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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT
OF THE SEVENTEETH MEETING OF THE REGIONAL COORDINATION MECHANISM
BEIRUT, 10 DECEMBER 2012

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Introduction

1. As the Secretariat of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM), the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) convened the seventeenth meeting of RCM at the United Nations House, Beirut, on 10 December 2012. The meeting was chaired by United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Mr. Jan Eliasson.

2. The purpose of the meeting, which was attended by representatives of regional United Nations agencies, other regional organizations and the League of Arab States, was to do the following: (a) coordinate the regional discussion on the post-2015 Agenda and the follow-up to Rio+20; (b) discuss preparations for and outcomes of key global and regional events; (c) enable RCM Thematic Working Groups to bring issues to the attention of the group; (d) initiate discussion on the possibilities and limitations of Arab development funding; and (e) explore possible joint work in this area. This report is a summary of the key discussions and outcomes of the meeting.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

3. RCM confirms the importance of enhancing coordination between the United Nations and the League of Arab States through regular and institutionalized modalities of consultation, with special attention to supporting the specialized Arab Ministerial Councils and capacity-building for the League and its subsidiaries. In this regard, the meeting welcomed the resolution of the Arab Social Ministerial Council on 4 December 2012 to enhance cooperation with specialized United Nations agencies and RCM members.

4. The recommendations of the first session, the round table on the post-2015 agenda and follow-up to Rio+20, are as follows.

(a) In order to ensure the complementarity of international solutions and national interests in the region, and that new development goals address regional concerns, RCM called on ESCWA, as the secretariat of RCM, to coordinate with the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) and the League of Arab States to ensure coherence between different initiatives and to allow for the following:

- (i) Prioritizing development goals at the regional level;
- (ii) Translating regional demands for freedom, social justice, dignity, the rule of law and inclusive growth into concrete targets and goals.

(b) Building on the process they are currently leading on the post-2015 agenda, the regional commissions must take a stronger role in the consolidation of processes at the regional level. ESCWA, as the United Nations institution for the Arab region, was called upon to work out the details of this consolidation in consultation with RCM members and in close collaboration with the regional UNDG.

5. The recommendations of the second session, concerning regional and global processes, are as follows.

(a) RCM secretariat, in consultation with RCM members, is requested to create a matrix of inputs and regional events to feed into the global process for post-2015 and the sustainable development goals (SDGs), so as to align regional and global timelines.

(b) RCM was to consider the creation of a time-bound Thematic Working Group on the Annual Ministerial Review theme to ensure coherent United Nations input to the Review. For the 2013 Review, entitled “Science, technology and innovation, and the potential of culture, for promoting sustainable development and achieving the MDGs”, the RCM secretariat would circulate the outcome of the Amman Regional Consultation (November 2012) to its members and begin consultations on the terms of reference for the time-bound group.

6. The following are the recommendations of Part I of the third session, concerning the task force and thematic working groups.

(a) *Statistics Task Force*: The Task Force was urged to consider coordinated United Nations support for specific initiatives that could be implemented by member countries.

(b) *Thematic Working Group on MDGs*: Following the conclusion of its current mandate with the fourth Arab Report on MDGs, the thematic working group on MDGs would act as an advisory board to the Arab Development Outlook, taking note of existing thematic Arab development reports.

(c) *Thematic Working Groups on Food Security and Climate Change*: RCM recommended further discussion between both groups to consider the possibility of a merger of mandates and functions; RCM was to consider the possibility of establishing an Arab Food Security and Nutrition Forum with the League of Arab States.

7. Concerning Part II of the third session on the role of Arab development funds, RCM recommended that ESCWA, in cooperation with RCM members, initiate an analysis of the mandates and priorities of Arab funds, in addition to documentation of United Nations-Arab funds partnerships. As a result, RCM members would be able to consider the following:

(a) The preparation of a round table with the participation of RCM, the League of Arab States and Arab funds to discuss opportunities for and gaps in regional development funding;

(b) The preparation of a coordinated engagement strategy with the support of Arab funds for regional development priorities.

II. PRESENTATIONS, DISCUSSIONS AND OUTCOMES

A. SESSION 1 – ENHANCING POLICY COHERENCE

8. The objective of the session was to discuss how convergence between the post-2015 agenda and the follow-up to Rio+20 could take place, with particular emphasis on the regional implications and regional cooperation, both in terms of the development of the post-2015 agenda and SDGs. This session was chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Jan Eliasson.

1. Presentations

9. Ms. Amina Mohammed, Assistant Secretary-General and Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on the Post-2015 Agenda, highlighted an unprecedented opportunity for engagement in the development of the agenda; an opportunity that must be seized in order to advance the development of the MDGs. While noting that Member States have yet to produce a clear mandate and timeframe for work on SDGs, there were already a number of processes that need to converge. These included the report produced by the United Nations Task Force on the post-2015 development agenda; the United Nations Development Group national and global thematic consultations on the agenda; the report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the agenda; and the mandate resulting from Rio+20, which tasked a group of 30 to commence work on SDGs. Urging RCM members to consider stronger coordination at both national and regional levels in developing the post-2015 agenda and SDGs, as well as insisting on the need to advance a single, unified agenda post-Rio+20, she also emphasized the following:

(a) The importance of engaging parliamentarians as partners;

(b) The need to ensure balance between environmental concerns and the drive to eradicate poverty, to avoid a fragmented development agenda;

(c) A focus on issues of governance, voice, rights, the rule of law, peace and security, in addition to a focus on women and youth;

(d) The need to look at the world as a whole, recognizing inequalities between North and South as well as within countries;

(e) A better understanding of the role of technology transfer, education, financing for and investment in development, and in the promotion of sustainability;

(f) The need to make use of the Global Sustainability Report and similar reports that have been produced over the past year, both regionally and globally.

10. Mr. Thomas Stelzer, Assistant Secretary-General for Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, of the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) stated that integration of the three pillars – economic, social and environmental – should be the focus in launching SDGs. He argued that the “conceptual background for our next steps must be a dual convergence between the need to improve living standards and human development indicators in poor countries and the need to shrink our ecological footprint”. He emphasized the following:

(a) SDGs must be more inclusive and address challenges faced by the North as well as the South;

(b) Environmental concerns are paramount and it is necessary to promote greater resource efficiency, a cleaner energy mix, new technologies and different patterns of consumption; the green economy must be recognized as a useful tool;

(c) There is a need to aim for universal, but also nationally differentiated goals;

(d) It is imperative to uphold the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

11. Mr. Tarek Nabulsi of the League of Arab States briefed the participants on the Arab MDGs conference, which took place the week before RCM. The conference was attended by the Ministers of Social Affairs from the Arab countries and Ministers from the executive board of the Arab Ministerial Councils on Youth, Health, the Environment and Water, as well as United Nations entities. The recommendations of the conference revolved around two issues: what countries should focus on until 2015; and how to follow up after 2015.

12. Until 2015, there was a need to accelerate national mechanisms to develop a database according to United Nations standards, with the right indicators and information on how to calculate the data and how to achieve MDGs; to enhance joint efforts between the Arab Ministerial Councils and the United Nations system, in particular UNDG; to propose steps forward; to position the Arab region on the global stage; and to see progress in the partnerships between civil society and Government, including revisiting existing legislation.

13. For the post-2015 period, the new development goals needed to take into consideration different development levels in different countries and take national priorities into account; development indicators should be expanded to incorporate youth, civil society, unemployment and the key goals of Arab societies; cooperation to ensure collective action should be enhanced; and the League of Arab States and the United Nations should conduct technical workshops and conferences to assist Governments in developing plans and actions to incorporate all these elements.

14. Ms. Sima Bahous of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reaffirmed the importance of accelerating the MDGs and linking them to the post-2015 agenda. She stressed that governance was a critical component of the agenda, of particular importance for Arab countries. A strong contribution to

governance from the Arab region would send a powerful signal globally, showing regional engagement and willingness to move towards a new development paradigm and a new social contract. She stated that UNDP and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) were co-convening the global consultation on governance and the post-2015 development framework in partnership with the Government of Germany. This was an inclusive, multi-stakeholder forum aiming to contribute to setting shared governance priorities, such as reduced poverty, addressing inequalities, universal rights and values. Eventually, it would be the member countries deciding on what the post-2015 framework entailed. However, RCM agencies were strategically placed to support Member States in the identification and prioritization of aspects of the post-2015 framework.

15. Mr. Iyad Abugmoghli, Regional Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Regional Office for West Asia, gave a presentation on the outcome of Rio+20 and the centrality of the green economy to the process going forward, as well as SDGs. He surveyed investment and job-creating initiatives from the region that promote a green agenda, and he emphasized the following:

(a) Despite major environmental challenges, the Arab region has excellent potential for green investment opportunities;

(b) The energy-water-food-climate nexus has emerged as one of the most challenging and potentially rewarding aspects of sustainable development in the region;

(c) Actions that could be taken to make green sectors attractive for investors and businesses include greening government procurement, implementing multilateral environmental agreements and involving both the private sector and civil society.

16. Mr. Abu Moghli called on RCM to consider the creation of a viable and sustainable SDG fund to ensure continuity beyond 2015.

17. Ms. Roula Majdalani of ESCWA provided participants with an update on the Rio+20 process and outcomes. She stated that the Arab region was successful to a large extent in making its voice heard at the Summit. ESCWA, in partnership with UNEP and the League of Arab States, led the preparatory process and was set to capitalize on this in the post-Rio+20 implementation phase. Regarding the green economy, the question remained how to define indicators and benchmarks without harming nascent economies. There was a need to look at the water-energy-food nexus, where renewable energy should be high on the agenda. However, in a region rich in energy, yet very poor in water and food security, there had to be an effort to harness energy in order to improve access to clean, safe water and to secure food. She emphasized the need to translate the global agenda and the implementation of Rio+20 outcomes at the regional level, working with the League of Arab States to develop and update the Arab Sustainable Development Initiative and implementation plan. The Regional Implementation Meeting was scheduled for April 2013; however, the challenge was how to go beyond discrete individual initiatives towards more coherent and systematic regional strategies.

18. Mr. Mohamed Naciri of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) revisited the numerous successes of the Arab region with regards to MDGs. However, he stressed the importance of looking beyond quantitative successes in achieving development goals, noting that women in the Arab region formed the largest marginalized group when measured in terms of equality, with very low labor participation and underrepresentation in Government and in major decision-making processes. A more holistic approach was needed, moving away from numerical indicators, especially where inequalities and personal freedoms were reflected. Therefore, the post-2015 agenda needed to incorporate women's issues, with women represented every step of the way towards sustainable development.

2. Discussion and conclusions

19. Participants focused their interventions on the different regional priorities that had emerged over the past two years, especially with regard to demands for dignity and empowerment. On the basis of discussion, the following conclusions were proposed by the chair:

(a) The challenge remains to combine local, national, regional and global priorities. Achieving results requires working together. The task of the international community is to present effective solutions or formulas to facilitate the integration of national interests;

(b) The chair urged ESCWA to work with other UNDG members and the League of Arab States to determine ways to prioritize development goals for the region and move from broad concepts such as freedom, dignity, inclusivity and social justice towards measurable targets.

B. SESSION 2 – ENGAGING WITH REGIONAL AND GLOBAL PROCESSES

20. The purpose of this session was to explore ways of engaging in preparations for, and outcomes of key regional and global events.

1. Presentations

21. Ms. Maha Yahya of ESCWA briefed RCM participants on the ESCWA-led High-Level Meetings on Transitions to Democracy. These meetings were a collaborative effort by the five regional commissions with an aim to provide decision makers in emerging Arab democracies with an opportunity to interact with leaders who encountered similar challenges during the transitions in their own countries. The second meeting was scheduled to be held in February 2013 and would focus on economic transition. The third meeting was scheduled for the third quarter of 2013.

22. Mr. Tarek Nabulsi of the League of Arab States briefed participants on the upcoming Arab Economic and Social Summit, which was to take place in Riyadh in January 2013. Prior to the Summit, three forums were to be organized: a Youth Forum in Cairo, 6-8 January; a civil society organization Forum, 9-10 January; and a Private Sector Forum in Riyadh, 18-19 January. The forums received technical support from United Nations entities including ESCWA and UNDP. Declarations from the forums will feed into the Summit. The Summit agenda will focus on the following themes: follow-up to the resolutions of the previous Summits; investing in Arab countries; the Arab strategy for renewable energy applications 2012-2020; and non-communicable diseases.

23. Mr. Tomas Stelzer of DESA briefed RCM participants on the DESA-led Annual Ministerial Review. He stated that regionalism was the most important building block of multilateralism, which is why regional commissions had an important role to play in preparations for the Reviews. The theme for 2013 was “Science, technology and innovation, and the potential of culture, for promoting sustainable development and achieving the MDGs”. He stated that the RCM could serve as a platform for developing proposals for action in preparations for the Review, particularly through the Thematic Working Group on MDGs. He suggested establishing a working group to focus on the Annual Ministerial Reviews.

24. Mr. Alaa Alwan, Regional Director of the World Health Organization, briefed RCM participants on a high-level meeting on “Saving the Lives of Mothers and Children: Accelerating Progress towards Achieving Goals 4 and 5 of the MDGs in the Region”, to take place in Dubai in January 2013. He stated that many countries would not achieve MDGs, and in particular Goal 5. Interventions to reverse the trend existed, and initiatives must respond to this urgent problem in the region. The Arab region had shown tremendous progress, but it still lagged behind, particularly in Djibouti, Morocco, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen.

2. Discussion and conclusions

25. Participants highlighted the importance of sharing outcomes of all high-level panels and conferences as input to the global report on the post-2015 agenda, scheduled for September 2013. The deadline for providing input was set at June 2013, and participants were encouraged to report on these meetings as early as possible.

26. Members of RCM were called on to assist in the production of a realistic regional timeline for initiatives and inputs that could feed into the global reporting on preparations for post-2015.

C. SESSION 3 – ENHANCING COORDINATION BETWEEN RCM MEMBERS ON PRIORITY ISSUES (PART I)

27. The purpose of this session was to allow RCM thematic working groups to share their challenges and issues with RCM members and seek their advice on how to proceed with their work.

1. Presentations

28. Mr. Abdul-Mejid Haddad of UNEP and chair of the Thematic Working Group on Climate Change, stated that it was facing limited funding for coordination and meetings and lacked a common information-sharing platform. Despite these challenges, it had held fruitful face-to-face meetings during the year. There was a need to revisit the mandate of the Working Group, including its linkages with food security and climate change. At the time of the RCM meeting, the Working Group was also in the midst of a turnover of its focal points. He highlighted the need for stronger commitment from agencies and delivered a brief on the Arab Climate Change Action Plan 2012, saying that it would be fully operational by the end of 2013. The Working Group foresaw opportunities for dialogue, an action plan, negotiations for new climate agreements by 2015, the post-2015 agenda and SDGs. The new areas proposed included setting up climate change goals, national policy targets and national plans to support the new carbon market, as well as climate finance. The chair sought the advice of RCM members in defining the overall direction of the Working Group, and urged participating agencies to commit resources to ensure its success.

29. Mr. Khalid Abu-Ismaïl of ESCWA and chair of the Thematic Working Group on MDGs highlighted the data issues in producing the regional MDG report. He noted that the findings showed examples where targets had been met, but other goals had been missed. The report would also cover discrepancies and take note of initiatives that had not been successful. In the final section the report reflected on the post-2015 agenda. However, lack of clarity at the regional and global levels persisted. It was nevertheless important for the Working Group to at least continue giving directions and monitoring the implementation of agreed goals, rather than delivering detailed policy prescriptions. Work needed to be done on developing a new paradigm for inclusive development and the related impact on fiscal and monetary policies for inclusive growth.

30. Mr. Mohamed Aw Dahir of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and chair of the Food Security Thematic Working Group, organized his brief into several key messages. First, food security and nutritional strategies and interventions should take into account recent developments in the region, including pressure exerted on host communities by displaced population groups, and should focus on both chronic and acute dimensions of food insecurity and nutrition. Second, there were 15 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Third, the United Nations needed to assist member countries on issues related to land tenure and governance, with formulation and implementation of sustainable and integrated policies, which were important in terms of investments, access to loans and resources. Fourth, there was a need to help Member States to establish a platform for policy dialogue, possibly through a multi-stakeholder forum on food security and nutrition. Fifth, RCM should support the implementation of the Sustainable Development and Agricultural Development Strategy and the Emergency Arab Food Security Programme endorsed by the Arab Economic and Social Summit in Kuwait in 2009. The Working Group developed a

concept note proposing joint activities/knowledge production with the following objectives: (i) deliver evidence-based analysis on the use of social safety nets in the region and their impact on food security; (ii) assess land governance and tenure issues in the region and their impact on food security; and (iii) assess food losses in the region.

31. Mr. Juraj Riecan of ESCWA and chair of the Statistics Task Force, discussed the challenges it faced. He stressed that there was a high demand for statistical information, but a limited amount of data available. Discrepancies between different sources of data were another reality the Task Force was grappling with. Resources were also scattered and required better coordination. Quality concerns on comparability and compliance with international standards remained. It was important to understand that the quality of data would not improve if national statistical offices did not improve. Therefore, capacity development was critical, but remained on the margins of the mandate of the Working Group. The demand from Arab countries exceeded the capacity of RCM members, while the priorities of major potential donors did not cover the Arab region. He outlined the principal challenges of the Statistics Task Force as follows: (a) a dearth of resources for statistics in all offices of RCM members; (b) a lack of staff members specifically dedicated to the work of the Task Force; and (c) the challenge of short-term versus strategic focus. The Task Force suggested a way forward based on balancing data work with capacity-building, supported by the commitment of all participating members. A permanent coordination mechanism was proposed, which would involve national statistical offices. The Task Force stated that it had to focus on seeking funds and in-kind contributions.

2. Discussion and conclusions

32. Discussion covered the various issues presented with a focus on the importance of capacity building initiatives, especially for the League of Arab States in different areas covered by the Thematic Working Groups. In this context, it was proposed that a mechanism was needed to ensure more effective cooperation between the United Nations and the League of Arab States, especially at the level of ministerial councils. Support to Governments on data issues, especially at the country level, was considered a priority. In addition, the need for the establishment of a working group dedicated to follow-up on development policy in the Arab region was also considered.

33. RCM members suggested the establishment of a thematic working group related to the Annual Ministerial Review. ESCWA was to circulate to RCM members the recommendations of the most recent Review and seek feedback from the members, particularly on the issues that members were willing to take up.

34. Bilateral meetings were scheduled to take place to look at the future of all thematic working groups, in particular the one on MDGs.

D. SESSION 3 – ENHANCING COORDINATION AMONG RCM MEMBERS ON PRIORITY ISSUES (PART II)

35. The aim of this session was to discuss of the potential of Arab funds and their limitations, and brainstorm ways to mobilize efforts and capitalize on the existing funds for development in the region.

36. Mr. Abdallah Al Dardari and Mr. Jose Antonio Pedrosa Garcia, both of ESCWA, presented their preliminary findings on regional financing. The preliminary research looked at the gap between available and needed resources, through three pillars: the evolution of official development assistance over time in the region; the contributions of Arab funds to regional development; and the sufficiency of the available resources for addressing regional development challenges. Preliminary findings were that, overall, Arab funds were relatively generous, but official development assistance from Arab sources to the whole of the Arab region was decreasing. In addition, the funds' available resources were limited in comparison to similar funds in other regions.

37. It has been suggested to verify priority-setting processes by Arab funds and compare them to those of other development agencies. There is also a need to ascertain their selection of countries as beneficiaries and the rationale behind their prioritization of issues of infrastructure rather than institutional development.

38. Participants discussed some successes with regional funding institutions, noting that both ESCWA and UNDP have partnered in the past with the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development and the Islamic Development Bank. Agencies were encouraged to share their experiences with Arab funds and offer lessons learned. It was also noted that the League of Arab States has a committee on funding agencies, and there is an opportunity for the RCM to engage with the League in this area.

39. ESCWA was asked to pursue a more detailed study of Arab funds and their modalities of operation and to propose an agenda for moving forward, with the League of Arab States as a strategic partner in this endeavor.

III. CLOSING REMARKS

40. In closing, the chair of the meeting, Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Jan Eliasson, invited all participants to consider, amend and agree on the draft recommendations. Once finalized, he thanked all participants for their active participation and the organizers for a successful meeting, and declared the meeting closed.

IV. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE

41. The seventeenth meeting of RCM was held at the United Nations House, Beirut, on 10 December 2012. It convened five sessions for the discussion of agenda items.

B. OPENING OF THE SESSION

42. The session was opened by Under Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCWA, Ms. Rima Khalaf. She welcomed participants and noted that the RCM has accomplished a lot yet a lot remains to be done. As the region and the world are poised to forge a new development agenda, she called on RCM members to ensure that global and regional processes worked in tandem. The voice of the Arab region needs to be heard globally, specifically in insisting that issues of human rights and governance are placed at the centre of the new development agenda.

43. Ms. Sima Bahous, Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, noted that current developments in the region and in transition countries were testing optimism for the future. This uncertainty and the new challenges it brings will continue and the focus must remain on the key priorities for inclusive development in the region, including a focus on new social plans, the rights and empowerment of women, the issue of unemployment, and good governance.

44. The League of Arab States, represented by Mr. Tarek Nabulsi on behalf of Ms. Faiqa Al Saleh, Assistant Secretary-General for Social Affairs, surveyed positive and negative developments in the region in recent months and emphasized the importance of cooperation between the United Nations and the League of Arab States, noting in particular cooperation with ESCWA and UNDP. Building on the outcome of the United Nations-League of Arab States Cooperation Meeting in Vienna in July 2012, Mr. Nabulsi reiterated a number of priority areas for cooperation, including international migration and refugees, social integration, MDGs, human rights, the rule of law, and women and youth issues, among others.

45. Finally, Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Jan Eliasson, in his first address to RCM participants as chair of the meeting, called on the group to learn the lessons of the dramatic political change taking place in the

region. Mr. Eliasson acknowledged the courage and tenacity displayed by people across the Arab world, noting that the Arab uprisings had introduced a clarity and urgency to many key aspects of development. Secondly, he emphasized the need for a new course of development in the region, responsive to those new imperatives and building on the outcomes of Rio+20, including a greater role for women, non-governmental organizations, small-scale food producers, the private sector, and the academic and scientific communities. He called on the RCM to play its roles in carrying those imperatives forward and in ensuring a coherent regional voice at the global stage and in the new global development agenda. Thirdly, he called on all RCM members to strengthen the impact of United Nations work on the ground and in people's lives. Noting that the Arab uprisings had clarified the centrality of regionalism and highlighted the interconnection of the Arab world, the efforts of the United Nations need to take into account the players and realities on the ground, especially as it seeks coherence and convergence in the post-2015 agenda. It is within that context that the role of RCM and the regional commissions becomes even more relevant to ensure policy coherence, consolidate multiple efforts, and craft a vision and set joint strategic and substantive goals to guide the work of the United Nations on the ground.

C. PARTICIPANTS

46. The meeting was attended by representatives of regional United Nations agencies and the League of Arab States. A list of participants is annexed to this report.

Annex*

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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