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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON LABOUR MARKETS AND LABOUR MARKET POLICY IN THE ESCWA REGION BEIRUT, 22 MARCH 2011

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) conducted an expert group meeting on labour markets and labour market policy on 22 March 2011 at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon. In response to the challenges that ESCWA member countries face in providing adequate employment to a growing population in limited-capacity labour markets, the forthcoming Fourth Report on Integrated Social Policy will be dedicated to the topic of labour markets and labour market policy. To this end, three working papers, including preliminary research findings, were presented, and validation and input was sought from the participants to enrich the forthcoming Fourth Report on Integrated Social Policy.

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Introduction

1. The Social Policy Section (SPS) of the Social Development Division (SDD) of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is dedicating the forthcoming Fourth Report on Integrated Social Policy to the topic of labour markets and labour market policy. This decision is in response to the challenges ESCWA member countries face in providing adequate employment and income to growing populations in limited-capacity labour markets. The recent socio-political events in the region also highlight the urgency of addressing labour issues. Since employment growth is an integral part of a social development strategy, a more in-depth understanding of labour market challenges and effective policy approaches in the region is needed to guide social policy.
2. In this context, SDD conducted an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on labour markets and labour market policy on 22 March 2011 at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon.
3. The EGM presented three working papers and sought reactions and input from the participants, who included member country focal points nominated by ESCWA member countries for collaboration with ESCWA on labour market data and policies. The papers included: (a) *Labour Market Data, Structures and Challenges in the ESCWA Region*; (b) *Active Labour Market Policies in the ESCWA Region*; and (c) *ESCWA Member Countries' Labour Regulations as They Relate to Flexibility and Social Protection*.
4. Against this background, the meeting aimed to achieve the following goals:
 - (a) Present the preliminary research findings to country focal points;
 - (b) Validate and discuss the research findings of the Fourth Report on Integrated Social Policy.
5. The discussion and outcomes of the EGM are expected to enrich the development of the Fourth Report on Integrated Social Policy.

I. SUMMARY OF THE RESPONSES OF THE PARTICIPANTS TO WORKING PAPERS

6. The following is a summary of responses to the research findings of the three working papers presented at the EGM:
 - (a) *Labour Market Data, Structures and Challenges in the ESCWA Region*
 7. Participants agreed with the findings of the paper, that there are significant gaps in data, especially with regard to information on unemployment and informality. Participants also expressed that efforts are needed to collect regular and comprehensive data on the labour market in their respective countries. They also stressed the importance of understanding the characteristics of the unemployed as well as understanding the motivations and characteristics of the employed in order to appropriately shape labour market policies.
 - (b) *Active Labour Market Policies in the ESCWA Region*
 8. Participants responded to the review of active labour market policies (ALMPs) in the region with the suggestion that additional research is needed to study the macroeconomic and investment policies in member countries with regard to employment generation. This research would complement the analysis of labour market policies which was presented. They agreed with the conclusion of the paper, that more monitoring and evaluation of ALMPs is needed to determine their coverage and cost-effectiveness. However, participants noted that this recommendation involves the need for increased capacity and improved coordination between relevant institutions. They also affirmed that in order for ALMPs to be worthwhile and effective, information about skills deficits should be more systematically collected, allowing ALMPs to respond directly to the needs of the labour market.

(c) *ESCWA Member Countries' Regulations as They Relate to Flexibility and Social Protection*

9. Comments on the working paper on labour regulations involved a discussion about large sectors of the working population that are excluded from such regulations, namely those informally employed and migrant labourers. Participants also discussed the need to improve and expand enforcement of existing regulations.

II. SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSION

10. The agenda for the EGM included three sessions, covering labour market data, policies and regulations.

A. LABOUR MARKET DATA

1. *Labour market data, structures and challenges*

11. Ms. Tanja Sejersen, Associate Social Affairs Officer in the Social Policy Section of the Social Development Division at ESCWA, presented a working paper entitled, *Labour Market Data, Structures and Challenges in the ESCWA Region*. She highlighted the importance of a comprehensive and standardized methodology for data collection and analysis to inform policymaking.

12. Labour income is the major source of income for individuals in the ESCWA region. Therefore, understanding the labour market is essential for developing social policy. Specific population groups, namely women, migrants and youth, deserve special attention with regard to labour market data. The changing demographics in the region, especially a growing youth population, increased female participation in the labour force and increased migration, highlight the need for data to understand current issues, trends and the motivation of individuals regarding labour force participation, in order to inform policy decisions.

13. A review of data from multiple sources including an ESCWA-administered questionnaire, national statistical websites, international organizations and national data provided to ESCWA by focal points, demonstrated that the extent of data collection varies greatly within the region. While some countries may have relatively more frequent data collection through labour force surveys and other data sources than other countries, there are gaps in the data related to social aspects and vulnerability.

14. Other challenges with labour market data in the region include infrequent data collection and poor dissemination of data. The infrequency of data collection does not allow for a country to conduct trend analysis or make forecasts. Furthermore, the variant methodologies for data collection undertaken by different countries preclude the comparability of labour market data in the ESCWA region. The availability of data to the public is limited in the majority of countries, despite increased efforts to use statistical agency websites for data dissemination. One major issue with data dissemination in the region is that metadata is often lacking or sparse. This issue is magnified by the lack of streamlining of classifications across the region, making comparisons of some variables difficult.

15. Female participation in the labour market can have a positive impact on the economy as it further increases the pool of increasingly well-educated human resources within the country. From a social perspective, female labour force participation may limit economic risk factors for individual families due to the diversification of sources of income. In the ESCWA region, female participation in the workforce is low compared to other regions, but is witnessing an increase. Women occupy a narrower set of occupations than men and are more concentrated in specific sectors. In addition, women with higher education are more likely to be unemployed than their less-educated counterparts and are also more likely to experience long-term unemployment.

16. Unemployment is predominately a youth problem in ESCWA member countries. According to ESCWA staff calculations, average unemployment rates for youth in the region are 25 per cent for 15-19

year olds and almost 20 per cent for 20-24 year olds. However, average unemployment for individuals over the age of 34 is around 5 per cent, which is comparable to international levels.¹

17. Data on vulnerable employment, unemployment and underemployment are scarce, incomparable and limit the understanding of these issues in the region. Furthermore, individuals working in the informal sector, who happen to be the most poor and most vulnerable in society, are often excluded from labour market data.

2. *Labour and employment statistics in the United Arab Emirates*

18. Mr. Mohammed El Bahi, statistical expert from the National Bureau of Statistics in the United Arab Emirates, gave a presentation on *Labour and Employment Statistics in the UAE*. The presentation focused on the statistical system of the United Arab Emirates and methods of labour market data collection and addressed some strengths and weaknesses of the methodology.

19. The United Arab Emirates follows a decentralized approach as each emirate has a central and local department which is responsible for data collection. This approach has advantages but also poses some coordination challenges.

20. A major strength of the approach is that coordination of data collection takes place in the vicinity of the target population, while at the same time being connected, at the central level, to the council of ministers, thereby ensuring that key stakeholders support and are accountable to the system. Some challenges include limited financial resources allocated to the national office of statistics. However, given that there is a growing demand for statistical data in both the private and public sectors, additional financial resources for data collection and management may become available.

21. Using and disseminating the data collected also poses some challenges. Because the United Arab Emirates is a developing society and growing at a rapid pace, providing forecasts proves difficult.

22. Labour statistics sources include the census, administrative data and labour force surveys. Since 1971, five censuses have been conducted, most recently in 2005. Statistical records are used to make population estimates. There are still inconsistencies in estimates partially due to a large (roughly 80 per cent) migrant population.

23. With regard to administrative data, the United Arab Emirates faces several challenges with data accuracy. For example, unemployment is measured by the number of people who submit an application to employment services centres. As these centres cater to both those who are employed and seeking other work and those who are unemployed and looking for a job, the submission of an application does not necessarily imply unemployment. Thus, the figures for unemployment may be inflated and such administrative data is not reliable. In addition, the multiple sources of data can cloud data accuracy. There is no commitment to international indicators or standards, specifically concerning job classification.

¹ Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (ESCWA) technical paper (in progress) *Labour Market Data, Structures and Challenges in the ESCWA Region*. Averages are calculated based on data from: **Bahrain:** Ministry of Labour and Bahrain Centre for Studies and Research, *Labour Force Survey November 2004*; **Egypt:** data available from LABORSTA, but incomparable, as it uses different age groupings, therefore not included; **Iraq:** Central Organization for Statistics, *2008 Employment and Unemployment Survey*, provided by focal point; **Jordan:** Department of Statistics, *2009 Employment and Unemployment Survey*; **Kuwait:** Central Statistical Office, *2008 Labour Force Survey* data provided by focal point; **Lebanon:** Central Administration of Statistics, *Household Living Conditions Survey 2007*, age group 65+ contains individuals aged 65-69; **Oman:** No data found nor provided; **Palestine:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *2010 Labour Force Survey Database 2000-2009*; **Qatar:** Qatar Statistics Authority, *2010 Population and Housing Census*; **Saudi Arabia:** Central Department of Statistics and Information, *Labour Force Survey (2009)*; **The Sudan:** Central Bureau of Statistics, *2008 Census*; **Syrian Arab Republic:** Central Bureau of Statistics, *Manpower/Labour Force Survey: 2009*; **United Arab Emirates:** National Bureau of Statistics, *2009 Labour Force Survey*; **Yemen:** 1999: Central Statistical Organisation, statistics/labor force statistics, excel file table 6, rates calculated.

24. The United Arab Emirates also conducted labour force surveys in 2008 and 2009. The surveys covered all the emirates but did not cover one group, of about 30 per cent of all workers, those that have moved from one emirate to another or from one sector to another. The survey had a very high response rate of 95 per cent.

Points raised by participants

(a) There are significant data gaps related to unemployment and informality. More regular, comprehensive data collection and dissemination is needed in this regard as well as improved understanding of the needs and motivation of individuals seeking employment;

(b) Data need to be disaggregated by nationals and non-nationals. Because migrant labourers, by definition are working, including them in unemployment figures can give misleading information about the characteristics of the unemployed. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the unemployment rate in 2008 was 5.1 per cent in total and 9.9 per cent for Saudi nationals.² In another example in Saudi Arabia, including migrant labourers in the unemployment figures gives the impression of increased female participation in the workforce since many migrant labourers are female;

(c) The demographic shift, leading to more individuals who are able to participate in the workforce, is both a blessing and a curse. The demographic “window of opportunity” is a blessing because it allows for lower work dependency rates, with fewer dependent on others to sustain them. Savings and investments can increase with a higher number of people working, leading to economic growth. However, a growing work population poses some labour market challenges if the economy is unable to generate sufficient jobs;

(d) There is often a mismatch between job requirements and skills of jobseekers, requiring vocational training to align the skills of individuals to match labour market needs. However, in some countries, the highest unemployment rates are not necessarily among the uneducated. In Lebanon, for example, university graduates have the highest rate of unemployment, as few jobs requiring a higher skills level are available to candidates graduating from a number of high quality universities;

(e) Optimistic figures were presented for the labour market in Egypt, currently undergoing many changes as the result of the recent socio-political events. While those in the public sector are given fixed employment, the tourism sector, traditionally a source of many jobs, has been greatly affected and the return of migrants from the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and Algeria has generated even more unemployment;

(f) A participant from the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower and Immigration provided an estimate of 24 per cent unemployment for women, and some initiatives are underway that focus on their economic empowerment. Most of the unemployed in Egypt are in the rural areas and have the highest level of education. In addition, she mentioned that the informal sector is large, with an estimated 15 million participants;

(g) Understanding motivation for work is important data to be captured. The United Arab Emirates labour force survey includes a question which attempts to determine the motivation of an individual for switching between sectors. Wages are higher in the private sector while public sector work is characterized by less hours and more flexible work conditions. More women are likely to work in the public sector. Some programmes, such as the “Khalifa” programme in the United Arab Emirates, try to bridge the gap between the differences in the public and private sectors, so as to absorb the unemployed.

² ESCWA staff calculations based on data provided by Saudi Arabia, Central Department of Statistics and Information, Manpower and Research Bulletin, available at: http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=85&Itemid=162.

B. LABOUR MARKET POLICIES

1. *Active Labour market policies*

25. Ms. Diane Zovighian, a consultant for ESCWA, presented a working paper on *Active Labour Market Policies in the ESCWA Region*. She presented research on a survey of 87 ALMPs and information gathered from programmes or implementing agencies in order to guide policy recommendations for the region. Findings showed that youth are a recurring target group for ALMPs, reflecting Government recognition of youth unemployment as a major challenge for the region. In addition, findings indicated that training programmes and micro, small and medium enterprise (M/SME) development programmes represent a vast share of ALMPs in the ESCWA region.

26. Public Employment Services (PES) proved to be cost-effective in developed countries. In the ESCWA region, PES are one of the weakest components of labour policies and are characterized by low levels of activity, limited services and low coverage rates. In addition, there is little or no regulation of private employment offices. Some countries have addressed the weaknesses of the PES by creating nationalization agencies which provide integrated services (as is the case in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries) and by regulating private employment agencies (as is the case in Jordan).

27. Training programmes compose the main components of labour policies in the Middle East. However, outcomes are poor due to the mismatch between the skills teaching offered and labour market needs, poor quality control, and poor coordination and regulation of private training providers. Approaches for M/SME programmes vary within the ESCWA region. GCC countries tend to focus on nationalization, with a strong business orientation, while non-GCC countries implement these programmes with the objective of poverty alleviation.

28. This review points to several policy challenges relating to coverage, policy integration and coordination, as ALMPs in the region cater to a very small share of the unemployed. Women and rural residents have the least access to ALMPs, which also neglect those in the informal sector.

29. In the ESCWA region, ALMPs are not developed in coordination with other social policies (for example, education policy) leading to poor coverage and implementation. International experience shows that providing combined services to the unemployed can be beneficial and provide comprehensive approaches to improving unemployment.

30. Because trainings comprise the majority of ALMPs in the ESCWA region, there is a need for Governments to coordinate non-state actors including the private sector, donors and NGOs involved in the provision of trainings which would result in more efficient, targeted and complementary ALMPs.

2. *Active labour market policies - the case of Jordan*

31. Mr. Mousa Khalaf, Director of the Policy and Strategic Planning Unit in the Ministry of Labour, Jordan, presented an overview of current ALMPs implemented in his country. These include PES, employment subsidies, training centres and initiatives and M/SME development programmes.

32. As for PES, the “Al Manar” project along with the Directorate of Employment, coordinates services in 20 centres around the country and creates a unified database for job seekers. In addition, Jordan has adopted an employment-technical and vocational education and training (E-TVET) programme which serves as a comprehensive PES reform.

33. Several projects aimed at providing employment opportunities, implemented by the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, foreign donors, the armed forces and private sector institutions, have trained thousands of youth and women, and targeted sectors and geographic

locations in need. On-the-job training projects are aimed at increasing the capacity of employees. Other programmes target university graduates to provide practical skills and experience.

Points raised by participants

(a) There seems to be little information on the impact of ALMPs and their cost-effectiveness in the region;

(b) Active labour market policies are costly and countries should determine their budgetary implications. Ideas for generating funds include partnerships with private businesses. Some countries have training funds that rely on levy fees. In Kuwait, there is a committee that is responsible for overseeing the evaluation and financing of ALMPs;

(c) The institutional capacity for implementing and evaluating ALMPs also needs to be assessed. Generally, such policies are quick fixes and not long-term solutions;

(d) Donor support for ALMPs is well intentioned but is not necessarily sustainable. With donor support, there are a number of risks that threaten sustainability including costs of ALMPs not included in the public budget, poor coordination between donors and duplication of effort;

(e) Governance of these programmes is a concern. There is a need for the integration of ALMPs and institutional coordination between different public departments, such as labour, education and social affairs. One example is in Iraq, where the ESCWA focal point estimates an unemployment rate of 15 per cent, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education have set up a committee to coordinate the educational system and labour market requirements as well as determine the legal retirement age;

(f) There is a call for an integration of cross-governmental agencies as ministries of labour need to coordinate with statistical agencies. Statistical data is needed to identify and forecast needs in the public sector, private sector and education. Labour market issues cannot be dealt with separately or in an isolated manner;

(g) Trainings offered as one type of ALMPs need special attention. The content of the trainings is critical, as it must respond to labour market needs. One example is that of Egypt where there are numerous trainings that do not necessarily match the needs of the labour market. While funds are spent on construction of training centres, what is needed is a reform of the training curricula;

(h) In addition, the donor-supported training programmes may not necessarily respond to the needs of the country as curricula are not always developed in partnership. It is important that these trainings gain accreditation by the country;

(i) In order for workers to develop the skills they need, the duration for training programmes, including vocational education, should be extended and complemented by on-the-job training;

(j) Saudi Arabia is undertaking a new approach towards training and is partnering with the private sector which bears the responsibility for developing the training programmes while the public sector is responsible for its funding;

(k) In some countries, nationalization is driving policies. In Kuwait, for example, there is a plan to reduce the number of non-national workers and promote certain skills among school dropouts and integrate them into the private market. In addition, there are quotas for nationals in certain sectors and jobs.

C. LABOUR MARKET REGULATION IN THE ESCWA REGION

1. *ESCWA Member Countries' Labour Regulations as They Relate to Flexibility and Social Protection*

34. Ms. Naela Haddad, First Social Affairs Officer at ESCWA, began this session with a presentation on the working paper, *ESCWA Member Countries' Labour Regulations as They Relate to Flexibility and Social Protection*, in which she gave an overview of three areas of labour market regulation: employment protection, minimum wage and provision for social security. While an international debate continues on the effect of regulations on the labour market, a guiding principle for Governments is to have a balance of regulations which are conducive to growth, employment generation, social security and protection, rather than seeking market flexibility on its own merit.

35. Coverage under labour laws in ESCWA countries is limited because it excludes major segments of workers, mostly those employed in the informal sector. In addition, separate legislation for civil servants, members of the police force, public sector employees and migrant labourers among others contribute to labour market segmentation. Ms. Haddad argues for the need to regulate and govern labour laws and legislations.

2. *The Status of Labour Market Regulation in the ESCWA Region*

36. Mr. Ibrahim Saif, Secretary General of the Economic and Social Council of Jordan, presented a paper on the *Status of Labour Market Regulation in the ESCWA Region*. Building upon the presentation of Ms. Haddad, Mr. Saif covered hiring laws, minimum wage, non-wage benefits, social security contribution, firing regulations, severance payments and unemployment benefits in the ESCWA region, where labour regulations are in line with international benchmarks. For example, average maximum working hours in ESCWA countries are the same as those of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. In addition, several ESCWA countries embarked on labour reforms and introduced new labour regulations to regulate their labour markets. However, trend analysis demonstrated that the outcome of such labour regulations on the labour market is mixed. For example, some countries witnessed increased productivity as a result of wage increases while other countries witnessed an inverse relationship. Mr. Saif concluded that ESCWA countries are characterized by having weak institutions that govern and support labour market regulation development (for example, governmental departments and trade unions, respectively).

Points raised by participants

(a) Typically, regulation does not cover the informal sector, which in many countries, has the largest share of workers. Workers in this sector are in most need of protection, as they are often the poorest and most vulnerable. Also, the social security system is very modest, as no contributions are received from the informal sector;

(b) A common definition of the informal sector is needed, as characteristics in the Arab region differ from other regions. A common methodology is needed to measure the informal sector;

(c) To improve the informal sector, it is suggested to adopt “on-the-job training” or microcredit models that support workers in this sector and facilitate “formalization” of their businesses;

(d) In Jordan, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation is licensing 30 home-based occupations in order to help employees in this sector market their products and services. This is one way to provide support to informal workers;

(e) Migrant workers also need to be protected by national legislation. Those who travel between countries within the ESCWA region are often not protected in regard to the transfer of social security or sponsorship;

(f) While the laws themselves are advanced, enforcement is lacking. Without enforcement, the laws provide little social protection;

(g) A main priority for countries should be the assurance of freedom of association, specifically the freedom to set up trade unions and collective bargaining;

(h) Policy coherence is needed. Ministries of labour typically have a role in the implementation, but not in the shaping of labour policy. A more central role is needed;

(i) Minimum wage setting should have a mechanism in place to ensure that wages are reflective of the cost of living. In addition, minimum wage should be decided through a collective bargaining method. Wages of those in the public sector are generally low and there is very little increase in wages. Minimum wage should be enforced;

(j) There is a need for reform, as a key feature of the current socio-political crisis is the lack of connection between economic and political reform.

III. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

A. VENUE AND DATE

37. The EGM on Labour Markets and Labour Market Policy in the ESCWA Region was held in Beirut on 22 March 2011.

B. PARTICIPANTS

38. In addition to experts from ESCWA, the meeting was attended by country focal points, who were nominated by ESCWA member countries for collaboration with ESCWA on labour market data and policies, and a number of regional experts and representatives working in various national centres, ministries, and international and regional organizations working in the field of labour, statistics and policy. Ten of the fourteen ESCWA member countries were represented.

C. OPENING OF THE MEETING

39. Mr. Frederico Neto, Director of the Social Development Division opened the meeting by introducing the theme of the forthcoming Fourth Report on Integrated Social Policy, which has a specific focus on labour markets. For the majority of people in the ESCWA region, labour is the only source of income. Therefore, labour issues are central to livelihood and social development.

40. Mr. Mohamed Lamine Fares, Advisor to the Director General of the Arab Labour Organization (ALO), presented an opening statement in which he emphasized the timeliness of the meeting, given the recent socio-political events in the Arab world, triggered by issues of unemployment and living conditions. According to Mr. Fares, seventeen million people in the Arab Region are currently unemployed. In recent months, Governments took action in areas they had previously neglected, including efforts for job creation and increased wages. While these are desirable interventions, they were either too late or not enough. These recent movements proved that policymakers are not limited by resources and have the ability to make changes. Although foreign direct investment has increased, unemployment rates have hardly been affected even in countries that are said to have economic success such as Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. Mr. Fares argued that it is time to integrate social objectives with development and review economic reform

programmes. Further, he emphasized that labour issues, such as unemployment, are regional rather than country-specific issues. The 2009 Arab Economic Summit in Kuwait illustrated the need for a regional approach to tackle labour issues. The issues of employment and labour markets and conditions of work deserve to receive priority attention at the country, regional and international levels. What should be envisioned is freedom of organization, laws and regulations that are more protective to workers, a focus on the informal sector, a trend towards a new Arab social contract in which civil society will participate with economic and social actors, the transformation of migration challenges into opportunities and an emphasis on broad-based dialogue on labour issues. He ended the opening statement by stating that ESCWA and the ALO share the same objectives and such commonality can be a basis for future cooperation between the two organizations.

41. Ms. Gisela Nauk, Chief of the Social Policy Section at ESCWA gave opening remarks in which she emphasized that the meeting will focus on labour markets from a social perspective rather than an economic perspective as labour is critical to social development, especially for the most poor and vulnerable. The objective of the meeting, in summary, is to examine the functioning of labour markets and how they contribute to social aspects.

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