

United Nations
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Statement by

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To

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Mr/Mme. Chair, Distinguished Delegates and Colleagues,

On behalf of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), I thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this distinguished audience. Given the situation of the Arab region, which is one of the most migration-intense regions in the world, ESCWA welcomes the theme of the forty-sixth session of the Commission on Population and Development of “New trends in migration: demographic aspects.”

Since 1990, the number of international migrants in the region has increased by over 10 million to reach 25 million. Whereas international migrants made up 3.1 per cent of the global population in 2010, in the ESCWA region they make up over 8 per cent of the population. In some countries, particularly the oil- and gas-rich countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, migrants make up the majority of the workforce and sometimes even of the population.

The social and economic impacts of these migrants entering, leaving and moving between countries of the region are central to many of the opportunities and challenges faced by ESCWA countries. Migrants in the region are overwhelmingly concentrated in the working-age population reflecting the importance of labour migration in the region. Migrants have therefore provided several countries of the region with the vital skills and labour power required for these countries to achieve their ambitious development goals. However, an over-reliance on migrants in some countries is also exacerbating youth employment concerns.

Countries of origin in the ESCWA region also feel the impacts of emigration. In 2010, an estimated 17 million people from ESCWA countries lived outside their countries of birth. The remittances sent by migrants have played a central role in reducing poverty in many countries of origin and the mobility of many of these migrants has enabled them to upgrade their skills

and strengthened links between countries of origin and destination. The possibility of emigration has helped to reduce labour market pressures in countries facing a youth bulge. However, too often migration is still a result of social and economic development failures in countries of origin, such as poor employment prospects for young people. In countries of origin with smaller populations, this hinders optimal capitalization on the demographic dividends potentially afforded by a growing population, as well as raising the prospect of brain drain.

Mr/Mme. Chair,

The work programme of the Population and Social Development Section of the Social Development Division of ESCWA continues to focus its normative and capacity building work on three areas with some strong inter-linkages: (1) the population dynamics of Arab countries; (2) youth empowerment and (3) international migration, mainly the effects of population movements, both inside and outside the region, on development.

The social and economic impact of migration in the ESCWA region can hardly be overstated, with ongoing demographic changes in many Arab countries likely to contribute to a shift in the economy of migration. However, much progress remains to be made to ensure that countries of the region are maximizing the benefits of this process, and minimizing its negative effects, while guaranteeing that the rights of migrants are respected.

ESCWA played an active role in the Development Account Project on Strengthening National Capacities to Deal with International Migration: Maximizing Development Benefits while Minimizing Negative Impact. In July 2010 we held a regional workshop on "International Migration and Development in the ESCWA Region: Challenges and Opportunities". We followed this with an inter-regional workshop, co-organized in June 2011 with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific on "Strengthening Dialogue between ESCWA and ESCAP Countries on International Migration and Development", which brought together participants from ESCWA countries of destination and ESCAP countries of origin to address issues related to social protection of migrants. The papers produced in the context of this project will soon be released as the "Inter-Regional Report on Labour Migration and Social Protection".

These workshops provided member countries with an important platform to better understand the role of migration and migrants in their respective societies and economies, and to explore possibilities for further dialogue and cooperation, both at a regional and inter-regional level, between countries of origin and destination to maximize the development gains of these movements. These workshops were also an opportunity to sensitize member countries as to the importance of mainstreaming migration into their national development policies, while ensuring full respect of the rights of all migrants.

Mr/Mme. Chair,

Looking forward to the second High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and beyond, ESCWA foresees the importance of working both with our member countries to ensure that the specificities of migration are highlighted and addressed in the Dialogue, and with other actors of the United Nations system to ensure that their complementary capacity building and knowledge production efforts are coordinated at the regional level.

In support of the first goal, we are cooperating closely with the Migration and Arab Expatriates Department of the League of Arab States and the International Organization for Migration to organize the "Regional Consultative Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region in preparation for the second High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development". This meeting, which will be held on 4-5 June at the Headquarters of the League of Arab States in Cairo, will provide Arab countries with a forum for dialogue towards a strong regional position on international migration to take to the global High-Level Dialogue. I take this opportunity to encourage the participation of all Arab countries in this event.

In order to improve the coordination of the United Nations system on international migration, we are also cooperating with LAS and IOM to establish and co-chair an Arab Regional Working Group on International Migration. This working group, formed through the UN Regional Coordination Mechanism for the Arab States, will help to translate the impressive efforts in terms of coordination and collaboration of the Global Migration Group to a regional level.

Finally, we are looking to work with our member countries through our Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation to assist them with their efforts to mainstream international migration into their national development strategies through capacity building trainings using major knowledge and training materials including the "Mainstreaming Migration into Development Planning" handbook, which ESCWA is translating into Arabic to make it accessible to our member countries.

In conclusion, Mr/Mme. Chair, Distinguished Delegates and Colleagues, ESCWA believes that migration benefits the social and economic development of its member countries and supports regional and inter-regional integration. However, further work is required to ensure that migration can be truly beneficial for countries of origin, transit and destination – and for migrants themselves. ESCWA looks forward to enhancing its cooperation with member countries at the policy level, as they address this and other issues central to their development. We would like to assure them of our continued support in the future. ESCWA would also like to express its willingness to pool its efforts with those of other actors involved in migration in the Arab region to maximize our collective impact for the benefit of our member countries and migrants.

Thank you.