

ESCWA POPULATION ACTIVITIES 2006-2007

Statement by

Batool Shakoori

Population and Social Policies Team Leader

Mr./Ms. Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues,

I am pleased to come today before the fortieth session of the Commission on Population and Development to brief you on ESCWA's ongoing workprogramme on the issue of changing age structure of the Arab population and its consequences for development.

By undertaking demographic analysis, based on DESA's estimates and projections, we have found that despite the hidden momentum of population growth, the age structure of Arab population is changing. Trend analysis revealed that the slow growth of the elderly population associated with a high growth of the working age population would permit dependency ratios to decline. This trend will offer a number of countries in the Arab region at different points in time a demographic window of opportunity, through which increased savings and investments will become possible.

Within this context, the work programme of the Population and Social Policy Team has been focusing on assisting ESCWA member States in seizing this unique opportunity to escape income inequality and ensure

faster economic growth. To this end, ESCWA undertook the following activities:

A study entitled “The Demographic Window: An Opportunity for Development in Arab Countries,” was prepared to envisage a regional strategy that would be responsive to capturing the benefits and coping with the challenges of the new demography of the region. This study was instrumental in arriving at recommendations to guide national policy makers in their endeavours to formulate and implement rational and timely policies that increase employment, reduce poverty and provide for the emerging youth bulge.

In efforts to raise awareness of policy makers on the importance of acknowledging the nexus between changing age structure and sustained economic growth, ESCWA published a wall chart to highlight the dramatic shift in the age composition of population and to illustrate how different countries of the region, at different points in time will have the potential to achieve significant demographic benefits and improve their economic performance.

Equally important to ESCWA is the need to upgrade national skills in the area of demographic analysis. To this effect, ESCWA is cooperating with UNFPA in the implementation of a project on “integrating demographic transition in the process of development in the Arab region.” The project

consists of three major activities: (1) conducting a survey that aims at better defining the needs and capabilities of demographic centres in the Arab region; (2) designing a regional framework for integrating demographic transitions in the Arab development planning processes; and (3) conducting workshops to enhance the capacity of member states in the area of demographic analysis and in using up to date methods of estimates and projections.

As part of this project, ESCWA has successfully implemented an expert group meeting in Jordan. Regional experts from various disciplines and from different research centres and development organizations have participated in that meeting to discuss a regional framework for integrating the demographic transitions in the process of planning and programming. The framework while reviewed trends and prospects regarding changing age structures of population in the Arab region, it suggested a regional scenario to integrate this favourable trend in the process of socio economic development. The framework also alerted policy makers, that it might be a forgone opportunity, if Arab countries fail to acknowledge the inter linkages between the changing age structure of population and economic growth and sustainable development.

Continuing to uphold its commitment to shed light on how the changes in the population age structure are vital to fostering or impeding social

inclusion and basic human rights, ESCWA published a report on the impact of the changing age structure of population on international migration in the Arab region. The report concluded that unless efficient labour market and human development policies were initiated to accommodate for the changing age structure of population, the pressure for international migration in the Arab region will increase.

In the Arab region, where the onset of fertility decline is a relatively new trend, the process of ageing is also in its early stage. Nevertheless, in the wake of the rapidly changing demographic situation in the region, the need to meet the challenges with regard to the increase in the absolute number of older persons cannot be underestimated. Assisted by UNFPA financial support, ESCWA issued a study entitled "Ageing in the Arab countries: regional variations, policies and programmes," in which the challenges posed by a growing elderly Arab population was highlighted through reviewing existing governmental policy provisions and presenting some alternative strategies.

With the aim of preparing for the 5-year review of the 'Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing,' ESCWA will be conducting a regional survey to prepare a situation analysis report on the subject, followed by a regional meeting to discuss the report's outcomes. ESCWA has also published a fact sheet on population ageing in Arab countries.

In closing, Mr./Ms. Chairperson, our regional Commission reiterates its commitment to the importance of this fortieth session's theme: the changing age structure and its developmental implications, and to supporting the achievement of a more balanced, equitable and sustained human development, and eventually a sustained social security in the Arab region.

Thank you.