

ARAB STATES

ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETIES

Hugely diverse, the Arab region ranges from the very top of the human development charts to the very bottom, from the wealthy Gulf States to the impoverished countries of North Africa. As a whole, *Towards 2015: Achievements and Aspirations*, an MDG Report on the Arab countries released in 2003, found that the region has made some progress towards the MDGs. Literacy has soared along with life expectancy, and the vast majority of people now have safe water to drink. But in the 1990s, a time of increasing political and economic instability, progress began to stall, and the region is now, in many cases, falling short.

Within 17 countries and across the region, UNDP has explored the root hindrances to forward movement, including in those countries that on the surface

In the United Arab Emirates, women's literacy rates may be higher than men's, but this has not translated readily into more opportunities in other areas. Partnering with UNIFEM and the UAE's General Women's Union, UNDP helped draw up a strategy to expand the possibilities for women's participation across their society. A series of projects now support women entrepreneurs, build connections to the outside world, and train advocates to work with legislators and policy makers.

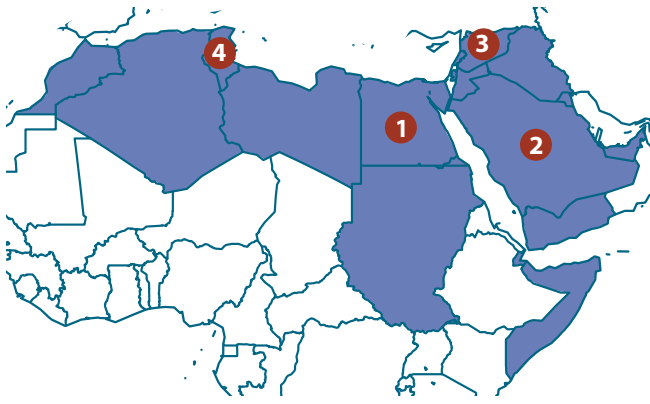
have sufficient domestic resources. Our analysis began with the *2002 Arab Human Development Report*, a ground-breaking publication that drew from the contributions of independent Arab scholars, and painted an unflinchingly honest picture of three development deficits: in political freedom, women's empowerment and knowledge. Its provocative conclusions not only sparked widespread debate within the Arab countries, but attracted international acclaim.

UNDP has turned to these findings to help mould development partnerships and inspire new forms of advocacy. In a region where minds and borders have at times been closed to the outside world, we are working with countries to explore the potential of a more open approach.

REJOINING THE WORLD

The *2003 Arab Human Development Report* focused on knowledge, and concluded that the deficit in the region is wide, afflicting education, research, the media and culture at large. UNDP's regional programme has already begun an assessment of higher-level education, where despite decades of investment, students remain poorly prepared for a competitive global marketplace. We are working with 35 Arab uni-





UNDP PRACTICES AT WORK

Regional: Hosted the first regional forum on local governance.

Regional: Produced the first regional documentary on HIV/AIDS.

Regional: Advocated for women's nationality rights.

Egypt: Trained micro-credit administrators to open business opportunities for poor women. (1)

Saudi Arabia: Supported the first MDG and national human development reports. (2)

Syria: Protected genetic diversity and the agricultural economy. (3)

Tunisia: Fostered sources of clean energy and new jobs. (4)

versities to begin defining the problems through self-assessments and external reviews, using international benchmarks. In six countries, UNDP is assisting the measurement of the quality of math and science education in primary and secondary schools.

For the Arab states, knowledge is the path both to better governance and economies diverse and flexible enough to compete with the rest of the world. At the same time, freer political systems and economic growth fuel the acquisition of new skills and under-

micro-credit programmes that extend sustainable livelihoods to women in Egypt, to a project that has opened new prospects for trade in Lebanon by unsnarling the red tape in the customs service. In two countries afflicted by long-term conflict, our concern has been helping people reach basic services. We have worked with local communities in Sudan on ending hostilities by jointly caring for solar energy projects, which are highly efficient for pumping water for irrigation. With the World Bank, we assisted Somalia,

We can free our minds to reason without fear, free our people's souls to breathe, and free our knowledge systems to grow into sources of new economic, social and technological strength.

— Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States upon the launch of the *2003 Arab Human Development Report*

standing. UNDP is advising Arab States on how to build some of the foundations of more open governments, including participation, the rule of law, transparency and accountability. In 2003, with our support, Bahrain sought to improve the skills of its Parliamentarians, and Yemen, which turned to us for technical advice on many aspects of its national elections, carried out one of the most fair and participatory polls ever to take place in the region. The turnout was 76 percent, with record levels of women voters.

While the Arab region is economically diverse, a common theme is economic stagnation, which feeds widespread discontent. UNDP supports activities fostering diverse sources of economic growth, from

which has no central government, in putting together its first collection of social and economic statistics in 20 years; donors can now use these to determine where support is needed most.

The Arab region, once the world centre for cultural pluralism and intellectual inquiry, still has a chance to catch up to the MDGs. UNDP offers a neutral platform for Arab countries to address their current challenges, share experiences and act on behalf of freer, more knowledgeable societies.