

Annual Ministerial Review  
Western Asia Regional Preparatory Meeting  
“Sustainable Urbanization”  
Manama, Bahrain  
1-2 June 2008

**Opening Remarks**  
**Mr Bader Omar AlDafa**  
**Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary, UN- ESCWA**

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His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Mubarak Al Khalifa,  
His Excellency Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohamed al Khalifa,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Ladies and gentlemen:

I am delighted to be participating in this meeting on “Sustainable Urbanization”, an issue of great importance to the ESCWA region, and would like to thank DESA and the Kingdom of Bahrain for hosting this regional preparatory review.

Given that over half the population in the Arab world is living in urban areas, promoting “Sustainable Urbanization” is a regional priority that requires the involvement of local, national, and regional stakeholders from both the private and public sectors.

Since the Second Habitat conference in Istanbul (1996), and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002), governments and non-governmental organization in the Arab region have made considerable efforts to promote “Sustainable Urbanization”. The 2005 Cairo Declaration on Sustainable Arab Cities, Security of Tenure and Good Urban Governance, is only one indicator of this commitment.

Yet, rapid urbanization in the Arab Region, due to high rates of rural to urban migration, displacement due to conflict, and high urban population growth, continue to pose great environmental and socio-economic challenges.

I hope that the discussions over the next two days will touch upon the multi-dimensional nature of the needs of urban dwellers, including the legal, health, social, and economic concerns of the urban poor, and offer creative proposals for building Public Private Partnerships, and encouraging regional and South-South Cooperation.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Currently, much urbanization and urban growth in the ESCWA region is happening haphazardly. Such unplanned urbanization places huge stress on the environment and on individual well being. In some countries, a lack of systematic urban planning has led to overcrowding and poor standards of drinking water and sanitation services, which heightens the risk of disease and epidemics.

Urban policies and national development strategies must be holistic to ensure that the expansion and upgrading of urban infrastructure, the provision of services, low cost housing, and public transportation, address the needs of the urban poor. Decentralization and enhancing the role of local authorities may be an important step to improving urban governance.

Currently, more than one third of the total urban population in the Arab world, amounting to over 57 million people in 2001, is living in informal settlements. Without secure land tenure, and often limited access to water, sanitation, and electricity, the health and well-being of these residents is compromised.

In 2004, 25 per cent of urban dwellers in the Arab Least Developed Countries did not have access to improved drinking water sources and over 40 per cent did not have access to improved sanitation facilities. It is therefore not surprising, that child mortality in the Arab LDCs remains high.

A key challenge specific to our region is the ongoing political instability and conflict in various countries, which contributes to a significant flow of refugees and internally displaced populations to urban centers and increases the pressure on these areas.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Promoting sustainable urbanization requires that we pay simultaneous attention to rural development as in the Arab world rural areas tend to lag behind urban areas in all of the development dimensions addressed in the Millennium Declaration.

Unfortunately, climate change is placing an additional burden by contributing to agricultural land degradation, intensifying the variability and unreliability of rainfall, and increasing vulnerability to drought, desertification and natural disasters.

In order to help stem migration from rural areas, there is a need to examine the inter-linkages and interdependence of urban and rural development, and focus on improving agricultural productivity, rural infrastructure and services.

A key challenge for reducing poverty in both rural and urban areas, involves addressing the persistent high rate of unemployment and underemployment in our region.

The demographic profile of the region in terms of a large and growing youth population, places an additional strain on urban centers to provide adequate educational and employment opportunities and services. Currently, youth are not being adequately absorbed in the job market, and contribute to a strikingly high youth unemployment rate across the region at around 25 per cent.

The budgetary implications, especially for the poorer countries of the region, to address the needs of a rapidly growing urban population are significant. I am pleased that financing, including through Islamic banking, is on the agenda for this meeting.

The challenge before us is great. However, our fruitful discussions today and tomorrow can help to formalize the commitment and coordinate the response needed to collectively address these growing concerns.

Inter-regional knowledge sharing, South-South Cooperation and partnerships for technology transfer and facilitating financing for development are just some of the areas in which Regional Commissions can cooperate with Member States, civil society, financing institutions, and the private sector to promote Sustainable Urbanization.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to listening to your views in the upcoming sessions.

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