Before we start, it’s important to review our understanding of some of the concepts relevant to our discussion.

**Development**

- There is now an international consensus that what we mean by development is comprehensive human development in all its dimensions: economic, social, environmental, political, educational, etc. This meaning is deepened when we talk about sustainable development.
- According to the Declaration on the Right to Development, the human person is the central subject of development, and that every person has the right to enjoy and participate in development at all levels. It defines development as the enjoyment of every person of his or her economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights.
- The Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 reconfirms these principles in its goals, objectives and indicators. Every state is to determine its own priority objectives and goals, means of achievement and follow up and review processes.

**The state and the government**

- It’s important to point out that we often conflate the meanings of ‘state’ and ‘government.’ The state is the political entity of society as a whole, and the responsibility of the government is to balance the various interests in society, guarantee equality before the law, develop and implement public policies including policies related to maintenance of public order and public security.
- If those policies are an outcome of the desires and consensus of society as a whole, i.e. if they are articulated with the participation of the various sectors of society, they would be more legitimate and more easily implementable as responsive to the needs of society and the state.

**Civil society**
- There continues to be some debate in the region on what constitutes “civil society” and its role. We at the Asfari Institute lean towards a more comprehensive definition. In our view, civil society is one of the three main components of the state: the government with its three components (legislative, executive and judicial), the private profit-seeking sector, and the non-profit-seeking social sector.

- Civil society is what citizens constitute in terms of associations and organizations, formal and informal, for a variety of purposes: to protect their rights and promote their interests, to serve the public good, and to participate in the progressive development of society through discussions and promotion of public policies as they perceive them, even should they disagree on the content of those policies.

- Thus, many sectors of society are included in this definition: Non-governmental organizations working in all spheres, regardless of whether or not they have broad or limited membership; professional associations and federations such as trade and labor unions; associations of business owners interested in public affairs; academics and research centers; social movements; faith-based organizations; even political parties that are not in government – being associations of citizens with political, social and economic perspectives that they have the right to promote and convince others of.

- Citizens are not simply “subjects” and recipients of state services. They are experts and scientists and practitioners and activists. They have experience and knowledge needed to inform all decisions related to their societies and families.

What can civil society do in achieving the SDGs?

- Many components of civil society have an important role in ensuring that development policies are based on scientific and studied data and analysis in all sectors. These include centers for research and studies, academic analysis units, civil society organizations specialized in the different spheres including those working on health, education; advocacy and labor organizations, women’s groups and associations, as well as those working on marginalized communities and others. With those rich and varied experiences, civil society can (and has the right to) participate in articulating and developing public development policies in all spheres.

- They can also play a role in developing national level expressions and solutions for the broad international or universal goals and principles of the SDGs.

- Civil society also has the right to participate in implementing development programs and projects, given the broad reach that its organizations and
associations have, and given that many are engaged in direct service delivery in all corners of society.

- Such a broad societal reach can also be helpful in the implementation of educational programs on the sustainable development goals and the role of every component of society in their implementation.
- Civil society can also participate, based on their experiences on the ground, in tracking developments and monitoring progress in achieving the 2030 agenda.
- Moreover, they can participate in evaluating the results of development programs, and to offer suggestions and alternatives.
- Civil society associations and organizations – national and regional – can build bridges between the local, national and regional levels, identifying common themes in the Arab region. A particular example is the common concern for the role of women in society and their rights, to enable women to contribute effectively to development in all spheres.
- National and regional organizations and networks can also play an important role in confronting global economic pressures on each state and on the region as whole. Through participation in global debates and United Nations forums and platforms, they can work to have an influence on global agendas and the promotion of Arab regional interests.

**Obstacles to effective partnership in the Arab region**

- The fundamental question is how are policies made in the Arab region? There is some dependence on experts and specialized knowledge, but consultation with broad sectors of the public is not common in the region.
- There are tremendous economic and political challenges facing the Arab region, and these cannot be confronted without joint efforts and a view of development as state enterprise and not only a governmental responsibility. This requires a reconsideration of the relationship between the governing authorities and state citizens, to remove the barriers of doubt and mutual distrust.
- There are also serious challenges with respect to the limited margin of freedoms in the Arab Region, especially freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly. It is very difficult of civil society groups to participate in achieving the SDG without a fundamental review and amendment of Arab legislation in this regard, and the lifting of repressive restrictions to allow societal creativity to participate and express itself without fear of reprisal.
- These laws are based in a view that one is guilty until proven innocent. The work of organizations is too often subject to administrative oversight, and is often stopped until the organization proves itself innocent of any suspicion. Human rights and other activists are regularly arrested simply for criticizing state policies. These laws need to be amended towards a more progressive
understanding and more precise language in order to provide freer space for the participation of civil society in public life.

- In Arab regional structures, such as in the League of Arab States with its various departments and units, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, more space needs to be opened up for the participation of civil society associations and organizations, to benefit from their experiences in their discussions of regional priorities of the SDGs. The Arab League is moving slowly in that direction, but to date, the participation of civil society in its meetings remains subject to approval at the level of “observer,” with no consultative status contemplated as of yet.

The 2030 sustainable development agenda with its goals and objectives provides stations along the way, as did the Millennium Development Goals before, and as undoubtedly other programs will later provide. To achieve them in Arab region requires building a true and effective partnership between the multi-stakeholders: governments, the private sector and civil society. This first requires a change in conceptual understanding of the political, economic and legal relationships. All it takes is political will.