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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**REPORT****OF THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION ON THE ROOT
CAUSES OF ETHNIC AND SECTARIAN TENSIONS
IN THE ESCWA REGION
BEIRUT, 26 AUGUST 2009****Summary**

A brainstorming session on the root causes of ethnic and sectarian tensions in the ESCWA region was held at UN House on 26 August 2009. The session was organized by the Section for Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues (ECRI) in collaboration with the Heinrich Boell Foundation. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss and solicit input and comments on a draft study entitled Unpacking the Dynamics of Ethno-Sectarian Tensions: A Youth-Focus Group Analysis. The meeting was designed to provide a platform for discussion amongst United Nations agencies, think tanks and academic institutions on the challenges associated with ethnic and sectarian tensions in this region and in Lebanon in particular, with the objective to develop clear policy recommendations for ESCWA member countries and other relevant actors.

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Introduction

1. The strong influence of communal affiliation on political, economic and social dynamics in the Arab region is not a novel phenomenon. Nevertheless, a series of developments over the last decades has re-triggered this detrimental trend, which has increasingly reasserted itself in several countries in Western Asia. If left unchecked, communal tensions will become a formidable and potentially unstoppable force of fragmentation and disintegration across the ESCWA region and beyond, undermining reform efforts, marginalizing human rights and religious values, and flaming disorder and civil discord.

2. The ESCWA study, *Unpacking the Dynamics of Ethno-Sectarian Tensions: A Youth-Focus Group Analysis* (henceforth the Study), which adopts a purely qualitative approach based on the analysis of focus group discussions with youth in the age group 18-25, aims to examine the dynamics of communal tensions, animosity and conflict utilizing Lebanon as a case study. The Study contends that at the macro level, communal tensions are compounded through the interplay of social, economic, state-structural, political, cultural and external factors. At the micro level, the Study unravels four building blocks as part and parcel of the root causes of existing communal tensions, namely the reproduction of communal identity, the compartmentalization of intercommunal social relations, the exclusionary spaces of social relations and the clientelistic nature of the political system.

3. The Study concludes with a number of recommendations presented to concerned State institutions, multilateral organizations, civil society and donors to work towards promoting civic values within the education system and promoting good governance practices within the public sector so as to enhance its capacity for development, social cohesiveness and peaceful coexistence.

4. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss and solicit input and comments on a draft of the Study. The meeting was designed to provide a platform for discussion amongst United Nations agencies, think tanks and academic institutions on the challenges associated with ethnic and sectarian tensions in the region and in Lebanon in particular, with the objective of developing clear policy recommendations for ESCWA member countries and other relevant actors.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

5. The participants agreed on the relevance and importance of the problem of communal and sectarian tensions in the region and proposed the following recommendations to both improve the ECRI study on the dynamics of sectarian tensions in Lebanon and contribute to further such studies:

(a) Reconsider the term “ethno-sectarian tensions” and replace with either “communal tensions” or “ethnic and/or sectarian tensions”;

(b) Reconceptualize the methodology for future similar studies, to include a wider range of participants in the focus group discussions, from different economic and geographical backgrounds, and include a gender dimension;

(c) Include a discussion on solutions with focus groups and test such solutions;

(d) Improve the recommendations so as to:

(i) Link the theoretical analysis and findings to the recommendations;

(ii) Specify the target audience for implementing each recommendation;

(iii) Include specific United Nations system-wide responses through various human rights tools, the media and civil society;

(iv) Include the need to address unequal access to resources and power, as a means to improve intercommunal relations;

(v) Suggest means of engaging youth in such common political activities as independent election monitoring.

(e) Consider what brings communities together rather than only focusing on what divides them;

(f) The Study should include an analysis of peacebuilding and propose a national peacebuilding strategy for Lebanon.

II. DISCUSSION TOPICS

A. FRAMEWORK AND PURPOSE

6. ECRI and the Heinrich Boell Foundation presented the findings, assessment and recommendations of the study entitled Unpacking the Dynamics of Ethno-Sectarian Tensions: A Youth-Focus Group Analysis, which framed the discussion during the brainstorming session. The discussion covered the conceptual analysis of ethnic and sectarian tensions, the methodology of the Study and the findings of the Study under four categories: the reproduction of sectarian identity, the compartmentalization of intercommunal social relations, the exclusionary spaces of social relations and the clientelistic nature of the political system. Further discussions covered the various policy recommendations targeting Government institutions, multilateral organizations, civil society and the donor community to more effectively tackle the challenges associated with ethnic and sectarian tensions in the ESCWA region.

7. This is a pilot study that aims to shed light on the root causes of and challenges posed by ethno-sectarian tensions in Western Asia, assessing their patterns of evolution, and highlighting the factors that exacerbate this trend. Through ascertaining and analysing the perceptions and involvement of youth with regards to communal tensions and conflict, the Study attempts to initiate a debate among researchers and policymakers on its findings and suggested policy recommendations.

8. The Study is based on the analysis of 15 focus group discussions that were conducted with 113 Lebanese youth (55 men and 58 women) between December 2008 and January 2009. The utilization of focus groups is one of the means of understanding the perception of youth on such matters as sectarian identity, the dynamics of living in multisectarian societies and their view of the Lebanese political system.

B. CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

9. Participants reflected first on the concepts and definitions of ethnic and sectarian tensions. The politicized use of specific terms such as “ethnic” or “sectarian” could lead to even further division and tensions. A general consensus emerged that the concept of “ethno-sectarian” as stated in the Study could not appropriately define both concepts separately. Therefore, it was advised to use the term “communal tensions” instead.

10. The participants discussed the need for a more thorough theoretical examination and how those specific theories relate to the case study in question. While looking at the region as a whole, it was noted that each conflict in the Middle East is different, with distinct characteristics and various root causes, each requiring its own theoretical framework.

C. METHODOLOGY

11. The discussion on the methodology of the Study led to important conclusions which will serve as key recommendations for future studies. A number of shortcomings were identified in the structure of the focus group discussions, including the fact that the participants were principally chosen from universities and not from more disadvantaged economic backgrounds, and lacked regional diversity. The difference between perceptions from female and male youths was not adequately addressed and the analysis, therefore, lacks a gender dimension. Moreover, the secular nature of the youth was not clearly identified, as groups were interviewed based on their sectarian affiliation.

12. The focus group discussions did not address possible solutions to sectarian tensions, and were thus unable to ascertain any perception of long-term alternatives.

D. REPRODUCTION OF SECTARIAN IDENTITY

13. In considering the analysis of the reproduction of sectarian identity, the participants agreed that memories of the civil war are often manipulated by elites for political gain and that distortions could arise in understanding how such memories actually shape sectarian intolerance. Sectarian identities should be considered as fluid cultural and social structures, rather than set in time and space.

14. A number of recommendations were put forward with regard to the means of engaging youth in such common political activities as independent election monitoring. It was agreed that this could build their sense of citizenship to become more tolerant politically and towards other sectarian groups.

E. COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF INTERCOMMUNAL SOCIAL RELATIONS

15. Unequal access to power and resources was considered one of the most important factors in dividing communities and fuelling tensions and conflict; therefore, it needs to be included in any conflict analysis.

F. EXCLUSIONARY SPACES

16. While discussing the issue of exclusionary spaces of social relations, it was agreed that it is important to understand how neutral spaces are created, and how they could be expanded, as they represent spaces which potentially bring communities and sects together, thus contributing to reducing tension and alleviating intolerance.

G. CLIENTELISTIC NATURE OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

17. The clientelistic nature of the political system was discussed and it was concluded that attempting to depoliticize sectarian tension is indeed an impossible task.

H. PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT PREVENTION

18. The issue of conflict and peace was addressed with concerns that the Study did not explore the fundamental principles of peacebuilding, including specific human rights instruments available to assist in national peacebuilding. It was also unclear where Lebanon is positioned in terms of peace: whether the country is still in need of conflict prevention or whether it is in a peace settlement phase.

Annex*

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Ms. Layla Al-Zubaidi
Director
Heinrich Boell Foundation
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-562926
E-mail: boell@terra.net.lb

Mr. Heiko Wimmen
Doctoral Fellow
Heinrich Boell Foundation
German Institute for International and Security
Studies (Berlin)
Lebanon/Germany
Tel.: 0049-175-10944830
E-mail: heikow@gmail.com

Ms. Doreen Khoury
Programme Manager
Heinrich Boell Foundation
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-562926
E-mail: boell@terra.net.lb

Ms. Hala Zhou
Intern
Heinrich Boell Foundation
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-562926
E-mail: hala.zhour@rub.de

Mr. Nasser Yassin
Professor
American University of Beirut (AUB)
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-350000 ext:4668/70-024542
E-mail: nasser.yassin@gmail.com

Mr. Oussama Safa
General Director
Lebanese Center for Policy Studies
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-486430
E-mail: osafa@lcp-lebanon.org

Ms. Zina Sawaf
Programme Coordinator
Issam Fares Institute-American University of
Beirut (AUB)
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-350000 ext.:4156/03-770536
E-mail: zs28@aub.edu.lb

Mr. Charles Harb
Associate Professor
American University of Beirut (AUB)
Lebanon
E-mail: charles.harb@aub.edu.lb

Mr. Sami Ofeish
Associate Professor
Balamand University
Lebanon
Tel.: 06-930250
E-mail: sami.ofeish@balamand.edu.lb

Mr. Faleh Abdul-Jabar
Director
Iraq Institute for Studies
United Kingdom/Iraq/Lebanon
Tel.: 01-755949 70-958794
E-mail: f-institute@hotmail.com

Mr. Ghassan Mkhaiber
Member of Parliament
Lebanon
E-mail: ghassanem@gmail.com

Ms. Muzna Al-Masri
PhD candidate
Goldsmiths College
United Kingdom/Lebanon
Tel.: 03-838046
E-mail: muznamasri@gmail.com

Ms. Maha Shuayb
Fellow
University of Oxford - Centre for Lebanese
Studies
United Kingdom/Lebanon
E-mail: maha.shuayb@sant.ox.ac.uk

* Issued as submitted.

Mr. Ziad Abdel Samad
Executive Director
Arab NGO Network for Development
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-319366
E-mail: annd@annd.org

Mr. Nadim Shehadi
Associate Fellow
Chatham House
United Kingdom/Lebanon
Tel.: 03-718249
079563900562
E-mail: nadim.shehadi@gmail.com

Ms. Lea Bou Khater
Researcher
Consultation and Research Institute (CRI)
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-801108/03-969972
E-mail: leah.aboukhater@gmail.com
info@crilebanon.com

Mr. Alexander Costy
Senior Advisor
United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon
(UNSCOL)
Lebanon
Tel.: 71-116171
E-mail: costy@un.org

Mr. Fateh Azzam
Regional Representative
Office of the High Commissioner for Human
Rights (OHCHR)
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978744
E-mail: azzam1@un.org

Mr. Roberto Laurenti
Chief, Programme Planning and Technical
Cooperation (PPTCD)
ESCWA
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978818
E-mail: laurentir@un.org

Ms. Maha Yahya
Regional Advisor
ESCWA
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978400
E-mail: yahya3@un.org

Ms. Maisaa Youssef
Research Coordinator
ESCWA
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978810
E-mail: youssef8@un.org

Ms. Aida Abu Ras
Regional Advisor
ESCWA
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978734/71-341655
E-mail: aburas@un.org

Mr. Alope Kar
Regional Advisor
ESCWA
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978342
E-mail: kar@un.org

Mr. Tarik Alami
Chief, Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues
(ECRI)
ESCWA
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978614
E-mail: alamit@un.org

Mr. Youssef Chaitani
First Economic Affairs Officer (ECRI)
ESCWA
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978619
E-mail: chaitani@un.org

Ms. Adeline Mills
Associate Economic Affairs Officer (ECRI)
ESCWA
Lebanon
Tel.: 01-978618
E-mail: mills3@un.org

