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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Expert Group Meeting on Moving the Development Agenda Forward:  
Opportunities and Potential Gains  
Beirut, 5-6 November 2009

**INFORMATION NOTE**

**I. PURPOSE AND EXPECTED OUTCOME**

The purpose of the High-Level Expert Group Meeting on Moving the Development Agenda Forward: Opportunities and Potential Gains is to provide a forum for deliberating on current and anticipated challenges facing Arab states amidst the ongoing global developments. The meeting shall be devoted to addressing salient development issues on the global and regional agendas of pertinence to the region. The results of the discussion shall guide the future work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and help in identifying regional priorities in line with the principal issues on the global agenda. The outcome of this meeting will contribute to the 2012-2013 strategic framework of ESCWA.

**II. ORGANIZATION**

The Meeting shall be organized into seven sessions during which a specialized speaker will present a discussion paper on a specific sub-theme addressed by the meeting, and also wrap up the discussion at the end of the session. A designated moderator will comment on the discussion paper delivered on each sub-theme, thus initiating a general open debate and opening the floor for further remarks and suggestions by the meeting participants.

The concluding session will synthesize the outcome of the discussions and present concrete recommendations for articulating the future role of ESCWA in its efforts to support its member countries and promote their development in a viable and sustainable manner.

**III. THEMES OF THE MEETING**

The EGM shall address the following key issues assumed to be of prime concern to the ESCWA region, other relevant issues may be raised by participants:

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1. Climate change and sustainable management of natural resources:

(a) Integrated water resource management and adapting to climate change;

Despite the fact that the ESCWA region was historically the lowest contributor to global warming, scientific projections indicate that climate change will disproportionately affect it. Water in the ESCWA region is central to both climate change and human development and most of the impacts of climate change will hit the region through its scarce water resources. Of the many social, economic and environmental impacts and vulnerabilities to climate change, the projected impacts of climate change on the qualitative and quantitative status of water resources in the ESCWA member countries are critical for people's lives and the economy in the region. Climate change will have significant impacts on freshwater; affecting both availability of freshwater and frequency of floods and droughts in the ESCWA member countries. It might also undermine national development plans, affect human security and livelihoods, significantly impact agriculture, biodiversity, tourism and industry and act as a push factor in population movements and migration.

Within this framework, a discussion paper will review the challenges ESCWA member countries are facing in dealing with the growing water scarcity; review the principles and practices of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) applied in ESCWA member countries, with reference to the dependence on shared water resources in the region; assess the challenges and opportunities to adapting to climate change in the region, particularly in view of growing water scarcity constraints and water quality threats; assess the capacity of member countries to examine and respond to anticipated climate change impacts on the water sector, including socio-economic impacts; identify opportunities and challenges presented by mainstreaming climate change adaptation strategies into national water resource management plans, including IWRM plans; propose policy options for improving water resource management in face of anticipated climate change impacts; reflect on what ESCWA's role should be in addressing these issues, in view of its regional mandate.

(b) Enhancing the role of the energy sector in achieving sustainable development and mitigating climate change;

Energy is one of the fundamental pillars fostering sustainable development. It is also a key requirement for providing other basic life necessities, such as food, water, shelter and clothing. Without energy, from its simplest to its more complex forms, society is unable to maintain or improve living standards, meet the basic needs of its citizens or maintain the socio-economic infrastructure necessary for political and economic stability. Indeed, lack of energy acts as a barrier to industrialization and getting out of the poverty trap. Consequently, a specialized discussion paper will provide a comprehensive overview of the current energy paradigm and its potential in the ESCWA region; review the characteristics of energy resources, production and consumption; examine the challenges facing the energy sector in supporting sustainable development in the region; assess the potential impacts of the current global crisis on the energy sector "mainly climate change and financial crisis" and measures needed to overcome such impacts; identify possible policies, measures and programmes for promoting energy for sustainable development objectives and initiating actions for climate change mitigation.; propose a vision on the role of the energy sector in alleviating poverty and promoting SME's for job creation and the possible roles of ESCWA in supporting member countries thereto; identify the priority areas of action for ESCWA to support the energy sector in achieving sustainable development and mitigating climate change.

2. Youth bulge, employment and investment:

(a) Youth bulge and the demographic window of opportunity;

There has been an increasing interest in analyzing the demographic and socioeconomic implications of different age groups in relation to key life cycle stages, and in response to socioeconomic and political requirements. In the ESCWA region, the number of youth, which is defined as the age group (15-24), was

estimated at 25.9 million in 1985 and 45.9 million in 2005, and is projected to increase to 59.9 million by 2025. The youth bulge is of particular importance for the region and has age specific policy implications, since this age specific category is the age of entry into the labour force, which increases the number of newcomers into the labour market and creates pressures on socioeconomic institutions, such as the educational and vocational systems, the labour market, and health systems.

In addition, this category represents a period of life when its members are transformed from consumers of resources into producers of wealth. As a result, the current demographic dynamics could actually be used to accelerate socio-economic development in the region. This 'demographic window of opportunity' arises from lower dependency ratio. This means that a lower share of both children and the elderly need to be supported by a relatively large proportion of the working-age population. This demographic window can lead to an acceleration of economic growth and social development, as lower dependency ratios tend to boost savings and investments, provided that sufficient employment opportunities are created.

The paper will present a regional profile of the current situation and future trajectories of the demography of youth and their potential contribution to the socioeconomic development of the region. The discussion paper will thus review the interrelationship between migration and development, analyze population trends in the region with special focus on the youth bulge and its contribution to the total population and to the population in the labour force (15-64), identify challenges and opportunities of the demographic dividend, analyze the impact of the youth bulge at the economic, social and political levels, and develop reliable policy recommendations.

(b) Investment in youth employment and skills;

Youth employment is one of the main human development challenges facing the ESCWA region. The current youth unemployment rate in the Arab region is more than double that of the world as a whole. High investment in education has not led to high rates of youth employment partly because of a mismatch between skills taught and those required by the modern labour market. As a result, unemployment among better-educated young people is particularly high in the region. Furthermore, unemployment for young women tends to be even higher than for young Arab men in the region.

Youth employment is critical in different respects: (i) at the individual level, to ensure youth self-fulfillment and providing them with a means of living; (ii) at the family level, to help them support their family; and (iii) at the national level, to enable youth to participate in the process of development in their country and to benefit from its returns. Conversely, widespread youth unemployment has serious economic, social and political implications both at national and regional levels. It is not only an economic waste, but can breed exclusion, threaten social cohesion and lead to socio-political unrest. It also fuels rural-to-urban and international migration.

This calls for proactive policies to create adequate employment opportunities for the growing labour force in the region, together with complementary policies to ensure that education and training are better geared towards the needs of the modern labour market. In addition, there is an urgent need to identify key economic sectors or industries required to increase the absorption capacity of human capital in general, and youth in particular.

Against this backdrop, the paper will analyze youth employment trends and prospects in the ESCWA/Arab regions; identify the factors affecting youth employment; examine the costs of youth unemployment; propose measures to improve youth employability; and identify key economic sectors designed to increase employment opportunities for youth.

3. Regional integration for socio-economic development:

(a) Building partnerships and implementing international agreements concluded by ESCWA;

ESCWA has so far concluded three UN conventions that are deposited with the UN Secretary-General. These are the (1) Agreement on International Roads in the Arab Mashreq (adopted 10 May 2001; ratified/acceded so far by 12 countries); (2) Agreement on International Railways in the Arab Mashreq (adopted on 14 April 2003; ratified/acceded so far by 9 countries); and (3) Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Maritime Transport in the Arab Mashreq (adopted on 9 May 2005; ratified/acceded so far by 8 countries).

The fruits of these UN conventions will only be realized through their proper operationalization and implementation. This process entails promoting south-south cooperation, enhancing aid for trade and building partnerships, including public-private partnerships between ESCWA and the concerned international, regional and national institutions and entities. These entities would include, but not be limited to, financial institutions, construction companies, and productive and service sectors in the economies of member countries. This implementation will significantly enhance the productive and service capacities of the real economies of member countries and well as regional integration among them. Furthermore, the implementation of these three UN transport conventions represents a necessary step towards enhancing transport and trade facilitation, socioeconomic development and integration in the region.

To that end, the discussion paper will provide a brief overview of ESCWA's approach towards the development of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq (ITSAM); review the degree of development and implementation of ITSAM including the three UN transport conventions and the transport and trade facilitation measures, and the challenges facing their implementation in the ESCWA region; assess the potential impacts of the current global crises (such as the international financial crisis, food crisis, energy crisis and climate change) on the transport sector and measures needed to respond effectively to such crises; assess the importance of establishing public-private partnerships to implement international agreements concluded by ESCWA; identify priority areas of action to support the transport sector in member countries in achieving regional integration.

(b) Enhancing socio-economic development of member countries through regional cooperation and integration.

Regional cooperation and integration are the building blocks for enhancing socio-economic development in the region. Since its adoption in 2002, the Monterrey Consensus has become a key reference point for international development cooperation. It called for enhanced regional cooperation and global partnerships between developed and developing countries. The recent financial crisis and the severe spillover effects felt in markets across the globe, demonstrated that crises respect no boundaries and require international coordination and cooperation to be overcome. Regional responses may offer the most appropriate solutions for limiting the impact of such crises and may serve as a buffer to reduce future volatility. Building effective regional institutions and strengthening cooperation is a key complement to the reform of the international financial system in its regulatory aspects, scope and function in promoting sustainable and equitable economic policies.

As such, a discussion paper will provide a brief overview of the current situation of regional cooperation and integration of ESCWA member countries; assess economic and social development in the region taking into consideration the impact of the current international financial and economic crisis thereto; identify possible strategies, policies, and programmes for the effective enhancement of socioeconomic capacities of member countries and the role of regional cooperation and integration; and formulate a vision on the role of ESCWA in the implementation of such strategies.

4. Development priorities for 2012-2013.

ESCWA is currently in the process of preparing its strategic framework which sets the direction of the programmes and activities to be implemented during the 2012-2013 biennium. A representative of ESCWA will present an overview of the strategic framework which contains the goals and expected accomplishments of the seven sub-programmes in ESCWA.

In preparing the strategic framework for 2012-2013, the secretariat took into consideration emerging priorities at the global and regional levels. As such, the deliberations of this high-level meeting are expected to guide the imminent work of the Commission and help in identifying regional priorities and the main concerns of member states, in line with the principal issues on the agenda of the United Nations.

#### **IV. PARTICIPATION**

The meeting is expected to bring together a select group of national, regional and international experts specialized in diverse socio-economic subjects, in general, and in the themes addressed by the meeting, in particular. Prominent academics and resource persons, representatives of international and regional entities, think tanks, research centres and non-governmental organizations, as well as representatives of civil society and the private sector will also participate in the meeting.

#### **V. DATE, VENUE AND DURATION**

The two-day expert meeting will be held at the United Nations House in Beirut on 5 and 6 November 2009.

#### **VI. LANGUAGE**

The EGM will be conducted in English and/or Arabic; simultaneous interpretation will be provided. Participants are welcome to present, discuss and share their views on the themes of the meeting in either of the two languages.

#### **VII. ORGANIZATIONAL/LOGISTICAL ARRANGEMENTS**

ESCWA shall cover the travel and accommodation expenses of invited speakers and moderators for the duration of the meeting. Other participants in the meeting are expected to cover their own expenses.

Meeting participants are advised to check with the Lebanese Embassy in their country of residence whether or not they would require an entry visa to Lebanon, and apply for a visa as necessary. For any assistance concerning the issuance of a visa, you may wish to contact Ms. Angela Samara by phone: +961-1-978894 or by e-mail: [samaraa@un.org](mailto:samaraa@un.org).

#### **VIII. CORRESPONDENCE**

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