



UN Deputy Secretary-General: A Challenge is an Opportunity to Seize



“There are challenges (in the region), but these challenges also represent opportunities”. Not belittling the hardship facing the region, UN Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro however gave a hopeful message before she left Lebanon where she stayed for three days during which she participated in the 12th UN Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) meeting UN-ESCWA hosted on 13-14 September and met with senior Lebanese officials. In an interview with a UN public information team, Migiro tackled the issue of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Arab women leaders, the role of UN-ESCWA, new global challenges and other issues, of a special importance in a region that holds as many opportunities as challenges.

The Millennium Development Goals

Speaking of the MDGs, Migiro said there were important measures needed for the Arab LDCs to get on track for meeting these goals. It was therefore appropriate that the RCM started with the MDGs as the theme. Noting that the region faces many challenges, Migiro said such challenges represent opportunities as well. “We have talked about political instability, violence and so on, but efforts are ongoing to address those challenges. Therefore, whatever space that comes out of these efforts should be made use of for purposes of development and MDGs in particular”. She also said that the region witnessed progress in the areas of child immunization, access to education, and maternal health. Despite its slow pace, “progress serves as an incentive to the countries in the region”. She added that concerning disparities “during the RCM it was discussed that these disparities should also open opportunities. Those countries that have

made progress can invest in least developed countries. In this regard, working through the RCM, using our tools like UN-ESCWA and others, then there will be an opportunity to make progress in the areas of MDGs. Since RCM is a mechanism that seeks to bring about coordination and coherence in the countries and in the region, (this) makes the job easy. I think the opportunities are there, if there is political will and increased cooperation – and UN-ESCWA and RCM are working on that – these factors can make MDGs achievable before 2015”.

Improving Women’s Participation

Migiro did not rule out hope in achieving gender equality by 2015. She spoke of ways to enhance the political, economic and social participation of women in public life in the Arab region, and said “Gender equality and women empowerment are all attainable. There are challenges, there are opportunities. The 2007 MDGs report shows that there has been increased access to education and boost in women empowerment. But the challenges now lie in translating these significant gains into increased involvement of women in employment, decision-making, political participation”. All these are achievable, namely that a good number of the countries in the region have ratified the CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women). Despite the fact that some had reservations that derailed the process, “If these are addressed, then opportunities are immense in the region and therefore, coupled with political will, 2015 should not be a problem. In the Arab world, there are outstanding women who have done great things and who are role models. If I may just mention a few for instance, (there is) Ms.

IN THIS ISSUE

- UN Deputy Secretary-General: A Challenge is an Opportunity to Seize
- Facts and Figures

Thuraya Obeid, who has been leading the UNFPA for close to eight years, she is doing a tremendous job. She comes from the Arab world and understands the culture and the history, and she has translated this into positive gains not only for the Arab region, but for women of the world. We also have President of 61st General Assembly her Excellency, Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa; she has done a lot for women empowerment. (And there are) First Ladies, as the First Lady of Egypt and the Queen of Jordan. Political will and working on stereotypes and overcoming such obstacles will really make women move forward. You cannot have half the population of the world or of a country lagging behind and say that we are making progress because that is not possible”.

Food and Climate Challenges

Migiro tackled the challenges presented by climate change and food security, and stressed in this regard that “the challenges should be a wake up call because scientists and other observers say that climate change, food security and

UN Deputy Secretary-General: A Challenge is an Opportunity to Seize (Cont.)

fuel prices are things that could have been forecasted. The way man has been dealing with the environment and lack of investment in the agricultural sector and so, all these factors have combined to bring us to the problems that we are now facing". On the other hand, these challenges affect the achievement of the MDGs, since when it comes to climate change, "we see floods, infrastructure tends to be affected. Even in developed countries, you affect the pace of development, but for countries of this region and other developing or under-developed countries, like my continent Africa, climate change, food security and fuel prices affect the little gains that we have made in MDGs in other areas."

Concerning the role of the UN in this regard, Migiro sees it as a hopeful one, since the Organization ensures that "it continues to act as a platform using its convening authority to bring players together not only to address these problems but to plan policies and commit to action. Without addressing these issues simultaneously, then we cannot achieve progress. The hope is there in the sense that the commit-

ment is there. Secretary-General Ban has taken climate change to be his priority. He has created a climate change team within the Secretariat to advise him constantly and also to act as a bridge so that he can engage member states and engage the big emitters of greenhouse gases, addressing civil societies and local authorities. We see that there is a lot of hope there. In terms of food, the UN Secretary-General has created the high-level food crisis task force and this brings together the UN, and member states. We see that there is hope because action is ongoing. Since the UN stands there in the middle to be a new arbitrator, then we have an opportunity to influence not only policies and plans, but also action."

No Peace without Development

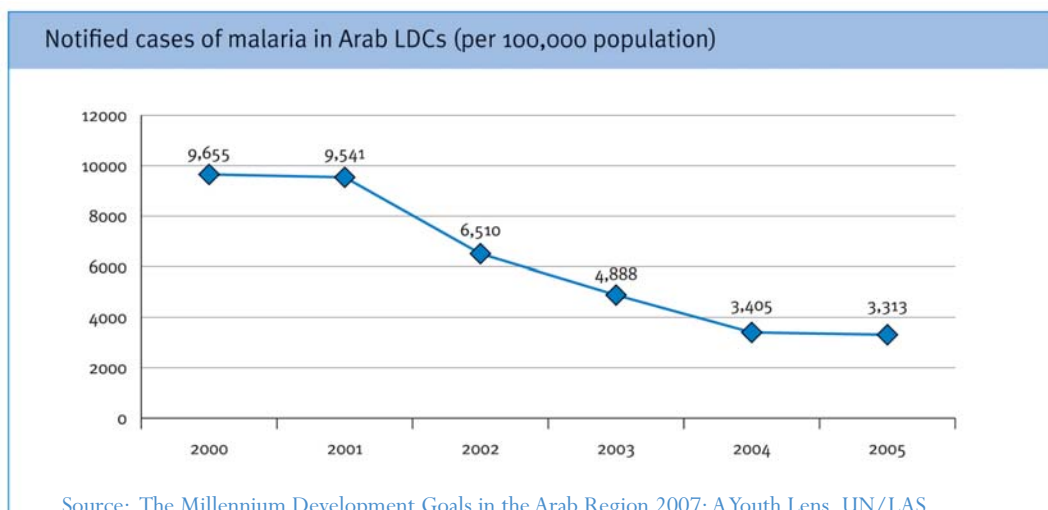
Migiro pointed out "where there is development the chances of peace are even higher. Countries that have been afflicted by conflict and political instability have no other agenda than to address peace, and in the process, there is a danger of losing sight of the need to con-

centrate on development. Then again, when you improve access to basic services, such as education, health, environmental issues, availability of food, good management of resources, and availability of strong institutions, you are contributing to peace because people will know where to go, whereas where there is chaos, people take the law in their own hands. There is very close link between development and peace. When you have worked in a way such that your people have confidence and see that there is a future in their own countries and communities then they can engage more. On the other hand, the more you invest in development, the more you are investing in peace. Similarly, if you don't have peace, you cannot focus on development. So, the attainment of MDGs depends on the governments' level of attention on institutional development to democratic processes, human rights poverty reduction, access to basic things, all these will create the necessary grounds for going even beyond the MDGs because the MDGs are simply an aspiration. They are supposed to get you up from the bottom". ■

Facts and Figures: The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2007

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases

Notified Cases of Malaria in Arab LDCs (per 100,000 population)



While malaria has been almost eliminated in most Arab countries, it remains highly endemic in Arab LDCs, where on average 3,313 cases per 100,000 persons were reported in 2005. Djibouti, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen accounted for 98 per cent of notified cases in the region. Halting the progress of malaria and reversing its incidence by 2015 in the subregion, and in the region as a whole, is therefore heavily dependent on progress in those four countries. Coverage of malaria risk areas by adequate preventive and curative measures is still very low. Current coverage in several countries is likely to be higher than what available figures suggest. Nonetheless, overall coverage in Arab LDCs still falls substantially short of the targets. ■

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