

LAND FOR PEACE, CLIMATE AND DEMOCRACY

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentleman,

I am delighted to be with you here at the Dead Sea today to address the Global Land Forum.

I recently had the privilege of being asked to become a board member for the UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration. This experience has already opened my eyes further to the plight of our planet, and all living things, today, and in the future, if we do not take action.

Our meeting here fittingly takes place in the lowest point on earth, 427 metres below sea level. This starkly beautiful landscape is a testament to survival, it features in the stories of the great religions, and it is a historical and geographical wonder. Yet this precious hypersaline lake, the deepest of its kind in the world, is shrinking, at the rate of about 1.2 meters a year. Some scientists believe that in just 25 years, it will have dried up completely.

Metaphorically, we are also at the lowest point, in terms of the damage and trauma that we are collectively inflicting upon the Earth, and by extension, upon much of its communities and ecology.

It is therefore apt that we congregate here at the Dead Sea, this remarkable place, where history, faith, geography, the environment, and politics not only intersect - but where they often collide.

The relationship of humanity to the earth, and to the land, is one that has dictated our very evolution and progress. Whether positively or negatively, the way we treat the land, is as important to our survival and existence as the way that we treat each other. The measure of our humanity is defined not only by our relationship to each other, but also our relationship to the land in which we live, and to all the other creatures and species and life that it contains.

As such the answers to the existential threat faced by the Dead Sea, belong to the same set of solutions required to remedy the predicament of our planet. Solutions come from science and technology, they come from dialogue, from respect for nature and the environment, and they come from international law and regulatory frameworks - that must reflect the principles and application of justice. Solutions come from creativity, innovation and vision. Crucially, they come when we LISTEN.

As a long-time advocate for people-centred human development, the notion of participation, of the absolute importance of listening to individuals and communities, is crystal clear. Societies, governments and service providers, international donors, the private sector, and civil society cannot have lasting, meaningful impact, unless they are truly responsive and reflective of the needs and opinions of the stakeholders and shareholders that they profess to uphold.

Contested spaces, whether political, geographical, physical or social, require patience, reciprocity and a commitment to hearing what others are truly saying, even in their silence. In the Arab world, contested spaces are often simultaneously physical, and social, as well as political and economic. In a region where populations are growing at a pace that is overtaking the ability of the environment to provide adequate arable land, water, and natural resources, land is a majorly contested site. ***In Jordan which over the years has provided a safe haven for people displaced by regional conflicts, the most recent sharp rise in population between 2004-2015 over 5 million to over 9 and a half million, as a result of the large influx of refugees in 2012. has put a tremendous strain on both resources and services within the country.***

Occupation and conflict around land and sovereignty are one of the most glaring man-made problems endured for decades in this troubled region. Yet land issues do not only extend between countries of the region, they also pose strife within borders of the countries themselves. As cited by a World bank report, specific challenges to land and land reform in the MENA region include:

- » Outdated laws and regulations
- » unregistered land and poor services provision
- » high levels of state ownership, access issues, and unregulated market speculation

Conflict, displacement, land degradation, women's rights, the rights of different ethnic and indigenous groups, politics, elites, weak institutions and weak civil society, the absence of strong and robust programmes, the absence of sufficient data and information – the list goes on - all of these are cited as main challenges to land reform in the region.

Land reform only represents one piece of a bigger puzzle facing many countries in our region, and all land issues must be viewed through a broader environmental lens. Jordan may be rich in bio-diversity (although threatened), but it is poor in water, arable land, and oil. This means that land and natural resources are contested, by the public sector, the private sector, and local communities themselves (the latter often being marginalised and overshadowed).

As in many other countries, the pressure of wanting to achieve accelerated economic growth at the expense of the environment is a trade-off that some see to be worthwhile in the long run.

Rapid economic growth is not the only threat to the environment. Poverty, exclusion and conflict pose severe threats to both communities and fragile ecosystems everywhere. Problems are inextricably linked, as evident in the refugee crisis in Jordan, which has led to the pollution and degradation of invaluable natural resources in the north near the Syrian border, and strains in the social fabric within communities across the country.

Water consumption by urban centres and large industrial and agricultural projects and from outside our borders, poses an existential threat to the entire country. Natural streams and man-made reserves and underground aquifers are drying up. *For instance Al Azraq, Jordan's only natural oasis and wetland situated in the Eastern desert, with its unique vegetation, and natural water collection, was a habitat for a wide variety of wild species, including thousands of birds that migrated annually between Europe and Africa. However, starting thirty years ago, the wetland virtually dried up and the ecological value of the oasis was nearly destroyed, due to excessive pumping of its waters to large urban areas, as well as illegal drilling of artesian wells for agricultural and domestic use. Since then major efforts have been underway to restore this unique ecological resource to some of its former state.* As elsewhere, mass agriculture has disrupted local farming practices, while pesticides have severe effects on health. Existing legal frameworks for women and increasingly children in the farming sector are inadequate. All of this points to the need to address laws and rights, as well as land ownership and access issues of the poor and of local communities.

Forty five years ago, His Majesty King Hussein entrusted me with the establishment of an NGO that I still have the honour of chairing today, the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development, or JOHUD, as it is known. Over the decades, I have witnessed, first-hand, the power of participation, as both a means and end result of sustainable human development efforts.

After years of working in this field, I should qualify the term 'human development'. It is problematic, and carries a lot of baggage, often raising more questions than answers. Nonetheless, within current human development discourse, and the pursuit of SUSTAINABLE global and local societies, the term 'governance' is one that offers countless opportunities for our present and our future.

In recent years, I have an increasing belief that principles of governance are relevant to every aspect of human survival - in order to live sustainably and with dignity, with nature, our planet and each other. Transformative governance applies to the process and outcome of devolving authority and responsibility.

Recognising the ownership, choices and voices of previously excluded peoples, neglected issues and marginalised groups is central to such deep transformation.

To quote a recent article that I came across "*Transformative governance is needed to enable the transformative change necessary for achieving global sustainability goals*".

To be transformative, governance - and I quote - must be :

- » **'integrative**, to ensure local solutions also have sustainable impacts elsewhere (across scales, places, issues and sectors)
- » **'inclusive**, to empower those whose interests are currently not being met and represent values embodying transformative change for sustainability'
- » **'adaptive**, enabling learning, experimentation, and reflexivity, to cope with the complexity of transformative change'
- » **'pluralist**, recognizing different knowledge systems'
(Moser Moore Sayer 2021)

Today, His Majesty King Abdullah's own vision for our country is one in which community participation is of paramount importance. His belief in the vital role of women and young people is one that is opening exciting new windows of engagement to shape Jordan's future. This vision gives us hope in the face of tremendous regional challenges.

Undoubtedly, civil society has an important role to play within this national process. Within the sphere of our own work as an NGO, JOHUD's social and physical outreach and local presence at the community level across the country, places it in a unique position to act as a catalyst of transformative governance at the grassroots level, where community participation and environmental sustainability can intersect. Instead of the perception of being at odds, the interest of communities and those of the environment can and should be seen as being mutually reinforcing.

A few lessons we have learned at JOHUD through our work include the following:

- » Top-down national development strategies are limited and sometimes detrimental in outcome, whereas consultation, representation and participation mechanisms to engage grassroots and civil society in decision making and finding solutions can lead to long term success
- » Often, local communities and those most marginalised in fact possess the knowledge, experience and perspective lacking to insure that national programmes take off and last.
- » Representative Councils, local elections, local leaders including women and youth, when empowered and mobilised, can act as catalysts and custodians, reshaping the overall political landscape and political outcomes for the better. *In JOHUD's day to day operations Women and Youth committees play a vital role in carrying out a range of programmes and initiatives. Volunteers in their thousands are involved in advocacy and outreach. In many ways this experience has also contributed to developing local leadership and provided a platform for local governance . Hence across local communities, as well as with numerous JOHUD Women and Youth committees, participants have gone on to become members of Municipal Councils and Decentralisation Committees . Some former women members have also gone on to become Members of Parliament.*
- » On another note Eco-tourism, and finding ways to encourage tourism that benefits communities and supports livelihoods, small businesses, presents a hugely significant opportunity for Jordan, for its economy and the preservation and protection of its historical and natural wonders
- » Drawing on the identity, culture and knowledge of local communities, women and village elders for natural resource management is enshrined in many smaller scale projects, but such an approach can be scaled up to have greater impact on larger projects and planning processes

- » Promoting environmental activism for environmental and historical preservation essentially also means promoting political engagement in a wider sense, as it relates to reinforcing spaces where people are able to engage decision makers and influence or be part of planning, policy making, budget setting and implementation

Supporting systems that safeguard local assets and give voice to communities that might otherwise be powerless in the face of large corporations and the public sector, insures that vital checks and balances are in place, and that there can be practical regulation and accountability. *For example, the environmental impact of prospective mining activities in the area of the Dana Biosphere Reserve, poses threats to its unique ecosystem. Not only home to Jordan's most diverse nature and wild species, many of which are endangered, such developments may also pose threats to the livelihoods of the community.*

While donor funding is important, the emphasis on projects often does not result in adequate return on investment, or traction, so the impact of the project can quickly disappear. *Funding that is invested into capacity building and a deep rooted localized approach can yield more sustainable results and impact. Institutional development, and capacity building of local organisations is critical in order to nurture local capabilities and sustainable impact. Frequently, donor funded projects and schedules do not address time factors sufficiently.*

Information exchange, between public, private and civil sectors, and between countries is also vital, and can minimise duplication, error and cost as well as lead to more efficient use of resources and better collaboration

- » Jordan has long held education to be a corner stone of its national development. While education in all its forms certainly remains a priority in Jordan, and is perhaps more important than ever in the world in its entirety, it is the process of learning -and even unlearning- that we are all required to undertake, as individuals, societies, institutions and governments, that goes well beyond traditional classrooms and schools. *As such, across JOHUD's centres the concept of "Mujawarah ", first begun by Dr. Munir Fasha the Palestinian educator and activist, provides a tangible, transformational opportunity for communities to come together to find solutions through meaningful dialogue while simultaneously celebrating authentic local identity, knowledge and culture; rather than relying solely on decontextualised knowledge and "one size fits all " educational models. Adopted by JOHUD, Fasha's approach has generated a powerful model of people-centred local activism which lies at the centre of JOHUD's own values and beliefs.*

While it is undeniable that Covid-19 has added new challenges to the world, it also delivered some important lessons, offering us an opportunity to rethink many of the ways in which we previously worked and lived.

Despite its own seemingly intransigent divides, the Arab region is in a unique position to address some of the most serious political and environmental problems in the world. In order to find solutions however, regional responses and regional cooperation, to develop alternative energy solutions, for water, desertification, migration and conflict, will be necessary. In addressing these challenges, we are simultaneously forging a new reality for the region and the world- our vision cannot aim to be less ambitious than this, or it will probably fail.

We should also not underestimate the importance of learning from the often small, but powerful examples from around the world, where people have rallied and come together to challenge the most daunting of threats to their existence. In doing so, they offer hope that we can collectively insure a future if we act and think globally and locally at the same time. We really don't have much of a choice.

I leave you with a quote from Imam Ali bin Abi Talib Peace be Upon Him: "Your remedy is within you, but you do not sense it. Your sickness is from you but you do not perceive it".

As I look out upon the audience in front of me, I am encouraged and optimistic. I see the diversity of genuinely engaged members of a global community that cares deeply, and intends to do everything in its power to turn the tide so that future generations and life on the planet can sustain and thrive.