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PRIORITY ISSUES IN THE WESTERN ASIA REGION*Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals
in ESCWA member countries***Summary**

In its resolution 55/2 of 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration. That Declaration, and the progress made by countries in achieving its goals, are primary concerns of the United Nations organization. The Declaration, which was unanimously adopted, establishes a large number of specific undertakings aimed at improving the human lot in the twenty-first century.

This document is essentially a summary of the document entitled "The Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA region: progress Report 2004" (E/ESCWA/SCU/2004/3), which was issued as part of the follow-up to implementation of those goals. The meetings of the twenty-third Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) session were chosen as the occasion on which to launch and discuss that document, at a round table on achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in ESCWA member countries.

The document reviews the progress made in implementing the eight Goals at the level of ESCWA region countries and the most significant challenges faced by those countries in their attempts to achieve the Goals. It also contains a set of procedures that should be taken in order to confront those challenges.

Introduction

1. In its resolution 55/2 of 8 September 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration. That Declaration embodies the consensus of member States on a number of basic undertakings that aim to improve the human lot in the new century and, recognizing that a large proportion of the world's population continues to live in abject misery, despite the huge wealth available in the world, expresses a collective undertaking to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people. The Declaration also constitutes a concerted attempt to confront the challenges of security and development in a changing world.
2. The Declaration focuses on several matters that currently may be considered the most significant political, economic and social issues at the international level, namely, peace, security and disarmament; development and the eradication of poverty; joint environmental protection; human rights, democracy and good governance; and protection for vulnerable sectors of society. The Declaration provides new hope for international unity and cooperation with a view to confronting the challenges faced by mankind in the twenty-first century.
3. With respect to development and the eradication of poverty, the Declaration outlined goals and targets that are known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They constitute eight goals comprised of 18 targets, for each of which a number of indicators is identified for monitoring implementation within a given period.
4. The importance of the Goals lies in the fact that they express the most urgent priorities at the global level and that, for the first time, world leaders set down a limited number of goals that may be measured by specific indicators within a specific time frame. The Declaration therefore sets before the Governments and peoples of the world a programme document of a practical nature that constitutes a pragmatic process for monitoring and evaluating the progress made.
5. The Goals represent a comprehensive development framework that aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.

I. THE CURRENT SITUATION AND ACHIEVEMENTS

6. Study of progress towards achievement of each of the eight MDGs in the ESCWA region reveals the following:

A. ERADICATE EXTREME POVERTY AND HUNGER

7. In the past 20 years, the ESCWA member countries have experienced harsher and more difficult circumstances than any other region, as the result of successive wars, lack of security and political stability, and sharp fluctuations in the price of oil. During that period, economic growth rates, which had risen in the 1970s and early 1980s, fell, and remained low throughout the 1990s.
8. Given the prevailing economic and political conditions, including sluggish economic growth, high unemployment rates, and inadequate poverty eradication policies, it is extremely difficult for the countries of the region, particularly the non-oil producing countries and those suffering from occupation and lack of political stability, to reduce poverty levels and, therefore, to achieve the Goal of halving, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day. It should be noted that this indicator is not a true measurement of poverty in the region, because if other means were used to measure that phenomenon, such as the proportion of the population whose income is less than two dollars per day, or the national poverty line, levels of poverty would greatly increase. For the same reasons, it is also unlikely that certain countries will succeed in reducing hunger levels in their populations within the period specified.

B. ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

9. In the 1990s, ESCWA member countries made noticeable progress with respect to increasing enrolment in primary education and lowering rates of illiteracy in the 15-24 age group. However, drop-out rates remain relatively high in some countries of the region, which impact negatively on enrolment averages. The available data indicate that most countries in the region will achieve the Goal of universal primary education, provided that the progress made in the 1990s continues.

C. PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

10. Most countries of the region have made progress with respect to equality at the various educational stages. With respect to women's participation in non-agricultural activities, progress made remains limited in the extreme compared with the field of education: at best, the proportion of women in paid non-agricultural employment is 21 per cent. At the political level, women's participation remains very weak: at the end of 2004, women accounted for only 5 per cent of all political representatives.

D. REDUCE CHILD MORTALITY

11. The ESCWA member countries have made strenuous efforts to reduce child mortality rates, adopting health policies on child and maternal health and taking action to intensify global immunization programmes and campaigns and reproductive health services. As a result, those countries, with the exception of Iraq, because of its political and security situation, and Yemen, whose economic situation makes it one of the least-developed countries, have achieved perceptible progress in the last decade with respect to child mortality rates.

E. IMPROVE MATERNAL HEALTH

12. The ESCWA member countries have made perceptible progress in reducing infant mortality rates. If present trends continue, most countries of the region will achieve this goal. However, it is likely that certain countries will experience delay because of the prevailing security, political, economic and social situations.

F. COMBAT HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES

13. It is very difficult to give a true picture of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the ESCWA region because of the lack of precise data on that issue. With respect to malaria, most countries of the region are outside the areas in which it is endemic or have succeeded in controlling it. However, in Yemen and some south-western regions of Saudi Arabia, control remains an aim.

G. ENSURE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

14. The decline in the proportion of the world's surface that is covered by forests as the result of population pressure and failure to replant trees has affected climate, raised temperatures and reduced rainfall in the ESCWA region, which is in any case one of the most arid parts of the world. The aforementioned factors increase desertification and further reduce wild and forested areas in a predominantly desert environment. Notwithstanding attempts to increase the number of forests and protected areas, the region faces serious challenges. Furthermore, failure to incorporate the environmental aspect in national development plans had a negative impact throughout the 1990s, which was manifested as increased carbon dioxide emissions and reduced energy efficiency. On the other hand, there has been a reduction in the consumption of materials that affect the ozone layer, which is a positive indication with respect to the implementation of international undertakings on environmental protection.

15. With regard to the provision of safe drinking water and sewage services to the population, urban areas in the region do not have much of a problem. However, the situation in rural areas requires exceptional endeavours to be exerted in most ESCWA member countries. The fact remains that all the countries of the

region face a perpetual challenge with respect to ensuring renewable water resources that can keep pace with population growth.

H. DEVELOP A GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

16. Despite the fact that the developed countries have given undertakings to increase the proportion of their national income allocated to development assistance, there was a noticeable decline in such assistance in the 1990s. It should be noted that if MDGs are to be achieved, both rich and poor countries must honour their undertakings to cooperate in the development process and promote good governance and accountability. The United Nations Millennium Declaration did not provide an obligatory time frame for achievement of the goal to establish a global partnership for development. Furthermore, the cost of agricultural support in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development countries is very high, albeit it fell in the 1990s, which creates an obstacle to the agricultural exports of the countries of the region and adversely affects their competitiveness.

17. With respect to youth unemployment, the available data indicate that it rose throughout the 1990s, particularly with respect to young women.

18. While the availability of information and communication services is so limited in the ESCWA region as to approach levels in many of the least-developed countries, the progress that has been made in recent years indicates that there will be rapid development on that level in the near future. There are certain factors that will contribute to the achievement of this target, one of the most important of which is the involvement of the private sector and the establishment of regional companies that are important in the sector.

II. THE CHALLENGES

19. Notwithstanding the progress that has been made by ESCWA member countries in recent years towards achieving MDGs, particularly with respect to the eradication of poverty, education, the empowerment of women and the improvement of health, those countries continue to face many challenges that not only reduce the pace of human development but squander what has been achieved. Those challenges include the following:

(a) Political obstacles caused by the continuing occupation of Arab territories and political and security upheavals that impede economic and human development, affecting the right to life, self-determination and material and other aspects of human well-being;

(b) Slow economic growth, from which most countries of the region suffer, affect individuals and society as a whole. Estimates of gross domestic product growth rates do not provide an optimistic outlook for the future, meaning that poor countries in particular will have to bear an even larger burden. Economic growth projections for the next few years are also low and that, combined with the impact on public expenditure, high public budget deficits and worsening debt, mean that it is debatable whether, simply by maintaining current growth rates, many of the countries in the region will be able to provide their populations with basic services, particularly in view of the growing demand for such services caused by population growth;

(c) Lack of commitment to and poor management of development policies in the countries of the region: the countries of Western Asia fall into three groups in respect of the adoption of a national strategy for the eradication of poverty and hunger. In the first, such a strategy exists, but there is no effective means of implementing it; in the second, some basic statistics on poverty and hunger are available, but have yet to lead to the formulation of a national strategy for the eradication of those phenomena; while in the third, basic statistics and indicators on poverty and hunger are still lacking and as a result, integrated national strategies for dealing with them cannot be formulated;

(d) The conflict between responding to the needs of increasing population growth and the need for economic structural reform;

- (e) The tyranny of social tradition, which obstructs the full participation of women in the development process and political life;
- (f) Little community involvement in the formulation and administration of social policies;
- (g) Legislation that is not capable of ensuring accountability and transparency or of limiting impunity and corruption;
- (h) The lack of regular series of the indicators and statistics necessary for the process of formulating policies that will ensure that MDGs are achieved or for monitoring the progress made in that regard.

III. RESUME

20. If MDGs are to be achieved and the lives and standards of living of the peoples of the region improved, countries must include many procedures among their priorities, some of the most important of which are the following:

- (a) Efforts to achieve just and lasting peace in the region must be continued, on the basis of the organic relationship between political stability and the economic and social development process and, consequently, the realization of the desired level of human development;
- (b) Critical consideration must be given to economic and humanitarian policies and their direct impact on human development and the achievement of MDGs. ESCWA member countries must so guide public expenditure as to improve the quality of public services, and reduce unemployment rates by encouraging public and private investment and improving general budget deficits, particularly in non-oil producing countries. That requires good governance and democracy to be strengthened, corruption and impunity restricted and accountability improved;
- (c) Regional partnerships must be strengthened and activated, particularly with respect to the liberalization of interregional trade, the lifting of customs barriers, the improvement of road networks, the interchange of labour forces and technical expertise, and the opening of financial and stock markets to the other countries of the region;
- (d) Social policies must be adjusted and brought into line with MDGs, monitoring systems upgraded, and national statistical strategies aimed at achieving sustainable production of the statistics and indicators necessary for that process must be prepared;
- (e) All sectors of society must participate in the development process and, in particular, in formulating and managing appropriate policies. All productive sectors must also be involved in carrying out their responsibilities;
- (f) Attempts must be made to implement programmes that aim to resolve the problems of desertification and the scarcity of water resources.

21. It should be noted that, if MDGs are to be achieved, both rich and poor countries must honour their undertakings, whether by providing the necessary cooperation and assistance in the development process, or by strengthening good governance and improving accountability. Hence the importance of cooperation and coordination between member countries and United Nations institutions and special agencies with a view to finding practical means of carrying out those undertakings.

