Opening Statement of H.E. Ambassador Desra Percaya (Indonesia)
Vice-President of the UN Economic and Social Council

[Delivered by Mr. Navid Hanif, Director, Office of ECOSOC Support and Coordination, UN DESA]

Regional Preparatory Meeting for Western Asia
26 November 2012, Amman, Jordan

Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,

Thank you, it is a privilege to be here.

Let me begin by congratulating the Jordan government, ESCWA, and El Hassan Science City for their efforts in organizing today's meeting.

Unfortunately, His Excellency Ambassador Desra Percaya, Vice-President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, could not attend, so I will deliver this statement on his behalf.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This region is no stranger to scientific achievement.

For the first half of the previous millennium, research, learning, and innovation flourished across Western Asia like nowhere else. Ground-breaking advances in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and engineering revolutionized their respective disciplines.

Hospitals as we now know them — replete with wards and teaching centres — got their start in Cairo, when the Ahmad ibn Tulun Hospital opened its doors in 872. The modern, multi-faculty university owes its existence to Morocco's Al Karaouin University, the world's oldest institution of higher learning, which also dates to the 9th Century.

Libraries across the region helped preserve much of Europe's classical knowledge, too. Indeed, Western Asia's scientific prowess was matched only by its reputation for tolerance and openness. Such strengths fuelled a virtuous cycle.

The same cannot be said today. International comparisons on science, technology, and innovation reveal a region, on the whole, lagging behind global leaders. How,

then, is Western Asia to regain its past splendour — and promote sustainable development in the process?

Start with investment. Spending on research and development hovers around 0.5% of regional GDP. The composition of research budgets varies as well. Countries in the region devote just 15% to basic research, well below the rich-country average.

Weak ties between research and business also mean Western Asia's governments shoulder a disproportionate share of financing costs. Here in the region, private sector funding amounts to less than 3% of total R&D outlays.

Making life easier for entrepreneurs would surely help, too. Labour mobility also means that the region's brightest talents can seek out greener pastures. Increasingly, they are doing so.

Plenty other structural hurdles exist. An increasingly well-educated youth population, coupled with the world's highest level of youth unemployment poses serious risks to growth and stability in the region. It also represents a vast potential, including for developing an abundant supply of scientists and researchers for the next generation.

Despite such obstacles, there is no shortage of promising developments, either.

Scientific output is surging. Over the past decade, Western Asia's share of global publications rose faster than any other region. Certain countries are carving out glittering niches of excellence. Sparkling new state-of-the-art research clusters are sprouting up as well. And a seismic shift in online learning is reshaping higher education, by broadening access and reducing costs.

Distinguished guests,

Boosting capacity should not be the only priority. If sustainable development is to flourish, so too must science and technology. This extends well beyond standard environmental fare, such as energy use and climate change.

Consider food security. Successfully feeding a fast growing global population while economizing on inputs — like land, water, fertilizer, and pesticides — requires major gains in agricultural productivity, on a scale similar to the Green Revolution of the 1960s.

Healthcare is another often overlooked area. As countries devote a rising share of output to medical spending, containing costs and improving care will depend on ever more rapid scientific and technological innovation.

Increasingly, policymakers are taking measures to address these areas.

At last June's Rio+20 Summit, for instance, governments devoted considerable energy to the issue. The soon-to-be-launched Sustainable Development Goals, likewise, should feature science and technology far more prominently than their MDG predecessors — as should the emerging post-2015 UN development framework.

A strong message from today's meeting – and your active engagement in these processes - can help.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Yet another area of promise beckons, waiting to be unleashed. "Multilateralism is not our region's greatest strength," said Jordan's Princess Sumaya Bint El Hassan, in a recent speech. "In fact, it is barely a reality."

Her Royal Highness is right. Low levels of collaboration across Western Asia regularly stifle scientific and technological innovation. On this, ESCWA and ECOSOC are especially well-placed to encourage dialogue — and action. Indeed, more gatherings like today's can only help.

Encouragingly, the cause of sustainable development now consistently tops the UN agenda. We saw it at Rio. And we see it now: in preparations for the post-2015 development framework; and in the acclaimed new Sustainable Development Solutions Network, a UN initiative which enlists the support of leading think-tanks and universities.

More than ever, then, this spirit of cooperation will need to grow. Western Asia's scientists of tomorrow are counting on it. So is everyone else who sets store in a cleaner, brighter future.

Thank you.