



ESCWA in Dialogue with the Executive Secretaries of the Regional Commissions



ESCWA Executive Secretary Bader AlDafa, in the annual Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Dialogue with the Executive Secretaries of the Regional Commissions, provided an overview of the challenges of the financial crisis in the Western Asia region and its impact on socio-economic development and public health. This year, the dialogue addressed the theme of “regional perspectives on the global economic and financial crisis, including the impact on global public health.”

In his presentation, entitled “The Financial and Economic Crisis in the ESCWA Region: Impact on Socioeconomic Development and Public Health,” AlDafa noted that the fi-

nancial crisis unfolded at a time when most ESCWA member countries were enjoying a decade-long period of strong economic performance. Although this will certainly help them weather the effects of the crisis, GDP growth is expected to drop from 6.1% in 2008 to 2.1% in 2009, he said.

The ESCWA region is a diverse one, accounting for several countries that globally rank among the top in the Human Development Index while others are among the Least Developed Countries, such as Yemen and Sudan that are trailing significantly behind.

The presentation highlighted regional health trends and priorities concerning the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as such non-MDG regional health concerns as non-communicable diseases and injuries related to traffic accidents, wars and conflicts. “There is unequal progress towards the MDGs, with countries in conflict, including Iraq and Palestine, and the Arab LDCs not expected to meet the majority of MDGs by 2015,” AlDafa noted.

The oil sector remains the key one in Arab economies, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Oil prices increased dramatically since 2003, but due to the growing expectations of a global recession in 2009, oil prices fell sharply to-

wards the end of 2008 to \$35 a barrel.

The impact of the financial crisis is manifold, with effects on the economy, unemployment, poverty, remittance flows and, particularly crisis-related health concerns and the public health of vulnerable people. “Although the number of poor may not change due to the crisis, the International Labour Organization (ILO) projects that the intensity of poverty may increase. It also projects that remittance inflows to the ESCWA region will shrink between 1.4% and 5.2%”.

There is limited available information on the impact of the financial crisis on public health in the ESCWA region. However, it is expected that the adversity will be borne primarily by vulnerable groups, including the poor and undocumented workers. The World Health Organization (WHO) has also warned that the financial crisis may lead to increased mental health problems. Although there is little documented evidence, there is rising concern that economic vulnerability may lead to higher levels of substance abuse and violence. At the same time, although communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, remain a major concern especially in the least developed countries of the region, the burden of disease is shifting towards non-communicable diseases.

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ESCWA in Dialogue with the Executive Secretaries of the Regional Commissions (Cont.)

But the crisis is also presenting opportunities for reform of the institutional health care systems in the region and for the improvement of social safety nets, AlDafa underlined. ESCWA's role in promoting regional initiatives with a direct impact on public health will be explained, as well as its role in promoting regional integration for coherence in addressing the impact of the crisis, encouraging South-South Cooperation and promoting public-private partnerships and linkages with the civil society and academia.

ESCWA Executive Secretary said this economic crisis can be

seen as an opportunity to address some of the underlying structural social vulnerabilities in ESCWA's member countries, including the enhancement of social protection systems, integrating employment generation into national development strategies, and strengthening health care systems.

The Commission will continue its efforts to enhance the capacity of member countries to address the impact of the crisis by contributing to the availability of relevant and accurate data for evidence-based policy making and promoting regional integration. An analytical report



prepared jointly by ESCWA and the ILO will be launched soon to address specific medium to long-term policies that the region could pursue in overcoming the crisis. In an effort to ensure that the regional opportunities emerging from the crisis are beneficial to other developing countries, ESCWA will also continue to promote South-South cooperation, including in technology transfer and trade, through close collaboration with the other regional commissions.

Finally, ESCWA will continue to work on encouraging public-private partnerships, specifically for employment generation, and links with the civil society and academia to monitor the social impacts of the crisis in preparation for a high-level regional meeting on this aspect of the crisis scheduled for November. ■

ESCWA Launches IP Telephony in Beirut

On 6 July, ESCWA has officially launched at its headquarters in Beirut the new Cisco IP Telephony system, a technology that uses the computing and internet-based infrastructure to transmit and receive voice and video calls. The project,

managed under the auspices of ESCWA's Information and Communication Systems Section (ICSS), took about three months to install since the selection of its contractor. All the equipment was procured for ESCWA by UNHQ. ■



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