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Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Social Development Division at UN-ESCWA is spearheading new and innovative work on the concept and application of integrated social policy in the region. Through normative analysis, field research and national projects it has begun to build a body of knowledge on social policy instruments and mechanisms.

ESCWA's definition of integrated social policy is one in which "social issues" are not considered residual or secondary to economic processes, but where public policy, all public policy, is informed at every stage by social equity and human rights concerns. It is an inseparable element of economic policy formulation and an integral pillar of any social contract.

Over the last five decades, countries in the ESCWA region have experienced unprecedented human development. Remarkable progress has been achieved across the region in health, education, nutrition and living standards. But the overall average indicators of social progress mask sometimes-wide disparities both between and within countries and do not reflect the considerable back-log of human deprivation.

In the 15 years between 1990 and 2005, the infant mortality rate (IMR) declined in all countries of the ESCWA region. In 2005, the IMR ranged from a high of 89 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in Sudan to a low of 7.7 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>1</sup> Life expectancy at birth, also showed improvement during the same time period in all ESCWA member countries with the exception of Iraq, where, due to the ongoing conflict, life expectancy dropped

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<sup>1</sup> ESCWA, 2007, Compendium of Social Statistics and Indicators, Issue Number 8, (Page 8)

significantly between 1990 and 2006 from 63 to 54.9 years for men and from 62 to 61.6 years for women.<sup>2</sup>

ESCWA countries have made similarly important overall progress in education and the eradication of illiteracy. Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE are very close to achieving universal primary education with net enrolment ratios reaching or exceeding 97 percent. The gender gap in primary education has been bridged in most ESCWA countries with more than one third of the countries achieving parity in enrolment in primary education in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Adult literacy rates have increased during the same period, but with major intra-regional and gender disparities.

However, there is a growing sense of unease over the direction of economic development that has been charted in recent years. Increased economic insecurity linked to rising inequality and the retrenchment of social services has led to a vicious cycle of poverty, economic insecurity and political insecurity. The poorest and most vulnerable communities are the ones least able to withstand shocks caused by financial crises, natural disasters and civil strife. The recent rise in the cost of basic food staples has exposed the fragile nature of the economic livelihoods of the poor and vulnerable. Endemic conflict in some countries has led to impoverishment, social disintegration and environmental degradation.

According to ESCWA's Social Policy Report II, launched in December last year, the absence of a clear social policy is a key factor in obstructing equitable and sustainable development. The report shows that social policy can integrate economic and social dimensions of development into a coherent whole. Using illustrative country examples, the report demonstrates the need for countries in the region to adopt an integrated approach to social policy, not as a matter of charity or good-will, but rather as a matter of economic, political, social and cultural necessity. It demonstrates that social policy is not just a tool to address the needs of the poor, but an instrument aimed at improving the overall well-being of all citizens by building equitable, stable and sustainable societies. It proposes a framework for social policy analysis that rests on the tripod of strategic vision, shared consensus and social services provision.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In today's political, economic and financial climate of uncertainty and insecurity this paradigm shift takes on added urgency. ESCWA is committed to working with member states to put in place institutional frameworks and mechanisms that support an integrated approach to social policy, working with governments and civil society groups to enhance social dialogue and bolster effective participation in development processes. ESCWA also supports regional strategies for social integration of demographic and socio-economic groups and supporting initiatives that highlight the special needs of urban centres.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid (page 12)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid (page 19)