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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)



Report

Twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development Beirut, 8-9 October 2019

Summary

The twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) was held in Beirut on 8 and 9 October 2019. Participants reviewed several reports on priority issues for the Arab region, including social protection reform, the policy implications of the inclusion of older persons, and the nexus approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Arab region.

Agenda items also covered progress in implementing the recommendations made by the Committee at its eleventh session, technical cooperation activities and the activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability since the Committee's previous session, and the proposed programme plan for 2020. The Committee also reviewed progress in implementing recommendations to member States made at its eleventh session.

The present report contains a brief account of the main issues raised during the discussions, of the measures taken by the Committee, and of implemented recommendations. The Committee adopted the present report at its closing meeting held on 9 October 2019.

CONTENTS

| | <i>Paragraphs</i> | <i>Page</i> |
|---|-------------------|-------------|
| Introduction | 1-2 | 3 |
| <i>Chapter</i> | | |
| I. RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AT ITS TWELFTH SESSION..... | 3 | 3 |
| A. Recommendations to ESCWA member States | | 3 |
| B. Recommendations to the secretariat..... | | 3 |
| II. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION | 4-56 | 4 |
| A. Progress in social development since the eleventh session of the Committee on Social Development | 4-24 | 4 |
| B. Social development and the Sustainable Development Goals | 25-50 | 8 |
| C. Proposed programme plan for 2020 in the field of social development | 51-54 | 13 |
| D. Date and venue of the thirteenth session of the committee on social development..... | 55 | 14 |
| E. Other matters..... | 56 | 14 |
| III. ADOPTION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AT ITS TWELFTH SESSION..... | 57 | 14 |
| IV. ORGANIZATION OF WORK..... | 58-64 | 14 |
| A. Venue and date of the session | 58 | 14 |
| B. Opening..... | 59-60 | 15 |
| C. Participants..... | 61 | 15 |
| D. Election of officers..... | 62 | 15 |
| E. Agenda | 63 | 15 |
| F. Documents | 64 | 15 |

ANNEXES

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| I. List of participants..... | 16 |
| II. List of documents..... | 18 |

Introduction

1. The twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) was held at the United Nations House in Beirut on 8 and 9 October 2019, pursuant to ESCWA resolution 198 (XVII) of 31 May 1994 which was endorsed by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in its resolution 27/1994 of 26 July 1994. The Committee aims to enhance regional cooperation on social development issues and to strengthen member States' participation in planning the ESCWA programme of work in this field.
2. The present report outlines the main issues discussed and the recommendations agreed by participants. The Committee unanimously adopted the recommendations contained in the present report at its final meeting, held on 9 October 2019.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AT ITS TWELFTH SESSION

3. At the close of the twelfth session, the Committee made the following recommendations to member States and to the ESCWA secretariat.

A. RECOMMENDATIONS TO ESCWA MEMBER STATES

- (a) Take note of the activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability, renew its mandate, and continue participating in its activities;
- (b) Stress the importance of developing integrated and sustainable social protection systems and link them to financial and macroeconomic policies, make efforts to link social protection policies to labour market policies, and inform the secretariat of key developments and provide it with data on social protection reforms;
- (c) Examine the effectiveness and efficiency of social assistance to ensure that it reaches the most vulnerable groups;
- (d) Establish an expert group under the Committee on Social Development tasked with following up on social protection reform in the period between ESCWA sessions. An evaluation of its activities should be submitted to the Committee on Social Development at its thirteenth session. The expert group's proposed functions include strengthening coordination and regional cooperation and exchanging experiences on social protection issues, including expanding the scope of social protection systems and improving their quality;
- (e) Intensify efforts to develop policies to ensure the full inclusion of older persons, in the light of prevailing demographic trends and national priorities, and in line with regional and international frameworks and the principle of 'leaving no one behind';
- (f) Adopt an inclusive approach to policymaking and to designing systems, programmes and interventions to ensure complementarity between them;
- (g) Develop short- and long-term policies and plans aimed at building an inclusive economic and social system that facilitates the real and effective participation of all individuals in the labour market and in production processes, on the basis of an equitable distribution of resources;
- (h) Invite donor institutions to allocate more resources to social development in the activities they fund.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SECRETARIAT

- (a) Support member States' efforts and build their capacity to mainstream a nexus approach to social policies in national plans and programmes aimed at achieving national development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);

(b) Continue providing technical support in response to requests from member States, with a focus on enhancing effectiveness and efficiency in the work of the secretariat, facilitating administrative procedures, and optimizing the benefits of new technologies;

(c) Strengthen the interlinkages between ESCWA activities at the regional level, whether in the framework of its governmental mechanisms or in other forums, and those undertaken at the bilateral level with member States through technical cooperation activities;

(d) Focus on conflict-affected countries in ESCWA social development activities;

(e) Continue assessing reforms of the various components of social protection systems, while maintaining an inclusive approach to these systems;

(f) Continue building knowledge and supporting member States in dealing with population dynamics with the aim of developing inclusive evidence-based policies that ensure decent living standards for all age groups;

(g) Support member States' efforts to integrate policies on reducing social and economic inequality and multidimensional poverty in national development plans and programmes, in line with the SDGs, with a focus on dialogue as an effective means to formulate and implement policies that address inequality;

(h) Continue holding meetings of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability, present an assessment of its activities at the thirteenth session of the Committee, and devise ways to finance its activities;

(i) Hold meetings of the expert group on social protection emanating from the Committee on Social Development, which will convene in the period between ESCWA sessions, present an assessment of its activities to the Committee at its thirteenth session, invite non-governmental experts to the expert group's meetings, and find ways to fund its activities.

II. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

A. PROGRESS IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT SINCE THE ELEVENTH SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

1. *Implementation of activities under the ESCWA programme of work and of recommendations made by the Committee on Social Development at its eleventh session* (Agenda item 4)

4. Under this item, the Committee considered document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/3](#) on activities implemented by ESCWA pursuant to recommendations made by the Committee at its eleventh session. The representative of the secretariat made a presentation, in which he referenced the goals of the ESCWA programme of work and their means of implementation. He listed priority thematic areas, including social inclusion, especially of vulnerable and marginalized social groups, social protection, population and development, international migration, social justice and participation. He noted the activities undertaken by the Committee, including issuing publications, and holding workshops and expert group meetings. He focused on efforts made by ESCWA to transfer the Arab region's perspective on urban issues to international forums, including participating in the issuance of an Arab regional report for the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, and a technical paper on housing policies for low-income persons in the Arab region.

5. The representative of the State of Palestine said that policymaking in his country had not previously made the link between social justice and its various components, which were not limited to social protection. However, the possibility of increasing poverty rates through economic policies had highlighted that link and encouraged the adoption of such an approach to achieve social justice. Efforts had been made to review and amend the law on protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. Participating member States were requested

to share their experiences in implementing the 2030 Agenda, as an important means for saving time, effort and money. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic said that conflict in her country had altered social development priorities, and stressed that housing had become a priority for many citizens because of war, destruction and displacement.

6. The representative of Tunisia noted her country's efforts to institutionalize its social assistance programme, and a draft law on developing a social security programme to advance poor groups, which was still under consideration by the House of Representatives. She said that the Social Research Centre was able to lay the foundations for developing the social security system through a census that included 90 per cent of those registered for social security. She indicated efforts to issue health cards to vulnerable groups, to help those poor pay the cost of treatment and medicines. The representative of Kuwait addressed his country's efforts to provide social assistance within the framework of the Ministry of Social Affairs. He said that the budget allocated for aid had been increased to include more vulnerable social groups, stressing that the law was updated periodically to include a greater number of groups.

7. The representative of Lebanon referred to a preliminary version of a social development project prepared by the Ministry of Social Affairs in partnership with several international organizations, stressing the need to develop a clear vision of social protection that addressed the specific needs of Lebanon. The representative of Yemen requested the inclusion of a recommendation on assistance to poor groups affected by the conflict in Yemen. The representative of Mauritania noted the efforts of the Ministry of Social Affairs in her country to provide social assistance to various vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities and older persons, and to protect their rights. Such efforts included the implementation of a 'disabled identification card' programme, allowing persons with disabilities to benefit from various health and educational services, and from an employment quota.

8. The representative of the International Organization of Persons with Disabilities asked whether accessibility for persons with disabilities was covered by housing-related support activities; about the consultative mechanisms related to those activities; and whether the training tools developed by ESCWA included inclusive standards, stressing that coordination should be strengthened to ensure the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities.

9. The representative of the secretariat said that ESCWA had prepared manuals on integrating social justice in national plans, and was preparing a workshop on the topic. He emphasized that integrating social protection required the participation of all sectors and the adoption of a holistic approach, and that the manuals issued by ESCWA addressed various issues from a regional perspective; however, the responsibility of identifying priorities rested with Governments. He said that rebuilding was an important issue for ESCWA, which was cooperating with UN-Habitat on all issues related to urban development. He added that the issues of housing and defining the features of cities were part of the support efforts provided by ESCWA to member States. He expressed hope that a network of housing ministries would be established in the region to develop social housing strategies not only for the poor, but also for the middle classes. The representative of the secretariat addressed the intervention of the representative of the International Organization of Persons with Disabilities, noting that ESCWA, especially the Sustainable Development Policies Division, was undertaking work on urban issues, including accessibility. He stressed that cooperation with non-governmental organizations concerned with persons with disabilities was an important part of ESCWA work on social development. He concluded that ESCWA addressed such issues from an inclusive human rights perspective.

2. Technical cooperation activities (Agenda item 5)

10. Under this item, the Committee considered document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/4](#) on technical cooperation activities implemented by the secretariat since the eleventh session of the Committee. The representative of the secretariat made a presentation in which he emphasized that the ultimate goal of these activities was to strengthen the capacity of member States to develop social policies in priority social areas. He reviewed the types of technical cooperation and their financing, which included a variety of advisory services provided to

10 member States in areas such as disability, population, development, ageing and equality. He added that the activities included several regional, subregional and national workshops on social justice, social protection, equality policies, youth participation and empowerment, and inclusion of disability issues. He called on member States to comment on technical cooperation services, especially if they met their national needs.

11. Representatives of member States commended the technical cooperation activities. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic enquired about the technical cooperation mechanisms between ESCWA and member States and how to determine their mandates and powers, to avoid confusion resulting from the involvement of more than one international organization in development work in her country. She requested clarification on the concept of social cohesion, noting that it may rouse sensitivities in her country if approached from an inappropriate perspective. The representative of the State of Palestine said that benefiting from technical support was the responsibility of countries, and that they should determine what suits their needs, especially since ESCWA provided services to the entire region and not to a specific country. He suggested that member States agree on common themes of priority to them, and identify similar challenges they faced, in order for technical support activities to lead to better outcomes. He praised the technical support provided by ESCWA in setting standards for multidimensional poverty.

12. The representative of the secretariat stressed that ESCWA work involved a regional dimension based on standards and guidance related to member States, and a national dimension that met the specific needs of individual countries when necessary. In response to the intervention by the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, he said that the Committee had dealt with the issue of social cohesion at the request of her country, stressing that the provision of references by countries to clarify their needs allowed ESCWA to better direct the technical cooperation services it provided. He noted that the technical cooperation model was successful because it was characterized by participation, transparency and accountability, as reflected in the Syrian model. He added that ESCWA avoided duplication of work by eliminating similar requests, noting that the electronic system for receiving requests aimed to avoid duplication.

3. Activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (Agenda item 6)

13. Under this item, the Committee considered document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/5](#) on activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability. The representative of the secretariat said that 17 member States had appointed focal points for the Group of Experts, and that Libya had appointed a representative, meaning that all member States were participating in the Group of Experts. She noted that the Group of Experts had held six meetings attended by an average of 10 member States, in addition to three annual meetings. She mentioned ESCWA participation in the European Union-Arab High-level Meeting on Disability Rights, held in Malta on 24 and 25 April 2019, and the organization of a workshop on developing a framework for Arab disability indicators and improving data collection on persons with disabilities (Cairo, 19-21 September 2018) in collaboration between the Social Development Division and the Statistics Division. She requested that member States extend the mandate of the Group of Experts to continue its work.

14. The representative of the secretariat, from the Statistics Division, made a presentation on the outcomes of the above-mentioned workshop. She pointed out that the workshop had provided an opportunity to bridge the gap between policymakers and statisticians, owing to the different ways they defined disability and the data sources they used, resulting in differing results related to persons with disabilities, and to the identification of indicators related to them, especially when comparing them with persons without disabilities. She emphasized the inadequate medical approach to defining disability. She reviewed key points covered in the workshop, including evaluating the availability of data, collecting data, and analysing indicators to develop a large dataset. She concluded that the framework resulting from the workshop was a starting point, and that the use of more data sources to complement that effort was necessary.

15. Representatives of member States commended the efforts of the Group of Experts and supported the renewal of its mandate, and requested that the recommendations include the formation of a counterpart committee devoted to disability in the statistical offices of member States. The representative of the State of

Palestine referred to what he called the ‘chaos of data’ related to persons with disabilities, which was caused by conflicting multiple references and indicators, and produced misleading results that did not allow real participation. He stressed the need to cooperate with the Group of Experts to complement efforts, and not only work with national focal points, within the framework of forging national partnerships on disability issues.

16. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic said that her country had conducted a demographic survey that included a disability assessment based on the questions of the Washington Group, but her country suffered from a lack of capacity to analyse all the data, and requested assistance from ESCWA in that regard. She said that the data were insufficient to produce an accurate description of the disability situation, which required a deeper and more specialized survey. The representative of Kuwait emphasized that his country used the medical approach to define cases of disabilities, requesting clarification on the additional efforts that it had to make in that regard. The representative of Lebanon noted the intersection between the secretariat’s presentation, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the SDGs, enquiring whether the data had been published in a specific report so as to formally submit it to the Central Administration of Statistics in Lebanon and to member States.

17. The representative of the International Organization of Persons with Disabilities asked about the methodology for defining disability. She said that the absence of an appropriate methodology for defining disability would impede the development of effective mechanisms for dealing with disability. She added that there was a lack of data on persons with disabilities in education and unemployment statistics. She stressed that it was not enough to make persons with disabilities an issue handled by ministries of social affairs; it was vital to change the prevailing intellectual perspective and to employ a human rights methodology based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

18. The representative of the secretariat said that ESCWA dealt primarily with focal points and, through them, it worked with various stakeholders, as reflected in its training workshop on integrating persons with disabilities in the labour market. It was the work of the Statistics Division with statisticians and policymakers that had revealed disparities in data on and definitions of persons with disabilities. With regard to the inquiry by the representative of Kuwait, she stressed that the medical definition of disability was insufficient, and that the functional capabilities of each person with a disability should be defined to ensure greater inclusion. She added that evaluations should identify areas in which the inclusion of persons with disabilities could be promoted, and should focus on their capacity.

19. The representative of the secretariat, from the Statistics Division, indicated that the framework established by ESCWA was not limited to statisticians, who possessed accurate data, but also included policymaking bodies and non-governmental organizations whose records and definitions differed. She said that the first set of findings generated by the framework had used non-traditional analytical tables to guide countries towards standardizing disability-related statistics approaches. She stressed the need for countries to adopt the framework, and to assess the ability of statisticians to collect the necessary data through meetings held specifically for that purpose. She suggested adding the loss of hands and fingers to disability categories, because they were not in the Washington Group’s short set of questions. She emphasized that most of the necessary data related to education were available, but the production of indicators and statistics based on them required more accuracy. She noted the absence of data related to violence and accessibility.

*4. Action taken by member States pursuant to the recommendations
of the Committee on Social Development
(Agenda item 7)*

20. Under this item, the representatives of member States made presentations on action taken by their countries to implement the recommendations made by the Committee at its eleventh session. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic emphasized that her country had adopted the recommendations of the previous session through the development and implementation of a national disability plan aimed at aligning the requirements of persons with disabilities with national legislation and laws. She stressed the importance of partnerships with the private sector to assume social responsibility related to the inclusion of

persons with disabilities, of activating the National Labour Law which required that 2 per cent of institutions' employees be persons with disabilities, and of ensuring that violating institutions be fined an amount paid to the Fund for Persons with Disabilities. She said that the survey on issues related to older persons and persons with disabilities dealt only with service satisfaction, and was not a statistical survey. Regarding the 2030 Agenda, she said that a report on sustainable development had been issued and national data had been updated, and that a report prepared by the Syrian Arab Republic in the aftermath of the crisis had been published in line with the SDGs framework and focused on social justice. She requested that ESCWA support the development of appropriate methodologies for measuring social justice. She spoke about her country's social development strategies, such as housing strategies that included various social groups, an early childhood strategy, a youth and women's empowerment strategy, and a strategy on issues related to older persons.

21. The representative of Lebanon reviewed the activities of the Ministry of Social Affairs aimed at achieving social development. She said that her country was developing a national strategy for older persons based on a participatory approach, a social protection strategy based on collecting information from all ministries and departments to avoid duplication, and a national strategy to protect women and children.

22. The representative of Kuwait said that his country had crossed the poverty line, and highlighted the efforts of the Ministry of Social Affairs in the area of inclusive social protection, such as issuing licenses to civil society organizations, and enacting laws such as the charitable work law currently under consideration by parliament and administrative laws for aid, especially a law guaranteeing the rights of older persons that included establishing care centres for older persons in each governorate, and providing free services for technical and social support in older persons' homes, given that the law guaranteed care for older persons under a binding legal umbrella.

23. The representative of Saudi Arabia said that his country was forming a ministerial committee for social protection to develop reform guidelines on related policies. He mentioned that a social care workshop had been held to address discrepancies between programmes related to families and those related to individuals, adding that such policies were directed towards providing social security and subsidizing benefits. He said that data was being collected on persons with disabilities, disaggregated by causes of disability and region, and that an independent body had been established comprising persons with disabilities and their families aimed at raising their awareness and communicating their voices. He emphasized that his country was pursuing a strategic goal of empowering persons with disabilities in the labour market by 2020, and reviewed the 'harmonization' programme devoted to that end.

24. The representative of Mauritania noted the national strategy for social protection in her country, and reviewed the measures implemented under it. Those measures included exempting families suffering from poverty and vulnerability from service fees; holding meetings with relevant authorities to develop policies to protect children from child labour, school dropout and early marriage; and forming a delegation for social protection and national solidarity at the ministry level. Regarding the protection of older persons, she said that social security programmes had been established for that age group, based on an approach that took into account the various dimensions of human development. The Ministry of Social Affairs provided several services for older persons, including free health care, social security for retirees, social assistance programmes for older persons with no family support, and awareness raising for stronger social cohesion. She confirmed the State's commitment to ensuring the provision of health care to the fourth age group (75 years and above).

B. SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1. *Round-table discussion: Social protection reform in Arab countries* (Agenda item 8)

25. Under this item, the Committee considered document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/CRP.1](#). The discussion was opened by Ms. Gisela Nauk, Chief of the Inclusive Social Development Section of the ESCWA Social Development Division. She said that social protection efforts had increased in the region as a consequence of the instability witnessed in 2011, which had led to good results in countries that had developed a new policy

structure, and to unsatisfactory results in other countries. The region had witnessed major reforms in social protection systems, based on the redistribution of public funds which underpinned the notion of social justice. She said that the major challenge faced by Governments was determining the basic criteria for that redistribution, and whether it should be based on the need for it, the right to it, or the ability to benefit from it. The challenge lay in what she called 'a lack of administrative flexibility' in government programmes aimed at achieving social justice in the region. Each programme has its own management, with no comprehensive reference to guide policies from a holistic and inclusive perspective. Arab countries did not lack the required political will, but faced technical problems in implementing the pillars of social protection that must be understood so as to address and overcome them.

26. She outlined the first of these pillars, namely social insurance, whereby productive workers today paid, through their contributions, the pensions provided to retirees. However, their contributions were insufficient, thus requiring Governments to also contribute. That imbalance necessitated a major reform of the social insurance systems in the region. She said that Governments faced two major problems in that framework. The first was the presence of a large informal economic sector that did not contribute to the systems, and the second was those systems' ability to be sustainable, noting efforts made by countries like Jordan, Oman and Tunisia to encourage self-employed workers to participate. Regarding the second pillar, namely health care, she said that Governments often linked health insurance to retirement to encourage participation, but the poor quality of and high demand for public health services did not help poor and middle-income people to obtain better social protection in the field of health. They were often forced to make out-of-pocket payments to complete treatment and medication requirements at a high cost, which many of them might not be able to afford, as was the case in Egypt and Jordan. She then considered the third pillar, namely social assistance, which included challenges related to identifying poor groups, the type of support each group required, and the level of support that should be provided to each household based on the previous two assessments.

27. She addressed the fourth pillar of social protection, namely Government, which must coordinate protection efforts and prevent duplication. As for the fifth pillar, namely national records, its greatest benefits lay in identifying the social features of every household, especially in the informal sector, and linking those features to tax records, as in Egypt. She said that the main problem with such records was the cost of creating and updating them, and that obtaining comprehensive records was a major challenge. She addressed the conflicts between the various pillars, the necessity of setting standards for each pillar, and the need to tackle the prevailing trend in the relationship between employers and employees where employers slightly increased employee wages, but without including them in social protection mechanisms, which could encourage many people to move to the informal sector.

28. Mr. Daoud Al-Dik, the representative of the State of Palestine, reviewed his country's experience, and stressed the need to distinguish between the social protection system and social protection programmes. He said that the adoption of programmes without a specific system resulted in the fragmentation of social protection sectors, while the existence of a system resulted in good governance, transparency and accountability. He called on all countries to adopt a system that took into account their specificities and needs. He stressed that experts were not guardians of the people and could not define poverty better than the poor themselves, which confirmed the necessity of talking to people at the community level and above to determine their real needs and types of poverty, of coordinating with civil society organizations, and of marketing the work carried out by government institutions, because people's contributions would increase if convinced by the work.

29. He mentioned the formation of an inter-ministerial council in his country to plan social services, to take into account the priorities of the governorates and to establish a guide for service quality, stressing that social protection was not limited to cash and provisions. Despite the existence of a social protection programme in the State of Palestine, which the World Bank and the European Union contributed to financing, irregular payments did not greatly help poor households. The social protection methodology had transformed social work into statistical survey work, rather than addressing the needs of households. He noted cooperation with ESCWA in developing a methodology for multidimensional poverty to combat poverty in all its forms.

30. Mr. Ibrahim bin Yousef Al Mubarak, the representative of Saudi Arabia, said that targeting households for social protection had revealed fragmented efforts. He noted that the problem in many social protection systems was that they expected people's behaviour to comply with specific criteria that their living conditions might not allow them to follow, especially since the perspective of poor groups regarding the future differed greatly from that of affluent groups, thus resulting in system failure.

31. Mr. Adeb Nehmeh, a specialized researcher, agreed with the representative of Palestine on the need to adopt a human rights approach to social development based on systems not programmes. He said that current reforms were not sound, even if they intended to correct targeting, because they ultimately aimed to reduce costs rather than improve people's situations. He concluded that it was necessary to adopt policies that matched reality, because the policy of austerity in social expenditure had failed. Targeting, in and of itself, was a principle that might harm people and Governments, and that adopting gradual distribution might lead to better results. He said that the existing imbalance was not caused by the division of people across two economic sectors, one formal and the other informal, but rather reflected disparities between the increased cost of living compared with limited personal income and a reduction in purchasing power. He added that encouraging informal employment violated the labour law and thus limited worker rights, and that there was therefore a need to change the approach.

32. Mr. David Robalino, a specialized researcher, said that social protection was a comprehensive concept that was not limited to the poor, but also included the middle class. He noted that the human rights approach required combining various protection systems into one integrated system that did not differentiate between social assistance and social security. He stressed that comprehensive social justice must be promoted, rather than ideological attitudes, in social protection systems by researching the costs and benefits of targeting, and calculating the costs of a sustainable social protection system that provided assistance but also covered everyone. With regard to the informal sector, he emphasized that it was easy to include people in a protection system, but that encouraging them to pay their contributions was difficult. Behavioural economics could help in that regard. He said that it was necessary to employ innovative thinking and make participation in and contribution to programmes compulsory for everyone, each according to their means.

33. Ms. Maysa Al-Midani, the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, said that conditional targeting was necessary because her country's experience indicated that the rich benefited more from comprehensive targeting than the poor. She expressed dissatisfaction with the term 'social assistance' as it detracted from the dignity of its beneficiaries when the aim was to provide a social safety net, which was the responsibility of the State. Ms. Nauk responded that ESCWA had adopted a systems approach to social protection, not the concept of social safety nets adopted by the World Bank. Ms. Al-Midani said that the social protection that her country sought was one that matched its capacity. Policymakers had not adopted the World Bank's definition of social safety nets, and her country was in the process of moving from the old socialist rentier system to a community system that reflected the approach of developed countries, but in accordance with the State's resources and capacity. She stressed that reductions in service subsidies targeted social groups according to their consumption.

34. Mr. Ziyad Abdul Samad, Executive Director of the Arab NGO Network for Development, stressed the need to integrate social protection systems in all development programmes in Arab countries, and that the success of those systems depended on financing, which in turn was linked to political will. He highlighted the difference between approaches that considered social protection as a set of 'services' and others that considered it a 'right'. The latter required a commitment from Governments to uphold those rights, but protection systems in Arab countries had not yet reached that level of maturity, and that the concept of 'inclusion' was not clearly defined in most Arab countries. Mr. Robalino said that social protection programmes should include all people, which did not mean that everyone would be covered but rather only those who needed it. Mr. Nehmeh said that the need for subsidies would be eliminated if people's income was adjusted according to the cost of living, and that it was necessary to move to a system that took into account country specificities rather than World Bank standards. Mr. Abdul Samad stressed that unless Governments adopted a human rights methodology, political will would remain absent.

35. Ms. Denise Dahrouj, the representative of Lebanon, noted the activities of her Government in social protection. She said that a social security institution existed, but it did not cover all segments of society. Efforts were ongoing to develop a unified strategy for social protection, in collaboration with international organizations. She noted the relationship between the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry Social Affairs in reforming existing protection systems, and the need for all stakeholders to cooperate to achieve the required support and ensure its continuity at a lower cost.

36. Ms. Aisha Makhoul, the representative of Tunisia, reviewed the criteria against which groups deserving of social protection were defined. She said that social protection activities were hampered by the allocation of much of the State's resources to fighting terrorism, which had negatively affected the development of the education and health sectors. She added that recognition of the need to combat corruption indicated widespread corruption that hindered social development efforts and represented a major challenge. She also noted the erosion of the middle class, which acted as a balancing force in society. Ms. Nauk said that the middle class must be covered by social protection, and that social security should be linked to social protection to protect the middle class.

37. Ms. Silvana Lakis, the representative of the International Organization of Persons with Disabilities, said that social protection paved the way to a dignified life, and expressed surprise that all proposed reforms led in the opposite direction. She added that the use of the word 'reform' implied moving forward, not adopting methods that exacerbated fragmentation in social protection efforts. She stressed that differentiating between vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities, older persons and divorced women, and the rest of society was harmful to all groups, and did not reflect a human rights approach and rationale, especially since all national constitutions stipulated that all people were equal. She concluded that ensuring inclusion and building a common culture would lead to inclusive economic and social policies, and that piecemeal initiatives produced a culture that accepted poverty.

38. 40. The representative of the State of Palestine, the Chair of the current session of the Committee, said that social protection was a right that required the development of efficient and rapid systems to meet people's needs, which was lacking in existing bureaucratic systems. He stressed that institutionalization and the enactment of laws, while important, could not replace the legitimacy that institutions gained as a result of citizens' confidence in them.

2. Inclusion of older persons: policy implications for the Arab region
(Agenda item 9)

39. Under this item, the Committee considered document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/6](#) on the inclusion of older persons and related policy measures in the Arab region. The representative of the secretariat made a presentation on emerging demographic trends in the region resulting from development gains achieved over the past decades, which presented opportunities and challenges. She said that most older persons in the Arab region were vulnerable to poverty, morbidity and isolation, and that 75 per cent of them did not have pensions. As people got older, their revenues were expected to increase; consequently, the higher proportions of older persons should positively affect the economy. She emphasized the importance of integrating older persons at the social, economic and political levels, and of some factors that facilitated success in implementing that integration, such as ensuring decent retirement, establishing a silver economy based on the purchasing power of older persons, providing education and lifelong learning opportunities, encouraging intergenerational exchange, ensuring volunteer and community work opportunities and cultural and recreational services, creating an enabling environment for the exercise of their right to vote, and formulating policies. She said that the integration process faced structural and cultural obstacles that were exacerbated by fragmented and non-inclusive social protection systems in the region.

40. The representative of the State of Palestine said that it was necessary to monitor persons before they reached old age to tackle the challenges of caring for older persons, including, for example, social stigma in cases of marriage between older persons. He noted the numerous challenges facing older persons, such as

illness or disability, especially under poverty, and the necessity of targeting them with interventions that took into account and met their needs, and of focusing on the human dimension of those interventions rather than their technical dimension.

41. The representative of Lebanon said that the increasing number of older persons required ensuring their participation in economic and social life, and assessing their social and economic needs. She added that any assistance provided to them was usually considered as family benefits. The Government had taken initiatives related to older persons, including developing relationships between retirees, preparing training courses for retirees on the use of technology and social media, setting standards for older persons' institutions to ensure their physical and mental health, declaring 27 May as a day of loyalty to retired persons, and developing strategies on Alzheimer's. She expressed her hope that a retirement fund would be established for retirees in exchange for a small fee.

42. The representative of Kuwait stressed the keenness of his Government to integrate all social groups, regardless of gender, age and disability status. He noted many achievements regarding older persons, including establishing clubs for them, giving them priority in completing government transactions, allocating parking spots for them, and developing phone applications to serve them.

43. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic indicated that her country was considered 'young' because of the high proportion of young people in it. However, the war had marked a turning point after which the number of older persons without family care had increased dramatically, resulting in begging and homelessness. She noted the development of programmes for that vulnerable group, aimed at providing them with psychological support and chaperones. Such programmes could be managed in partnership with the private sector and civil society. Her country had also developed a strategy on older persons, and conducted a related survey that specialized bodies were currently analysing. She stressed the need to take advantage of older persons' capacity to provide younger generations with experience. She mentioned agriculture workers in the informal sector, noting that they were not covered by social welfare systems. She said that part of the State's budget would be earmarked to ensure social support for them.

44. The representative of Tunisia said that the State provided health care and shelters for older persons who had nobody to care for them, and that unemployment was more widespread among qualified young people than among older persons. Many challenges impeded the payment of pensions and required borrowing from the World Bank. She added that private institutions of an administrative nature were able to give flexible holidays to their employees to care for older persons suffering from chronic diseases such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's, and that efforts were being made to ensure the financial sustainability of funds for older persons through deductions from employee wages.

45. The representative of Mauritania said that family patterns had changed in her country, prompting the Government to make serious efforts to help older persons, such as covering the costs of medical treatment inside or outside Mauritania, preparing social assistance programmes, hosting lonely older persons, buying medicines for older persons with chronic diseases, and ensuring older persons' rights in national legislation.

*3. The nexus approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development in the Arab region
(Agenda item 10)*

46. Under this item, the Committee considered document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/7](#) on the nexus approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda in the Arab region. The representative of the secretariat made a presentation outlining lessons learned from the implementation mechanism of the Millennium Development Goals, including ensuring synergies, cementing political will, and adopting a more inclusive and integrated approach to planning and implementation. He noted the various aspects of the nexus and the resulting integrated management between sectors, synergies, transition to a green economy, and the need to use statistical indicators and sustainable means to collect reliable data. He said that the nexus approach was an ongoing

process that required classifying the SDGs according to their interactions, interlinkages and complementarity, finding common themes between them to help countries formulate their policies and strategies, and assessing systemic and contextual interactions. He stressed the need to adopt a systems approach to achieve the nexus.

47. The representative of the secretariat reviewed the three thematic nexus sets, namely water, energy and food security; poverty reduction, decent work and sustainable growth; and equality, inclusion and justice, and indicted how the nexus approach helped achieve the SDGs related to each of those fields. He focused on the equality-inclusion-justice nexus in the Arab region, stating that although the region had made significant progress in several areas, injustice and exclusion continued to affect many people. He added that wars and economic deterioration had impeded the achievement of that nexus, in addition to the prevailing economic model that had led to chronic unemployment and increased multidimensional poverty and inequality. He mentioned the challenges faced by the region that were reflected in multiple statistical results related to poverty and inequality. He said that taking into account the equality-inclusion-justice nexus in policy development would allow Arab Governments to implement innovative policies based on inclusion and equity. He made a number of recommendations, including applying the equality-inclusion-justice nexus to multisectoral interventions related to education, people and employment; economic growth, employment, social protection and social justice; and institutional reform, partnerships and participation.

48. The representative of the State of Palestine said that the major challenge facing Arab countries was integrating the 2030 Agenda in their national plans in a cross-sectoral manner. He added that flexibility was need in education systems and workplaces to meet the needs of persons with disabilities and to facilitate their inclusion. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic addressed the issue of comprehensive targeting, enquiring about the best way to achieve integration between social development and social protection, which of the two programmes was most comprehensive, and how to define the subprogrammes within them. The representative of the Arab Forum for Alternatives asked why the term ‘nexus’ was used instead of ‘integration’, and why the need for political will to achieve the nexus approach was not addressed.

49. The representative of Lebanon stressed the importance of the role of the Council of Ministers as a central government body responsible for coordinating interministerial affairs to achieve the desired nexus. She said that each ministry could work on only a limited number of goals, and that efforts in Lebanon were still insufficient since they had been limited to coordinating the preparation of the voluntary national review. She said that the Ministry of Labour had approved a decent work policy, which was a preliminary formulation that could be improved in the future. The representative of Saudi Arabia agreed with her, adding that social development was not the responsibility of any ministry per se, but rather should emerge from a national synergy, and that a shift from the concept of narrow ministerial responsibilities to the concept of inclusive national mobility was necessary for a nexus approach that achieved the SDGs. The representative of Mauritania noted a lack of coordination between ministries at times, which hindered the achievement of the SDGs.

50. The representative of the secretariat said that the term ‘nexus’ was broader than ‘integration’, and that political will would be further cemented if specialists took over the management of relevant areas. He added that political will was also reflected in content and form, and its best form was national dialogue. He noted the case of Lebanon, which had had a dialogue on the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals in 2008. He expressed support for the concept of ‘national synergy’, stressing that social protection was undoubtedly part of social development, but did not include all its dimensions, and that defining their programmes depended on the national context.

C. PROPOSED PROGRAMME PLAN FOR 2020 IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT (Agenda item 11)

51. Under this item, the Committee considered document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/8](#) on the proposed programme plan for 2020 in the field of social development. The representative of the secretariat made a presentation in which he reviewed the proposed programme plan’s courses of action, including the development of a regional roadmap for public policies based on equality, human rights-based social policies

and programmes focused on social inclusion, social protection systems, harmonizing national policies with the objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and supporting the implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. The representative of the secretariat gave an overview of ESCWA activities under each course of action.

52. Participants welcomed the courses of action, expressing their aspiration to cooperate in their implementation. The representative of Lebanon expressed reservations about the use of the term ‘country of origin’, preferring the term ‘motherland’. She said that the issue of migrant workers posed a major challenge in Lebanon, and that the Government was working on regulating it and amending related laws and practices to guarantee the rights of citizens and migrant workers, and on conducting activities to educate citizens and migrants on existing rights and laws in the country. She requested that ESCWA assist in addressing this issue to align national laws with international instruments.

53. The representative of the International Organization of Persons with Disabilities asked about the possibility of the plan contributing to the inclusion of persons with disabilities, especially since the unit concerned with the issue at ESCWA had a limited budget. She requested technical support to build specialized capacity in including persons with disabilities.

54. The representative of the secretariat said that the ESCWA disability unit, with its limited capacity, had accomplished a great deal, and that communication with partners was essential in that regard. He stressed that ESCWA took into account the needs of each country, and that the participatory communication system for development allowed the regional advisor to travel to any country requesting his presence to assess its needs and propose helpful initiatives.

**D. DATE AND VENUE OF THE THIRTEENTH SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE
ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
(Agenda item 12)**

55. Under this item, the Committee decided to hold its thirteenth session at the United Nations House in Beirut in February 2021.

**E. OTHER MATTERS
(Agenda item 13)**

56. No discussion points were raised under this item.

**III. ADOPTION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE COMMITTEE
ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AT ITS TWELFTH SESSION**

(Agenda item 14)

57. At its final meeting, held on 9 October 2019, the Committee adopted the recommendations made at its twelfth session.

IV. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE OF THE SESSION

58. The twelfth session of the ESCWA Committee on Social Development was held at the United Nations House in Beirut on 8 and 9 October 2019.

B. OPENING

59. The twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development was opened by Ms. Hoda bint Saleh al-Sharjiya, the representative of Oman. She made a statement in which she welcomed participants and praised the achievements of the Commission for Social Development. She expressed her hope that the meeting would be an opportunity to further exchange ideas and unify opinions on social development issues of common concern. She noted progress made at the eleventh session of the Commission in the areas of age structures, intergenerational justice, and inclusive urban development. She stressed the support of Oman for the Committee, and its keenness to implement its recommendations.

60. Mr. Frederico Neto, Director of the Social Development Division, made a statement on behalf of ESCWA. He thanked member States and partners for their support at the eleventh session of the Committee, despite the difficulties faced by the Arab region. He expressed his hope that the current session would result in specific and concrete proposals, especially since the session was being held in the light of numerous development transformations in the Arab region, coupled with major social, economic and political challenges hindering the achievement of human development and economic growth. He concluded by noting the need for concerted regional and international efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda and achieve its SDGs.

C. PARTICIPANTS

61. Nine of 18 ESCWA member States participated in the session, namely Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Oman, the State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen, as well as a number of experts and representatives of international entities and civil society organizations. The list of participants is set out in annex I to the present report.

D. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

62. Pursuant to ESCWA resolution 226 (XXI) on the election of officers for the sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies, members States shall assume the chairmanship of the sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies, on a rotating basis, in Arabic alphabetical order.* In accordance with rule 12 of the ESCWA Rules of Procedure, at the beginning of each session, the Commission shall elect from among the representatives of its member States two Vice-Chairmen and a Rapporteur. In accordance with this rule, Mr. Daoud al-Dik, the representative of the State of Palestine, was appointed Chair of the session. Ms. Hoda bint Saleh al-Sharjiya, the representative of Oman, was appointed Vice-Chair. Mr. Abdulaziz Sari Al-Mutairi, representative of Kuwait, was appointed Rapporteur.

E. AGENDA

63. At its first meeting, the Committee adopted the agenda for its twelfth session as set out in document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/L.1](#), and the organization of work as set out in document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/L.2](#).

F. DOCUMENTS

64. The documents presented to the Committee for Social Development at its twelfth session are set out in annex II to the present report. They are available from the ESCWA website: <https://www.unescwa.org/events/committee-social-development-12th-session>.

* Member States in Arabic alphabetical: Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Tunisia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Sudan, Iraq, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania and Yemen.

Annex I

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

A. ESCWA MEMBER STATES

Kuwait

Mr. Abdulaziz Sari Al-Mutairi
Assistant undersecretary in the Planning
and Administrative Development Sector
Ministry of Social Affairs

Ms. Nadia Hussein Hamza Al-Kout
Director of the Department of Foreign Relations
Ministry of Social Affairs

Mr. Anwar Ahmed Al-Ansari
Deputy Director-General for Education
and Training Services
Public Authority of the Disabled

Mr. Jassim Ali Muhammad al-Dalawi
Assistant Director
Ministry of Social Affairs

Lebanon

Ms. Denise Dahrouj
Head of the Department of Foreign Relations
Ministry of Labour

Ms. Nada Fawaz
Head of the Social Welfare Department
Ministry of Social Affairs

Mauritania

Ms. Mubarakah bint Abdul Jalil
Assistant Director of the Department of Social
Work and National Solidarity
Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family

Oman

Ms. Hoda bint Saleh al-Sharjiya
Statistician
General Directorate of Social Sectors
Secretariat General of the Supreme Council
for Planning

State of Palestine

Mr. Daoud al-Dik
Undersecretary of the Ministry
of Social Development
Ministry of Social Development

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Ibrahim bin Yousef Al Mubarak
Undersecretary for Empowerment
and Social Security
Ministry of Labour and Social Development

Mr. Hisham bin Mohammed al-Haidari
Chief Executive Officer
Authority for Persons with Disabilities

Syrian Arab Republic

Ms. Maysa Al-Midani
Social Services Manager
Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour

Tunisia

Ms. Aisha Makhoulf
Head of Department, Bureau of Studies,
Planning and Programming
Ministry of Social Affairs

Yemen

Mr. Mahdi Saleh Yaslem Batwil
Adviser to the Minister of Social Development
Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour

B. UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATIONS

World Food Programme

Ms. Fouz Kubeissi
Social Protection Network Programme Officer
Beirut

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Ms. Ruwaida al-Hajj
Regional representative
Regional Office for the Middle East
and North Africa
Beirut

International Labour Organization

Mr. Luca Pellirano
Social Protection Adviser

International Organization for Migration

Ms. Tala al-Khatib
Emergency Support Assistant
Beirut

C. ARAB AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

International Organization of Persons with Disabilities

Ms. Silvana Lakis
Second Vice President
Beirut

Arab NGO Network for Development

Mr. Ziyad Abdul Samad
Executive Manager
Beirut

Lebanese Union for People with Physical Disabilities

Ms. Rona Dibisi
Project Manager
Beirut

Mr. Sami Suleiman
Researcher
Beirut

Arab Forum for Alternatives

Mr. Mohammed al-Ajati
Researcher and Forum Director
Beirut

D. EXPERTS

Mr. Adeeb Nehmeh
Development Adviser

Mr. David Robalino
Adviser
American University of Beirut

Annex II

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

| Title | Item | Symbol |
|---|------|------------------------|
| Information for participants | | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/INF.1 |
| Provisional agenda and annotations | 3 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/L.1 |
| Organization of work | 3 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/L.2 |
| Implementation of activities under the ESCWA programme of work and of recommendations made by the Committee on Social Development at its eleventh session | 4 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/3 |
| Technical cooperation activities | 5 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/4 |
| Activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability | 6 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/5 |
| Round-table discussion: Social protection reform in Arab countries | 8 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/CRP.1 |
| Inclusion of older persons: policy implications for the Arab region | 9 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/6 |
| The nexus approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Arab region | 10 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/7 |
| Proposed programme plan for 2020 in the field of social development | 11 | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/8 |
| List of documents | | E/ESCWA/C.2/2019/INF.2 |