LGAs could play.

iii. **Opportunities for All, Culture and City Diplomacy; and Keys to Sustainable Development**

Due to the aforementioned political instabilities and conflict situation, the Region has a **weaker level of international-regional diplomacy** although the countries have many commons in the historical and cultural sense. However, today’s changing local government paradigm has made it necessary for city administrations and municipalities not only to meet basic infrastructure requirements but also to be active in regional cooperation.

Under these circumstances, there is a strong need in the Region as for the strengthened inter-city relations embodied in the form of **establishing sister city relations**, which makes municipalities one of the most important stakeholders of peace-building activities. As related to this and deriving from the regional challenges, UCLG-MEWA has identified city diplomacy as one of its strategic priorities and has capitalized on the experiences of relevant structures of the UCLG World Organization.

The need for strengthened sister city relations not only address regional peace but also refers to the protection and promotion of cultural diversity, as also employed under this policy council. Cultivating a culture of peace through sister-city relations creates an opportunity for citizens and also city officials to experience and explore other cultures, and it stimulates an environment for communities around the region to learn and share experiences, which contributes to the development of sound responses for cultural integration problems of this geography.

When addressed under the sustainable development framework, the regional need for stronger city diplomacy is crucial from the economic point of view. Since it’s a global world now, the more

relationships you have throughout the world the more productive and prosperous a community you may have. Considering the fact that commercial relations are not constrained to the initiatives at state level anymore, strengthened city diplomacy and empowered sister city relations emerges as one of the primary needs of the region for more trade and job opportunities established through business links between sister cities.

Giving this background, we remain convinced of the need for capacity-building initiatives, in particular through city-to-city and sister city relations as well as association-to-association activities in the MEWA Region.

iv. Safer, Resilient and Sustainable Cities Capable of Facing Crisis:

Severe water shortage, over-dependence on the non-renewable natural resources, arid climatic conditions, food insecurity, and frequently faced earthquakes and disasters in the countries of the Region demonstrate that the Middle East and West Asia is among the neediest areas for **urban resilience** initiatives. This is because, in the areas where these crises and shocks are experienced, there is growing environmental, social and economic instability and vulnerability, which negatively affects the countries of the region and makes their cities increasingly fragile.

This is particularly evident in the urban dimensions of the challenges stemming from climate change. Despite **limited and severely threatened natural resources**, MEWA Region has a very high rate of urbanization (by this token, over-metropolization) that leads to new forms of urban risks and challenges. Increasing pressure on the fragile environment raises social pressures and links to economic opportunity for lower-income groups since the percentage of informal housing is increasing, especially through the settlements in high-risk zones (flooding, earthquakes, landslides).

Therefore, regional challenges in relation to urban resilience and environmental vulnerabilities are directly related to the issues addressed under the Policy Council on Safer, Resilient and Sustainable Cities Capable of Facing Crisis.

4. Policy strategies and tools

Some of the policy strategies and tools developed in the MEWA region to face the aforementioned challenges are listed below. These policy strategies and tools are mostly employed under relevant UCLG-MEWA Committees, namely Committee on Smart Cities and Urban Mobility, Committee on Environment, Committee on City Diplomacy and Local Governance, Committee on Culture and Tourism, Committee on Social Inclusion, and Committee on Gender Equality.

Strategy: *Promoting the development of socially inclusive policies and ensuring their access to basic services in order to prevent vulnerable groups (migrants, youth, women, disabled people, child, and other disadvantaged groups) living in cities from being subject to social exploitation,*

Tools:

- Developing and conducting projects, webinars, panels, peer-to-peer learning programs, and many other activities in partnership with international organizations, specifically GIZ,
- Advocating the need for the changed narrative as for the refugees and migrants in a way to underline possible advantages that come through migratory movements,
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- Ensuring the inclusion of refugees into decision-making mechanisms by establishing sub-municipal councils, that serve as advisory committees.
- Collecting good practices on the active involvement of local governments in the region to migration management, and presenting these before the related bodies of the UN.

Strategy: *Increasing the awareness levels of local governments in the region, on the global goals,*

Tools:

- Organizing projects and capacity building activities specifically on the SDGs, such as UCLG-MEWA Pilot Project on Mapping the SDGs in Turkey,
- Holding local government talks to increase the awareness on regional and international agendas (green spaces, health, gastronomy, energy efficiency, sustainability were among the topics of these talks as of July 2019),
- Conducting social media campaigns in international days,
- Conducting publication activities for the dissemination of the commitments of the global agendas.

Strategy: *Encouraging local governments in the MEWA Region to establish new sister city relations within and/or outside the region,*

Tools:

- Organizing sister-city workshops to contribute to city diplomacy in the MEWA Region,
- Developing a common strategy document on city diplomacy,

Strategy: *Encouraging the development of local government structures that have resilience against social and economic disasters, shocks and fragilities,*

Tools:

- Conducting technical training on local government financing for district municipalities,
- Organizing awareness-raising activities to put the concept of intermediary cities at the heart of regional development (Intermediary Cities Workshops),
- Establishing experience sharing and functional collaboration platforms between the intermediary cities characterized by similar characteristics on demography, socioeconomic structure, and working areas,

Strategy: *Fighting against and adapting to climate change in the MEWA Region and encouraging national governments to provide local governments with necessary capacities and resources for the development of environmental protection plans,*

Tools:

- Encouraging members to commit to the Global Covenant of Mayors (GCoM), where local governments prepare climate action plans to decrease their carbon emissions, and following-up their commitment process,
- Encouraging the GCoM signatory member local governments for developing local policies and commitments on fighting against and adapting to climate change,
- Organizing workshop programs in partnership with global, regional and local partners to address the effective use of natural resources (Workshops of the Project on Solid Waste Management, Training Program On Wastewater and Municipal Water Systems for the Municipalities of Palestine, etc.),
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- Developing a database for good practices of member municipalities in the field of environmental protection,
- Advocating the use of zero and/or low carbon transport systems such as bicycles, electric vehicles and public transport

Strategy: *Encouraging the gender equality decision-making processes, the development of these mechanisms and or strengthening the existing structures,*

Tools:

- Advocating the dissemination of the Commitment of the Localization of SDG5 under UCLG-MEWA Committee on Gender Equality,
- Actively promoting political parties to determine a quota for women representatives,
- Encouraging women to take a role in the governing bodies of UCLG-MEWA

5. Links with global agendas and continental mechanisms

Working out the vision of our region and coming up with solutions to the challenges, in the light of the global agendas that shape our work, especially the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** as the basic building blocks of our agenda for development by 2030; are the reasons for our existence as an organization.

Therefore, we, as UCLG-MEWA, consider SDGs as the overarching platform for our activities. Within this context, while determining our prioritized areas of work, we referred to the relevant SDGs, with an aim to present the contribution that we have made to the global development agenda and to take the action that may be required, after the three-year working period.

Besides the SDGs, **Paris Climate Change Agreement** and relevant international environment-related agendas play an important role in framing our policy strategies and tools. Within this context, UCLG-MEWA's advocacy activities for increasing the number of signatory local governments to the Global Covenant of Mayors is directly relevant to the localization of the commitments of the Paris Agreement.

Regarding the UCLG-MEWA agenda on social inclusion, we mainly base our relevant activities on the **New York Declaration for Refugees, and Migration and Mechelen Declaration on Cities and Migration**. As related to this, we put special effort to change the negative narrative on migrants, as also specifically addressed in the Mechelen Declaration. We, as UCLG-MEWA, truly convinced that local governments are one of the most crucial actors in the development of social integration policies not only for migrants but also for children, women, disabled people, and other vulnerable groups, and their whose roles are also acknowledged in New York Declaration for Refugees and Migration

Apart from these, whole UCLG-MEWA activities, in somehow, touches upon the commitments made in the **Bogota Commitment and Action Agenda & New Urban Agenda** as for building sustainable cities. Advocating that local and regional governments must be at the center of public policy development processes in cities to transform targeted ideals into concrete policies and initiatives, the Bogota Commitment paves the way for taking local steps to reach global solutions. In the Action Agenda, which is the continuation of the Commitment, a framework is drawn for the work to be done in the light of all global development agendas in local, national and global contexts.

Similarly, our works seek to strengthen the governance structures in urban management as key elements of the New Urban Agenda, to create socially inclusive policies in cities, to eliminate the

problems encountered in the development of sustainable environment through the spatial development and urban prosperity, and to solve problems in the cities of the MEWA Region.

Lastly, UCLG-MEWA also has direct references in its activities to the **European Consensus on Development**, especially the works conducted under the framework **Policy Forum on Development (PFD)**. Considering the regional challenges on the development issues and inspired by the shared spirit of this initiative, UCLG-MEWA has developed a multi-stakeholder approach in policymaking and advocacy. These efforts resulted in several partnerships with academics, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the private sector which created a favorable dynamic among local governments in the region.

As the Neighborhood South countries have been facing dramatic levels of human and infrastructure destruction, one could not think about possible reconstruction without the support of local governments and communities. Bringing the perspective of national and local governments in the MEWA region, to the table, UCLG-MEWA actively participates in and contributes to the efforts of PFD and realization of the commitments of the European Consensus on Development.

6. Key recommendations and actions by the international local and regional governments movement

Recommendation 1: *Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals in the MEWA Region and ensuring the successful implementation of the New Urban Agenda.*

Local and regional governments in the region should be convinced that they have a key role to play in triggering the adaptation of global goals to the local level, and an important responsibility in fostering implementation by integrating the various agendas on the ground and ensuring territorial cohesion.

Recommendation 2: *Contributing to international diplomacy through city diplomacy in the MEWA Region and strengthening decentralized cooperation and peace-building activities*

Local authorities in the region can be a significant actor in global politics. They should be more active internationally by developing networks and twinning projects, sharing information, signing cooperation agreements, contributing to the drafting of national and international policies, providing development aid, enacting refugee assistance, and doing territorial marketing through city-to-city or district-to-district decentralized cooperation.

Recommendation 3: Advocating before the UN for the crucial roles played by local governments on migration management

Large-scale movements of refugees and migrants affect all UN Member States and they require closer cooperation and responsibility-sharing. Working with local governments is key to creating long-lasting and sustainable migration strategies, especially in an environment as complex and dynamic as the Middle East and West Asia Region.

Recommendation 4: Promoting the establishment of national and local government associations

National and local government associations will form a vital bridge between national governments, communities and citizens and will have a critical role in new global partnerships. National and local government associations will increase solidarity and coordination by bringing together member municipalities, providing consultancy services to member municipalities, raising awareness by organizing training seminars and panels.

Recommendation 5: Disseminating and implementing the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, (GCoM) in the MEWA Region.

The Global Covenant is an international alliance of cities, local governments and their communities' with a shared long-term vision of taking measurable action to combat climate change and make the transition to low-emission and more resilient societies.

Recommendation 6: Encouraging the development of local government structures that have resilience against environmental disasters, shocks, and fragilities while contributing to the development of socially resilient cities on the basis of gender equality

International collaboration can facilitate the flow of knowledge and financial resources necessary to help cities become more resilient to disruptions related to climate change and other systemic shocks and stresses, including the socioeconomic challenges associated with rapid urbanization.

Recommendation 7: Promoting the adoption of a rights-based approach in local governments for all forms of vulnerabilities

The promotion of adapting a rights-based approach in a national and international network will create better familiarity with a particular focus on equal opportunity, participation, transparency, corruption, and accountability.

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