

Statement by ESCWA Executive Secretary Rima Khalaf

**At the opening of the 20th Meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism
11 December 2014**

Colleagues and friends,

It is a pleasure to welcome you all to the 20th meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism. I would like to extend a special and very warm welcome to Nada Al-Nashif, ILO Regional Director, who will soon leave us to assume a leadership role at UNESCO. Nada, congratulations on your new assignment. We will miss you in Beirut. We will miss your innovative thinking, your tenacity, energy and wit. I wish you every success.

Mr. Thomas Gass, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs; Mr. Tarik Al-Nabulsi, Head of Coordination in the Social Department at the League of Arab States; Mr. Mourad Wahba, Deputy Regional Director of the Regional Bureau for Arab States at UNDP - a special welcome to all of you.

Colleagues,

The year 2015 will be especially significant. The United Nations will turn 70. The Sustainable Development Goals will be finalized. Major conferences on financing for development and on climate change will chart our course to the global post-2015 Development Agenda.

As the Secretary-General says in his Synthesis Report, “never before has the world had to face such a complex agenda in a single year.” We meet here today to coordinate and harmonize our regional contribution to that agenda.

The RCM is a unique forum in which to explore visions of hope at a time of change, globally and regionally. The turmoil in the region today is a testament to the consequences of justice denied. Although justice is deeply rooted in Arab and Islamic cultures, its absence remains a concern across the region, preventing people from achieving their potential, hindering the flourishing of societies, and impeding the growth and prosperity of nations. The absence of justice drives people to resignation and despair, and fosters extremism, sectarianism and recourse to violence.

The past three years have exposed the very instability of “systems of stability” premised on inequity, oppression and exclusion. Thousands have taken to the streets, toppling despotic rulers, and demanding: “Freedom, Dignity and Justice.” These demands are now instilled in the Secretary-General’s Synthesis Report, with Dignity and Justice as two of the Report’s essential elements for delivering the SDGs

Those demands, require us to find new answers to questions like:

- How can we help implement the new Global Development Agenda amidst violence and oppression? and how can we help countries deal with their ramifications?
- What can we do for peoples under occupation so that they are not left behind yet again?
- How can we engage all segments of society in countries where governments see diversity as a curse and inclusion as a threat to their dominance.

The latest developments do not bode well. Exclusionary and sectarian practices are becoming more widespread. Calls for an Islamic state or for a Jewish state are examples of trends taking us back to the darker ages, to the abhorrent concept of ethnic and religious purity of states. We all agree that justice and dignity are protected and preserved only through diversity and pluralism, and that sustainable development is tied to justice and grounded in freedoms.

Today we must reassess the challenges facing our region. We must hold ourselves and our stakeholders to a higher standard on gender and minority rights, coordinating with civil society so as to deliver inclusive and locally owned policies. We can no longer allow divergence between humanitarian and development work to diminish our collective impact.

We will need to identify anew the region's unique strengths and align our work within the Post-2015 Development Agenda, since the global processes of negotiation and consensus-building will not automatically include all our priorities. A regional perspective should help the UN agencies to achieve the SDGs in the light of the region's needs.

We must proceed with renewed hope and a shared vision. We must reaffirm to our societies that their hopes for a just and equitable world, free from violence, poverty and oppression, were neither misled, nor in vain. Not only do we recognize their hardships and their achievements, but we draw from them inspiration and guidance.

Today we pledge to build a development paradigm rooted in social justice. We renew our commitment to work tirelessly in the pursuit of a better future, fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of the millions living in our region.

Colleagues,

I look forward to successful deliberations during today's RCM.