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ESCWA POPULATION ACTIVITIES 2007-2008

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Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates and Colleagues:

Initially, I would like to congratulate you and the other members of the Bureau on your successful elections. I also wish to thank you for giving the Population and Social policy Team of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) this opportunity to briefly outline its current work programme in the area of population and development.

Mr. Chairman,

On behalf of the secretariat and the thirteen member countries of the ESCWA, I will begin by stating that the overall mission of the Population and Social Policy Team has been to enhance the capabilities of ESCWA member states to integrate demographic changes as well as the emerging population issues into development policies, programmes and plans at the regional and national levels. This includes the initiatives to promote the commitment of Arab countries to the common population and development goals stemming from global and regional conferences, including the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Millennium Declaration and the 2004 Beirut Declaration on Population and Development.

Two aspects determine the activities of ESCWA in the area of population team:

The first of these is related to the quantitative analysis of population, in which emphasis has been placed on both cross sectional and trend analyses with a view toward studying the consequences and implications of the core demographic indicators for growth and development. In this context, the consequences of population dynamics, including the changing population age structure, is seen by ESCWA as being fundamental from a life cycle approach and from a developmental approach.

The second aspect is concerned with qualitative factors, in which emphasis is placed on the formulation of policies by which the fundamental links between population change and socioeconomic and political development are acknowledged. Emphasis is placed on the importance of integrating population concerns such as the evolving age groups in the process of social, economic and political plans and programmes. To this end, the strategy of integrating the youth, the working age and the elderly within the developmental process is central. The following section presents the highlights of the ESCWA's activities in these areas during 2007-2008:

A multifaceted strategy for accomplishing these objectives has been followed. On the one hand, ESCWA has increasingly become involved with regional demographic centers, national population councils and concerned ministries. On the other hand, it has successfully established cooperation and created links with international, regional and national organizations to advance population and development activities. Meanwhile, its strategies encompass the following aspects:

- Monitoring the progress made by Arab nations in the implementation of the Programme of Action that was adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994;
- Raising awareness about the importance of demographic changes and increasing the understanding of the linkages between demographic changes, economic growth and Social equity;
- Strengthening national capacities in the formulation of population policies, and integrating population issues with socio-economic development plans and programmes;
- Disseminating and exchanging information and knowledge on population and development issues; and,
- Alerting member states to the challenges imposed by emerging issues including the effect of youth bulge on internal conflicts and the impact of social inequity on the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Mr. Chairman,

Based on the regional analysis of the 2006 revision of the global estimates and projections, prepared by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the age structure of the Arab population is changing, thus ensuring the emergence of what has been termed the “Youth Bulge.” In the Arab region, the youth age group totalled 65,680 million in 2005; it is projected to increase to 71,704 million in 2015 and then to 79,452 million in 2025. It is envisaged that this increased population in the young age of 15-24 in the overall population resulted in the most rapid growth in the number of young people in the region’s history. In this regard, two opposing views have emerged; first, a pessimistic view whereby the predominance of young adults is seen as factor constituting social and political challenges; secondly, a more optimistic view also exists in which a large number of youth is seen as an asset. Managing this increase, however, will be an enormous challenge for Arab governments, and the economic, social and political consequences of failing to do so could be serious.

Relative to this youth bulge, ESCWA is currently committed to implementing a number of activities, and chief among them is the organization of a regional expert group meeting on “Reinforcing Social Equity: Integrating Youth in the Development Planning Process” planned during 2008. The meeting is intended to address the changes of different age groups in relation to key life cycle stages, and in consonance with the socioeconomic and political consequences of the youth bulge on development. The meeting is designed to (i) undertake situation analysis and baseline studies aimed at analyzing the demographic, social, economic and cultural aspects of the emerging youth bulge in the region, (ii) identify strategies that aim to transform this youth bulge into a window of opportunity, and to (iii) evaluate the experience accumulated in Arab countries in the area of formulating national youth policy. Based on this activity, ESCWA aims to publish a

regional report, in compliance with the World Programme of Action on Youth—WPAY—in which macro level policies geared to improving the quality of life and the well-being of youth will be recommended. The meeting will also assess the progress being made in the implementation of the WPAY by underscoring the operational and institutional factors that impede the formulation of integrated social policies intended to integrate youth issues in the development process.

In the context of Ageing, the regional analysis of the 2006 revision of the global estimates and projections illustrates that in the Arab regions, 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 requirement to meet these challenges with regard to the increasing number of older persons cannot be underestimated. To this end, and in preparation for the First Cycle of the Review and Appraisal of the “Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing” (MIPAA), ESCWA prepared a regional report that was submitted to DESA in 2007 as part of the regional input to the global SG’s Report on Ageing.

In an effort to raise the awareness of policy makers about the importance of Ageing, ESCWA published the second issue of the Social Development Bulletin, entitled: “Population Ageing in Arab Countries: Building a Society for All Ages.” The Bulletin aims to alert concerned officials to pay due attention to the fact that ignoring the consequences of ageing will impose a tremendous cost on social and economic equity. In November 2007, ESCWA convened the “Regional Seminar on the Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA)” in Amman, Jordan. The seminar was organized to respond to UN General Assembly Resolution 61/142, and was governed by Resolution 45/1 of the UN Commission on Social Development. It was intended to monitor the progress being made in implementing the MIPAA recommendations in the ESCWA region five years after the adoption of the Plan of Action. The seminar discussed the current issues related to worldwide ageing and focused in particular on the achievements made in the ESCWA countries. The seminar identified several remaining challenges at the individual country level. The lack of social security and health services was emphasized by many countries as being of prime importance for the achievement of human rights and social equity in the ESCWA region. It debated the availability of data and analysis, ascertained the current individual and institutional capacity in the different countries to respond to the growing needs of older people and made specific recommendations for the governments in the region to follow through. The seminar finally proposed to approach ageing issues from an integrated social policy perspective, highlighting those of social equity and equal opportunity environments as important parameters in addressing ageing issues at regional level.

The outcome of the seminar served as ESCWA’s regional input to the 46th Session of the Commission for Social Development, and a PowerPoint presentation on the ESCWA “Regional Perspective” on the implementation of MIPAA was conducted to highlight social, economic and health challenges, including a decreasing financial ability towards achieving the economic independence of the elderly. In its work programme for 2008/2009, ESCWA will take further steps to encourage Arab countries to integrate demographic ageing in the process of national planning and programming.

Within its mandate to alert member States to the challenges imposed by demographic changes and in the context of improving the research agenda used in Arab countries to incorporate methods of

integrating demographic changes in the process of planning and policy formulation, ESCWA collaborated with UNFPA, national population councils and research centers in advancing the merits of integrating the changing age structure in national population policies. The project was formulated with a view to coordinating UN support for regional needs and to assist Arab countries in formulating integrated population policies that can respond in a timely manner to the demographic bonus, absorb the increased supply of labour, foster economic development and ultimately, achieve the MDGs.

Equally important to ESCWA is the need to upgrade national skills in the area of demographic analysis. To that end, a reference tool on the "Methods of Integrating Demographic Transition in Development Plans and Programmes in the Arab Region" was developed and discussed by policy makers, researchers and academicians in an Expert Group Meeting in Jordan. The meeting was convened to adopt a pilot framework, which comprises the major steps necessary for integrating demographic transition in the development process. A survey of demographic centers and experts was also conducted to provide an assessment of available demographic expertise in the Arab region, identify gaps in required skills and knowledge and develop a framework for capacity development. Finally, a workshop on enhancing the skills of demographers and population experts in the area of demographic analysis was convened to discuss the outline and basic components of a manual that intended to enhance demographic knowledge and skills, and guide the work of researchers and training centers in this field.

Mr. Chairman,

Driven by the realization that economic, social and cultural benefits must be more effectively acknowledged, ESCWA has increasingly worked to highlight the developmental aspects of international migration in its work programme. The result is that ESCWA has become increasingly involved in the area of migration and development, and finds itself involved with working to establish cooperation and create links with policy makers and regional experts. The high migration rates in the GCC states associated with marked deficiencies in policies, programs and institutions to help settle and integrate migrants in the host countries of the region create serious concerns.

In the Arab region, International migration and its socio economic and political impacts continued to be vitally important at both the regional and sub regional levels. As a result, ESCWA released two major publications on international migration and development including the third issue of the Population and Development Report. The Population and Development Report is one of a series of analytical assessments published biennially by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. It aims to enhance knowledge about the vital relationship between population and development issues, and to generate awareness in advance of the challenges presented by population dynamics and demographic changes. The third issue of this report is entitled "International Migration and Development in the Arab region: Challenges and Opportunities. It was prepared in light of the discussion held at the Expert Group meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab region that was organized in collaboration with the United Nations Population Division. This publication highlighted the socio-economic opportunities and challenges attributed to international migration, and discussed the role of remittances, female migration, and the rights of migrant workers, brain drain and the changing age structure of population. Moreover, it underscored the centrality of these factors to the formulation of integrated and sound population and social policies.

In a parallel effort to raise awareness, ESCWA published the quarterly Social Development Bulletin on the links between International migration and development. In view of the economic, social, political and demographic changes that are expected to occur at the regional level, the bulletin highlights the significance of International migration and pinpoints the importance of devising a regional strategy to assist Arab governments in coordinating their positions and strengthening their cooperation to confront the challenges and reap the benefits offered by these new opportunities.

Furthermore, in its outreach activities, ESCWA is working to increase knowledge-based information in the region, not only by disseminating information through publications, but also with the establishment of a strong presence on the World Wide Web. In the area of electronic dissemination and exchange of population information, ESCWA continues to offer instant access to up-to-date population and demographic information via the Population Information Network for Western Asia (POPIN). This dissemination information is aimed at expanding the knowledge of member states and other stakeholders about the vital links between population and development, and promoting an environment that enables the formulation of integrated population policies. The Population Information Network for Western Asia (POPIN) also provides instant access to information about key population issues for a wide range of practitioners in the Arab and global communities. In this respect and to capitalize on the progress made by Arab nations in meeting the MDGs in the coming decade, ESCWA is currently updating the electronic version of the demographic profile in line with the 2006 revision and in relation to socio-economic and development indicators associated with the MDGs.

Mr. Chairperson,

In conclusion, our regional Commission would like to reiterate its commitment to the implementation of the Programme of Action for the International Conference on Population and Development. Guided by its principles, ESCWA pledges to support the achievement of a more balanced, equitable and sustained human development, and eventually a sustained social security within the Arab region. In conducting our activities, we at ESCWA are extremely thankful to the member governments that welcome cooperation with ESCWA and that actively participate with us in our programmes. We appreciate their continued cooperation, and we welcome whatever suggestions these governments may wish to share on ways that may be of even greater assistance.

Thank you.