Distinguished delegates, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, 

I am pleased to welcome you on behalf of ESCWA to this Regional Consultative Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region, in preparation of the second High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development.

At the outset, I would like to thank our partners, the League of Arab States and the International Organization for Migration, for their willingness to collaborate with us in the organization of this event, and for hosting us here in Cairo. This partnership has been essential to the organization of this meeting. I sincerely hope that this spirit of cooperation continues into future work on migration and development.

The social and economic impact of migration in the Arab region can hardly be overstated. Migration promotes Arab regional integration at all levels, as well as the integration of the region into the global economy. Since 1990, the number of migrants in the 17 Arab countries covered by ESCWA has increased by over 10 million to reach 25 million. Whereas migrants made up 3.1 per cent of the global population in 2010, in the ESCWA region they make up over 8 per cent of the population. In some countries, particularly the oil- and gas-rich countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), migrants make up the majority of the workforce and sometimes even of the population. Meanwhile, an estimated 17 million people from ESCWA countries lived outside their countries of birth in 2010.

As we are all aware, the main driver of migration in the Arab countries is work opportunities in countries of destination in the region and beyond. Migrants have provided several countries of the region, particularly those of the GCC, with the vital skills and labour power required for these countries to achieve their ambitious development goals. Meanwhile, by taking up these opportunities, migrants are often able to access higher incomes and opportunities for career advancement and skill upgrading. This has benefited not just the individual workers but also their families and communities of origin through the financial remittances they send home, and the new ideas and linkages between countries that migrants are able to transfer.
However, the impacts of migration can be negative as well as positive. Too often migration is a result of socio-economic development failures in countries of origin, such as poor employment prospects for young people. In countries of origin with smaller populations, this can prevent them from being able to capitalize on the demographic dividends potentially afforded by a growing population, as well as raising the prospect of brain drain.

Meanwhile in countries of destination, an over-reliance on migrants can lead to the development of social and economic structures which distort labour markets and make these migrants vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Finally, given the current context in the Arab region, we cannot ignore the situation of refugees and forced migrants, whose desperate situation needs urgent attention to ensure that their humanitarian needs are met, and that hosting communities are not unduly strained.

The challenges in maximizing the development benefits of migration while minimizing its negative effects are substantial. However, since the turn of the millennium, an increased interest in the role international migration plays in development has seen not only an increase in the knowledge base on migration’s impacts, but also an emerging consensus that well-managed migration which respects the human rights of migrants can lead to a “triple-win” scenario, benefiting countries of destination, countries of origin and migrants themselves.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The first High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development was a landmark event in the development of this consensus. For the first time, countries were able to gather under the auspices of the United Nations to share their experiences in this field, and come to mutual understandings on this issue. Since 2006, the number of initiatives with regard to international migration and development has increased significantly at both regional and global levels.

Dialogue processes such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development (represented by its Swedish chair for 2013-14 in the person of Ambassador Åkerman-Börje) and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue between Arab countries of destination and Asian countries of origin of labour migrants have helped to crystallize the consensus and provide a basis for concrete activities, showing the importance of international cooperation to manage migration.

Arab countries have often been at the forefront of these initiatives. Indeed, Arab countries of origin such as Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt have been proactive in their
attempts to provide their emigrants with opportunities to contribute to the development of their homelands. Meanwhile countries of destination, such as those of the GCC, have long been leaders in facilitating labour mobility to achieve development goals and are currently engaging in dialogue with countries of origin to better-protect the workers coming to their countries.

In addition, the political changes underway in many countries of the region have provided Arab countries with an opportunity to consider the place of expatriate populations and immigrant communities in their social contracts. I hope that this meeting provides us all with an opportunity to highlight to the world how far the region has come since 2006 and the lessons that the rest of the world can learn from this region, as well as showing us what still needs to be done.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This meeting aims to feed its conclusions into the second High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, which will be held at the UN General Assembly in New York from 3 to 4 October 2013. This High-Level Dialogue will take place at a critical moment not only in the evolution of the migration and development debate, but also as the world looks towards the future global development agenda.

In 2014, the Programme of Action developed at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held here in Cairo in 1994 will see its 20-year review. The ICPD regional review will also take place here in Cairo later this month. And 2015 will mark the dates when the world will hopefully have achieved the Millennium Development Goals, and when the post-2015 development agenda will begin to be implemented.

It is increasingly becoming clear that migration is a key enabler of human development. Although not a goal in itself, migration can be a means towards the achievement of human and economic development at individual, community and national levels. Any future development agenda should consider how migration relates to its goals, while the outcomes of any such agenda on migrants themselves should also be considered.

The conclusions of our meeting can give a clear signal at the global level of the importance of integrating migration into future development agendas. The Arab region has unique experiences in relation to international migration and development which it can share with the world. We hope that this meeting can facilitate this process. I therefore look forward to your active participation in this meeting, and wish you all success in your deliberations.