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ESCWA's Activities in relation to Population and Development

Statement by:
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Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates and Colleagues,

I would like in the opening of my statement to inform you that, within the restructuring of the Social Development Division of ESCWA, the “Population and Social Policy Team” has been converted into the “Population and Social Development Section” (PSD Section). The overall mission of this Section is to strengthen the capacities of ESCWA Member Countries in integrating population issues into development policies, strategies and programmes at the regional and national levels.

The PSD Section of ESCWA welcomes the theme of the forty-second session of the Commission on Population and Development, under the title of “The contribution of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development to the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals”. In fact, in the occasion of ICPD+15, the PSD Section is currently collaborating with UNFPA, the League of Arab States and the Permanent Population Committee in Qatar, to conduct a “*Conference on Population and Development in the Arab Region: Current Situation and Future Prospects*”, in Doha, during the period 18-20 May 2009. This Conference will bring together experts from national population committees (or other relevant bodies) in the Arab region, experts from NGOs and academic institutions, representatives of selected UN regional commissions and UN agencies, as well as experts from other regions of the

world, to present their experiences and best practices. Within the framework of ICPD and MDGs "Working as one", a regional report on the progress so far achieved in the implementation of ICPD will be presented. The Conference will also examine emerging population issues such as the population structure in Gulf countries, the phenomenon of "fertility plateau" in some Arab countries, the issue of population and armed conflicts, as well as the issue of youth empowerment and maternal mortality.

Chairperson,

During 2008-2009, the work of the PSD Section of ESCWA has focused on four main priority themes:

- (1) Youth.
- (2) Ageing.
- (3) International migration.
- (4) The demography of Arab countries.

In this statement, I will briefly highlight the rationale and main activities of the Section in each of these priority themes.

In relation to the **First Priority Theme, "Youth"**, let me bring to your attention that the Arab Region has witnessed a considerable increase in its youth population (aged 15-24 years), from 38.8 millions in 1985 to 65.7 millions in 2005, and projections reveal that the number of youth would reach 86.0 millions by 2035. This "youth bulge" would open up opportunities for countries in the region, but would also impose challenges related to the increase of violence among youth and the upsurge of political rebellion and unrest, particularly in countries suffering from an inequitable social system and the social exclusion of youth.

Within the theme of "Youth", the PSD Section's activities are focused on monitoring the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) in the Arab Region. We believe that the ability of countries to take advantage of the demographic window of opportunity depends on whether young people entering the workforce are healthy, educated, and skilled and whether adequate investments are made to expand productive capacity and create jobs.

The main completed youth-related activities of the PSD Section include:

First: Publishing a Social Development Bulletin entitled “*The Youth Bulge: Social Implications and Future Prospects*” (June 2008).

Second: Undertaking a “*Regional Inquiry on ESCWA Countries’ Responses to the WPAY*”, during the months of October and November 2008. This inquiry has revealed that the main obstacles facing countries in their efforts to formulate and implement national youth policies are the lack of knowledge of the contemporary approaches to youth issues and the lack of guiding frameworks. In fact, development strategies are often formulated in response to sectoral issues (such as education, labour, health...), without targeting youth as a distinct socio-demographic group having specific needs and facing specific challenges. This ‘universal approach’ in prevailing strategies results in unbalanced unsustainable impacts and might lead to the exclusion of youth who might slide into poverty, unemployment and increased vulnerability to a risky lifestyle and to sexually transmitted diseases.

Third: Conducting a “*Workshop on ESCWA Countries’ Responses to the WPAY*”, in Beirut, 17-18 December 2008. In this Workshop, ESCWA countries agreed on a template/outline for writing national reports on WPAY implementation, highlighting the situation of youth in the various WPAY priority areas, and examining the general, structural, institutional and circumstantial settings in approaching youth issues and formulating youth policies.

Fourth: Conducting, in collaboration with the Family Development Foundation in Abu-Dhabi, an “*Expert Group Meeting on Reinforcing Social Equity: Integrating Youth into the Development Process*”, in the UAE, 29-31 March 2009. This EGM brought together experts from the UN and the Family Development Foundation, as well government officials from ESCWA member countries, experts in social sciences and economics as well as representatives of international and regional organizations. Several youth-related issues were analyzed in the meeting, such as the issues of youth unemployment and the impact of the global financial crisis, youth international migration as well as the gender gap among youth.

The EGM was concluded with a regional project proposal on “*Strengthening National Capacities to Formulate Youth Policies: Responding to the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)*”. The aim of this proposed regional project is to assist policy-makers in formulating appropriate policies and suitable mechanisms that would accelerate WPAY implementation.

Chairperson,

With regard to the **Second Priority Theme, “Ageing”**, the PSD Section of ESCWA has recently assessed the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) at the regional level. It has requested ESCWA Member Countries to prepare national official follow-up reports and to fill out a monitoring questionnaire. Demography-related information was also obtained from ESCWA available resources / documents on ageing.

Furthermore, the Section has published in 2008 ‘*The Demographic Profile of Arab Countries- Ageing of Rural Populations*’. This publication highlighted the course of fertility and mortality transitions in the Arab region and examined trends in rural and urban populations for the period 1980-2050. It also analyzed age-structural changes and ageing of rural populations for the period 1980-2015 in eight selected Arab countries, namely Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, Somalia and Yemen. While the process of ageing in the Arab region is comparatively a recent phenomenon, there is evidence to suggest that population ageing in rural areas began considerably sooner in many countries. Within that context, the publication concluded that the two most important determinants of ageing of rural populations in developing countries are rural-to-urban migration of the working-age population in search of employment, and urban-to-rural migration of the population aged 65 years and over after retirement from the workforce, both of which accelerate rural ageing.

Furthermore, in relation to the **Third Priority Theme on “International Migration”**, the PSD Section has focused on how to capitalize on the opportunities and on how to meet the challenges associated with international migration. In general, ESCWA Member Countries lack the capacity required to formulate and implement effective and coherent migration policies, and officials dealing with the issues of migration need to have access to more timely, accurate and detailed migration data.

In this regard, ESCWA and other UN Regional Commissions will soon embark on a two-years project entitled “*Strengthening national capacities to deal with international migration: Maximizing development benefits and minimizing negative impact*”. The main objective of the project is to strengthen national capacities to incorporate international migration issues into national development strategies in order to maximize the development benefits of international migration and minimize its negative impacts.

Finally, we mention that the Section has issued several publications related to international migration, including the 3rd Issue of the Population and

Development Report on “*International Migration and Development in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities*”, as well as several technical papers, wallcharts, bulletins and fact sheets... The Section is also currently preparing an “*Information Kit on International Migration in the ESCWA Region*”, to be released by the end of 2009.

Finally, in relation to the **Fourth Priority Theme on “Demography of Arab Countries”**, the work of the PSD Section is based on the recognition that the process of fertility decline, along with the slow growth of the elderly population, offers a number of Arab countries, at different points in time, a ‘demographic window of opportunity’ through which increased savings and investments will become possible. This particular situation eases the pressure on countries to provide for the dependent young and elderly, thereby enabling more investment in economic and social development.

In this regard, the work of the Section focuses on how to capture the benefits and to cope with the challenges of the “new demography” of the Arab region. It aims at raising awareness of policymakers on the importance of linking the demographic changes to the process of development and to promote the formulation of integrated population policies. These topics were analyzed in the first issue of the *Social Policy Brief*, entitled “*The Demographic Transition in the Arab Countries: Preparing for the Future*”. This publication will soon be released in the occasion of ICPD+15 because we believe that the issue of Age-Structural Transitions is so urgent that it must be built into the discussions surrounding ICPD+15, if the ‘demographic window of opportunity’ is not to be lost.

It is also important to note that the PSD Section will soon launch the updated “*Demographic profiles of Arab Countries*”, on the POPIN Website for Western Asia. These profiles provide, for each country, detailed data and analysis on population size and growth; population age-sex structure; the levels of fertility, mortality and migration; a focus on the ‘youth bulge’; as well as a brief population policy profile.

Chairperson,

In conclusion, we at ESCWA are extremely thankful to the member governments that are actively collaborating with us in our population and development activities. We value their cooperation and seize this opportunity to encourage them to actively participate in the forthcoming international conferences on population and development, such as the *Conference on Population and Development in the Arab Region: Current Situation and Future Prospects*, in Doha, during the period 18-20 May 2009.