

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

Statement by

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To

The Commission on Population and Development

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Mr. Chair,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates and Colleagues,

ESCWA welcomes the theme of this debate, on “Assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development”. ESCWA believes strongly that the Commission on Population and Development is a unique venue to reaffirm the commitment of all parties to the consensus achieved in Cairo in 1994, and to ensure that the priorities identified in the review of two decades of implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action remain central to global development agendas, including the discussions on the post-2015 UN development agenda.

The latest review of the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action comes at a particularly critical moment for the Arab region. Recent years have seen enormous transformations across the region, as shifting age structures have led to a region-wide youth bulge, economic trends have increased urbanization, and conflicts have caused some of the largest displacement crises in recent history. This review is therefore crucial in informing the directions and strategies that Arab countries can take to respond to these challenges and opportunities.

Mr. Chair,

ESCWA has been intensely engaged in the process of reviewing the Programme of Action in the 22 Arab countries, in close partnership with UNFPA, the League of Arab States, and the Economic Commission for Africa. The partners used a wide range of different approaches – including surveys, consultations with youth, civil society, women’s groups and parliamentarians, and specially-commissioned research – to understand the current state of implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, and emerging priorities.

A number of key observations emerge strongly from this review.

- Progress on implementation has been uneven between countries. While some progress was noticeable in higher income countries, the least-developed countries of the region are still lagging behind;

- Within countries, certain issue areas have received more attention than others, resulting in uneven progress at the national level;
- Moreover, while some issues have been prioritised, others have been consistently neglected by Arab countries. For example, while progress was promising on girls' education across the board, few Arab countries have shown any progress with regards to the promotion of migrants' rights or the impact of climate change on different population groups
- It was evident that countries made most progress where civil society existed and was engaged as a partner. Indeed this partnership was highlighted as the best facilitator and enabling factor in achieving progress;
- Finally, a consensus has formed around a number of emerging issues requiring urgent attention in the Arab region, especially given the political turmoil that the region has witnessed in recent years: the protection of vulnerable populations, especially those affected by conflict; the empowerment of youth, who today make up almost one-fifth of the Arab region population; the affirmation of gender equality as a fundamental right and enabler of women's empowerment; and the provision of a full range of safe, reliable and good-quality sexual and reproductive health services that meet the needs of individuals across the life course.

The final step in the review process was the "Regional Conference on Population and Development in the Arab States: Development Challenges and Population Dynamics in a Changing Arab World", held from 24-26 June 2013 in Cairo. This conference provided countries with a forum to discuss the findings of the review process and seek agreement on future directions on the implementation of the Programme of Action beyond 2014. Thanks to the strong partnerships between the lead agencies, this Regional Conference was a resounding success. Over 400 delegates took part, including representatives from 18 governments, parliamentarians, experts and non-governmental organizations, with priority given to youth coalitions and women's rights organizations.

The deliberations at the Conference resulted in the adoption of the 2013 Cairo Declaration for the Arab States, which assesses the progress of the Arab countries towards the goals set out in the Programme of Action, and reconfirms the commitment of the Arab countries to the Programme of Action as an unfinished agenda that requires strengthened efforts beyond 2014. In line with the global framework, the 129 recommendations set out in the second Cairo Declaration highlight the priority issues for the future implementation of the Programme of Action across the four main thematic areas of dignity and equality; health; place and environment sustainability; and governance.

Mr. Chair,

ESCWA believes strongly that the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development is an essential tool for the promotion of balanced and holistic human development in the Arab region and around the world. Since 1994, ESCWA has been assisting

countries to understand the policy implications of the ICPD Programme of Action, and supporting their efforts to implement it. It has worked on areas as varied as women's empowerment, capacity-building in data-gathering for population and development, empowerment of persons with disabilities, integrating young people into development and mainstreaming international migration into development planning.

The 2013 Cairo Declaration is therefore an essential road map for our work. Through this consensual document, fully endorsed by the countries, our Member States have told us what progress they have made, what challenges they face, and what support they need to achieve their population and development goals. ESCWA will therefore continue to use its convening power among countries and strengthen its partnership with United Nations agencies and the League of Arab States to address the region's priorities in a coordinated way and to maximize our collective impact for the benefit of all of the people living in the Arab region.

ESCWA will also aim to continue providing our member countries with high-quality normative work to understand the nature of the population and development challenges and opportunities in the Arab region. It will complement this coordination and normative work with direct technical cooperation to respond to requests from its member countries to meet their population and development priorities through knowledge development, exchange of practice and capacity building. ESCWA stands ready to support its member countries through projects aimed at forging sustainable partnerships between governments and civil society actors for more effective population and development policies.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, ESCWA believes that the review of two decades of the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action has provided us another opportunity to reaffirm the consensus around the population and development nexus. In particular, it has reminded us of the importance of ensuring that the development models we pursue have the concerns, rights and dignity of all groups of people at their heart. It should also help to guide us in the formulation of the post-2015 UN Development Agenda, to make sure that it achieves progress across all pillars of sustainable development.

ESCWA looks forward to working with our member countries to push forward progress in "taking an integrated approach to inclusive economic growth and inclusive social development, [ensuring] the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health, equality of opportunity for all as well as access to social and health services and [recognition of] equality and dignity as central to progress and peace and security".¹

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

¹ "Cairo Declaration" of the Regional Conference on Population and Development in the Arab States

