BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Traditionally, most Arab countries have been characterized by a dominant role of the State in most spheres of social life. However, this is undergoing fundamental changes. In recent decades, there has been a global trend towards reduced involvement of the state. Increased privatization efforts and technical as well as regulatory innovations enabled the private sector and other actors to contribute to the provision of basic social services. Some countries in the region have thus deliberately designed policies to allow private participation in some social sectors. In other countries, weakened state capacity led to the situation where gaps in public service provision left room for non-state actors who increasingly provide essential social services in the area of education, health care, child care and poverty alleviation. With the changes resulting from recent political developments in some Arab countries, it is pertinent to have a closer look at a welfare mix containing provision of social services by different providers and evaluate this welfare mix with regards to criteria of social justice as well as existing state capacity.

In ESCWA member countries, non-state actors which provide social services run the gamut from private foundations to religious or political organizations to CSOs and (for profit) market institutions. In a region marked by conflict, political instability, governance challenges and large refugee populations, these actors fill an important void. When the state is not able to provide these services, or is providing services in limited quality, users often welcome these contributions, even if they are provided at relatively high prices.

Insufficient coverage as well as unequal and unstable quality of social services also lie behind some difficulties in reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the 2015 deadline. Despite overall progress, there are still wide disparities within and across countries in indicators related to education and health. Some countries even show signs of regression in some health and education indicators, which is often due to lack of access to quality education and health services. The post-2015 development agenda will thus address critical welfare issues related to universal coverage and quality service delivery.
To this end, it is pertinent to study the prevailing status of social service provision by different providers in the ESCWA region and to evaluate this welfare mix with regards to criteria of social justice as well as existing state capacity. When activities of non-state actors are not sufficiently regulated by the State, several concerns may arise. First, without proper regulation and governance, the overall objectives of equal opportunities, social integration and progress towards the Millennium Development Goals may be in danger. Services and care are often not standardized, thereby putting the quality into question. The sources of funding can impact continuity and sustainability of services and care. This is especially the case when services provided by CSOs are funded through international donors and subject to shifting priorities. Third, when services are provided by the private sector only, based on profit-gain principles, the poorer quintiles of society may not be able to afford these services.

How can governments ensure a welfare mix that corresponds to the broader public goods of equity and equality? How can government regulation on the one hand respect the legitimate particular interests and motivation of individual actors while on the other hand ensuring equal opportunities and distributive fairness in the area of social protection and the provision of social services? Are there particular types of services that are better provided by other actors than the State? How can the State and non-state actors collaborate to maximize efforts?

As integrated social policy calls for a harmonization of roles across statutory and non-state actors in the development of social policy and services, the objective of this Forum will:

1) Evaluate social services provided by non-state actors in the region and foster knowledge sharing and discussion of experiences of states’, civil society’s and the market’s provision of social services in the region and beyond.
2) Identify the challenges and opportunities in the provision of basic social services by non-state actors with specific focus on equity, governance, regulation and sustainability.
3) Provide recommendations on a welfare mix addressing both criteria of social justice and limited state capacity.
4) Create a network for future regional knowledge exchange.

The recommendations from the forum will also inform ESCWA’s Integrated Social Policy Report V: Towards a New Welfare Mix: The Roles and Responsibilities of Public, Private and Civil Society Actors in the Provision of Social Services”

PARTICIPANTS

In order to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience between different actors, participants will be representatives of civil society organizations, government officials from Ministries of Social Affairs,
Planning, Education, Health and Labour from ESCWA member countries, as well as international experts from academia and others. Interested colleagues and experts from Lebanese as well as international organizations located in Lebanon will also be invited to attend.

**ORGANIZATION**

The Arab Forum will be jointly organized by the Social Development Division and the Economic Development and Globalization Division of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in cooperation with the International Labour Organization and the World Bank.

**DATE AND VENUE**

The Arab Forum on the Role of Civil Society in the Provision of Basic Social Services will be held on 19 and 20 December 2012 at the UN House in Beirut, Lebanon.