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**PRIORITY ISSUES IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
IN THE ARAB REGION****ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT
IN POLITICAL TRANSITIONS****Summary**

Civil society is increasingly participating in processes aimed at achieving sustainable and inclusive development and upholding universal rights. One of the key functions of civil society that emerged during and after the popular protests that affected some Arab countries in 2011 is to support and participate in national dialogues and in the crafting of new social contracts that reflect the aspirations of citizens. Success in such an endeavour will depend on the capacity of civil society organizations to rise to the challenge and on the aptitude of Governments to embrace civil society engagement and empower it to ensure that stability is restored.

This report highlights the role of civil society in promoting participatory development, particularly addressing the challenges of political transitions that were prompted by popular movements in the region since 2011. The report draws a number of conclusions based on the experience of applying the participatory development approach of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and presents recommendations that member countries may consider to enhance public-civic partnerships in service delivery, consensus-building mechanisms and democratic governance.

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Introduction

1. In 2011, the Arab region witnessed the onset of popular protests that challenged and changed a number of Arab regimes, and initiated waves of political instability across the region. Scenes of public squares filled with people demanding change were seen daily on television screens worldwide. Their demands were clear and simple: more political participation.
2. The efforts of some countries, which originally intended to foster more inclusion and participation, often took the form of largesse, social transfers and insufficient political reform. Additionally, measures to allow the formation of participatory channels were insufficient to include and empower such important and representative swaths of society as youth, minorities and women. Consequently, the efforts of some regimes to encourage reasonable civil society formation had little impact on policymaking and national debates.
3. Participation and citizen engagement are enabled by the clear rule of law and transparent procedures for their meaningful and orderly contribution to matters of public interest. They take place through the involvement of citizens in non-governmental organizations and other civil society entities. The primary driver of the ongoing political transformation of countries in the region is the demand of citizens for inclusive participatory mechanisms that give them a say in defining their own futures. In turn, that implies negotiating new social contracts that redefine the relationship between citizens and the State and guarantee the meaningful participation of citizens at various levels of policymaking. The purpose is to ensure that the participation and input of citizens are taken into account and dealt with transparently, resulting in consensus on public policies, broad-based buy-in and an improved democratic practice.
4. Additionally, participatory development and citizen engagement rest on the principles of empowerment, consensus, participation and the rule of law. Empowerment seeks to reinforce the ability and freedom of citizens to voice their opinions, participate in the design of public policies and monitor their implementation for the greater good of society. Consensus is the ability to negotiate and find common ground between diverse groups in the interest of sustainable and far-reaching policies. Participation allows equal opportunity for stakeholders to contribute through a variety of efforts and to meet their needs according to their own priorities. Accordingly, participation should be guaranteed by clear and effective laws, procedures and institutional mechanisms, going as far as being protected by the constitution.
5. A few years ago, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) championed the concept and practice of participatory development in the region, which consisted of a bottom-up approach geared towards integrated ways of designing public policies based on wide coalitions of social and political forces and supported by an extensive web of stakeholders including civil society and the private sector. Participatory development can only happen in societies that are socially cohesive, economically prosperous, culturally open and politically stable.
6. As the Arab region has embarked on a transitional path that is seemingly unclear and often unstable, participation and citizen engagement gain additional significance and importance. National dialogues and their outcomes as negotiated social contracts, both the process and the substance, will be the litmus test for how far participation and citizen engagement will impact a new and uncharted political reality. This report offers valuable experiences, guidance and applicable recommendations on viable options to foster meaningful participation and citizen engagement in times of uncertain transition.

I. PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN PERIODS OF POLITICAL TRANSITION

A. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPATION, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

7. Broad-based participation and civic engagement are prerequisites for inclusive development because they enable individuals and groups to have a say in the decisions that shape their lives. The aim of development is not limited to boosting economic growth, but also includes improving the quality of people's

lives and enabling them to set their own priorities so that they become catalysts for and beneficiaries of change. To that end, people voluntarily congregate to advance common interests and their efforts can grow into what is referred to as civil society. Civil society is also known as the “third sector” which occupies the space between the State and the family, and includes non-governmental and faith-based organizations, community and non-profit foundations, civic and activist groups, charities, academia, labour unions, syndicates and political parties.

8. Civil society is increasingly taking part in processes that aim to achieve sustainable and inclusive development, and to promote the rights of all citizens. In that respect, it plays an important role in promoting the transparency of the decision-making process, ensuring Government accountability towards its citizens, promoting civil and political rights and complementing development interventions. Owing to their flexible structure and grass-roots nature, civil society organizations are capable of quickly acting upon emerging socioeconomic, environmental and political problems either through direct interventions or by influencing the policymaking process.

9. Civil society organizations have long participated in providing a variety of welfare services to vulnerable groups. Additionally, such organizations have been active in galvanizing efforts to reduce poverty, empower women, protect the environment, provide health and education services, create jobs, provide vocational training and enhance rural development. An increasing number of organizations focus on raising public awareness, building capacity, promoting civic values and rights and lobbying for the ratification of international conventions and human rights instruments. The media are part of the larger civil society network, and a medium to increase access to critical public information.

B. THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

10. Effective civic engagement is essential to support political transitions. That inextricable relationship is embodied in the historical role of civil society in defending the political rights of citizens and in facilitating the transitional processes in many parts of the world.¹ Civil society complements the role of the State and provides the necessary checks and balances that can ensure individual rights and freedoms.² Thus, it is considered a partner rather than a rival of the State. It holds Governments liable, exposes abuse of power and corruption, informs the public on issues of concern and cultivates democratic values. Increasingly, some civil society organizations are acting as watchdogs of public policy processes, ensuring that legislative decisions are properly implemented and that marginalized populations are not excluded.

11. During post-conflict periods or political transitions, civil society can play an important role in facilitating conflict resolution and combating factionalism. An active civil society contributes to building national policy dialogue and provides legitimacy to policy and reform processes by contributing to constitutional reforms, engaging in transitional justice or monitoring electoral processes (such as in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Sudan) and the performance of the Government (such as in Palestine).

12. The civic engagement of Arab citizens has been widely lauded in the wake of the popular movements that ushered political transition into a number of countries in 2011. From North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, the protests appealed for socioeconomic reforms and democratic change. Men and women, old and young, people with different levels of education, occupations and religious beliefs assembled to demand a new social contract that would allow their voices to be heard, and to assert their right to fair and equal opportunities. The popular demonstrations were a catalyst for change and led to political transformation in a significant number of countries. In others, they contributed to the reevaluation of citizen-State relations.

¹ Micheal Bratton, 1994, “Civil Society and Political Transition in Africa”, *IDR Reports* (vol. 11, No. 6).

² Jeremy Hobbs, 2011, “A Civil Society Transition”, *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue No. 1045, 28 April-4 May).

During political transitions, the participation of citizens in decision-making offers a window of opportunity for them to understand and influence the process of democratic governance.

C. FORMS AND RELEVANCE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT DURING PERIODS OF POLITICAL TRANSITION

13. Civic engagement can have a considerable impact on the process of political transition, particularly in terms of advocating the concerns of citizens. In order to realize that goal, a clear understanding of the different forms of civic engagement and roles of civil society is required for both national civil society actors and external supporters or donors. Researchers distinguish seven essential and interdependent forms or functions of civic engagement, namely: protection of citizens; intermediation or facilitation; participatory socialization; community-building and integration; monitoring for accountability; service delivery; and communication.³

- Civil society acts as a watch dog to prompt and compel the State to ensure the protection of citizen's political and civil rights;
- By intermediating between the State and citizens, civil society ensures a balance of power and mobilizes public opinion on a range of issues and policies that need to be negotiated with the State;
- Civil society organizations act as public advocacy schools that provide citizens with experience in the prepare citizens to practice democratic attitudes such as respect for diversity, equity and rule of law;
- Participating in open social groupings and associations nurtures civic values such as tolerance, mutual trust and cooperation, and fosters social cohesion by connecting individuals and communities from different social, economic and political backgrounds;
- Civil society organizations monitor Government performance in the fight against corruption and in the area of human development. In doing so, they increase accessibility to such social services as education, health care, housing and employment;
- Civil society can play an important role in service delivery especially when the State is incapable of providing those services. Generally speaking, civil society organizations are better able to reach marginalized and vulnerable groups and communities, and their contribution to poverty alleviation and sustainable development is increasingly acknowledged. Concerns have been raised related to the quality of services, the accountability of such organizations and the conditionality of services set up by certain providers;
- To be able to assume all the above functions, civil society must have communication and negotiation skills to help articulate concerns and channel them to the forefront of public agendas. Civil society organizations should use different kinds of media outlets to facilitate civic engagement, national dialogues, public meetings, education and training, and research on public engagement.

14. Throughout the political upheavals of the past two years, civil society organizations and activists adopted innovative approaches to the use of social media to build national and regional solidarity around

³ Thania Paffenholz and Christoph Spurk, 2006, *Civil Society, Civic Engagement and Peacebuilding*. Social Development Papers: Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction (Paper No. 36, October), pp. 13-14.

concepts such as freedom, democracy and social justice as a basis for political and social change. A study conducted by the University of Washington analysed the use of social media platforms (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and blogs) before and during the protests. The results showed that social media was an effective tool to communicate public dissatisfaction with the status of development in Arab countries that had built up in recent years.

15. During different stages of democratic transition, certain civil society functions become more strategic than others. Protection and intermediation, for example, are highly needed during the early stages of political change, while others functions such as integration provide greater value later on in the process. Very often, civil society organizations must play several of those roles simultaneously.

A key function of civil society that emerged recently in Libya, Tunisia and Yemen is to support and participate in national dialogues on the future of the country. In conjunction with State institutions, civil society organizations are working on transitional justice and governance reforms, rewriting constitutions and developing a new social contract based on the consent of citizens. Success in that endeavour will be the litmus test of civil society and its ability to emerge from the initial stage and reach full maturity. Its capacity for dialogue, negotiation, peacebuilding and consensus-seeking will be essential to the successful transition to more equitable forms of governance.

D. CHALLENGES TO CIVIL SOCIETY DURING POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

16. Civil society in the ESCWA region is, to varying extents, nascent and experimental, and legislative, political, institutional and cultural obstacles limit its development and potential. Nonetheless, in the past decade a number of organizations have had an impact on national development agendas and have moved away from political polarization and factionalism.

17. The performance of civil society organizations varies with their context, size, source of funding, regulatory and administrative structures, goals, functions, geographical coverage and affiliations. Yet, they often share similar challenges, including the following:

- Multiple understandings of the concept and role of civil society;
- Overlap between civil society functions and those of the Government in terms of welfare and service provision;
- Dependence on the shifting priorities and agendas of donors;
- Weak institutional structure and capacity, which also affect continuity and impact;
- Lack of objectivity in analysis and performance due to segmentation along religious or political lines;
- Poor culture of participation, volunteerism and citizen engagement;
- Dominance of patriarchal and clientelist approaches;
- Absence or poor application of the human rights-based approach to services and programmes.

18. The above challenges represent the tip of the iceberg for the burgeoning civil society of the ESCWA region. Notwithstanding its role in the popular uprisings that began in 2011, civil society must now cope with a set of internal and external issues in order to uphold its gains and contribute to a smooth political transition in affected countries. The issues are summarized as follows.⁴

⁴ The Center on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, 2012, *Arab Civil Societies After the Uprisings: Challenges During Political Transitions* (Amman Issue Brief: August 2012).

- Civil societies are heterogeneous and are sharply divided along political, religious, geographic or doctrinal lines. Internal divisions and diversity may break the bonds of trust between different organizations and diminish their ability to influence the policy process in the aftermath of the popular movements.
- Trade-offs between civil society groups with different organizational structures, such as between spontaneous, flexible activist groups and other more formal and well-established groups, can allow each to benefit from the strength of the other, but may result in mistrust. Groups may be reluctant to negotiate amid new political realities and it may be difficult for different civil society institutions to agree to a common vision.
- Tension and polarization can perpetuate violence and deepen the social divide when political elites draw on civil society groups and associations on the basis of ethnicity and religion as instruments to achieve political gains. In the transition period, civil society groups have to decide whether to support specific political leaders and to what extent. In addition, civil society groups have to decide whether to keep their role as advocates and independent oversight bodies, to become political parties that influence policy reform, or to disband and become civil servants in the new regime. All of those decisions can create tension within civil society and erode solidarity.
- Exclusive and contradictory international policies and donor relations can undermine trust. Historically, there have been double standards in the international relations of Arab countries. Support for non-democratic regimes contradicted the simultaneous advocacy of the values of human rights and democracy, which undermined trust between civil society and certain donor agencies. It also led to the development of exclusive funding relations between some donors and a number of civil society organizations, thereby creating haves and have-nots among them and increasing tension within civil society. Funding itself can lead to further challenges. After struggling to secure international assistance, civil society organizations continue to struggle to maintain their sovereignty and independence from the agenda of the donor.
- Civil society may lack for governance practices that are based on mechanisms of accountability and legitimacy. While some organizations answer to an advisory or governing body, they often lack effective leadership, strategic planning and management and are not accountable to clearly defined stakeholders or constituencies.⁵ That undermines their credibility with constituents as well as regional and international stakeholders.
- Particularly in conflict-affected areas, aid inflows can negatively impact peacebuilding and sustainable development if they disproportionately benefit one part of the country or if they prevent the development of responsive, universal and home-grown solutions. Organizations that administer international assistance may fail to programme their activities with an objective lens and donors may favour one party of the conflict over others and diffuse funds to proliferate civil strife instead of supporting the economy.
- Armed conflict destroys the physical infrastructure in the country, wears down State institutions and affects independent media. Moreover, insecurity, new power relations and fear of prosecution prevent people from participating, thus causing a decline in civic engagement during conflicts. Those factors increase the risk that civil society organizations will withdraw from activities that cross sectarian or ethnic lines.

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011, *Perspectives Note Capacity Development and Civil Society Organizations*, p. 12. Available from www.oecd.org/dac/governanceanddevelopment/48252653.pdf.

Political change can have destabilizing effects on civil society particularly during its early stages. Strengthening civil society as a driver of democratic governance will be a major issue for the post-transition agenda. As arbiters and representatives of popular opinion, the institutions of civil society can either support or oppose new Governments. New political regimes must rally the support of those institutions and ensure their effective participation in drawing the new political and developmental landscape.

II. PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO PUBLIC POLICY PROCESSES

19. The work of ESCWA on participatory development stems from the belief that development is a continuous process that should engage the widest possible array of local community institutions, groups and individuals, in order to achieve an improvement in the living conditions of the community. Accordingly, participatory development is “the framework that guarantees equal distribution of national wealth and provides opportunities to all the citizens to employ their skills and capacities in the advancement and progress of their societies”.⁶

20. In that context, the Social Participatory Development Section of the Social Development Division of ESCWA devised a comprehensive local community development and participatory social development approach and tailored it for implementing context-sensitive, demand-driven training programmes in selected Arab countries, namely Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. The programmes were implemented in cooperation with Government institutions, local authorities, civil society organizations, as well as United Nations agencies and other regional and international organizations.

21. The training programmes aimed to build the knowledge and capacity on the concepts of participatory social development and local community development along with participatory methodologies including project management, training methods and participatory research skills and to subsequently transform those skills into employment-generating, self-sustaining initiatives. The programmes assisted decision makers, local leaders, civil society institutions including non-governmental organizations and media practitioners and other concerned stakeholders to become development actors at both the policy and project management levels, while at the same time enhancing social dialogue, broad-based consultation, knowledge exchange and public-civic partnerships.⁷

22. In addition to their impact on the acquisition of skills in the area of management and service delivery, the training programmes implemented by ESCWA forged new public-civic partnerships and had a positive impact on institutional development policy. That was reflected in the establishment of national networks and joint committees, and in the integration of the participatory social development approach of ESCWA and its capacity-building strategy into a number of national policy documents, including the Palestinian report on social policies; the national strategy for poverty alleviation (2006-2010) of Yemen; and the Yemen five-year development plan (2006-2010).

23. The need for the participatory development approach of ESCWA gains more urgency in the light of the transition that some Arab countries are facing. Participation in decision-making and development was a major demand of the people who took to the streets of Arab cities and towns in 2011. The current transitional phase calls for a more integrated approach to participation and social justice to realize the aspirations of the people. The knowledge and skills of local and national leaders must be upgraded in order to foster creativity and entrepreneurship that lead to development.

⁶ ESCWA, 2009, *Measures Needed for Public Participation in Policymaking Processes*. (Social Development Bulletin, vol. 2, No. 7).

⁷ Oussama Safa, 2009, *Evaluation of SDD Capacity-Building Programs on Local Community Development (LCD)/Participatory Social Development (PSD)* (Unpublished).

III. HIGHLIGHTS OF CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA OF PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT

24. In the area of participatory development, the Social Participatory Development Section developed a strategy for building institutional and individual capacities. Between 2000 and 2012, ESCWA organized more than 60 training workshops in cooperation with governmental and civil society institutions and regional and intergovernmental organizations in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. A total of 1,345 participants benefited from the workshops, and with the support of ESCWA, workshops on participatory development programmes were replicated in some of those countries.

25. For example, end users of ESCWA's activities implemented 28 workshops in addition to a number of lectures, round tables and a national plan of action (in Iraq). A total of 839 participants benefited from replicated activities. Participants represented Government offices, civil society institutions and research centres and included social workers and local authorities. Additionally, end users initiated an electronic network, the Arab Network for Social Development (ANSO), which optimizes networking and knowledge sharing and gauges support for the participatory projects and activities that end users implement in their countries.

26. The following section describes the three main pillars of ESCWA capacity-building programmes implemented during the period 2000-2012, in addition to two other technical activities that were completed in 2012 in the same context.

Capacity-building in participatory development and local community development approaches

27. The programme aims to increase the impact of a community development and participatory approach on Government institutions and community groups and productive sectors through the following: (a) raising awareness and increasing knowledge on local community development and participatory development concepts and approaches; (b) providing a modus operandi for managing participation-oriented development projects; (c) engaging community members in problem identification and problem solving techniques; (d) providing expertise on methods of mass communication and on mobilizing popular participation in community-based initiatives; and (e) exchanging experiences in local governance, resource mobilizations and monitoring and evaluating participatory projects.

Training of trainers in participatory social development

28. The programme focuses on consolidating knowledge and building competencies in training techniques and methodologies for the replication of ESCWA programmes on participatory development and participatory research approaches. An integrated set of training activities aims to do the following: (a) increase knowledge of the concept and importance of training; (b) enhance technical expertise in managing and executing participatory training programmes; (c) exchange experiences in coordination mechanisms; and (d) understand the concept of training evaluation and identify the different layers of evaluation and reporting.

Building capacity in the participatory research approach

29. The programme is geared towards enhancing knowledge of participatory research approaches and building the capacity to manage participatory research. A number of training activities were implemented, which focused on the following: (a) the concept and methodology of participatory research and its relevance to local development; (b) the characteristics, requirements, functions and methods of the participatory research team; (c) the techniques of data collection and analysis required for participatory research; (d) the identification of the various stages of participatory research planning and implementation; and (e) the development of technical skills for evaluating and reporting on participatory research initiatives and preparing project proposals.

Website on participatory development in Western Asia

30. Four e-forums were launched on the ESCWA website on “Participatory Development in Western Asia”, and triggered discussions on practical measures that could be adopted to support public-civic partnerships, enhance the role of the media in social development, promote integration through a participatory process and forge a culture of democracy, consensus-building and national dialogue. The e-discussions provided a platform to share knowledge, promote dialogue and exchange experiences and good practice between stakeholders at local, national and international levels on the following key themes: (a) participation in public policies; (b) the role of media in development; (c) achieving social integration; and (d) democracy and participation.

Building capacity on partnership in democratic governance

31. In response to the political situation in some Arab countries, ESCWA developed a manual on “Building Capacities on Partnership in Democratic Governance” that aims to develop good governance competencies among Government officials, civil society actors and community leaders and enables them to more effectively manage ongoing transitions. The manual advocates the importance of partnerships between public authorities and the civil society and highlights contemporary experiences and field knowledge from several Arab countries, in addition to experiences from around the world. It also offers national stakeholders an opportunity to develop the capacity of institutions and organizations, and encourages them to participate in reform, systems transformation and conflict resolution processes.

32. The manual explores nine competencies that can support political leaders, civil society actors and all stakeholders involved in the course and success of the transition process, namely: practicing just and good leadership; engaging civil society in the reform process; building alliances for public policymaking; building public institutions; upholding accountability and transparency; promoting dialogue and building consensus; designing public policies based on the principles of equity and social justice; promoting local development; and developing communication and social media strategies. The manual was assessed during a training workshop (Beirut, 16-19 April 2012) which confirmed its applicability and relevance to the region, particularly for countries undergoing transition.

Through training cascades and e-forums, ESCWA has fostered broader civil society participation and engagement in public policy processes and national development initiatives, and facilitated consensus-building and partnerships among the different development actors.

IV. GOOD PRACTICE IN SELECTED COUNTRIES DURING THE PERIOD 2010-2012

33. The information provided in this section is based on the results of semi-structured interviews targeting a group of beneficiaries who participated in ESCWA capacity-building programmes on local and participatory development, and who represented different ministries and public institutions, civil society organizations, as well as academic and media institutions in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen.

34. The interviews aimed to evaluate the outcomes of ESCWA training programmes on local and participatory development activities undertaken in those countries during the period 2010-2012 and the extent to which the programmes were replicated or institutionalized at the national level. The questions measured the level of satisfaction with the training tools, knowledge and technical material provided by ESCWA and their relevance to current political transitions. They also explored the impact of the training programmes on the relationship between public offices and civil society organizations and assessed the extent to which civil society was engaged in the design of national development policies, plans and projects.

35. Beneficiaries of ESCWA training programmes unanimously agreed that the programmes had provided them with new skills and contributed to deepening their knowledge of development concepts and of the different intervention approaches. They believed that the curricula were well-designed and based on real experiences, and nurtured a value for participatory development action. The participants commended the

tools used to identify local community needs and issues, and the methodologies for galvanizing civic engagement and participation in the design of programmes that affect them. A number of successful initiatives undertaken by Government and civil society organizations to replicate the approach of ESCWA are set forth below.

Several end users who benefited from the participatory social development and local community development capacity-building programmes repeatedly voiced that ESCWA had “democratized” the concept of development work and had implanted a new culture of social participatory development through transforming knowledge, skills and attitudes of State and non-State actors towards local development.

A. SUCCESS STORIES

Yemen

Strategy for training the leaders and cadres of local authorities

36. The Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation in Yemen adopted the approach of ESCWA to local development and integrated it into its five-year national development plan (2006-2010). The approach was also used by the Ministry of Local Administration in developing its Training Strategy for Leaders and Cadres of Local Authorities. Both ministries are working to establish a reference team composed of the trainees from the programme, to work in collaboration with civil society organizations.

37. In cooperation with the Ministry of Local Administration and with the support of ESCWA, Al-Shifa Community College for Medical Sciences and Technology in Hodeida Governorate, which had formerly benefitted from ESCWA training programmes, organized a workshop on “The rehabilitation of workers in local community development” in March 2012. There were 28 participants who represented local councils, executive bodies, ministries and civil society organizations. The workshop resulted in the development of three project proposals on student drop-outs, combating violence against children and the rights of prisoners. In addition, a plan of action was developed for implementing a project on “Care of Female Prisoners” by three non-governmental organizations in coordination with Al-Shifa Community College.

The national strategy for poverty alleviation

38. The training of civil society organizations in the local community and participatory approaches of ESCWA produced a new understanding of the role of civil society in advocating for development and the importance of engaging civil society in development planning. That was evidenced in the fact that the Khadija Welfare Association for Women in Yemen, an association that received training and technical support from ESCWA, was invited to participate in the preparation of the national strategy for poverty alleviation in Yemen for the period 2006-2010. The Association replicated the approach of ESCWA by fostering communication with different stakeholders and organizing seminars and round tables at the governorate level. The Association provided training to the local authority officers, Government officials and civil society organizations in identifying the needs and priorities of a local community using a participatory approach. In addition, the Khadija Association partnered with local authorities in the implementation of several development projects, which aimed to increase the enrolment of girls in schools; provide free access to education and health for poor families; and find sources of safe water for Adda village. Some of those projects were annexed to the strategy for poverty alleviation. The Association also played an oversight role during the implementation of the Strategy through a network of civil society organizations.

Palestine

Joint committees and partnership in designing local development policies

39. Development in Palestine is severely obstructed as a direct result of the Israeli occupation. Two ramifications of the occupation are limited access to financial resources and disrupted access to services owing to restricted movement across Palestinian territories. By adopting a participatory approach, the Palestinian Union of Health Care Committees, whose President is a former beneficiary of ESCWA training

programmes, were able to partially circumvent some of those hurdles and forge partnerships, mobilize local capacity and resources and create a general sense of ownership to meet the needs of local communities. They implemented several projects that met demands for primary health services, child care, training and rehabilitation of civil and local institutions, leisure and income-generating activities, and provided opportunities that increased the participation of women in development activities.

40. Since 2008, the workshops on participatory development facilitated by the Health Care Committees contributed to strengthening the awareness of local institutions on their rights to participate in decision-making processes and resulted in partnerships between local civil society organizations and municipal councils and in the participation of local institutions in designing policies and programmes related to infrastructure, women, youth and social and health services.

41. In 2011, upon the request of the Ministry of Social Affairs in Palestine, the Ma'an News Agency (also a beneficiary of ESCWA training programmes) and the Union of Health Care Committees prepared a project to strengthen the relationship between the Ministry and the media, and to raise awareness on the role of the media in promoting social protection and other programmes implemented by the Ministry. Consequently, a workshop on "Social Protection and Partnership with the Media" was organized with the support of ESCWA, in October 2011, targeting 20 participants from media institutions, academia and different departments in the Ministry. Following the workshop, a number of training sessions enabled the staff of the Ministry to prepare news reports on social issues and policies. Staff also received training on social networking tools and on methods for increasing the participation of media in development projects.

Iraq

National team to train on the local community development approach of ESCWA

42. The multiplier effect of the capacity-building activities of ESCWA was evident in a voluntary initiative of a group of participants who attended a workshop on local community and participatory development organized by ESCWA in Iraq, in February 2010. The participants established a national team to carry out training on the local community and participatory development approaches of ESCWA and organized similar trainings for civil society organizations, local and governorate-level councils and students. The trainings covered such issues as participatory development and democratic governance. The last two were held in Diwaniyah and Sulaimaniyah provinces in March and June 2012, and benefitted a total of 30 participants from local authorities, civil society and the private sector.

Developing the Strategy for the Eradication of Illiteracy

43. The Sorouh for Sustainable Development Foundation, a main beneficiary of ESCWA activities on participatory development in Iraq, was selected to partake in the implementation of a project led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization country office to support the Iraqi Government in developing a strategy for halving illiteracy by 2015. In that context, the Foundation developed a network to support community learning centres and worked closely with local communities in rural areas in coordination with local leaders and social workers. Equipped with the skills and technical material acquired from the participatory programmes of ESCWA, the Foundation held counselling sessions and awareness-raising campaigns on human rights and the rights of women. The Foundation was also active in helping graduates to apply for small loans and worked closely with the private sector to create new employment opportunities.

Adopting the local community development approach of ESCWA in academic curricula

44. The adoption of the ESCWA training guide on local development in university curricula in Iraq is another example of the impact of the training programme. For instance, Al-Nahrain University in Baghdad adapted the guide to fit the academic curricula of the Department of Public Policies. The training material was similarly customized and taught in the Department of Social Work in the College of Education for Women at the University of Baghdad. The approach is also being considered as a means to raise knowledge

on development issues among Iraqi police officers. Along the same line, the College of Political Science in Al-Nahrain University offered an introductory lecture to 20 police officers on participatory local community development in June 2012.

Lebanon

Building the capacities of workers in marginalized communities

45. In Akkar, North Lebanon, ESCWA supported a project of the United Nations Development Programme in 35 villages. The project aimed to build capacity in local socioeconomic development and increase the participation of women and youth in the development process. As a result, 11 workshops were held during the period March-May 2011, targeting 64 representatives from the municipalities, cooperatives, non-governmental and civil society organizations and staff of the Social Development Services Centers affiliated to the Ministry of Social Affairs. The workshops covered topics that included local development, participatory action research, project development and planning for selected productive sectors (for example, olive cultivation).

Plan of action to build the capacities of the Ministry of Social Affairs staff

46. ESCWA provided advice and technical support to the Social Development Services Center in Rashaya to train 30 staff members of the Ministry of Social Affairs and officers from other Centers in Lebanon on the participatory research approach in December 2011. The Center administrator developed a plan of action to build the capacities of Ministry staff based on local community and participatory development approaches. Upon formal endorsement, a team of trainers from the Ministry, who were previously trained by ESCWA, was formed to universalize the approach in all Centers.

It should be noted that while several civil society organizations quickly embraced the local community and participatory development approaches of ESCWA, the institutionalization of the programmes at the national scale was not achieved. This was due either to insufficient political will, lack of funds, bureaucracy or in some cases, political instability.

B. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

47. Participants from civil society have demonstrated an increased commitment and ability to carry forward the training they received from ESCWA. That was not the case, however, for the majority of Government-affiliated bodies and institutions, which lacked the mandate and the empowerment to build on their acquired knowledge and launch similar programmes at the institutional level. Challenges included bureaucratic hurdles, budget shortfalls and competing priorities within the ministries.

48. Nevertheless, one of the significant aspects of the training activities that ESCWA implemented over the years is the deep personal benefit that capacity-building imparted to participants. On several occasions, participants from both Governments and civil society emphasized that the training transformed their understanding of and attitudes towards local development and participation, and nurtured in them an urgency to become responsible social development actors.

49. The participatory approach that ESCWA followed was not about the delivery of theoretical concepts and complex technical information. It was about creating a space for dialogue and broad-based consultations that deal with every day challenges. Some successful interventions took place in communities where poverty and illiteracy were widespread and under conditions too difficult to be overcome by one development partner. Special emphasis was placed on the participation of women in the training activities, even when they took place in conservative societies or communities.

50. Among the strengths of the programme is the early and substantive involvement of all stakeholders in designing the workshops and securing the necessary buy-in from the Government, local authorities, civil

society and sister United Nations agencies. The fact that the programmes responded to local needs, especially in marginalized communities, ensured wide participation and credibility. The training was highly interactive and included a good combination of skill-building and knowledge transfer. ESCWA was careful to bring trainers from other countries to the training workshops to help create an important knowledge-sharing network and a potential community of practice for the region.

51. According to beneficiaries who responded to the questionnaire, the training programme and technical material of ESCWA are valuable commodities, irrespective of the shape of future Governments. Participatory development is a means to support the development of local communities and identify their needs according to local agendas and domestic interests. The shift towards full participation and partnership ultimately remains in the custody of authorities that will run the affairs of the people in the coming transitions.

The approach of ESCWA added value to local and participatory development in targeted countries. It has demonstrated that programmes and policies can be more effective and efficient when there is stakeholder ownership and when programmes and policies incorporate their needs and opinions.

52. In all countries, the highest impact found was that individuals who participated in ESCWA programmes went on to train others either by replicating the workshops or by modifying the training material and adapting it to their local and emerging needs. That represents the “best bet” of ESCWA for a sustainable, locally-adaptable and cost-effective approach to local and participatory development. The rigorous process in selecting workshop participants undoubtedly succeeded in creating a sense of ownership and national responsibility, and is an example of using meagre resources in the best possible way. The participants are in fact the best multiplier effect of the programme.⁸

53. Civil society organizations, in particular, have demonstrated considerable ability in adapting the approach to local projects. That was not the case, however, with Government institutions in some countries where the absence of a clear local development policy and bureaucratic hurdles impeded the potential institutionalization of the approach at the official level, despite the evident good will and responsiveness of ministries to ESCWA initiatives.

Across the countries where the participatory development approach was implemented, civil society organizations showed more resilience, flexibility and less bureaucracy than Government institutions in adopting the approach and tailoring it to their needs.

V. THE WAY FORWARD: EMPOWERMENT AND FULL ENGAGEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

54. Not long ago, it was said that Arab culture was impervious to civil society activism and that, unlike other regions in the world, specific cultural impediments stand in the way of developing a fully active civil society. What the experience of ESCWA has proven, and what demonstrations over the past two years have attested to, is that civil society and committed citizens are capable of transcending their traditional divisions and rallying around a common cause. That is the essence of social cohesion and it must be nurtured and encouraged to foster unity and strengthen citizenship and civic duties as a legitimate path towards the democratic maturation of Arab societies. Member countries of ESCWA may wish to consider the following recommendations for mainstreaming participation and civic engagement in all aspects of public policymaking, and countries that are undergoing a political transition should consider supporting and involving civil society in national dialogues.

⁸ Ibid.

- Civil society, the third sector, should be a full partner to Governments and other sectors to underpin a successful development process. Indeed, some of the most successful examples of human rights-based development featured a tripartite partnership that rested on the pillars of Government, civil society and the private sector. Where the State is unable to optimize service delivery, development assistance or policy execution, citizen groups and civil society organizations step to the fore, and ideally they would be supported by the private sector. Member countries are encouraged to establish and consolidate partnerships with civil society institutions and the private sector to implement initiatives and to take stock of the lessons and successful experiences of civil society in service delivery.
- While transitions could have a destabilizing effect on the work of civil society, they could also strengthen the sector by giving rise to new groups that would defend emerging causes and become the guardians of the developing social contract. Resilience and quick adaptation characterize civil society more than any other sector, which proves vital in times of instability. This is particularly true in places like Egypt, Libya and Tunisia where civil society has the potential to become a partner in setting the agenda and becoming a determinant of sociopolitical priorities and reforms. Member countries are called upon to consider relying more on civil society as a vehicle to voice the opinions of the people and aggregate their interests, and member countries should ensure that participation becomes an institutionalized process by way of the third sector.
- The concept of citizenship includes the notion of uniting and rallying people around a common cause. While civil society remains the most effective vehicle to promote civic values, an oft-neglected angle is the media which, if appropriately engaged, could exponentially boost the reach and impact of the work of the third sector. Recent experience has shown that the proper use of media, particularly social media outlets, has led to effective advocacy and has rallied citizens around common, uniting causes. Member countries are encouraged to support an enabling environment for media by reducing restrictions, promoting freedoms and ensuring fair and easy access to media outlets.
- This report has shown that with the required structural incentives, including an enabling political environment, a good legal framework and adequate funding, civil society is able to step up to its responsibility of fostering the participation of citizens and their meaningful input into policy formulation. Member countries are advised to consider introducing liberal legal frameworks that allow civil society organizations to thrive and to bolster civil society by unconditionally allocating resources and support, giving tax breaks and creating opportunities for the sector to grow and play its proper role.
- Demonstrably, the work of a strong and vibrant civil society creates a strong core of resilience and moderation, an antidote to extremism and severe polarization. With civil society come negotiation, consensus and compromise that are necessary for participation in public policy. Negotiated settlements infuse society with a mentality that emphasizes the middle ground rather than a zero-sum, win-lose attitude. Such a mentality is essential to healthy democratic practice. Member Governments are called upon to benefit from the resilience and capacity of civil society to organize, convene and facilitate consensus and provide a mechanism for supporting dialogue and joint decision-making; this is especially true of national dialogue mechanisms.
- The knowledge sharing and support of ESCWA has boosted the capacity of civil society to impact public policies and the development agenda in member countries. That work is all the more relevant and significant during transitions; and the Social Development Division has developed a manual of nine skills to train and build the capacity of Government officials, civil society actors and community leaders to more effectively manage the ongoing transition. Member countries are encouraged to use the ESCWA capacity-building approach and its

reference material to develop skills, build knowledge and change attitudes for leading the stages of transition. Governments should be urged to designate officials and administrators to benefit from it and allocate sufficient resources, sustaining the will to achieve a successful transition.

- Civil society is the vehicle of interaction between the State and its citizens and is not meant to replace the State or its necessary functions. The third sector possesses an inherent capacity to complement the role of the State, to monitor its activities through watchdog roles and infuse democratic values and human rights in the work that it undertakes. It is therefore mutually beneficial for the State to enhance democratic institutions and structures, for civil society to complement State functions and for both to collaborate at the early stage of policy design and implementation. To that end, member countries are advised to enhance democratic institutions and structures such as economic and social councils, human rights boards, councils of women and others; and civil society organizations should be encouraged to complement State functions where possible, in addition to monitoring and evaluating them.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”, *Anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978)*.
