ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)

ESCWA ANNUAL REPORT
2008

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Introduction

The world has seen significant developments during the period under review (April 2007-March 2009). Along with climate change, the emergence of the food, fuel and financial crises has further exacerbated existing challenges within the region, impacting upon every policy, plan and programme, whatever the field of activity. The effect of these intertwined developments is not confined to a single country or a single region; nor are they limited to a single sphere of endeavour. Rather, they extend across the complex spectrum of development work, requiring an intensification of effort if we are to safeguard the achievements made thus far and accomplish still more in the future.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) continues to carry out its mission, benefiting from its dual position within the United Nations and the Arab region. It works with its member countries to identify their priorities in the light of these developments, supporting them in dealing with the major challenges and concerns they face across a broad range of issues. Today, more than ever, the Commission focuses on fostering regional integration and encouraging enhanced interaction between the region and the rest of the world, with the overriding objective of further promoting economic and social development.

ESCWA endeavours to provide a framework for the formulation and harmonization of sectoral policies for member countries, a platform for in-depth dialogue and a home base for expertise, knowledge and information. These issues range from ongoing conflict and political tension to the impact of the financial and economic crises, from the implementation of sustainable development strategies to the formulation of national statistics development policies, and from the realization of an inclusive information society to mainstreaming gender into policies, programmes and projects.

The Commission is mandated to promote economic and social development in line with the international agenda. By using a wide range of tools and instruments, tailored to the specific needs of the region, the objectives of the organization are implemented through seven subprogrammes: conflict mitigation and development; economic development and integration; information and communications technology (ICT) for regional integration; statistics for evidence-based policymaking; integrated management of natural resources for sustainable development; integrated social policies; and advancement of women.

The achievements in these seven subprogrammes during the period under review were significant. Among other major accomplishments, we continued to promote transport and trade facilitation by developing transport agreements and highlighting the single window concept; provided a forum for the first time to deliberate the implementation of the Monterrey Consensus and financing for development issues; strengthened the use of renewable energy and management of water resources; launched a number of initiatives and networks for development of the ICT sector and an e-network for national machineries for women; supported conflict-affected Palestine and Iraq; assisted in the production and definition of accurate and comparable statistical indicators; provided advocacy efforts and policy advice on intersectoral social development plans; and addressed the means to safeguard the economic, social and political well-being of women in times of war and conflict.

During 2009, ESCWA will continue to support the region in achieving internationally-agreed development objectives, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It will continue to work on the promotion of intraregional trade and investment; the integration of transport and communications infrastructure; the harmonization and facilitation of trade and transport; and the coordination of strategies and plans for the development of the ICT sector. It will also pursue the formulation and adoption of integrated social policies that balance economic and social development. Addressing these cross-cutting issues will

provide a basis for further advancing the region and developing policy options to buffer the impact of the food, fuel and financial crises.

Using a results-oriented approach and drawing upon the expertise of staff members, this annual report provides a comprehensive regional perspective on the major socio-economic development issues and challenges facing the region, as well as the achievements of the organization. An interactive CD-ROM has also been developed to provide an alternative means of sharing and disseminating this information for greater public impact.

<div align="right">
Bader AlDafa
Under-Secretary-General and
Executive Secretary
</div>

What is ESCWA?

Stability and prosperity are the watchwords of the United Nations Charter. They are prerequisites for sound and cordial relations between nations, based on respect for the principle of equal rights that ensures self-determination and provides equality of opportunity to pursue a higher standard of living and employment for all through consistent economic growth and social development. The five regional commissions were created by the United Nations in order to fulfil the economic and social goals set out in the United Nations Charter by promoting cooperation and integration between countries in each region of the world. Those commissions are the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE, established in 1947); the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP, 1947); the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 1948); the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA, 1958); and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA, 1973).

ESCWA Membership (14 Countries)

- Bahrain (year of admission: 1973)
- Egypt (1977)
- Iraq (1973)
- Jordan (1973)
- Kuwait (1973)
- Lebanon (1973)
- Oman (1973)
- Palestine (1977)
- Qatar (1973)
- Saudi Arabia (1973)
- The Sudan (2008)
- Syrian Arab Republic (1973)
- United Arab Emirates (1973)
- Yemen (1973)

THE ROLE OF ESCWA IN THE UNITED NATIONS

ESCWA forms part of the United Nations Secretariat and, like the other regional commissions, operates under the supervision of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Objectives

- To support economic and social development in the countries of the region;

- To promote cooperation between the countries of the region;

- To encourage interaction between member countries and promote the exchange of experience, best practice and lessons learned;

- To achieve regional integration between member countries;

- To ensure interaction between Western Asia and other regions, bringing the circumstances and needs of the countries in the region to the attention of the rest of the world.

Mission

ESCWA provides a framework for the formulation and harmonization of sectoral policies for member countries, a platform for congress and coordination, a hub for expertise and knowledge, and an information observatory. ESCWA activities are coordinated with the divisions and main offices of the Headquarters of the United Nations, specialized agencies, and international and regional organizations, including the League of Arab States, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

ESCWA staff

The Commission and Other Intergovernmental Bodies

The ministerial session, held every two years, is the governing body of ESCWA (the Commission) and mandates its policy. In addition, ESCWA has seven specialized subsidiary intergovernmental committees that meet biennially, with the exception of the Committee on Transport, which meets annually. Those committees are as follows:

- The Statistical Committee (established in 1992);

- The Committee on Social Development (established in 1994);

- The Committee on Energy (established in 1995);

- The Committee on Water Resources (established in 1995);

- The Committee on Transport (established in 1997);

- The Technical Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region (established in 1997);

- The Committee on Women (established in 2003).

Financial Resources

The ESCWA budget is funded by United Nations financial resources. The Commission also receives financial contributions and donations from outside the regular budget, which are used to fund additional projects to serve ESCWA member countries. Those contributions are deposited in trust funds and their use is regulated by formal agreements. Additional contributions from Governments, businessmen and private sector companies are also sought in order to enable ESCWA to assume an even more effective role in the interests of the countries of the region.

Fast Facts About ESCWA

Established: 1973
Location: Beirut, Lebanon
Member countries: 14
Budget: US$ 68,168,500
Executive Secretary: Bader Omar AlDafa
ESCWA staff: 261
Meetings: 193 in 2008
Documents and publications: 149 in 2008
Official languages: Arabic, English and French

PART I

**MAJOR CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
IN THE ESCWA REGION**

Financial Crisis: Investing for Optimal Growth
By Mona Fattah

The first symptoms of the current financial crisis were observed in 2006, when the boom in the real estate market in the United States of America began to falter. Initially, ESCWA member countries were not affected as severely as other regions; however, their growth prospects for 2009 and 2010 look increasingly uncertain. The sharp decline in prices of crude oil, stocks and real estate have taken a particularly heavy toll on such countries as Dubai in the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, and, to a lesser extent, on the other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Given the substantial accumulation of foreign reserves in recent years, however, the external balance of the region is not expected to deteriorate to such an extent as to cause a serious balance of payments problem in 2009. Nonetheless, this external constraint will undoubtedly affect the growth prospects of ESCWA member countries.

This situation further justifies the need for higher levels of regional cooperation and coordination, and an enhanced governance structure that mitigates the impact of future crises on both the regional and international economies. To respond optimally to these challenges, a framework and an appropriate environment are required to enable countries to create space for policy experimentation and provide access to the ideas, technology and knowledge that will facilitate growth and development.

As part of its efforts to confront the challenges of financing for development, ESCWA fulfilled the role of focal point for the five United Nations regional commissions at the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus (Doha, 29 November – 2 December 2008). The principal outcome of the Conference, the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development,[*] recognized the severe impact that the current financial and economic crises have had on the ability of developing countries to mobilize resources for development, and expressed deep concern about the impact of the current financial crisis and global economic slowdown on the ability of developing countries to access the necessary financing for their development objectives. It reaffirmed the commitment to meaningful trade liberalization, ensuring that trade plays a full part in promoting economic growth, employment and development for all, and called for intensification of international efforts to prevent debt crises by enhancing international financial mechanisms for crisis prevention and resolution in cooperation with the private sector, and by finding solutions that are transparent and acceptable to all.

In order to address these challenges and opportunities posed by the financial crisis in the ESCWA region, further investment in low-risk and real profit-generating sectors, such as trade in goods (primarily food, agricultural products and related industries) and services, and in transport systems is therefore crucial.

Indeed, the role of transport in economic development can be viewed from a dual perspective: first, transport as a service to trade and second, transport as a trade in services. To fully reap the benefits, the transport infrastructure needs to become more efficient and multimodal transport systems more developed, with a view to encouraging productive investments in such areas as agriculture and industry. Moreover, cooperation and coordination at the regional level would assist member countries in adopting concepts of integrated transport planning and logistics, which in turn would further improve efficiency, reduce costs and enhance competitiveness. Ultimately, this would promote multilateral cooperation for the development of an integrated transport system at the subregional level and lead to the

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[*] United Nations. 2008. *Doha Declaration on Financing for Development: Outcome Document of the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus* (A/CONF.212/L.1/Rev.1).

adoption of policies to determine the most appropriate course of action for dealing effectively with issues relating to international trade and transport facilitation.

During 2007 and 2008, ESCWA has therefore focused its trade and transport efforts on four areas: improving understanding and increasing awareness of international trade as a major contributor to the national economy; providing assistance and support to member countries in achieving trade-led regional integration and securing greater participation in the multilateral trading system through the use of trade as an engine for growth in their national economies; strengthening the capacity of member countries to formulate and implement policies and programmes for improving transport infrastructure and logistics within the framework of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq; and increasing facilitation of transboundary flows of goods, services, persons and capital between member countries. Today, ESCWA continues to serve the region within this framework on the national, regional and international levels by supporting its member countries in setting appropriate strategies, revising policies and strengthening existing measures, tools and mechanisms in order to better respond to the challenges posed by the global financial and economic crises.

Climate Change and Sustainable Development
By Jana El-Baba

Environmental problems resulting from water scarcity and land degradation pose significant challenges for the ESCWA region. Environmental degradation issues are particularly acute in already fragile and over-populated areas, and it is likely that their intensity will be compounded by the effects of climate change. Indeed, recent scientific projections by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change[1] indicate that, despite the fact that the region is one of the lowest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, ESCWA member countries will be disproportionately affected by climate change.[2]

Climate change is expected to have a diverse environmental, social and economic impact on the region. Major environmental impacts are likely to include intensified drought, land degradation and water scarcity in almost all member countries. Rising sea levels may lead to the flooding of large parts of the most fertile agricultural lands in the Nile Delta in Egypt and the Shatt al-Arab in Iraq. Submerged coastal zones will lead to population migration, especially in Bahrain, Egypt and Kuwait.[3] Furthermore, as one of the most arid areas of the world, the ESCWA region would suffer from reduced precipitation, both in the Mediterranean basin and in upstream countries supplying most of the renewable freshwater in the region. Climate change is also expected to have a severely negative impact on water quality (leading to pollution and the intrusion of seawater into groundwater aquifers), water quantity (variability of intensity, duration, distribution and seasonal shift of precipitation) and ecosystems (resulting in loss of biodiversity, further land degradation and increasing desertification). As in other parts of the world, the region is also expected to suffer a greater number of natural disasters, including extended drought, cyclones, floods and severe hurricanes that, combined with other factors, would endanger coastal oil and gas production facilities in the Gulf countries.

Climate change is also expected to have a significant impact on agriculture and oil and gas production, and is likely to blight the burgeoning tourism sector in the region, particularly in coastal areas. As the region is a net importer of food, a decrease in water resources and arable land, coupled with such natural disasters as drought or flooding, caused or worsened by climate change, will adversely affect agricultural produce and productivity, resulting in an increase in food imports. A substantial increase in food imports at a time of insecure global food supplies and rising food prices will not only threaten food security, but wreak devastating effects on the poor and vulnerable, particularly in rural and remote communities in the region. The tourism sector, especially along the coastlines of the Gulf peninsula and the Red Sea, could be exposed to considerable challenges from rising sea levels and increasing constraints on available water. Responding to the challenges posed by water scarcity and degradation of water quality will require significant investment.

Such environmental and economic impact brings with it adverse social implications. These include internal and external migration as a result of drought and rising seawater levels; escalating unemployment and poverty, with a concomitant threat to health; and an increasing risk of regional conflict from competition for scarce water resources. In the coming few years, these phenomena will not only hamper the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the region, but also pose a threat to the sustainability of MDG achievements beyond 2015.

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[1] Pachauri, R.K. and Reisinger, A. (eds.). 2007. *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*, Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

[2] *Role of the Energy Sector in Countering the Potential Impact of Climate Change* (E/ESCWA/SDPD/2009/IG.1/4). (Document only available in Arabic.)

[3] *Potential Impacts of Climate Change on the Water Resources Sector and Possible Adaptation Measures* (E/ESCWA/SDPD/2008/IG.1/3).

In recognition of this growing threat, ESCWA activities in this field have focused on facilitating the formulation and implementation of sustainable development strategies, policies and programmes in response to global mandates arising from the 2005 World Summit on Sustainable Development,[4] the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation[5] and the MDGs. Principal areas of activity include sustainable patterns of production and consumption of water and energy resources; integrated management of water resources; development of energy networks and renewable energy in order to enhance energy efficiency; and sustainable development of the production sectors.

At the twenty-fifth ESCWA session in May 2008, member countries adopted a resolution concerning the addressing of climate change issues in the region.[6] The resolution requests the ESCWA secretariat to prepare an assessment of the economic and social vulnerability of the region to climate change, with particular emphasis on its impact on freshwater resources. It also requests ESCWA to take all measures necessary to increase awareness of climate change, both in terms of adjusting to and alleviating its impact, and develop an Arab framework action plan on climate change in partnership with the League of Arab States, the Regional Office for West Asia of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP/ROWA) and other relevant regional organizations. The resolution is in support of the Arab Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change, adopted unanimously by the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment at its nineteenth session in December 2007.[7]

In response to this call, ESCWA will continue to exert efforts in building the capacity of member countries to address climate change. It will also seek to foster a deeper understanding of measures to mitigate climate change and will support the implementation of such measures. As part of these efforts it will address such issues as the vulnerability of the water sector to climate change, including identifying appropriate adaptation measures; large-scale renewable energy applications; reducing transport emissions; and enhancing energy efficiency. ESCWA will continue to offer technical assistance to member countries and will extend this service to include guidance on the preparation of action plans and the formulation of measures to combat climate change.

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[4] A/RES/60/1.

[5] http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/WSSD_PlanImpl.pdf.

[6] Resolution 281 (XXV) of 29 May 2008 concerning Addressing climate change issues in the Arab region. See ESCWA, *Report on the Twenty-fifth Session 26-29 May 2008* (E/ESCWA/25/10/Rev.1), p. 5.

[7] The Technical Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment, The General Secretariat of the League of Arab States, *The Arab Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change* (2007).

Social Policy Integration
By Tania Faour, Nadine Daou and Maisaa Youssef

ESCWA member countries face significant challenges related to social development, poverty and inequality. The impending global financial and economic crises, compounded by soaring food prices, has sent shock waves through many economies in the region and threatened to undermine hard-won social development gains at a time when many countries are already facing considerable social disparities. The reliance on economic growth as the main engine of change – and from which social benefits were expected to trickle down – has failed to redress the most pressing social problems. Across the region, such basic social services as education and health are all too frequently not only unevenly distributed, but inadequate in their scope and reach, and, as a result, many member countries face significant difficulties in achieving the MDGs. Existing social programmes are often designed as appendages to mainstream policymaking and typically implemented by bodies which are isolated from each other, leading to the squandering of human and financial resources, the exacerbation of crises of poverty and unemployment, and the heightening of social and economic inequality.

As part of its Social Policy series, ESCWA is providing a platform for leading edge thinking on mainstreaming and integrating social equity and human rights concerns across all areas of public policy. The report Integrated Social Policy Report II: From Concept to Practice[1] puts forward a normative framework that is both timely and relevant. It presents Governments with a three-tier framework in which social equity concerns are at the heart of every economic and public policy adopted; coordinated implementation of quality social services for all is achieved through optimized design,

"Policymakers in the region must adopt a new vision for a social policy that is more holistic and in tune with regional and global economic developments."

Jihad Az'our, Former Minister of Finance, Lebanon

management and delivery; and a shared consensus engages social partners in continuous policy dialogue, including the renegotiation of social priorities. At the core of the framework is the need for countries in the region to adopt an integrated approach to social policy, not from a charitable perspective, but as an economic, political, social and cultural imperative.

The lack of an enabling environment and institutional mechanisms to regulate, monitor and assess the impact of social policy interventions is a major challenge in the region. Debates on issues of equity, inclusion, exclusion and social justice are generally ineffective, given the lack of institutional support for a public domain within which such ideas could be proposed and discussed. This is not to say that such debates do not take place; they do, whether in the media, among academics, or even through the protest culture of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other social movements. However, what is lacking are the institutional mechanisms to take up such debates at the policymaking and monitoring levels, ensuring that they are given due consideration by policymakers.

In order to take up this challenge, member countries need to consider a number of long-term initiatives, including increasing public monitoring and reporting through social audits, public hearings, opinion polls, independent research centres and the media; emphasizing accountability through "right to information" bills that explain resource allocation and distribution; supporting research centres of excellence; improving the quality of public discourse; and creating the mechanisms and institutional frameworks within which all stakeholders can come together to participate in identifying and monitoring social outcomes.

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[1] E/ESCWA/SDD/2008/3.

Working with member countries to implement intermediary strategies that would support an integrated social policy approach, ESCWA has produced information kits on social observatories[2] and economic and social councils.[3] These kits highlight the experience of social policy institutions around the world and put forward guiding questions for consideration in the countries of the region.

However, disparities in economic structure, demographics, political systems and institutional capacity necessitate differentiated strategies in the design and implementation of social policy interventions in order to take into account national specificities. ESCWA is working with member countries to develop tailor-made solutions to the complex socio-economic challenges which they face. From Bahrain to the Sudan, Egypt and Palestine, ESCWA has supported broad-based social policy consultations, often spanning over a year, with the aim of achieving a participatory assessment of the economic and social challenges facing the country and arriving at a consensus on options and solutions.

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[2] E/ESCWA/SDD/2008/Technical paper 1.

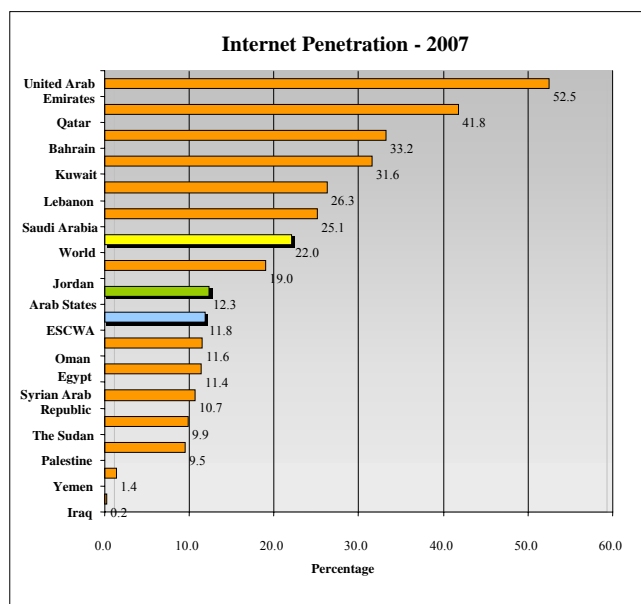[3] E/ESCWA/SDD/2008/Technical paper 2.

ICT-related Development Issues

By Zahr Bou-Ghanem, Mansour Farah and Nibal Idlebi

The ESCWA region is experiencing a widening digital divide and faces major challenges in building the information society. The realization of an inclusive information society in the region would enhance the quality of life of its citizens, including their educational and working environments, and support efforts towards sustainable development and regional integration.

The digital divide in the region can be seen on both internal and external levels: between countries, between urban and rural areas within countries and between the ESCWA region and other regions of the world. The extent of the digital divide is apparent from the following graph, which compares Internet penetration rates in 2007.

Enhancing the enabling environment is the key to advancing the information society in the region and addressing challenges related to information and communications technology (ICT). Means through which this could be achieved include encouraging the use of ICT tools in Government and education, promoting digital Arabic content (DAC) and developing the ICT sector. The optimal means, however, is the introduction of cyber legislation, which would also provide the associated benefits of intellectual property protection, while contributing to building trust in electronic services and tools.

Source: International Telecommunication Union 2007.

Implementing Formulated Plans of Action

One of the challenges to the development of the information society in the ESCWA region is the implementation of formulated plans of action. The outcomes of the two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)[1] were the Geneva Plan of Action in 2003[2] and the Tunis Agenda in 2005.[3] These constitute guiding plans, to which commitments have been made at the global level. The challenge for the ESCWA region in meeting these commitments is to create and implement regional plans that are in line with the global plan of action while specifically addressing the needs of the region.

These plans include the Regional Plan of Action for Building the Information Society[4] and the plan of action for the Arab ICT Strategy for the period 2007-2012.[5] The latter, formulated in 2008, sets out activities for the implementation of the Arab ICT Strategy, seeking not simply to develop the ICT sector, but to establish a competitive market within it that will enable the development of an information society offering services that are both inclusive and of high quality.

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[1] http://www.itu.int/wsis/index.html.

[2] http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc_multi.asp?lang=en&id=1160|1160.

[3] http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html.

[4] http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/ictd-04-4.pdf.

[5] http://www.aticm.org.eg/upload/Strategy/تكنولوجيا المعلومات - يوليو 2007.doc. (Document only available in Arabic.)

The Need for Evidence-based Policymaking

A further challenge facing the region is the need for evidence-based policymaking that relies on basic indicators and profiling of the information society in order to produce policies and strategies that optimize development. The adoption of internationally-agreed core ICT indicators is another significant challenge, particularly in view of the need to build capacity within the region for measuring the progress made towards the information society. Targeted efforts are essential for the harmonization of methodologies used in the compilation, analysis and updating of ICT-related statistical data. Successfully addressing this challenge by adopting ICT indicators and collecting and analysing data would result in sound national policies and strategies that meet real needs and utilize available resources optimally.

Monitoring Progress Towards the Information Society

The profiling of the information society at the national and regional levels in order to assess the progress made towards its realization in the region requires particular attention. Member country profiles would assist in monitoring the status of each country in terms of its progress towards developing the information society. This in turn would provide the basis for decision makers to identify priorities and plan initiatives for reducing the digital divide. A starting point for the assessment of regional progress towards the information society is participation in the biennial profiling used to produce the Regional Profile of the Information Society in Western Asia[6] and participation by all member countries should therefore be strongly encouraged.

Capacity-building in ICT Policy, Broadband and Financing ICT Projects

There remains an overarching need to build capacity in ICT policy, strategy formulation and implementation within the region. This in turn would lead to the development of a common vision, setting the implementation framework through the use of appropriate ICT tools and applications.

In terms of developing the ICT infrastructure in the region, broadband represents a critical challenge, since most online applications require the transfer and display of significant amounts of data. The deployment of broadband would expedite access to ICT services across the region, including e-learning, e-commerce and e-Government.

The financing of ICT projects is also a major obstacle, as financing institutions remain reluctant to fund cyberspace projects of intangible dimensions. There is thus a clear need to strengthen support for ICT entrepreneurship and innovation, with a view to meeting national and regional development goals and achieving a sustainable information society.

Digital Arabic Content as a Tool

The number of Internet users increased significantly between 2000 and 2008, both in the ESCWA region and globally. However, DAC is still very limited compared with Internet content in other languages, representing just 0.16 per cent of overall content (as at the end of 2006), although 5 per cent of the world population is Arabic-speaking. A sharply increased, focused effort is therefore required to promote the DAC industry in the region in order to preserve Arabic language and culture in a digital world, particularly on the Internet. This would also create job opportunities for young entrepreneurs and recent graduates in the region.

ESCWA is addressing these challenges by following up on the implementation of the WSIS outcomes and collaborating with other regional organizations, including the League of Arab States, to tackle regional needs and priorities. During the period under review, ESCWA continued to support the formulation and

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[6] The most recent issue is available at: http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/ictd-07-15-e.pdf.

implementation of policies and plans for developing the ICT sector and measuring the development of the information society in the region through the use of ICT indicators.

Statistics for Evidence-based Policymaking
By Neda Jafar, Giovanni Savio and Zeina Sinno

ESCWA member countries face major challenges in producing and disseminating reliable and up-to-date data on globally-agreed development indicators and relevant socio-economic time series. Considerable progress has been achieved, but much remains to be done.

National statistics offices (NSOs) in the region face significant obstacles in such areas as incorporating appropriate data collection plans into statistical strategies; improving methodologies for the collection of basic data and metadata; raising the accuracy of estimates in order to bring them into line with international standards; and strengthening reporting mechanisms at the national and international levels.

The implementation of collection and reporting mechanisms that provide official data that are not only of impeccable quality, but also in accordance with international sources, has proved particularly problematic for many member countries. Indeed, recent research carried out by the Statistics Division at ESCWA revealed major differences in the data availability reported by national and

> **If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.**

international sources, indicating significant shortcomings in reporting mechanisms. It is estimated that in 44 per cent of cases where data were available for the same indicator in the same year for a given country, the figures were discrepant. Such inconsistency results from one or more components related to the metadata of each indicator, including definitions, methods of calculation, the targeted population and subpopulation, sources of data and estimation methods, but whatever the source, finding a solution to the problems of data availability, consistency and reliability remains a challenge for member countries.

In order to further improve the quality and reliability of statistical data, closer coordination between producers of official statistics at the national level is crucial. Across the region, the lack of adequate mechanisms for accessing administrative registers and records at NSO level needs to be addressed. In addition, it is vital that member countries consider the introduction or amendment of statistics-oriented legislation as an essential tool for the definition of control mechanisms and the facilitation of access to basic statistical data and information.

Comparability of data requires standardization of statistical concepts and applications. While the bulk of this work is at the global level, much also needs to be done to harmonize statistical concepts at the regional level. The process of harmonization would benefit from accelerated exchange of information on best practice and practical, technical support. The provision of such support, primarily in the form of advisory services and capacity-building workshops and projects, is also vital for developing the scope, quality and organization of official statistics. This alone would go a considerable way towards enabling member countries to fulfil their obligations in this field.

In order to assist member countries in overcoming these obstacles, ESCWA's support is guided by the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities.[*] It regularly monitors the implementation of and adherence to the Principles in order to promote and support the formulation of national statistics development strategies, improve national institutional frameworks and achieve national development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration. The support offered by ESCWA also encourages the incorporation of a gender perspective into national statistics through the collection of sex-disaggregated data and the production of gender-sensitive indicators to provide evidence for cost-effective and targeted policymaking, and the inclusion of data on vulnerable population groups.

<Insert picture 1>

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[*] These are relevance, independence and equal access; professional standards and ethics; accountability and transparency; prevention of misuse; sources of official statistics; confidentiality; legislation; national coordination; use of international standards; and international cooperation. Further information is available at: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/FP-English.htm.

Advancement of Women
By Kendra Knoebl

Great strides have been made in advancing gender equality in ESCWA member countries in recent years, in large part due to increased awareness of the importance of equal access for women to health care, education and decision-making. Positive developments have been particularly notable in the areas of health and education. For example, life expectancy among women in the region rose from 66 years in 1995 to 69.3 years in 2005;[1] fertility rates declined from 4.90 children per woman in 1995 to 3.84 children per woman in 2005;[2] maternal mortality rates declined by 34 per cent to 272 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births between 1990 and 2000;[3] the literacy rate among women increased from 35 per cent in 1990 to 49.6 per cent in 2002;[4] and access to education has increased at primary, secondary and tertiary education levels.[5] Furthermore, there has been a notable increase in the number of women parliamentarians, and the number of women working at the ministerial level has risen from 8 in 1990 to 19 in 2002.[6]

However, despite these positive developments, the ESCWA region still lags behind on a number of gender equality indicators. For example, female literacy rates are among the lowest in the world and there were 44 million illiterate women aged over 15 years in the Arab region in 2002;[7] women only accounted for 29 per cent of the labour force in 2005;[8] and political representation in national parliaments is barely half the world average (9.6 per cent as compared to 18 per cent).

The limited access to and participation in economic and political activities by women in the ESCWA region can be explained by a variety of factors. However, the consequences are far-reaching and have a profound impact on the daily lives of women in the region. Most women in the region have limited access to formal education and training and tend either to be employed in such low-income sectors as agriculture and services or to be excluded from the formal labour market, in large part because of social perceptions. As a result, many women are dependent on male relatives for financial resources. Political instability and conflict have left many families in the region without a principal breadwinner, thereby reducing them to a precarious state. In such situations, women are obliged to assume responsibility for the welfare of their families, and can easily fall into poverty.

In recent years, ESCWA member countries have shown greater political will to empower women and support their advancement. National legislation in a number of countries has been amended to strengthen the rights of women and establish ministries responsible for gender-related issues, as well as other mechanisms to support and monitor the advancement of women. These mechanisms were established with the support of ESCWA and are now in place in all member countries. The challenge in the coming years will be to build knowledge and capacity on gender issues in order to allow these mechanisms to introduce greater levels of gender equality in their respective countries; this can be achieved by raising awareness of gender issues and establishing closer ties with other Government actors. These same mechanisms will also play an increasingly important role as gender becomes progressively mainstreamed into national development plans and more

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[1] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2005. *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision.* New York: UNDESA.

[2] Ibid.

[3] United Nations and League of Arab States. 2007. *The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2007: A Youth Lens.* New York and Geneva: United Nations.

[4] ESCWA. 2007. *Developments in the Situation of Arab Women. Health, Education, Employment, Political Representation, CEDAW.* Beirut: ESCWA.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] ESCWA. 2007. Op. cit.

[8] Ibid.

resources are allocated within national budgets to implement projects and programmes aimed at advancing the rights of women.

With ESCWA assistance, member countries are currently addressing three main challenges: promoting and mainstreaming gender into policies, programmes and projects; mitigating the effects of regional instability and conflict; and continuing to fully implement the areas of concern of the Beijing Platform of Action[9] and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).[10]

To date, 11 out of 14 ESCWA member countries have ratified the Convention.[11] However, all these contracting parties have lodged reservations[12] on specific articles of the Convention, notably on Article 2 (the right to equality and non-discrimination) and Article 16 (marriage and family life), or have made other objections that stand in the way of effective implementation of the Convention in the region.

Adherence to international instruments and conventions is considered essential for the advancement and empowerment of women, and unlocking the potential of women to contribute to the realization of sustainable human development and healthy societies. One of the priorities of ESCWA is therefore to support member countries in their efforts to implement such instruments. One of the challenges faced by ESCWA in this respect is to encourage and convince member countries to lift their reservations and ratify the optional protocol.[13]

Political crises, conflicts and wars in the region have serious repercussions on social and economic development and constitute significant challenges to the advancement of women. While men and boys are directly affected by violence during conflict and war, women also suffer from such indirect consequences as displacement, the breakdown of family structure and social networks, the loss of the breadwinner and the need to assume new roles and responsibilities.

In the light of these challenges it is essential to strengthen the capacity of national mechanisms and civil society organizations in order to further address gender imbalances and introduce a gender perspective in development plans and programmes.

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[9] The text of the Beijing Platform for Action and further information is available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/.

[10] The text of the Convention is available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/.

[11] The following countries have ratified CEDAW: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Palestine has not ratified it due to its observer status at the United Nations.

[12] The list of countries with reservations is available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations.htm.

[13] The optional protocol is a separate document that defines procedures for communication and inquiries. It enables individuals and groups to claim their rights under CEDAW, and enables the CEDAW Committee to investigate violations of the rights of women in countries that are signatories to the protocol.
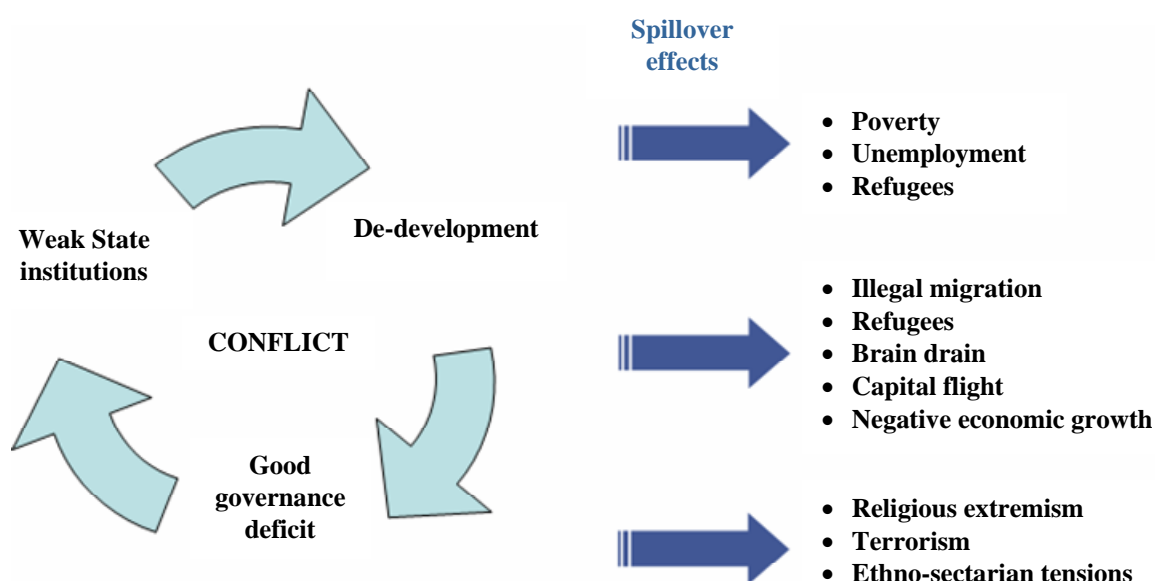
Challenges of Continuous Conflict and Political Tension
By Youssef Chaitani

For decades, the ESCWA region has suffered from conflict and political tension. The focus of the media and the general public remains on the political and strategic dimensions, as well as the immediate humanitarian fallout resulting from the calamities of war, civil strife and occupation. Frequently overlooked, however, are the root causes, long-term ramifications and the harmful regional spillover effects that these generate.

Due to the profound hardship associated with war, occupation, civil strife and political tension, conflict-affected countries tend to lack strong, accountable institutions and frequently suffer from a good governance deficit and de-development. The interplay of these factors, which are mutually reinforcing, perpetuates conflict and a number of spillover effects, as illustrated in the "spillover-producing" cycle below.

The "Spillover-Producing" Cycle of Conflict

Spillover effects

- **Poverty**
- **Unemployment**
- **Refugees**

- **Illegal migration**
- **Refugees**
- **Brain drain**
- **Capital flight**
- **Negative economic growth**

- **Religious extremism**
- **Terrorism**
- **Ethno-sectarian tensions**

Weak State institutions — **De-development** — **CONFLICT** — **Good governance deficit**

As the figure below clearly demonstrates, conflicts at the national level and the spillover effects associated with these are not confined to one particular country or a specific geographical area, but are interrelated. This has important implications from both developmental and policymaking perspectives. First, the design of research models, policies and programmes has to be approached at both national and regional levels, due to the close interrelatedness of the socio-economic and political dynamics of conflict. Second, most – if not all – spillover effects are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Third, each of the varied and extensive spillover effects identified carries with it social, economic, strategic, political, humanitarian, developmental, cultural-religious-ideological and conflict dimensions. These effects must therefore be considered together, as different manifestations of the same underlying causes, and should be approached in a multidimensional fashion. Any policies or programmes for development or peacebuilding that fail to take this into account are likely to be ineffective, if not futile. A further obstacle is the protracted nature of conflicts and the rapidly changing environment in which they unfold. These patterns compromise the effectiveness of even the best-laid development plans and peacebuilding efforts, which are often superseded by events on the ground. Among the leading guiding principles of ESCWA's approach to designing research models and development programmes have been the principles of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, in which all United Nations Member States agreed that security, development and human rights are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. None can last without the others.

There is an obvious need to reduce the impact of conflict and instability on socio-economic and political development in Western Asia. Also crucial is the enhancement of the capacity of member countries to face the challenges resulting from conflict and instability. ESCWA has been actively addressing these issues by analysing the regional impact of conflict in order to derive policy recommendations, and design programmes and development projects that primarily aim to assist member countries in attaining development goals, including the MDGs, in spite of conflict or instability. The themes tackled within that context are the impact of conflict-driven displacement on Western Asia, the root causes and challenges of ethnic and sectarian tensions, and increasing private sector resilience as a vehicle for development in conflict settings.

A solid platform from which to launch efforts to break the vicious cycle illustrated above is the strengthening of good governance in the region, particularly in conflict-affected countries. Capacity-building modules for the public sector in strategic planning, decentralization, human resource management, public-private partnerships, essential service provision and local community development could act as a catalyst for development and peacebuilding. A chronic good governance deficit is in most – if not all – cases a driving force not only for conflict, but for sustained conflict. Closing the good governance gap would also have positive repercussions on local social, economic and political development efforts, generating a positive ripple effect across the region as a whole.

In order to ensure the success of such efforts, however, the process of good governance taking firmer root must be indigenous and sustainable. It must also be home-grown, since individual countries are best placed to decide where their priorities lie and how best to address them. This is particularly the case in conflict-affected countries, where humanitarian and developmental challenges abound.

During 2007 and 2008, therefore, the Emerging and Conflict-related Issues (ECRI) section at ESCWA conducted numerous capacity-building modules in a wide variety of specializations, catering for over 4,500 participants from Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen. Through such training, ESCWA works to strengthen good governance practice in conflict-affected countries as an indispensable tool for empowering local populations to mitigate the impact of conflict on their development needs and reinforcing their capacity to work for their own prosperity and peaceful co-existence.

Addressing the Language Needs of the Region
By Ahed Sboul

The General Assembly proclaimed 2008 the International Year of Languages,[1] pursuant to the resolution adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).[2] In so doing, the United Nations stressed once again the importance of languages in the international community. Far from being solely a means of cultural exchange, languages play a critical role in addressing international concerns, building peace and enhancing social integration. Indeed, languages are a development tool, determining the ability of a country or a group of countries to preserve valuable heritage and create, assimilate and disseminate new content.

Arabic matters

Languages play a vital role in spreading human civilization and culture, as well as addressing developmental priorities and concerns. For its role to be fully effective, a language must be firmly rooted in the past, yet not be hostage to it. It must keep pace with the culture of the present while looking forward to that of the future.

Since its creation in 1973, ESCWA has been working towards furthering economic and social development in its member countries. These represent a homogenous group in terms of language and from the outset the Commission, conscious of the importance of addressing people in their own language, adopted Arabic as a working and official language for its meetings and publications. In view of its location within the Arab region, its ease of access to the full range of expertise available regionally and its acknowledged commitment to supporting and promoting the Arabic language internationally, the United Nations has entrusted ESCWA with the establishment of an Arabic Language Centre, in close cooperation with the Arabic translation services at Headquarters and other duty stations.

In the light of this mandate and in response to comments made by member countries regarding Arabic language services,[3] ESCWA implemented a series of practical preparatory measures: background studies were prepared, an expert group meeting was organized[4] and regular communication and coordination with member countries was undertaken. As a result, a consensus was built on the importance of providing the Arabic language with additional support, following the example set by other groups of countries in support of certain other languages. The overall aim of such support is to enhance the use of Arabic in all United Nations events, promote its use in international forums and strengthen its role as a tool for intercultural dialogue and economic and social development.

Given this commitment and within the context of the International Year of Languages, ESCWA therefore resolved, at its twenty-fifth session (Sana'a, 26-29 May 2008), to establish an Arabic Language Centre.[5] In implementation of the resolution, the ESCWA secretariat has initiated a series of activities in training, terminology coordination and research, and outreach to leading language and translation schools in the region. It has continued to promote the project to potential funding partners in all Arab countries and a number of parties have expressed interest in the activities of the Centre. However, full implementation of the projected activities requires extrabudgetary funding and this is still being actively sought.

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[1] General Assembly resolution 61/266.

[2] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Records of the General Conference, Thirty-third Session, Paris, 3-21 October 2005*. Vol. 1 and corrigenda: Resolutions, chap. V, resolution 41.

[3] A/56/261 and A/49/32/Rev.1.

[4] E/ESCWA/OES/2007/EGM.1/8.

[5] ESCWA resolution 288 (XXV).

The proposed quasi-virtual Centre will focus on a wide range of activities. These will include strengthening coordination between translation and editing services at the duty stations that use Arabic; developing and harmonizing technical terminology used in United Nations documents; providing translators with training opportunities to develop their capacities and enrich their skills; creating and maintaining a database of expertise that would categorize translators and experts by field of specialization; and making optimal use of ICT to facilitate the research component of translation work. The proposed Centre will also work towards promoting dialogue between language experts and those in various other fields in order to build consensus on terminology and, in cooperation with language and terminology research centres, update terminology databases throughout the Organization.

As has been noted in many General Assembly resolutions,[6] ESCWA is ideally positioned to play a central role in addressing the specificities of the Arabic language. Its location in the Arab region, its multidisciplinary work and its developmental mandate all enable it to work to broaden and strengthen the use of Arabic at the United Nations and in other international forums. From its very establishment, one of the primary concerns of the Commission has been to forge a common understanding of new developmental concepts. Language is an indispensable tool in this process and it is clear that, to quote the slogan of the International Year of Languages, "language matters".

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[6] General Assembly resolutions concerning Patterns of conferences.

Enhancing the Effectiveness of Technical Cooperation
By May Ziadeh Saliba

ESCWA assists member countries by providing them with policy advisory services, technical support and capacity-building activities in the areas of expertise of the Commission. Technical cooperation activities, including advisory services, are complementary to the ESCWA regular programme and contribute to enhancing capacity-building at both the national and regional levels. They are carried out by the Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation (RPTC), which is administered by the Programme Planning and Technical Cooperation Division (PPTCD).

The regional advisory services provided by ESCWA make the professional knowledge and expertise of a number of regional advisors available to member countries at the request of member Governments. Regional advisors support member countries in their development efforts; recommend measures and policies to help them overcome specific problems; undertake capacity-building; provide training; and assist in the preparation and formulation of project proposals. They also disseminate knowledge and information in their field of expertise through lectures, papers and participation in Commission, national and international meetings.

Although the resources available for technical assistance at ESCWA are relatively modest, they are of significant value, as they come from a neutral, non-profit organization and are generally demand-driven and free of charge. It is in the interests of both the ESCWA secretariat and member countries to maximize the benefit from such technical assistance in order to further economic and social development in the region.

An effective technical cooperation programme hinges, among other things, on effective communication and sharing of knowledge and information, both between member countries, and between the secretariat and member countries. Facilitating the exchange of information on the submission of requests for technical assistance and following up on such requests is critical for all stakeholders and enables ESCWA to provide support services that meet the needs of its member countries in the most effective manner possible.

In response to the challenge of improving information and knowledge-sharing, in 2007 the ESCWA secretariat organized a preparatory meeting (Cairo, 28-30 October 2007) for the focal points assigned by their countries for technical cooperation. At that meeting, the Technical Cooperation Knowledge-Sharing Network was established and the delegates agreed upon the objectives of the network, and the guidelines and procedures relating to the planned website.

The objectives of the Technical Cooperation Knowledge-Sharing Network

- To strengthen communication and follow-up between member countries and ESCWA on matters pertaining to the technical cooperation programme;

- To create a mechanism for the exchange of views, information and expertise;

- To share knowledge and experience in order to assist decision makers in the region to devise and develop national strategies for achieving the Millennium Development Goals and benefit from lessons learned;

- To focus on added value activities to improve the performance of the technical cooperation programme;

- To respond to the needs of member countries by strengthening coordination with national focal points;

- To strengthen regional cooperation, coordination and integration.

At the second meeting of the Network (Beirut, 16-18 February 2009), a dedicated website[*] was launched, which will facilitate information sharing, communication and coordination between the secretariat and member countries.

As a side event of the meeting, a workshop on strategic planning for sustainable development was held for the technical cooperation focal points. One of the roles of the focal points is to liaise with their national counterparts in order to coordinate requests for technical assistance from ministries and officials, and with the ESCWA secretariat. Having focal points who are knowledgeable about the functioning of the United Nations, familiar with ESCWA programmes and priorities, and understand how to develop clear terms of reference will therefore improve the processing of requests for technical assistance from member countries and enhance the timeliness and quality of the response from ESCWA.

Although the Network is still in its preliminary stages, it has already contributed to actively engaging communication between member countries and ESCWA on technical cooperation issues and provided guidance on how the process can be streamlined.

Support to Saudi Arabia in Finalizing its Ninth Five-year Development Plan

An illustration of the way in which ESCWA, through its technical cooperation services, can provide multidisciplinary expertise to support member countries in their sustainable development efforts can be seen in the assistance provided to Saudi Arabia in the review and finalization of its ninth five-year development plan (2010-2015). In November 2008, following a request from Saudi Arabia, ESCWA brought together a multidisciplinary team, comprising eight experts and regional advisors in development planning, environment, macroeconomic policy, water resources, ICT and networks, industrial development, youth issues and gender issues. The team travelled to Saudi Arabia, where they reviewed drafts of seven chapters of the development plan and provided comments and proposed revisions to sharpen the focus in certain areas. They emphasized the importance of establishing specific objectives, setting performance indicators and identifying the authority responsible for implementation, and their expert technical assistance expedited the review process and successful finalization of the plan.

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[*] http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/pptcd/TCNetwork/.

The Fourth Power
By Mirane Abi-Zaki

As the regional arm of the United Nations in Western Asia, ESCWA has been firmly in the public eye since its establishment in 1973. As a result of political instability in the region, the Commission relocated a number of times before finally settling in its permanent headquarters in Beirut in 1997. The relocation of ESCWA to United Nations House in the newly renovated central downtown area of Beirut was perceived as a mark of confidence in the future of Lebanon and a positive sign in building trust in the regional Commission and its future. However, the public image of ESCWA was not clear and its work was often confused with that of other United Nations agencies. Its activities in the economic and social domains encompass issues relating to water, energy, information and communications technology, women, trade, financing for development, transport and statistics, and the breadth of this scope poses significant challenges in the task of providing a comprehensive, yet simple concept of the work of ESCWA to the public.

The work of the Commission is chiefly on the policy level, focusing on analytical and normative work. The Commission offers a primarily regional platform for the harmonization of policies of its member countries, providing policy advice in such a way as to ensure regional integration and assist member countries in achieving their developmental objectives, including the MDGs. It does not have daily field activities that the media and the public can "touch", its principal clients being its member Governments. Furthermore, interrelated social and economic issues, particularly in this region, are seldom viewed as equal, let alone more attractive than political matters, and as a consequence the latter generally attract greater media coverage.

"I fear three newspapers more than a hundred thousand bayonets."[*] Napoleon Bonaparte.

Commonly recognized as the fourth power after the executive, legislative and judicial powers, media may well be the most powerful tool in the world. It influences public opinion and shapes public beliefs.

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[*] Lloyd Bird, G. and Maton Mervin, F. *The Newspaper and Society: A Book of Reading* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1949), p. 254.

The mission of the United Nations Information Services/United Nations Information Centre (UNIS/UNIC) is therefore to deal with the media in such a way as to enhance public understanding of the work of ESCWA. UNIS/UNIC promotes the work of the Commission and its Executive Secretary, ensuring wide visibility and the highest possible profile for their activities and events. As the security situation in Lebanon deteriorated during 2007-2008, the media prioritized coverage of politics and incidents of major impact. During this period, a number of United Nations system-wide security measures were introduced, which required many meetings and events to be held outside the duty station. The number of public information activities in Lebanon decreased as a direct consequence of these changes, which came at a time when ESCWA was going through a transitional period as its new Executive Secretary assumed his functions. From a regional perspective, holding more meetings and events outside the duty station provided the benefit of greater coverage and increased interest in the work of ESCWA in the member countries in which the events took place.

Within this complex context, UNIS/UNIC continued to adopt a client-oriented approach to the promotion of ESCWA activities, focusing on local media. It disseminated media reports on the general work of ESCWA and emerging issues, with the joint aims of raising public awareness and increasing visibility in the local media,[1] which in turn led to interest in the international media.

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[1] See, for example, the biweekly column Window on the United Nations in Al-Mustaqbal; the weekly United Nations Page in Al-Balad; reports in pan-Arab newspapers, such as Al-Hayat; and international media, including the CNN Arabic website and the BBC.

Greater focus was placed on improving electronic outreach through the Internet. Working in partnership with the webmaster and the information team, the ESCWA website has become more user-friendly and now allows thematic browsing. There was also increased emphasis on the use of regular, traditional media tools, such as the daily archive and weekly news bulletin,[2] and the media client database, which grew to almost 2,800 individuals and organizations, who were sent regular information and updates on ESCWA activities, ensuring consistent visibility for the organization. Particular efforts were made to reach out to the next generation by presenting seminars and lectures to young professionals and university students, briefing them on the mandate of ESCWA, its place in the United Nations system and its role in the region. In collaboration with other United Nations agencies, it contributed to the Model UN initiative in Lebanon, helping to provide a better understanding of the United Nations in general and ESCWA in particular.

In revamping its tools, UNIS/UNIC has adapted and optimized the ways in which it reaches out to the public, ensuring strategic communication of the activities and concerns of ESCWA. The result has paid dividends and the public has proved receptive to the message, in particular young professionals and university students, who are the opinion leaders of the future.

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[2] For more information on the ESCWA Daily Archive and Weekly News, see: http://www.escwa.un.org/dailynewsarchive.asp and http://www.escwa.un.org/information/weeklynews/ex1main.asp.

PART II

ACHIEVING RESULTS

Outcome of the Twenty-fifth Session of the Commission

The Session

The sessions of the Commission are an important forum for member countries to discuss and reach consensus on key regional and global emerging issues; support economic and social development in the region and the adoption of international standards and measures; adopt a consolidated regional stance for international meetings and conferences; and achieve greater coordination and collaboration between member countries, thereby strengthening regional integration and solidarity.

Main Issues

The twenty-fifth ESCWA session, which was held in Sana'a, from 26-29 May 2008, considered two principal issues, namely financing for development in the ESCWA region, in preparation for the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus (Doha, 29 November – 2 December 2008), and the progress made in the achievement of the MDGs, including the role of regional cooperation in accelerating their achievement.

With regard to financing for development, delegates reviewed the progress made by the countries of the region in implementing the principal actions of the Monterrey Consensus and the outcome of the regional consultative preparatory meeting that took place on the subject (Doha, 29-30 April 2008).

The review of progress made towards the achievement of the MDGs assessed the situation as at 2007, which marked the mid-point for the time set for their attainment. The ESCWA secretariat encouraged the strengthening of regional cooperation to counter the main obstacles facing certain Arab countries and subregions, in particular the least developed and conflict-affected countries. The 2007 MDG Arab report, The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2007: A Youth Lens,[38] covered such issues as education and work; political, social and cultural participation; environmental sustainability; and youth health, and concluded with a youth policy framework for the region.

Increasing Cooperation Between United Nations Regional Entities: Regional Coordination Mechanism

The Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) meetings provide a forum for the sharing of experience and expertise between the United Nations agencies and organizations in the Arab region, and for strengthening coherence and cooperation between them with the aim of maximizing the impact of the work of the United Nations and making progress towards "Delivery as One" by the United Nations system, not only at the country level but also at the regional level.

The twelfth RCM meeting (Beirut, 13-14 September 2008) was held under the chairmanship of the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ms. Asha-Rose Migiro.

The meeting focused on emerging global issues and such challenges as climate change, the economic crisis and food shortages, recognizing not only their interdependence, but also their implications for achieving the MDGs in the Arab region. It was agreed that three thematic working groups should be established, dealing with MDGs, climate change and food security. It also recommended the production of a regional mapping of priority areas of work in the regional programmes of United Nations entities in the Arab region for 2008-2009. Further information can be obtained at http://www.escwa.un.org/rcg/index.asp.

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[38] E/ESCWA/EAD/2007/3.

Side Events

Side events during the session included the inauguration of the Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region[39] and the launch of two publications: Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region: A Youth Lens and Gender in the Millennium Development Goals: Information Guide for Arab Millennium Development Goals Reports.[40]

Outcome

One of the major outcomes of the session was the welcoming of the membership of the Sudan, which was later approved by the United Nations Economic and Social Council.[41] Following review and deliberation, the session adopted a number of resolutions concerning the following substantive issues: climate change; integrated social policy; strengthening statistical capacities, gender statistics and compliance with international statistical standards; accelerating the implementation of the Monterrey Consensus in Western Asia; and supporting the comprehensive development efforts of Yemen.[42] It should be noted that as part of its efforts to support and accelerate implementation, the ESCWA secretariat regularly monitors the implementation of resolutions.

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[39] http://isper.escwa.org.lb/.

[40] E/ESCWA/SCU/2007/Technical Paper.1.

[41] ECOSOC, E/2008/15, Add.1, Section B.

[42] Further details on the session and the resolutions can be found in *Report on the Twenty-fifth Session*, (E/ESCWA/25/10).

Achieving Results in Economic Development and Globalization

During 2008, the Economic Development and Globalization Division (EDGD) at ESCWA worked to enhance the capacity of member countries to design and implement sound economic policies and strategies for sustainable economic growth, employment creation and poverty alleviation. In order to achieve this, EDGD organized a wide range of activities across a broad span of key priority issues of economic importance to the region. These aimed to increase the capacity of member countries to promote foreign direct investment (FDI), formulate and implement adequate trade policies; strengthen the processes by which they formulate and implement policies and programmes for improving transport infrastructure and logistics within the framework of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq (ITSAM); and assist member countries in formulating and implementing economic policies for accelerating progress towards achieving the MDGs.

Macroeconomic Analysis

The Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region is the principal annual macroeconomic analytical output of the division and one of the flagship publications of ESCWA. The summary of the Survey[1] will feed into the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council[2] in July 2008. Based on the Survey, a focused macroeconomic analysis of the situation in the region was presented at the twenty-fifth ESCWA session (Sana'a, 26-29 May 2008), centring on two MDG-related outputs: Strengthening Regional Cooperation for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals and Report on the Progress Towards the Attainment of MDGs in the Arab Region.

Promoting Financing for Development

In line with the Monterrey Consensus of the International Conference on Financing for Development, EDGD continued to support member countries in promoting finance for development. The division organized a consultative preparatory meeting for the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development (Doha, 29-30 April 2008) to prepare member countries for the second International Conference; this was complemented by a report on regional progress in financing for development[3] and a major report on FDI.[4]

Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus (Doha, November 2008)

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[1] E/ESCWA/EDGD/2008/2.

[2] http://www.un.org/ecosoc/meetings/.

[3] United Nations Regional Commissions. 2008. *The Role of Regional Cooperation and Global Partnership in Financing for Development*. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

[4] E/ESCWA/EDGD/2008/Technical Paper.1.

The division also prepared the seventh issue of its flagship publication, Annual Review of Developments in Globalization and Regional Integration in the Arab World,[5] which focused on FDI and regional integration, highlighting labour movement in the ESCWA region. As part of the follow-up activities to this high-profile publication, an expert group meeting was organized (Beirut, 20 November 2008).

Throughout 2008, EDGD continued to provide a range of training services for member countries on financing for development, double taxation, FDI statistics and bilateral investment agreements and their economic implications.

Within the framework of the **United Nations Development Account Project** entitled Interregional Partnership for Promoting Trade as an Engine for Growth Through Knowledge Management and ICT, the following activities were undertaken by EDGD:

- The Capacity-building Workshop on Trade Facilitation Through the Application of Single Window (Cairo, 11-12 July 2007) was held to present the trends and developments in trade facilitation.

- The Interregional Forum on Trade Facilitation and Regional Trade Agreements (Amman, 14-15 November 2007) focused on the creation of synergies and compatibility between regional and international trade facilitation patterns to promote trade.

Promoting Trade as an Engine for Growth

During the period under review, EDGD conducted the Third Forum on Arab Business Community and World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreements (Beirut, 2-3 July 2008). This forum was organized to enhance the capacity of member countries to negotiate and implement subregional, regional and multilateral trade agreements, and to increase awareness in the Arab business community of the latest developments in WTO negotiations and their implications for businesses in the region. In addition, EDGD reviewed and assessed trade policy trends in member countries, trade facilitation, service liberalization measures and the WTO accession process. It also provided related policy advocacy and advice through an expert group meeting on the assessment of trade policy trends in the ESCWA region and their implications for trade and economic performance (Beirut, 17-18 December 2008).

Given the importance of aid for trade, EDGD, in collaboration with other United Nations entities, prepared the regional input to the United Nations Joint Annual Report on Trade, entitled Promoting Aid for Trade in Western Asia,[6] which was presented at the Twelfth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD XII) (Accra, Ghana, 20-25 April 2008).

Trade advisory services focused on technical assistance on service liberalization for the Syrian Arab Republic, including a thorough review of the country's initial services schedules. Policy advice to Yemen, which aspires to accede to the WTO, included guidance on accession and emphasized the importance of prioritizing sectors and developing non-oil exports.

Improving Transport Infrastructure and Logistics

EDGD continued the follow-up on the development and implementation of the components of ITSAM with member countries. As part of these activities, the division organized the ninth session of the Committee on Transport (Beirut, 26-28 February 2008), which focused on the draft convention on international

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[5] E/ESCWA/EDGD/2008/4.

[6] De Lombaerde, P. and Puri, L. (eds.). 2009. *Aid for Trade: Global and Regional Perspectives. United Nations University Series on Regionalism,* Vol. 2. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

multimodal transport of goods in the Arab Mashreq[7] and the follow-up of the implementation of the Agreement on International Roads in the Arab Mashreq.[8]

ESCWA initiated work to support Yemen in conducting an economic feasibility study for the construction of a railway network and prepared a technical report on a development strategy for the transport system in the Arab Mashreq. In cooperation with the Global Road Safety Partnership, Royal Dutch Shell and the Ministry of Interior in Qatar, ESCWA organized a workshop entitled Building the Arab Mashreq Road Safety Partnership (Doha, 21-22 October 2008), at which the establishment of the partnership was agreed. In cooperation with the Ministry of Transport in the Syrian Arab Republic, EDGD held an expert group meeting on the harmonization of institutional frameworks and legislation in the transport sector in the ESCWA region (Damascus, 12-13 November 2008), at which a number of recommendations were made, which will be presented at the following tenth session of the Committee on Transport (Beirut, 31 March – 2 April 2009).

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[7] http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/EDGD-08-L3.pdf.

[8] E/ESCWA/TRANS/2003/IG.1/3/Add.3.

Working Towards Sustainable Development

Dealing with Water-related Issues

The strategy adopted by ESCWA, through its Sustainable Development and Productivity Division (SDPD), focuses on building the negotiation skills of member countries for the joint management of shared water resources and developing regional cooperation mechanisms on water issues. During the period under review, ESCWA, in cooperation with the Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources (BGR), organized workshops in Jordan and Iraq on dispute resolution over shared water resources. Joint meetings were also held to facilitate the establishment of an agreement between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic over the waters of the Nahr el-Kabir river. ESCWA also led a Development Account project to build capacity for the sustainable utilization, management and protection of internationally-shared groundwater resources in the Mediterranean region. Case studies were carried out on two shared aquifers (the Nubian Sandstone aquifer system and the Nahr el-Kabir) in order to demonstrate the importance of inter-State cooperation and data exchange between riparian countries.

In order to improve water-related regional cooperation mechanisms, ESCWA expanded its communication and networking efforts through the Arab Integrated Water Resources Management Network (www.awarenet.org). In 2008, training activities were conducted on climate change, economic and financial instruments for integrated water resource management, and gender and water.

Improving Sustainable Rural Development

Two specialized capacity-building packages were conducted in Jordan and Lebanon in order to build the capacity of officials in land degradation assessment and prevention. In addition, through the Regional Conference on Land Degradation Issues in the Arab Region (Cairo, 30 October – 1 November 2007), ESCWA contributed to promoting regional cooperation in reversing land degradation. It also published selected case studies, which reviewed and assessed land degradation prevention programmes implemented in Egypt, Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Arab Emirates.

Training on land degradation assessment and prevention, Lebanon, 2007

Enhancing Sustainable Management of Energy Resources

SDPD also focuses on assisting member countries to formulate policies, and adopt measures and mechanisms to improve the sustainable use and management of energy. To this end, a study[1] was prepared to assess energy efficiency and energy conservation opportunities in oil and natural gas production. It also investigated trends and technologies from exploration to transport, featuring case studies from selected countries in the region, and examined measures that aim to reduce the adverse effects of climate change, including the use of carbon capture and storage technologies.

Both Qatar and Yemen received technical assistance in energy efficiency. In Qatar, a five-volume study and field surveys were prepared for the Qatar General Electricity and Water Corporation in order to evaluate the current situation and identify potential areas for improvement.[2] As part of efforts to support the Ministry of Electricity and Energy in Yemen, ESCWA held a number of workshops and seminars. These included a workshop on energy efficiency and conservation (Sana'a, 26-28 January 2008), which focused on integrated energy resource planning, demand side management and energy audits, with particular reference to energy-consuming sectors, and a seminar on national cleaner fuels strategies (Sana'a, 15-16 October 2008), which provided an opportunity for collecting data and information. The Training of Trainers Workshop on Performing Energy Audits (Sana'a, 18-22 October 2008) included on-the-job training through field work covering the methodology, requirements and stages of energy auditing, while also focusing on energy calculations and measurements, the energy balance and opportunities for energy efficiency.

ESCWA also contributed to a study on pan-Arab electricity grid interconnections[3] and a seminar[4] on the environmental impact of the electricity sector, recommending policy options for promoting renewable energy. SDPD also implemented a broad spectrum of activities in cooperation with the League of Arab States in support of energy for sustainable development in the Arab region, including the Arab Regional Forum on Energy for Sustainable Development (Abu Dhabi, 1 February 2007), which focused on sustainable transport, and the first expert group meeting on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) in the Arab region (Al-Ain, 17-19 March 2008), which identified key priorities for a regional SCP action plan.

Revolving Microcredit Fund for Agriculture and Agro-businesses in South Lebanon

In an effort to support the establishment and strengthening of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in rural and remote areas in south Lebanon, ESCWA joined forces with the Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development and the Association for the Development of Rural Capacities, a Lebanese NGO, to establish a revolving microcredit fund to assist small farmers and agro-business entrepreneurs.

The microcredit scheme is complemented by a training of trainers programme to enhance the business skills of microcredit field officers so that they can better assist loan applicants to develop effective business plans. By the end of 2007, the US$ 210,000 revolving microcredit fund had been fully disbursed and subsequent loan cycles were initiated in 2008. Loans issued during 2008 supported 118 small agricultural projects in south Lebanon and had a universally positive impact on employment creation and income generation, especially among women and young people. As clear evidence of the success of the scheme, 140 jobs have been sustained and 53 new jobs created in south Lebanon as a direct result of loans supported by the fund.

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[1] *Rationalizing Energy Consumption and Improving Energy Efficiency in Upstream Energy Production Sectors in Selected ESCWA Member Countries* (E/ESCWA/SDPD/2007/8). (Document only available in Arabic.)

[2] The outcome and recommendations of the study were discussed at a workshop entitled Measures and Technologies for Improving Sectoral Energy Efficiency in the Qatari Electricity Sector (Doha, 15-16 April 2008).

[3] Commissioned by the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for Electricity.

[4] Organized by the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for Electricity (Cairo, 26 April 2007).

First expert group meeting on sustainable consumption and production in the Arab region
United Arab Emirates, 2008

Enhancing Productivity and Competitiveness in the Production Sectors

In cooperation with the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, ESCWA has built partnerships with local communities and NGOs in order to generate income and employment opportunities in impoverished areas of Lebanon through the introduction of appropriate and affordable technologies that will enhance productivity and competitiveness in the production sectors. These efforts have included training and assisting a cluster of small enterprises producing garments in north Lebanon to utilize computer-aided design software and equipment to improve product quality and efficiency. In south Lebanon, ESCWA provided two clusters of small-scale farmers with training and technical assistance on the use of environmentally-friendly technologies to produce *zaatar* (thyme) as a profitable alternative to tobacco.

SDPD also continued the implementation of the Regional Programme for Trade and Environment Capacity-building in the Arab Region.[5] ESCWA prepared a study[6] assessing the implications for trade and tariff revenues of liberalizing a list of environmental goods and services developed by the League of Arab States. Within the framework of the programme, the Government of Yemen received technical assistance that led to the inclusion of priority trade and environment linkages in its National Strategy for Environmental Sustainability and the associated National Environmental Action Plan. Programme outreach was enhanced with the launch of a dedicated website (www.escwa.un.org/tear/) which serves as a portal for accessing information on meetings, publications and activities implemented by programme partners.

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[5] This ongoing programme is coordinated by a joint secretariat, comprising CAMRE, ESCWA and UNEP/ROWA.

[6] The Liberalization of Trade in Environmental Goods and Services in the ESCWA and Arab Regions (E/ESCWA/SDPD/2007/WP.1).

<center>**Promoting Integrated Social Policy**</center>

The Social Development Division (SDD) at ESCWA focuses on strengthening the capacity of member countries to formulate and promote integrated social development policies that are region-specific and culturally sensitive, with a view to achieving social equity, poverty reduction and sustainable development. SDD also strives to increase the capacity of member countries to develop and implement intersectoral social development plans, programmes and projects that focus on youth, migrant workers, the disabled, and the rural and urban poor.

Technical Cooperation and Assistance

In addition to the Integrated Social Policy Report II: From Concept to Practice,[1] in 2008 ESCWA produced two information kits on mechanisms and instruments of social policy – Economic and Social Councils[2] and Social Observatories.[3] Projects were also launched in Egypt and Palestine, responding to the needs of the respective Governments for technical assistance in the area of integrated social policy.

ESCWA continued to cement its leading edge in the region in the research and analysis of exclusion through its work on the policy consultations phase of the interregional Development Account project, Interregional Cooperation to Strengthen Social Inclusion, Gender Equality and Health Promotion in the Millennium Development Goals. SDD also conducted methodologically innovative studies to analyse social exclusion in the region, and country studies in Yemen, Egypt and Lebanon led to the identification of determinants, enablers and manifestations of exclusion in relation to a number of disadvantaged and marginalized groups. As a further step in its mission to provide member countries with the analytical and methodological tools that they need to devise, monitor and implement programmes that aim to include the marginalized, SDD also began work on a project to map inequity related to persons with disability in Jordan.

Focusing on Youth

SDD monitors the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (WPAY) in the ESCWA region. Its work on youth issues is based on the recognition that future development in the region will hinge on the ability of countries to take advantage of a demographic window of opportunity that has the potential to promote social and economic development.

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[1] E/ESCWA/SDD/2008/3.

[2] E/ESCWA/SDD/2008/Technical paper 1.

[3] E/ESCWA/SDD/2008/Technical paper 2.

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Major Youth-related Activities by SDD

- Publication of a Social Development Bulletin entitled The Youth Bulge: Social Implications and Future Vision;[*]

- Regional inquiry on the responses of ESCWA member countries to WPAY (October – November 2008)

- Workshop on reinforcing national capacities in responding to the World Programme of Action on Youth: National Reports and Systematic Documentation of Accomplishments (Beirut, 17-18 December 2008)

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[*] ESCWA. 2008. *Social Development Bulletin*. Vol. 2, issue 1.

Population Ageing

SDD recently assessed the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing[4] at the regional level. It requested ESCWA member countries to prepare national follow-up reports and complete a monitoring questionnaire. In parallel, demography-related information was also obtained from ESCWA resources and documents on ageing. As part of its work on this issue, ESCWA also published The Demographic Profile of Arab Countries – Ageing of Rural Populations[5] and a Social Development Bulletin entitled Population Ageing in Arab Countries: Building a Society for All Ages.[6]

The Participation of Government and Civil Society in Public Policy Processes

Continuing its work on participatory development, SDD devised a series of analytical and operational activities to advise member countries on the identification and development of methodologies and approaches that contribute to the forging of dynamic participation between Government and civil society in public policy processes.

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[4] A/CONF.1979/9.

[5] E/ESCWA/SDD/2007/Booklet.1.

[6] ESCWA. 2007. *Social Development Bulletin*. Vol. 1, issue 2.

Subnational workshop on Capacity-building of Palestinian Government and Civil Society Officials in the Field of Participatory Social Development (Amman, 27-31 October 2007)

In Saudi Arabia, SDD has undertaken a series of advisory missions and capacity-building activities. These have involved consultative and technical support to a nationally-initiated joint plan between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the King Khalid Foundation (a non-profit organization) to build capacity in participatory social development. A cooperation agreement was also signed in which the Capacity-building Training Programme on Participatory Social Development, designed by ESCWA, was adopted. As a result, six capacity-building workshops were held for 140 beneficiaries from both Government and civil society, and a formal request was received from Saudi Arabia to increase the number of workshops with ESCWA technical assistance from four to 14.

Urban Poor

As part of its work on the urban poor, in 2008 SDD published a report, The Status and Prospects of the Arab City I: Urbanization and the Challenge of Urban Slums.[7] Focusing on concepts of good urban governance, social inclusion and security of tenure, the report presents a general framework for the various dimensions of urbanization and slum areas. It examines a variety of mechanisms and means adopted to improve the quality of life in urban slums and prevent the emergence of new slum areas. In order to enable member countries to deal more effectively with the issue of slums in urban cities, the report also highlights a number of basic principles and good practices that have been used successfully at both the regional and international level.

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[7] E/ESCWA/SDD/2008/4. (Document only available in Arabic.)

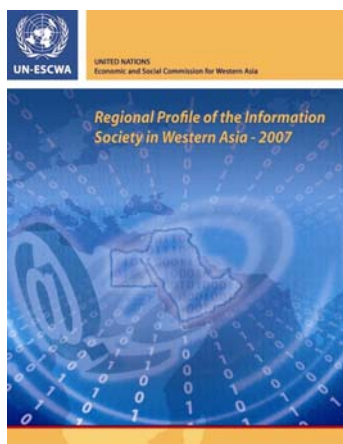**Harnessing Science and Technology for Development**

At the fourth meeting of the ESCWA Consultative Committee on Scientific and Technological Development and Technological Innovation (Bahrain, 1-2 April 2008), ESCWA, through its Information and Communications Technology Division (ICTD), reviewed progress made towards the establishment of the ESCWA Technology Centre for Development, including a detailed assessment of regional needs and priorities, and proposed implementation mechanisms for the centre. The meeting dealt with hosting and financing issues and implementation models, including activities seeking to catalyse and facilitate technology transfer.

Partnership in ICT Initiatives for Development

Public-private partnerships are of considerable importance in the implementation of ICT projects and initiatives aimed at building the information society. With this in mind, subregional capacity-building workshops entitled Establishing PPPs for ICT Initiatives were held in February 2007 (Amman, 26 February – 1 March 2007) and February 2008 (Riyadh, 17-19 February 2008).

Given the importance of promoting partnerships between institutions to incubate development projects that contribute to building an inclusive information society, in September 2007 an expert group meeting was held on regional networking and partnership for the development of the information society. ESCWA is also working in collaboration with the other United Nations regional commissions and since 2007 has been leading the implementation of a project entitled Knowledge Networks through ICT Access Points in Disadvantaged Areas. This project focuses on the strategies, mechanisms and tools needed to transform ICT access points into knowledge hubs and build a knowledge network of community-based telecentres and access points across the region. As part of this project, a training workshop to build capacity and familiarize key staff at selected ICT access points with the process of transforming the access points into knowledge hubs was organized (Beirut, 17-19 December 2008).

Profiling the Information Society in Western Asia

As a follow-up activity to the WSIS outcomes, ESCWA produced the Regional Profile of the Information Society in Western Asia – 2007,[1] a publication based on thirteen national profiles of the information society, covering the WSIS action lines, highlighting advances in ICT and outlining the major achievements towards building the information society in the region. These profiles assist decision makers and stakeholders to update and fine-tune their ICT strategies and implementation plans, and to compare their status with that of other countries in the region, thereby promoting opportunities for cooperation and regional integration in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy.

Measuring the Information Society in Western Asia

Measuring the information society enables Governments to formulate and evaluate ICT policies that target the use of ICT for socio-economic development. Assessing the current status of the use of ICT for development is therefore crucial for the region and requires common indicators and comparable, reliable data.

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[1] E/ESCWA/ICTD/2007/15.

In this regard, the following three meetings on information society measurements were held in 2007: Ready Statistical Packages (Cairo, 14-30 April); Household and Business Surveys (Cairo, 20-21 June); and ICT Indicators Adoption and Data Collection in Education and Government (Cairo, 13-15 February). Activities and partnership with the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS) led to the translation into Arabic of the publication Core ICT Indicators,[2] with the aim of ensuring wider dissemination. Collaboration with AITRS is paving the way for the standardization of the measurement process for ICT indicators in the region, and has resulted in the publication of the booklet Guidelines for ICT Indicators Measurement[3] in Arabic.

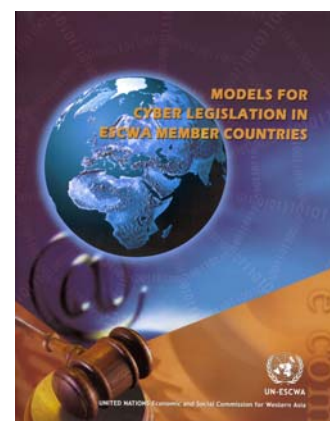### Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region[4]

Central to the WSIS outcomes was the call to Governments and stakeholders to build and monitor the status of their information societies. Responding to this call, ICTD developed an interactive information society portal, which was launched during the twenty-fifth ESCWA session (Sana'a, 26-29 May 2008). A dynamic, bilingual (English and Arabic), database-driven and open-source application, the portal is a Web application dedicated to harnessing the potential for collaboration and building an online network for partnerships on ICT initiatives. A unique access point to essential information on the current status of the information society in the region, it provides a medium for the collection of ICT indicators, the building of statistical capacity in the region, the follow-up on the implementation of the regional plan of action, and the sharing of experience and best practice.

Arabic Domain Names System

In 2008, ESCWA, in partnership with the League of Arab States, established a working group to formulate guidelines on the use of Arabic script in Internationalized Domain Names. Over the course of three expert group meetings, recommendations were produced on the Arabic characters that should be permitted. Activities also included the preparation of a preliminary feasibility study on the establishment of the ".arab" top-level domain registry and its Arabic-script equivalent, the financing and implementation of which will be reviewed in 2009.

The Development of Cyber Legislation in the ESCWA Region

In 2007, ESCWA published the study Models for Cyber Legislation in ESCWA Member Countries[5] in English and Arabic. The publication reviewed the status of regional and international cyber legislation, and proposed directives and guidelines for formulating cyberspace legislation. The models were reviewed at the Peer Consultation Meeting on Cyber Legislation (Amman, 11-12 December 2007). Building on this foundation, in 2008, ESCWA defined a template for cyber legislation to assist member countries in developing their national cyber legislation. Training on the use of this template was held in Beirut in December 2008, as part of an awareness campaign on the vital role that cyber legislation plays in developing the information society.

Promoting Digital Arabic Content

A Digital Arabic Content (DAC) competition was held in the summer of 2008 in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. The competition was organized in partnership with

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[2] E/ESCWA/ICTD/2007/Technical Paper.1.

[3] http://new.unctad.org/upload/docs/Core%20ICT%20Indicators_Eng.pdf.

[4] http://isper.escwa.org.lb/.

[5] E/ESCWA/ICTD/2007/8.

national technology incubators and the winners were offered a subsidized incubation period in order to enable them to develop their projects into viable prototypes and help them create and build enterprises.

Run in parallel with an awareness campaign, it resulted in the selection of nine winning projects from 55 applications. The winning projects are being offered incubation until the end of 2009, this will be followed by a business phase designed to enable the incubated projects to enter the market by commercializing their DAC products.
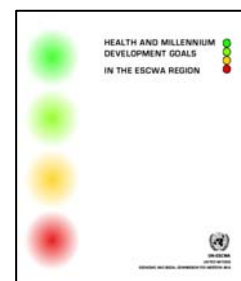
Enhancing Statistical Analysis

The Statistics Division (SD) at ESCWA has adopted a dual strategy aimed, on the one hand, at strengthening the capacity of national institutional frameworks for official statistics in member countries and, on the other hand, strengthening the capacity of member countries to participate effectively in the 2010 round of population censuses and implement household and other surveys in order to provide evidence-based data for the attainment of the MDGs by 2015.

During the period under review, SD focused on the MDGs; population and demographic statistics; gender statistics; national accounts and the international comparison programme; foreign trade; and sectoral and environment statistics. The division also provided support and information through its online databases and e-resources on standards and methods.

Millennium Development Goals

Since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration in 2000, the division has monitored and reported on the implementation of the MDGs in the Arab region, and strengthened the capacity of member countries to collect and disseminate data through national MDG reports.

In 2008, the division compiled MDG national data and metadata from NSOs and disseminated the resulting regional analysis, along with proposals for improvement, in a report entitled Millennium Development Goals: Monitoring Framework and Proposals for Improvements.[1] It also published a thematic report on health and the MDGs,[2] which tracked progress achieved since 1990 by each country in the ESCWA region and provided analysis at the national and regional levels on health-related indicators.

The division also organized periodic workshops on DevInfo software for data users and administrators. Two customized DevInfo regional databases based on national data were released in 2008: HealthInfo[3] and YouInfo.[4] The division organized a DevInfo v.5 workshop[5] for participants from Arab NSOs, including health officials responsible for compiling and processing health data (Beirut, 7-10 July 2008) and implemented a field-based statistical literacy programme to enhance the capacity of users to better monitor and report on the MDGs.[6]

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[1] E/ESCWA/SD/2008/IG.1/4.

[2] ESCWA. 2008. *Health and Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA Region* (E/ESCWA/SCU/2007/Technical Paper.2). Also available at: http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/scu/healthMDG/index.asp.

[3] More information on the HealthInfo database is available at: http://health-info.escwa.org.lb/.

[4] More information on the YouInfo database is available at: http://youthinfo.escwa.org.lb.

[5] More information on the workshop is available at: http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetings.asp?division=sd&condition=old.

[6] More information on the statistical literacy programme is available at: http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/div_editor/Download.asp?table_name=other&field_name=ID&FileID=573.

Population and Demographic Statistics

Established in 2004, the Regional Task Force on Population and Housing Censuses meets annually to support ESCWA member countries in their efforts to complete the 2010 Population and Housing Census programme. These meetings provide a platform for countries to report on national issues and concerns relating to census procedures. The division has developed a discussion forum on its homepage called Census-Net, where members of the Task Force can exchange documentation and discuss issues of common interest. The fourth meeting of the Task Force (Cairo, 5-6 September 2007) reviewed matters including the status of the translation of the second revision of the Population and Principles of Population and Housing Censuses, the dissemination and tabulation of micro-data, and outsourcing in censuses.[7]
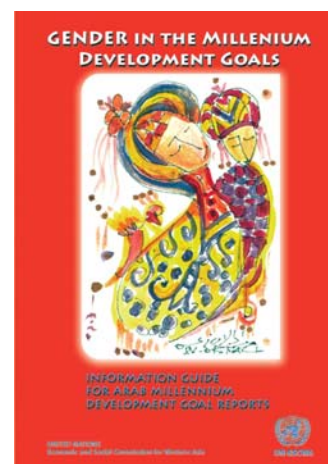

Gender Statistics

Gender Statistics Workshops, 2007-2008

- Workshop on Mainstreaming Gender in Labour Statistics in Iraq (Turin, 9-12 December 2008)

- Second National Workshop on a Strategic Framework for Enhancing National Statistical Capacities and Mainstreaming Gender in Statistical Work (Beirut, 25-27 November 2008)

- Workshop on the Design of National Strategies for the Development of Statistics: Mainstreaming Gender in Sectoral Statistics (Istanbul, 24-26 March 2008)

- COSIT Fellowship on Gender Statistics (Amman, 7-8 November 2007)

- National Workshop on Gender Statistics and Time-Use Survey (Amman, 4-6 November 2007)

The growing need for gender equality and the empowerment of women underlines the importance of developing a single information-gathering monitoring system for gender statistics. In cooperation with United Nations agencies in the Arab region, the division is implementing a joint project entitled Toward More Gender-responsive Millennium Development Goal Monitoring and Reporting in the Arab Region.

To this end, an expert group meeting on gender and the MDGs in the Arab region (Cairo, 10-11 September 2007) called upon member countries to adopt the "G IS IN" Framework measurement tool. This three-dimensional framework contains a minimum core set of gender indicators and facilitates the monitoring of MDGs and compliance with agreements related to the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW.

National Accounts and the International Comparison Programme

The 2005 International Comparison Programme (ICP) round is the world's largest statistical initiative. Managed by the World Bank globally, SD is responsible for its regional deployment, which is currently being implemented in 11 member countries. Using a series of statistical surveys to collect price data for a basket of goods and services, the programme aims to produce internationally comparable price levels,

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[7] More information is available at: http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=527E.

economic aggregates in real terms and Purchasing Power Parity estimates (PPPs). The use of PPPs as conversion factors makes it possible to measure the relative social and economic well-being of countries, monitor the incidence of poverty, track progress towards the MDGs and target programmes optimally.

Foreign Trade Data

In collaboration with the United Nations Statistics Division and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the division assists member countries to develop and improve their capacity to collect, process, analyse and disseminate trade data for the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of national plans and policies for regional and international trade negotiations.
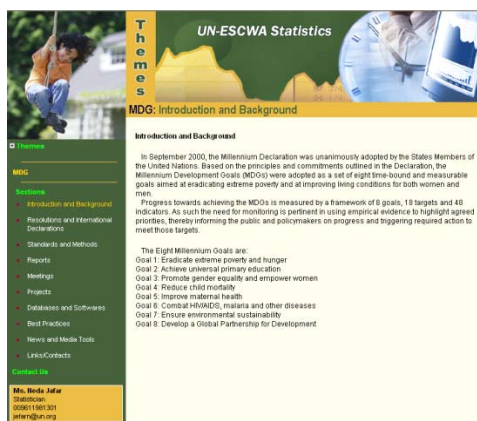
These activities are conducted within the framework of a project entitled Strengthening the Development of International Merchandise Trade Statistics and the Compilation of e-Commerce in ESCWA Member Countries.[8] During the period under review, ESCWA organized two workshops in support of this work, the first focusing on data compilation and application of methodological concepts (Amman, 28 October – 2 November 2007) and the second on data quality and external trade indices (Cairo, 12-15 June 2008).

Environment Statistics and Accounts in the ESCWA Region

In collaboration with ECLAC, the division is leading a project on strengthening national capacity in environment statistics, indicators and accounts, which aims to integrate environmental concerns into economic development and to support member countries in their efforts to develop water accounts. Parallel to this project, an interactive platform has been created, providing continuous updates on environmental statistics, indicators and accounts and constituting a resource for both the Arab region and other interested groups.

Throughout 2008, ESCWA continued to strengthen its partnership with other agencies[9] through the implementation of joint activities, organizing two subregional workshops and training sessions on water accounts and the system of environmental-economic accounting for water for the Arab Gulf Countries (Beirut, 25-28 August 2008).

Knowledge Sharing: The Virtual Library

The division has developed the Virtual Library[10] as a knowledge-sharing tool to provide users from different disciplines with access to selected national, regional and international resources across a variety of thematic areas. In the period under review, the Virtual Library contained five priority themes (national statistical systems; the MDGs; population and housing; gender statistics; and health and disability statistics), each with its own independent website, and plans are in hand to develop additional thematic areas.

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[8] More information on this project is available at: http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/scu/tradestats/index.asp.

[9] Including UNSD, MEDSTAT (Regional Programme of Statistics in the Mediterranean Region), ECLAC and the United Nations Environment Programme.

[10] More information is available at: http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/main.asp?division=sd.

Mainstreaming Gender Equality

Through its Centre for Women (ECW), ESCWA undertakes normative, analytical and operational work by providing policymakers with specific recommendations on advancing the rights of women in the region; engaging in capacity-building activities on the rights of women and the need to adhere to international instruments, particularly among parliamentarians in the ESCWA region who are entrusted with the task of amending discriminative legislation; engaging in capacity-building activities aimed at enhancing the capacity of Government institutions in such gender issues as national machineries for women; and raising awareness on gender issues among men, women and society at large.

Full Implementation of CEDAW in the ESCWA Region

The full implementation of CEDAW[1] and its optional protocol[2] in the region remains an important priority for ESCWA. To this end, during the period under review, it organized several capacity-building workshops and advisory missions to raise awareness of the importance of implementing the Convention and the need for member countries to withdraw their reservations. Under the Convention, member countries are obliged to submit a periodic report to the CEDAW Committee in Geneva on the progress made in implementing the Convention. ESCWA provides assistance to member countries to fulfil their obligations under the Convention by assisting them to draft such reports in line with the requirements set out in the guidelines prepared by the CEDAW Committee.

In February 2008, ECW undertook a mission to Bahrain to raise awareness on the Convention and assist civil society organizations to draft shadow reports. A similar technical cooperation mission also targeted the national machinery in Bahrain to assist the country in finalizing its national report to the CEDAW Committee in Geneva. In collaboration with the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UN-DAW), ESCWA also organized two regional workshops for judges and parliamentarians on the implementation of CEDAW in the ESCWA region (Amman, 17-19 October 2007 and Beirut, 26-28 November 2008).

Integrating a Gender Perspective into the National Policies of Member Countries

ESCWA seeks to enhance the capacity of member countries to mainstream gender through the establishment of national machineries for women and support those countries with existing machineries. In accordance with the eighth area of concern of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,[3] all ESCWA member countries have created national machineries for women or gender-related Government bodies. ESCWA continues to build the capacity of these bodies through advisory services, regular training workshops, meetings and the preparation of supporting materials and publications.

Increased Assistance on Gender Equality and the Advancement of Women

The number of requests for assistance and information on gender-related issues has risen sharply since the ECW was established in 2003. The operational, analytical and normative activities undertaken by ESCWA have raised awareness of and interest in gender issues in member countries and prompted them to solicit help from ESCWA in building capacity in this challenging field. This is reflected in the number of requests for ESCWA technical cooperation/advisory services on gender-related issues, which rose from a single request in 2003 to 70 requests in 2008.

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[1] The text of the Convention can be found at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/.

[2] The optional protocol is a separate document, which defines procedures for communication and inquiries. It enables individuals and groups to claim their rights under CEDAW, and enables the CEDAW Committee to investigate violations of the rights of women in countries that are signatories to the protocol.

[3] The text of the Beijing Platform for Action and further information is available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/.

More than 30 capacity-building missions took place in 2007 and 2008 to Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. These missions aimed to build the capacity of member countries on such issues as the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325,[4] which focuses on protecting the rights of women in conflict situations and integrating them in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction efforts; the eradication of violence against women; CEDAW; gender mainstreaming; gender budgeting; and strategic planning. One of the direct results of these capacity-building missions is that many ESCWA member countries have been able to strengthen their commitment to gender equality and the advancement of women by institutionalizing gender in State or Government structures. The successes of these missions include the technical assistance on developing the five-year development plan of the Syrian Arab Republic; and timely submission of the national CEDAW reports of the Syrian Arab Republic and Bahrain to the CEDAW Committee in Geneva.

In 2007, as volume 35 of the series Studies on Arab Women and Development, ESCWA published guidelines aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of national machineries for women in the ESCWA countries. A further study on gender mainstreaming was also prepared, with a view to enhancing the technical skills of national machineries for women in mainstreaming gender in the water and environment sectors; both documents were presented at an expert group meeting (Amman, 17-19 October 2007).

In the period under review, ESCWA also held a regional workshop on gender budgeting (Amman, 27-28 November 2007) and two subregional workshops (Amman, 5-7 February 2007 and 4-6 May 2007) on gender mainstreaming.

Gender Budgeting Workshop in Amman (November 2007)

In 2007, ESCWA launched an electronic newsletter on sectoral gender mainstreaming.[5] Fifteen issues of the newsletter have been published to raise awareness of the complex interplay between gender and issues of conflict, renewable energy, migration, economic stability, climate change and food security. The ECW has also established an interactive e-network to help national machineries for women to interact, learn from each other's experiences and communicate on issues of concern.

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[4] United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000).

[5] Available at: http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/ecw.asp?division=ecw.

Addressing Emerging and Conflict-related Issues

Capacity-building Interventions: The ECRI Approach

The capacity-building interventions undertaken by the Emerging and Conflict-related Issues (ECRI) section at ESCWA are primarily geared towards enhancing the ability of the public sector to take the lead in the attainment of development objectives, including the MDGs. These interventions are principally context-specific, based on a meticulous needs assessment and in concert with national development strategies. They are also designed to create a sustainable dynamic in which the staff trained become the drivers of good governance and development within their local institutions.

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<tr><td>

Capacity-building and Institutional Strengthening of the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works (MMPW) in Iraq Project

- Enhancing the capacity of the MMPW to deliver public services efficiently

- Enhancing the capacity of Ministry trainers to manage decentralized training programmes

- Training 250 public officials in a wide variety of management skills, including management of water provision under crisis conditions

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Strategic Planning Workshops

As part of its technical cooperation activities, two training of trainers workshops on strategic planning were organized by ECRI for Palestinian and Yemeni public sector managers. The workshops were held in Beirut (7-13 November 2008) and Sana'a (24 November – 2 December 2008) respectively, and targeted public officials from 20 Palestinian and 15 Yemeni institutions. The workshops focused on the concepts, principles and approaches of strategic planning and provided trainees with the tools to train others. They aimed to familiarize participants with techniques to enhance their strategic planning skills, assist them in developing and implementing action plans within their units, and provide them with the opportunity to share experiences and expertise.

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Capacity-building Through the Iraqi Public Sector Management Project

- Creating a management development framework for the Iraqi public sector

- Building the capacity of 55 staff from the National Center for Consultancy and Management Development (NCCMD) through training and study tours

- Strengthening the participation of the centre in the Governance Institutes Forum for Training in the Middle East and North Africa (GIFT-MENA), a regional governance network

- Equipping the centre with advanced management and strategic planning software and techniques (Parmenides Eidos Think Tools)

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E-Caravan Phoenix in Lebanon

In January 2006, ESCWA launched the E-Caravan project in partnership with Fondation Saradar. The E-Caravan aims to provide opportunities to generate income and reduce unemployment in disadvantaged rural communities by bridging the digital gap. The E-Caravan was destroyed during the Lebanon-Israeli war in July 2006 and a new E-Caravan – the E-Caravan Phoenix – was launched in April 2008 with assistance from Italy and Canada. This mobile school circumvents the inherent obstacles of remote and isolated locations at low cost. The beneficiaries of the project are youth, women and disabled persons in disadvantaged rural areas of south Lebanon, micro and small businesses, educational and civic institutions, and local municipalities. Some 770 people have been trained since its launch. E-Caravan trainees gain

marketable skills and become more employable, women increase their ability to generate additional income, and employees improve their performance levels, which in turn has an impact on the profitability, output and ability to generate employment of the enterprise for which they work. Building on its success in Lebanon, there are plans to replicate the project in Iraq and Yemen.

The E-Caravan in January 2006   **The destruction in July 2006**   **The New E-Caravan in April 2008**

The Smart Community Project in Iraq

Principal components of the project
• Multipurpose Technology Community Centres (MTCCs) to provide access to IT and vocational training courses for impoverished communities
• Agro-food processing units to process and market agro-food products, enhancing employment opportunities and the profitability of agro-food activities
• A technology dissemination programme to share experiences and provide a support and training network for civil society institutions

The Smart Community Project (SCP) in Iraq promotes the acquisition and dissemination of integrated modern technology in order to generate employment, create enterprises and reduce poverty while taking into account such considerations as local socio-economic status, environmental conditions and development priorities. The project has initially targeted two rural communities, but has been designed for eventual dissemination throughout Iraq.

ESCWA involved local universities in the implementation of the main components of the SCP in order to develop a local institutional memory that would permit their replication using local resources and know-how. In an effort to promote public-private partnership, the facilities were handed over to local municipalities, which in turn lease them to the private sector. Some of the major achievements of the SCP include:

• The commissioning and installation of two dairy processing facilities in Dibs and Sayid Dikhil;

• The establishment and fitting-out of two chemistry and microbiology laboratories for food testing at Salahaddine and Thi Qar Universities;

• A total of 200 trainers have trained to deliver courses in IT basics, agro-food and dairy processing, PC-based accountancy, literacy, office management procedures and the creation of micro-enterprises at the community level;

• Three databases have been designed and developed to provide local communities with access to socio-economic information, employment opportunities and technical support through networking.

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Selected Substantive Publications by ECRI

Economic and Social Repercussions of the Israeli Occupation on the Living Conditions of the Palestinian People in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including Jerusalem, and of the Arab Population in the Occupied Syrian Golan, a Note by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, drafted annually by ECRI. The 2008 report highlighted the alarming trend of de-development and the severe impact of Israeli measures, including the blockade on the Gaza Strip and mobility restrictions throughout the occupied Palestinian territory. The report also focused on the continued Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank, the construction of the barrier and the socio-economic implications for the Palestinian population.

Socio-economic Impact of Conflict-driven Displacement in the ESCWA Region, the first issue in the Trends and Impact in Conflict Settings series, analysing the socio-economic impact of conflict-related issues in the ESCWA region. Conflict-driven displacement in the ESCWA region accounts for 35 per cent of displaced persons globally, with 7.6 million refugees and 7.2 million internally displaced. The aim of the study is to draw attention to the fact that displacement is a regional issue and that any solution will thus require coordinated regional strategies.

Public Information

During 2007-2008, the United Nations Information Services/United Nations Information Centre (UNIS/UNIC), in close coordination with ESCWA, deployed a wide variety of means to support the work of the substantive divisions by ensuring visibility and increasing public awareness of the activities and work programme of the regional Commission. These included media support, exhibitions of ESCWA publications, public briefings, press interviews and the coordination of events in celebration of United Nations Day.

Publication Exhibitions

Two major exhibitions of ESCWA publications were organized by UNIS/UNIC in 2008. The first was a four-day exhibition in Yemen during the twenty-fifth ESCWA session, which showcased recent ESCWA publications, covering an array of topics from water to women and conflict to technology. During the official United Nations Day ceremony, jointly organized with the Lions District 351 (Lebanon-Jordan-Iraq) on 24 October 2008, the information team also coordinated the design and realization of an exhibition of ESCWA publications and others from the wider United Nations system. Both exhibitions attracted a large number of visitors, as well as media and prominent figures, and the publications were received with great interest. The media coverage was significant and helped to further consolidate the image of ESCWA as a source of substantive expertise in the region on a wide range of topics.

Twenty-fifth ESCWA session, Yemen (May 2008)

Coverage of the Twenty-fifth ESCWA Session

Organized every biennium, ESCWA sessions are an opportunity to reach out to a wider audience and disseminate knowledge on the United Nations and the work of the regional Commission. During the period leading up to the twenty-fifth session (Sana'a, 26-29 May 2008), UNIS/UNIC disseminated information and print reportages to the regional media, with the local media in Yemen expressing particular interest. It also coordinated the updating and dissemination of ESCWA at a Glance, a key document on the regional Commission that introduces its history, workings and areas of specialization. To complement the event, the information team also coordinated a four-day exhibition of ESCWA publications.

Through both the written media and television interviews with participants and ESCWA officials, the wide coverage received in both regional and pan-Arab media contributed significantly to the visibility of the session. The media spotlight, both before and during the session, helped to shape a stronger image and clearer understanding of ESCWA, especially in the host country.

Press Conferences for the Launch of Flagship Publications

In 2008, UNIS/UNIC organized or coordinated press conferences for the launch of several major ESCWA publications, including The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2007: A Youth Lens, Annual Review of Developments in Globalization and Regional Integration, Information Guide for Arab Millennium Development Goal Reports and Integrated Social Policy Report.

These press conferences attracted significant media attention, in large part because the publications deal with such "hot" topics in the region as financing for development and youth. The launches also served to anchor the image of ESCWA as a reliable source of specialist information, encouraging the media to use its flagship publications as sources of reference and to cite from them on relevant issues.

Launch of Annual Review of Developments in
Globalization and Regional Integration (August 2008)

Public Awareness and Press Interviews

Despite the heightened security situation, UNIS/UNIC organized two public briefings at United Nations House in 2008, one for university students and another for young judges. Both groups were given a detailed account of the work of the United Nations in general and ESCWA in particular. They left with a better understanding of the United Nations and the work of the regional Commission, and a desire to contribute to the work of the organization in the future.

UNIS/UNIC also arranged press interviews with the Executive Secretary for the local and regional press. Such interviews contributed to raising awareness of the work of ESCWA, its involvement in local and regional issues, and its role in serving the region.

Celebrating United Nations Day (October 2008)

Coordination of United Nations Week Activities

UNIS/UNIC coordinated the events of United Nations Week in Lebanon, which culminated in the celebrations for United Nations Day. These included print reportages and television interviews focusing on the work of ESCWA and the United Nations. Feedback was universally positive, the image of ESCWA having been more clearly defined in the public mind, allaying any misconceptions about the role of the regional Commission in comparison with other United Nations organizations.

Administrative and Organizational Matters

In order to ensure the effective implementation of the Commission's programme of work, the Administrative Services Division (ASD) at ESCWA provides support in a number of key areas. In addition to providing advice to the Executive Secretary on policy guidelines, monitoring the management reform process and coordinating central common services, the functions of the division encompass the full spectrum of administrative and organizational support. Much of its work is carried out behind the scenes, but is vital to the efficient functioning of the Commission, the needs of its staff and the success of its programme of work.

Human Resources Management

The Human Resources Management Section (HRMS) delivers quality services to client managers and staff members. In the period under review, HRMS enhanced the efficiency of a number of processes covering recruitment, benefits and entitlements, and implemented policies to streamline and introduce greater transparency to the recruitment and management of staff. It also provided training programmes and medical services for all staff.

Information and Communication Systems

The Information and Communication Systems Section (ICSS) supports the substantive, administrative and management processes by maintaining the ICT infrastructure of the organization and providing innovative technological solutions wherever necessary. Furthermore, by maintaining the ESCWA websites/portals, it makes a vital contribution to the sharing and dissemination of information on the Commission and its substantive work, not only to member countries, but also to the general public.
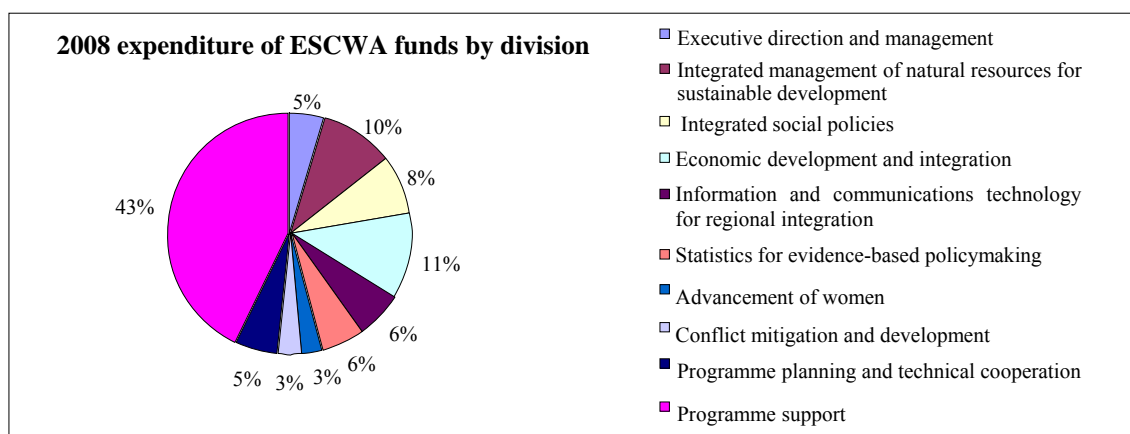
Central Support Services

The core mission of the Central Support Services Section (CSSS) is to ensure the safe and efficient operation of United Nations House, the Commission's headquarters in Beirut. In addition to facilities management, its activities cover such diversified areas as travel, property and inventory control, mail, and management of the ESCWA archives.

Procurement

The Procurement Unit (PU) is responsible for the purchase and rental of services, supplies and equipment. Its work covers the entire procurement process, from the drafting of detailed specifications and the invitation of tenders and proposals, through the negotiation and contract phases to the successful provision of competitively-priced, optimal quality products and services for the Commission.

Budget and Finance

The primary objectives of the Budget and Finance Section (BFS) are to contribute to the sound budgetary, financial and accounting management of both regular and extrabudgetary resources, the effective monitoring and management of the Commission's financial assets, and budget planning and control. It is constantly working to increase the efficiency of these processes, introducing automation wherever possible. The expenditure in 2008 by each division at ESCWA is illustrated in the diagram on the previous page, shown as a percentage of total funding.

2008 expenditure of ESCWA funds by division

5%	Executive direction and management
10%	Integrated management of natural resources for sustainable development
8%	Integrated social policies
43%	Economic development and integration
11%	Information and communications technology for regional integration
6%	Statistics for evidence-based policymaking
5% 3% 3% 6%	Advancement of women
	Conflict mitigation and development
	Programme planning and technical cooperation
	Programme support

Security and Safety

Given the visible presence of its staff in and around United Nations House, the Security and Safety Section (SSS) is one of the externally higher-profile sections of ASD. Such presence is not only reassuring for staff members and visitors, but vital to their safety. In the period under review, it faced particularly challenging circumstances and deployed exceptional measures to ensure a secure environment for delegates, staff and visitors, thus enabling ESCWA to continue to carry out its regular activities.

Library

Housing a comprehensive and expanding collection in the fields of specialization of the Commission, the ESCWA library provides services and information to staff, member countries, United Nations libraries, depository libraries and a range of other clients. Open to the public three days a week, it also caters for those who wish to access ESCWA documents via the Internet, by constantly updating the ESCWA databases and indexing Commission documents on the United Nations Official Documents System.

Conference Services

The Conference Services Section (CSS) is the Commission's service provider for conferences and publications. Its services are wide-ranging, covering the practical organization of intergovernmental meetings, expert group meetings and workshops in Beirut and elsewhere in the region, and the processing of documents and publications produced by the substantive divisions. It provides specialist referencing, editing, translating, desktop publishing, reproduction and distribution services for parliamentary documentation, recurrent and non-recurrent publications, as well as technical and information material in order to support, promote and disseminate the work of the Commission.

Although by its very nature, much of the work of ASD is behind the scenes, it is central to the smooth functioning of the ESCWA secretariat. The division is a supporter, enabler and facilitator of the work of the Commission, underpinning the efficient implementation of its substantive mandate in the region.

The Way Forward

For millions of people across the globe, 2008 was a year of great insecurity, as the food, financial and economic crises threatened livelihoods and caused stagnation, if not regression, in progress towards the achievement of the MDGs. Governments, civil society, and regional and international organizations all exerted significant efforts in the search for solutions to the surge in food prices, volatility in energy prices and instability caused by the financial crisis. Today, the impact of these crises on financial and socio-economic development in the ESCWA region remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that the region will not only need to address the threats posed by these crises in the short term, but also find effective strategies in the medium and long term to tackle the underlying structural factors that led to such volatility and vulnerability.

Financial and Economic Crises

As a result of the financial and economic crises and falling oil prices, economic growth prospects for the coming year appear to be increasingly uncertain in the ESCWA region. Member country Governments and regional and international organizations will need to address the expected increase in unemployment, the sharp drop in remittance inflows and FDI in the region, and introduce safety nets to buffer the impact on the most vulnerable groups in society.

In the coming year, ESCWA will continue to contribute to the global debate on the financial and economic crises through research, analytical work and through its convening power to ensure both a coordinated regional response and full representation of the interests of the region in global discussions on reform of the financial institutions. Through its interdisciplinary work, the Commission will contribute to finding innovative solutions by looking not only at the immediate impact of the financial crisis on economic development, but also its ripple effect on social development.

Food Crisis

Rising staple food prices have affected the region, contributing to an increase in poverty. Political repercussions have been seen in demonstrations and political riots in Egypt and Yemen, as well as rising tensions among expatriate workers in parts of the Gulf. The response of member Governments to date has tended to focus on short term alleviation of the problems, such as cash transfers and additional subsidies, rather than the development of long-term policies to ensure household food security. While prices of certain food staples have now declined, the underlying volatility, caused by the need for greater investment in agriculture (among other factors), will remain. Net food imports account for some 5-10 per cent of total imports in most Arab countries; as a result, the region is exposed to food price volatility. Extensive reliance on fuel and food subsidies brings with it high fiscal costs, further reducing the capacity to address social needs.

Initiatives for achieving long-term food security should be embedded in integrated sustainable development policies that take into consideration structural concerns and encourage investment in agricultural production and productivity improvements. ESCWA will therefore continue to promote an approach that addresses not only the immediate emergency needs, but also long-term regional food security.

Climate Change

In parallel to the financial and food crises, the ongoing challenge of global climate change is expected to have an adverse impact on the economic and social development of the region, especially as the availability of water and agricultural land diminishes. Despite being one of the lowest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, it is universally accepted that the ESCWA region will be disproportionately affected by climate change, including coastal zone threats, increased water scarcity and worsening drought

and desertification. The impact of these predicted changes will be greatest on such vulnerable groups as the poor, women and youth, further aggravating instability in the region.

The Commission will respond to these challenges by supporting the implementation of the Arab Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change, giving greater attention to climate change issues in its work programme for 2010-2011 and addressing sustainable development issues. The forthcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference (Copenhagen, 7-18 December 2009) is expected to establish a new post-Kyoto global agreement on climate change. The United Nations Secretary-General is spearheading this initiative at both the global and regional levels and ESCWA will play a central role in its implementation in Western Asia.

Good Governance

In the ESCWA region, the ramifications of these major global issues are all too frequently set against a backdrop of political instability, foreign occupation and lack of adequate reform. The already considerable challenges faced by member countries are often further complicated by political factors. Good governance is essential to ensure transparent and inclusive policymaking and implementation mechanisms for the effective delivery of public goods and services. The Commission will therefore continue its efforts to support member countries in this field, with a view to ensuring that lack of good governance does not impede social and economic progress or individual liberties.

Trade, Partnerships for Development and ICT

To support developing countries in facing the challenges of the financial crisis, food insecurity, and volatile energy and commodity prices, the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development called for continued support in the form of aid for trade, official development assistance, reform of the international financial institutions and reinvigoration of the global partnership for development through both South-South and North-South cooperation. In the coming year and those ahead, ESCWA will continue to address issues related to financing for development, including mobilizing domestic financial resources and FDI. It will also extend its work on the promotion of intraregional trade and investment, the integration of the transport and communications infrastructure, the harmonization and facilitation of trade and transport, and the coordination of strategies and plans for the development of the information and communications technology sector within the framework of the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society.

Millennium Development Goals

During the High-level Event on the Millennium Development Goals, to be held in September 2008, the Secretary-General is expected to call for new partnerships between donor countries, national leaders, civil society groups, the business world and philanthropists to ensure that the food and financial crises do not reverse the progress made to date on achieving the MDGs. While most member countries have made significant progress, particularly in the area of health, and are on track to meet most MDG targets by 2015, vulnerable groups are likely to fare appreciably worse than is suggested by the national averages. Similarly, the least developed and conflict-affected countries in the region are lagging behind and are unlikely to achieve the majority of the MDGs by 2015.

Central to tracking the progress towards the achievement of the MDGs and to policy and programme formulation in general is the production of timely, reliable, comparable and gender-sensitive statistics. ESCWA has long demonstrated its commitment to enhancing the capacity of member countries to produce and disseminate socio-economic statistics and indicators of the highest quality for use in evidence-based policymaking both nationally and regionally, and this support will continue in the coming years. In the context of the MDGs, this will include ongoing assistance in collecting and disseminating accurate data and progress indicators in order to develop measures for accelerating and attaining the goals, thus guiding policymakers for the future.

Other Issues

In the coming year and across the next biennium, ESCWA will focus on addressing the above challenges; supporting the region in achieving its goals; working to support vulnerable groups, including the poor, women, youth, the disabled and the displaced; promoting gender equality and the advancement of women; ensuring that the impact of the financial and economic crises on the region is attenuated to the greatest extent possible; and pursuing the formulation and adoption of integrated social policies that balance economic and social development. As a concrete recognition of the importance of addressing people in their own language and promoting the Arabic language in international forums, the Commission will continue to provide quality services in Arabic, making use of its expertise across a broad range of specialized fields in order to meet the language needs of the region.

> Looking towards a future of peace, security and prosperity for all

This report has provided a necessarily brief snapshot of the work of ESCWA in the period under review. The successes have been many and varied, but the challenges faced by the countries of the region continue. The road ahead will be long and the challenges considerable, but given the commitment and expertise of its staff, ESCWA is well-positioned to lead and support its member countries into the next decade and beyond. As it enters its 35th anniversary year, the Commission can not only look back with pride on the difference that it has made in the lives of the peoples of the region, but can also look forward to continuing to work with its member countries towards a future of peace, security and prosperity for all.