



Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**REPORT****EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PRIORITIES FOR
THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE ARAB REGION
BEIRUT, 19-20 JULY 2011****Summary**

The aim of the expert group meeting (EGM) was to discuss the national and regional developmental priorities that would accelerate process towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The participants discussed a methodology that provided a brief snapshot on the attainability of the MDGs. This introduced the issue of challenges faced by the Arab countries and formed the background for a wider discussion on a new development framework for the region.

An inclusive and equitable growth within economies, social protection and social policies were at the core of the discussions. Economic and political governance formed other pillars of the meeting on national priorities for accelerating the attainment of the MDGs and the drive towards further developmental outcomes. The meeting also discussed regional priorities that could unlock multiplier effects at the national level. The debates looked for different forms of partnerships for development through trade and finance integration, as well as cooperation on water management and food security issues. Labour migration within the region was another subject of regional priority.

The discussions also went beyond the MDGs achievement in 2015 to brainstorm on a vision of development for the region. Within this context, contributions included the need to refocus on issues of political economy, governance and institution-building, the primacy of social policy, the role of State and most importantly the role of politics in development.

These last brainstorming sessions aimed to develop an upcoming project initiated by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in order to establish a niche in the region in policy-advising, based on evidence-based empirical research. This project attempts to conceptualize a region-specific development framework using qualitative analysis and quantitative modeling techniques.

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Introduction

1. The Millennium Declaration aimed to build a consensus on priorities to better identify the path to development. The MDGs, issued from the Millennium Declaration, are both a national and global level effort to achieve a set of quantifiable targets and set nations on the right track for multidimensional human development. They are a set of interconnected goals and targets that can be considered as a means to long-term sustainable human development. With four years until the 2015 deadline, it is time to review and analyse where the region stands in order to identify national as well as regional priorities and accelerate progress before 2015. It is also time to review and discuss the established development paradigm with a discussion for beyond 2015, in line with the conclusions of the MDGs Review Summit that took place in September 2010.
2. In the Arab region, this report comes at a critical juncture when decision makers are ready to listen and new actors are emerging. The 2011 Arab Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Report also comes a few months after the report “Third Arab Report on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2010 and the Impact of the Global Economic Crises,” that comprehensively reviewed the progress made towards the MDG targets, and prior to a report that will reconsider the MDG framework beyond 2015.
3. The 2011 MDG report identified priorities with multiplier effects that are essential at the national and regional level for the attainment of developmental goals. On the national level, it addresses the issue of inclusive and equitable growth, comprehensive social policy and social protection, gender issues, water management and governance, and institutional reforms. On the regional level, the report discusses how countries can benefit from inter-Arab cooperation in trade, finance, labour migration, as well as food and water security. The EGM discussed these priorities across the following five thematic sessions:
 - (a) A methodology to assess progress and attainability of the MDGs;
 - (b) Inclusive and equitable growth and comprehensive social policies;
 - (c) Cross-cutting issues: governance, ICT for development, water and food security;
 - (d) Partnership for development: trade, finance and labour migration;
 - (e) Future challenges for development in the region.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4. The main conclusions and recommendations of the five thematic sessions were as follows:
 - (a) Data availability, the differences between national and international, the type of indicators used for assessing the MDGs, such as maternal and infant mortality, and the heterogeneity of Arab countries are the main technical challenges in forecasting regional and national progress. The methodology used was considered accurate, in light of existing technical constraints;
 - (b) There is a need for an integrated framework that has inclusive economic growth and social policy as two necessary elements for the MDGs, as well a long-term development process. The role of the State is crucial, but there are emerging actors that influence and affect the development process;
 - (c) Cross-cutting issues and most importantly governance and institution-building are necessary in the Arab region. Water and food security are major challenges that have to be addressed for any developmental outcomes. ICT could also be a channel for development and the achievement of the MDGs, beyond the MDG 8 indicators;
 - (d) Regional integration is weak. Global integration of the Arab world is similarly weak. This reflects failures of economic policies and deficiencies in the development models adopted over the past decades and also a lack of political will. Trade and financial integration can have a role in fostering an inclusive economic

growth. Strong flows of labour migration have both positive and negative effects on MDGs in the region and need to be subject to a regional cooperation framework;

(e) Considering the MDGs achievements in the region in the context of recommendations by the 2010 United Nations MDGs Review Summit and the wave of social movements sweeping the Arab world, it has been concluded that there is a need for a new development paradigm for the region. This also requires focusing particularly on politics and political economy, governance and institution-building, and the primacy of social protection.

II. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

5. The EGM was divided into five thematic sessions in line with the report's identified priorities. The last session consisted of a round-table discussion aimed to devise a vision of a development model for the region over the next fifteen years. The following is a summary of the main presentations and ideas debated.

A. A METHODOLOGY TO ASSESS PROGRESS AND ATTAINABILITY OF THE MDGS

6. The first session included a detailed presentation by the Economic Development and Globalization Division (EDGD) at ESCWA of the methodology used to assess the likelihood of reaching the MDG targets through using a selected number of indicators. The date of attainment of the goal is estimated based on the assumption that the rate of progress will not change. Colour codes categorize the indicators by country depending on the year of attainment. The estimations have been done mainly using the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) databases. The same exercise was also presented using national data. The ESCWA Statistics Division (SD) presented the different forecasting techniques and their application in this exercise while highlighting the main technical constraints such as non-linearity issues, the limitations of upper-bound and lower-bound levels, and concluded that most of these issues have been resolved.

7. This session also included another presentation by the Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues Section at ESCWA (ECRI) on conflict as an overarching problem for the region and discussed its causal relationship with the MDGs. Conflict countries tend to have poor MDG attainments. The region has two exceptions with the cases of Lebanon and Palestine. It concluded that while the MDG report does not explicitly address the direction of causality, it does look at the conflict-development nexus from both angles.

8. The concluding presentation in this session reviewed the main components of the output of the September 2010 United Nations Review Summit on MDGs. This Summit reiterated the importance of treating the MDGs as a whole and focused on main elements in the MDGs framework, including governance and inequalities. The Summit also advocated for tailoring the MDGs to a national context.

9. The discussions following this session focused mainly on the results of the forecasting exercise made with regards to MDG attainability. The comments went back to questioning the sources of United Nations data versus national data to justify the discrepancies and recommended having both referenced in the report.

B. INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE GROWTH AND COMPREHENSIVE SOCIAL POLICIES

10. The second session started with a presentation by EDGD of a suggested framework for inclusive and equitable growth in the economies of the region. It attempted to define inclusive economic growth as a means to reduce poverty, vulnerability and inequality, and as both a broad-based and long-term project. It highlighted the need for conducting diagnostics and reframing the classical policy tools in order to meet the prerequisites for inclusion of the poor or vulnerable and marginalized. The second presentation by the Social Development Division at ESCWA (SDD) discussed the role of social policy and protection that reduces inequalities and promotes greater social cohesion. Social policy joins the inclusive economic growth policy tools for achieving the MDGs and a longer-term development process in general.

11. The third presentation in this session attempted to combine the two previous interventions into one integrated schematic framework which could serve to summarize the main message of the report, adding other elements such as good governance and participation in public policymaking.

12. The final intervention in this session presented another approach in assessing MDG achievement by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that assess what has been done and tries to avoid technical constraints as well as data problems, particularly in measuring poverty.

13. The discussions during this session were focused on the target audience of this policy-oriented report, as currently new actors are emerging in the region while the Arab countries have not succeeded in accelerating the development process within the region. However, two central warnings were given. The first advised against reversing all past reforms implemented and thus reducing any positive achievements. The second addressed the need to manage fiscal space limitations.

C. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES: GOVERNANCE, ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT, WATER AND FOOD SECURITY

14. The third session covered a number of cross-cutting issues that have an impact on the MDGs in the region. These included water and food security, governance, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Development (ICT4D). On water and food security, the presentation by the Sustainable Development and Productivity Division at ESCWA (SDPD) focused on highlighting the importance of this scarce resource in the region and the shared dependency of Arab countries. It also provided policy recommendations to manage this developmental challenge. The same presentation linked food security to the MDGs and to water security and provided other short-term and long-term policy recommendations.

15. The role of ICT4D was also presented by the ICT Division at ESCWA (ICTD) and by the International Telecommunication Union. A number of projects and programmes in that respect have been implemented by regional and international organizations. However, the presenters concluded by warning that there is no clear set of indicators to measure the true impact of ICT4D projects on the development of targeted communities and posed the question of introducing new trends in technology for developmental projects.

16. The discussions following this session revolved about the importance of water and agriculture in the region and suggested regional policies for water management. Other comments highlighted the need to include water accessibility within the MDGs as an access to a service and not an access to infrastructure. A point of caution was raised against the sustainability of non-conventional water projects implemented in the richer countries of the region.

D. PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT: TRADE, FINANCE AND LABOUR MIGRATION

17. The second day of the EGM started with regional integration and other forms of economic cooperation that can foster a partnership for the attainment of the MDGs. EDGD delivered a presentation on trade and finance. Concerning trade, recommendations included improving trade facilitation, fairer agreements for the liberalization of trade and services, better regional governance mechanisms, in addition to enhancing the technological absorptive capacity and technology diffusion process throughout the region. Concerning finance, examples were given on rechannelling foreign direct investment (FDI) towards MDG-related sectors and for making tourism pro-poor.

18. Labour migration flows were another aspect of a partnership for development. The presentation by SDD assessed the linkages between MDGs and migration within the region. It highlighted regional agreements in this respect but also the apparent weak implementation. The presentation stressed the importance of cooperation from destination countries.

19. The discussions following this session concerned the weak intraregional integration and the region's low level of integration with the rest of the world. The experts questioned the type of industrial policy required and the key sectors that have most developmental impact. The discussion extended to the role of services and the competitiveness of the tertiary sector in the region.

20. The other subject to receive focus was labour migration, which required consideration from both the recipient and sending country perspectives. In addition, the role of remittances in poverty alleviation was questioned. As remittances remain a relatively volatile financial resource and as migration is also a selective process, data may not necessarily include the poorest of the poor.

E. FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGION

21. The last session broadened the scope of the debate to devise a development vision for the region. The first issue raised was the ways in which the attainment of the MDGs could be linked with the wave of social movements that are currently sweeping the region.

22. The first presentation by SDD raised two questions that could shape a desired development paradigm for the region. The first question was about the common values of the Arab people and their aspired society. This question concerns social cohesion and solidarity, but considers the different meanings of terms that can have particular policy implications. The second question concerned the implementation of that vision, in particular which what institutions and policies would drive the region towards that aim.

23. The following presentation by a World Bank economist stressed the need for generating economic growth as "inclusive growth" and warned against dumping all previous economic reforms into one failure basket. A second point related to the importance of including political constraints within policy recommendations, since these have generally been absent and any policy choice involves a trade-off.

24. The third presentation focused on a main challenge that the region continues to face, both in employment and labour. A central message was that there is not a disparity between education outcome and labour demand in the region. While the link is not perfect, it is not the main constraint for the Arab world. Unemployment is rather due to a set of policies that does not generate jobs, even in times of growth. In addition, employers in the region tend to hire foreign labour. Employer training programmes are another area of weakness within the region.

25. Job creation in services was the key message of the next speaker, an expert on trade and agriculture, who stressed that manufacturing and agriculture are unable to generate the level of employment needed for the Arab labour force. Examples from other countries, such as health services in Thailand, were mentioned to highlight the competitiveness of the service sector. Another key recommendation highlighted in this presentation relates to modest interventions in trade facilitation, which can have a tremendous impact on increasing trade.

26. Another expert from Jordan focused on the political will to implement policy recommendations. Whereas the Arab world has tried forms of socialism as well as economic liberalization, the urgently needed political liberalization has been absent in both cases.

27. The final round-table session re-echoed a number of key elements of a development vision for the Arab region. This includes the need to emphasize governance and inequality in the future agenda; to give primacy for social policy; to have economic growth complementing its objective and not the other way around; the importance of moving beyond the specific MDG indicators, for example, looking beyond education enrolment to more qualitative analysis; and balancing the short-term versus long-term policy implications. The multidimensional basis of development was highlighted, with the MDGs being only a selection of basic priorities. Finally, development was considered as an act of change and thus by definition it should consider politics as an essential element to the development agenda, particularly in this region.

28. The closing of the meeting introduced a new project initiated by ESCWA. The project aims to establish ESCWA in the niche of policy-advising for the region, based on evidence-based empirical research. This project attempts to conceptualize a region-specific development framework, using qualitative analysis and quantitative modelling techniques.

III. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

A. VENUE AND DATE

29. The EGM was held at the United Nations House, Beirut, from 19 to 20 July 2011.

B. OPENING

30. The Director of the Economic Development and Globalization Division gave the opening address and welcomed participants. He outlined the EGM goals and situated the MDG publication amongst a series of other publications. He reviewed the agenda with the participants and adopted it.

C. PARTICIPANTS

31. The EGM engaged a group of experts with social and economic expertise in the Arab region.

Annex*

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