1. Background information

For almost two years now, the Arab region has been facing unprecedented challenges in the political, economic and social spheres. Several governments in the region have failed to understand the underlying dynamics that were driving popular discontent that built up over several decades. The decline in people’s living standards, increasing frustration due to the lack of decent employment opportunities, income inequality and social exclusion have led to a loss of confidence in ruling elites and resulted in what is now commonly referred to as the “Arab spring”.

Despite heterogeneity of socio-economic profiles, most Arab countries share challenges such as high socio-economic and geographic disparities, chronic unemployment, distinct rural-urban divides, marginalization of certain social groups, widespread corruption, and deterioration of key governance indicators. At this historical turning point, when several countries in the region are transitioning to a new developmental course, there is a need to develop a new discourse on the potential ways to tackle the major economic, social and political challenges.

In line with its mandate to support economic and social development in the countries of the region, promote mutual cooperation and encourage interaction between member countries and promote the exchange of experience, best practices and lessons learned, UN ESCWA is organizing its first Arab Economics Forum, which will be held on 23 and 24 November 2012. As a regional commission, ESCWA has a unique position to launch this type of event bringing the decision makers together to exchange ideas on issues such as unemployment, financing social protection and the ways to engage the available funds and put them to serve the developmental efforts of the Arab region itself.
2. Objective

The overall objective of the Forum is to respond to the claims of the popular uprisings throughout the region, by convening policy practitioners, prominent figures in the political and socio-economic spheres from the region and abroad, in order to discuss several major challenges the region is facing and come up with fresh thinking on the possible ways to address them. The deliberations on the background papers prepared for the Forum and policy recommendations stemming from the discussions will also help ESCWA shape its research agenda for the next two years and tailor its technical cooperation programs.

The Forum will be carried out through three thematic sessions, based on three background papers prepared as inputs to the discussion. The papers are entitled as follows:

- **Short Term Policy Responses to Unemployment Problems in the Arab Region**: the session will propose short term responses to unemployment problems and discuss the possibilities of better translating growth into job creation.

- **Fiscal Space in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring”: Is there fiscal space for development?**: This session will discuss the potential fiscal space challenges related to the affordability of a social protection floor in the Arab countries, in order to answer the question: “Is there fiscal space for a social protection floor in the Arab World”? It will provide estimates of the cost of a social protection floor in selected Arab countries and discuss different fiscal policy options to finance the social protection floor.

- **Reinforcing the Role of Arab Development Fund: The Financing Gap**: The session will explore the role of Arab funds in dealing with economic problems in the region, particularly in their support to small and medium-size enterprises and job creation.

The Forum will end with a wrap up session during which the participants will have the opportunity to discuss the outcomes of the first three sessions, and express their points of view as well as concerns. The session also aims at determining the priority topics to be tackled by ESCWA in its research agenda.
3. Agenda

The provisional agenda and annotations of the first ESCWA Arab Economics Forum is available on ESCWA website http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/main.asp?division=edgd

4. Participants

Prominent economists, academics, and practitioners at Central Banks, Ministries, and Regional Funds in the Arab Countries are expected to take part. In addition, experts from recognized regional and international organizations are invited.

5. Language

Presentations and interventions will be in English. Arabic interpretation services will be available.

4. Date and venue

The first ESCWA Arab Economics Forum will be held at the UN-House in Beirut, Lebanon on Friday, November 23rd, 2012 and on Saturday, November 24th, 2012.

5. Accommodation

Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered by UN-ESCWA according to UN rules and regulations. Participants will be accommodated in Holiday INN Dunes Hotel, Verdun Str. A shuttle from and to ESCWA will be available.

6. Entry Visa

Participants may obtain entry visa from the Embassy of Lebanon in their respective countries. The official invitation should be presented to the Lebanese embassy along with the passport and the required correspondence.
For Yemen, Sudan and Palestine, ESCWA will assist in obtaining visas, provided a copy of the passport containing all necessary information is submitted to ESCWA by no later than 31 October 2012 at the latest.

7. Correspondence

For Substantive and Technical communication: Please contact Ms. Fathia Abdelfadil, focal point, at abdelfadil@un.org.

For Logistics and Administrative communication: Please send all necessary information directly to Ms. Hanaa Saad at saad@un.org. For travel and hotel reservations, a scanned copy of the passport, its validity and a separate photo of the participant, as well as the country of origine are coming from are required.

All other correspondence should be addressed to:

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