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**POLICY ISSUES IN THE ESCWA REGION****REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR ACHIEVING  
THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

*Achievements and progress made in attaining the Millennium  
Development Goals in the Arab countries: challenges and policies*

**Summary**

The year 2007 marks the midpoint between adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the target date for their attainment of 2015. Since adopting the eight Goals, the Arab region has achieved progress in many relevant areas, including significant strides in health and education. Notwithstanding the efforts Arab countries have exerted with a view to meeting the Goals, there have been setbacks and constraints that are attributable to a number of factors, including relatively poor economic performance in the 1990s and, at the turn of the century, inadequate financing for social policies, lack of administrative and managerial competencies, increasing political tensions and conflicts.

There continue to be sharp disparities between the different Arab subregions, particularly between the high-income countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the least developed countries (LDCs). Those disparities are large not only in terms of level of development, but also in respect of progress made towards the attainment of MDGs. Stronger and more concerted efforts are needed in order to attain MDGs, not only at the regional, but also at the subregional and country levels. Additional global and regional support is specifically required for the countries suffering from conflict and for LDCs, where extreme poverty is widespread and maternal, child and infant mortality rates remain high.

Based on the ESCWA publication *The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab region 2007: A youth lens*, this document covers each of the eight Goals, assessing achievements and progress at the regional and subregional levels, identifying major obstacles to their attainment and providing proposals to counter the challenges. In order to address such other pressing development challenges in the region as conflict-related issues and the rural-urban divide, ESCWA suggests replicating and building on the collaborative initiative utilized in producing the 2007 MDG Report for the Arab Region.

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## I. OVERVIEW

1. The year 2007 marks the midpoint between the adoption in 2000 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that evolved from the United Nations Millennium Declaration, and the target date for their attainment of 2015. The Millennium Declaration identified eight time-bound and measurable goals and 18 targets, as well as 48 indicators of progress in various development fields. Since adopting the Goals, the Arab region has achieved progress in many relevant areas, including significant strides in health and education. Notwithstanding the efforts Arab countries have exerted with a view to meeting the Goals, there have been setbacks and constraints that are attributable to a number of factors, including relatively poor economic performance in the 1990s and, at the turn of the century, inadequate financing for social policies, lack of administrative and managerial competencies, increasing political tensions and conflicts. There continue to be sharp disparities between the different Arab subregions,<sup>1</sup> particularly between the high-income countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab least developed countries (LDCs). Those disparities are large not only in terms of level of development, but also in respect of progress made towards attainment of MDGs. While the GCC countries seem to be on track in achieving most MDG targets, Arab LDCs and conflict-ridden Iraq and Palestine lag significantly behind. It is clear that the latter must make much faster progress if they are to be able to reach the eight Goals and their corresponding targets by 2015. That will require not only intensified political efforts in those countries, but more generous and effective financial assistance from developed countries and a further strengthening of regional cooperation between Arab countries.

## II. PROGRESS MADE IN ATTAINING MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN ARAB COUNTRIES

2. On the basis of the results published in the 2007 MDG Report for the Arab Region, this section briefly assesses achievements and progress made towards MDGs at the regional and subregional level and identifies major obstacles to their attainment.

### *Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*

3. Trends in the proportion of people living below national poverty lines highlight the fact that the Arab region as a whole has not made significant progress in reducing income poverty. Based on data for 12 Arab countries, representing 74 per cent of the region's total population, the proportion of the population living below national poverty lines fell only slightly across the region, from 23 per cent in the period 1995-1999 to 22.6 per cent in 2000-2005. At the subregional level, the incidence of poverty declined from 11.2 to 9.0 per cent in the Maghreb, and from 46.3 to 44.8 per cent in Arab LDCs, while it increased from 17.9 to 19 per cent in the Mashreq. Data also confirmed an enormous increase in poverty in Iraq and Palestine. According to the latest data, approximately half of the Palestinian population and 31 per cent of the Iraqi population are poor. The malnutrition rate for the region decreased at a slow pace, indicating critical malfunctions in development efforts. The proportion of underweight children under five years of age remained relatively high in 2000, with no noticeable improvement from the 1990 level and with significant differences in progress among individual countries. Moreover, individual country data indicate wide disparities in the proportion of underweight children. In Yemen, it was estimated that 45.6 per cent of children were underweight in 2003, compared with only 3.3 per cent in Lebanon. Data also reveal that the

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<sup>1</sup> In this document as well as in the 2007 MDG Report, the Arab region is divided into the following four subregions: (1) Arab Least Developed Countries: the Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan, Yemen; (2) Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates; (3) Maghreb: Algeria, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, Tunisia; and (4) Mashreq: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic. Countries were divided into those regional sub-groupings on the basis of a combination of per capita income levels, geographical proximity and similarities in economic and social characteristics and conditions.

number of food-deprived persons rose from approximately 20 million in 1991 to around 23.3 million in 2002.

4. Labour markets in most Arab countries are characterized by widespread underemployment and very high rates of youth unemployment: some 25 per cent of Arab youth were unemployed in 2005. The situation is particularly grave for young women, with the unemployment rate for young females estimated at some 34 per cent in 2005. Many young Arab people are therefore resorting to migration, leading to a serious brain drain in the Maghreb, Mashreq and Arab LDCs. Policy priorities include addressing the quality of education and tailoring skills to the demands of the labour market, youth participation in decision-making, and Government efforts to improve domestic labour market institutions and support the development of the private sector, with a view to improving its capacity to absorb labour.

*Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education*

5. The Arab region as a whole has achieved significant progress in access to education, despite rapid population growth, which constitutes a major challenge to the provision of basic education. However, as a consequence of the socio-economic differences between the four subregions, the progress made has varied. While the number of out-of-school children in the Maghreb fell by two thirds between 1999 and 2005 to some 1 million, two thirds of the 7.5 million out-of-school children in the region live in LDCs, and those countries must increase efforts to achieve universal primary education. Despite significant improvements, one child in every two was out of school in Arab LDCs in 2005. Furthermore, the youth literacy rate in Arab LDCs has improved by only 11 percentage points since 1990, to reach 70 per cent in 2005. Some one third of all Arab LDC youth is therefore illiterate. Moreover, 73 per cent of out-of-school children in Arab LDCs are girls.

6. The challenges to achieving universal primary education and high levels of literacy in the Arab region are manifold and diverse. They include difficulties in acquiring adequate funding, especially in Arab LDCs; poor management skills in public schools; and a lack of qualified teachers, particularly a shortage of female teachers in rural areas, which translates into lower enrolment rates for girls. Moreover, the lack of a proper incentive system poses a particular challenge. For parents from low-income households, the compounded effect of poverty and of a perceived low rate of return on education renders the cost of sending a child to school high. Morocco and Yemen have attempted to address those problems by, for example, school feeding programmes. Improved curriculum quality would enhance the incentive for children to remain in school. The introduction of innovative ideas and a more application-oriented approach, along the lines of the curriculum reforms in Morocco and Tunisia, can also have a positive effect on children's desire to learn. Security issues pose a serious threat to the achievement of Goal 2 in the conflict-torn countries of Iraq, Palestine, Somalia and the Sudan. Teachers and students cannot reach school because of destroyed infrastructure and other barriers to freedom of movement, and some may join one of the conflict parties or flee the country.

*Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women*

7. The region has recently witnessed a surge in efforts by Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations to tackle all forms of discrimination against women, and make major investment in women's issues. In respect of education, Arab women have moved closer to equality, with the gender parity index measured by the girls-to-boys gross enrolment ratio having substantially increased at all levels of education over the period 1991-2005. Indeed, progress towards gender parity has been significant in the Mashreq, Maghreb and GCC countries. However, despite recording the greatest progress of all subregions in primary education, Arab LDCs continue to face major challenges to guaranteeing girls equal access to secondary and tertiary education.

8. The gains achieved by Arab women in access to education have not yet been translated into greater economic and political participation. The share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector

has remained constant in all subregions since 1990. For the region as a whole, it stood at 18.3 per cent in 2004, slightly down from 18.5 per cent in 1990; however, official statistics measuring female participation in labour markets fail to accurately reflect reality, because they exclude all forms of non-paid work. The percentage of seats held in national parliaments has increased only slightly since 1990, with women's participation in parliament in the Arab region standing at 8.7 per cent in 2007, a figure which is among the lowest in the world. Policies that aim at eliminating gender disparities must address both employment issues and political participation if they are to ensure that Arab countries remain on the path towards gender equality in all its dimensions.

9. A matrix of legal, educational, social, behavioural and economic factors hinder the inclusion of Arab women in the labour market and impede their participation in political decision-making. On the employment front, policies should address labour and family laws and regulations that discriminate against women and should offer women special conditions. On the political participation front, hurdles are mainly social in nature. Public attitudes frequently express a clear prejudice against women's participation in political life. However, some action may be taken, including the enforcement of quota systems, which have been proved to bring an influx of women into national parliaments.

*Goal 4: Reduce child mortality*

10. With respect to child mortality rates in the Arab region, there continue to be disparities between the four subregions and individual countries. No other region in the world records such wide contrasts in that indicator. Indeed, while the region has made significant progress since 1990, and is not far off track to meet the target of reducing the under-five mortality rate by two thirds over the period 1990 to 2015, more than one child in ten dies before reaching his/her fifth birthday in Arab LDCs. Furthermore, some 75 per cent of deaths before the age of five in the Arab region occur in the first year of life.

11. In many Arab countries, there is a need to improve access to basic social services and the quality of care, and to promote the use of health services and care practices, including child feeding, better hygiene, maternal care and nutritional interventions that aim to improve weight gain in pregnancy. Special support is required to extend immunization coverage and access to safe drinking water and sanitation by households living in Arab LDCs and countries in conflict. Improving the livelihoods of the poorest population groups and youth access to education will also contribute to lowering mortality rates. The ability of young people to plan safe childbearing and raise healthy children requires not only direct investment in reproductive health services and care, but also educational and communication interventions that address existing inequalities and tackle the issue of early marriage, early pregnancy and poor child-spacing, especially through the participation and empowerment of girls.

*Goal 5: Improve maternal health*

12. The reduction of maternal mortality requires universal access to reproductive health and rights. In the Arab region, the average maternal mortality rate fell by some 34 per cent between 1990 and 2000 to 272 per 100,000 live births.<sup>2</sup> The region as a whole is therefore on track towards reducing the maternal mortality rate by three quarters from its 1990 level by 2015. The decline in maternal mortality is linked to the significant increase in the number of births attended by a skilled health professional, which rose by over 16 percentage points between 1990 and 2000. National maternal mortality rates differ widely, ranging in 2000

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<sup>2</sup> Monitoring progress in reducing maternal mortality in the Arab region is hampered by a lack of comprehensive recent data that use the same methodologies as previous estimates. A new study, entitled *Maternal mortality in 2005*, includes updated estimates developed by World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Bank. While the lack of comparable 1990 figures does preclude a thorough assessment of progress towards MDG target 6, those recent estimates suggest a slower rate of progress in the Arab region than the previous estimates used in the 2007 MDG Report and in this document.

from levels below 10 per 100,000 live births in some GCC countries to some 1,600 per 100,000 in Somalia. The burden of maternal death in the Arab region is primarily carried by Arab LDCs and, to a lesser extent, by Iraq and Morocco. The decrease in maternal mortality may also be attributed to a reduction in adolescent pregnancy: girls aged between 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die during childbirth, and those under 15 are five times more likely to die during childbirth as women aged 20 to 29. A major challenge to meeting the educational, informational and clinical needs of female adolescents in the Arab region is the eradication of existing social and cultural biases against young women. Therefore, the needs of pregnant adolescents must be approached from a holistic standpoint, rather than a solely biomedical perspective.

13. Policies that positively impact on maternal health include the following: promoting awareness of symptoms of complications in pregnancy and childbirth; providing pregnancy tests, counselling, early detection, and psychological and nutritional support; providing antenatal care, including the treatment of malaria and other communicable diseases; promoting post-partum care, especially for adolescents; and supporting breastfeeding.

*Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases*

14. Albeit the incidence of HIV/AIDS continues to be relatively low in Arab countries, risks and vulnerability are high, because the epidemic is on the rise. Based on data for 10 Arab countries, an estimated 68,000 people were newly infected with HIV in 2006, bringing the estimated number of persons living with the virus to some 460,000. Several recent surveys have shown that in the most affected countries the level of knowledge on HIV, especially among youth, and the percentage of people adopting preventive practices is extremely low. Access to antiretroviral therapy is only available for a fraction of those people who are living with HIV in Arab countries. According to recent World Health Organization (WHO) estimates for 15 Arab countries, only some 6.5 per cent of those in need of antiretroviral therapy actually received such treatment. If the spread of HIV is to be halted in the Arab region, a substantial increase in the provision of services related to prevention, information and multisectoriality must be ensured, coupled with a profound qualitative enhancement of such services.

15. While malaria has been almost eliminated in the majority of Arab countries, it remains endemic in Arab LDCs, where on average 3,313 cases per 100,000 persons were reported in 2005. Djibouti, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen accounted for 98 per cent of notified cases in the region. Achievement of the MDG target in the subregion and the region as a whole is therefore heavily dependent on progress in those four countries. Factors that have hindered progress in Arab LDCs include limited coverage of primary health-care services; poor quality of malaria diagnostic services; lack of mechanisms for delivery of artemisinin-based combination therapy (ACT) at the community level; high cost of new drugs; weak logistic and supply systems for the timely delivery of drugs; low private sector compliance with new treatment guidelines; and the presence of counterfeit drugs on the market.

16. While the average prevalence rate in the region has fallen by 27 per cent since 1990, tuberculosis (TB) remains a significant public health problem, and is probably the leading cause of communicable disease deaths in adults in the Arab region. In 2005, an estimated 240,000 people in the region developed TB and 43,000 died from it, corresponding to incidence and mortality rates of 75 and 13 per 100,000, respectively. Arab LDCs are most affected: a total of 134,000 people developed the disease in 2005, accounting for almost 56 per cent of all new TB cases in the entire region. The average incidence rate in the six Arab LDCs was 191 per 100,000 in 2005, with Djibouti recording the highest rate. In order to hasten the decrease of the TB burden, countries have developed strategic plans in line with the Global Plan to Stop TB 2006-2015. Such plans aim to rapidly increase TB care, especially through improving case detection capacities. They also indicate the financial requirements for scheduled activities. A close link between TB and HIV is well-established: HIV has abetted the incidence and spread of TB, which is currently the most common cause of death in AIDS patients. Because number of cases of HIV are increasing in some Arab countries and, in particular, LDCs, it is increasingly crucial to monitor the prevalence of both diseases in the same patients.

HIV prevalence in adult TB patients in 2005 was estimated at 16 per cent in Djibouti and 9 per cent in the Sudan. There is little data in the region on multidrug-resistant TB, but the wide availability of anti-TB drugs in private pharmacies indicates probable drug resistance in many, if not all, countries of the Arab region.

*Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability*

17. The major challenge of improving environmental governance and integrating environment resource management into poverty reduction strategies and national development plans is, to varying degrees, common to all Arab countries. Many of the environmental problems the region is facing are related to poor management, weak institutional capacity and insufficient public expenditure on environmental issues. Total emissions of carbon dioxide in the region soared to 1.2 trillion metric tons in 2003, an increase of 81 per cent since 1990, which is partly accounted for by a surge in population of 35 per cent. In addition, per capita carbon dioxide emissions also intensified.

18. Water resources are a serious problem throughout the region. Seven countries rank amongst the 10 most water-scarce in the world. Much of the water in most Arab countries originates outside their borders, or is shared with other countries. Between 1990 and 2004, the proportion of the population using improved drinking water sources in the Arab region remained constant, at some 83 per cent. However, by 2004, demand for water exceeded supply by some 46 per cent while the subregions have been gradually improving access to sanitation facilities for their populations since 1990. In 2004, the proportion of the population in Arab LDCs using improved sanitation facilities remained low, namely, 36 per cent. If such slow progress continues, an estimated 124 million people in the region will be without access to basic sanitation in 2015, half of them living in Arab LDCs. Furthermore, it is estimated that in 2001, some 57 million people in the Arab region lived in urban slums. In Arab LDCs, slum-dwellers represented some 70 per cent of the urban population in 2001.

19. Consequently, it is vital for Governments to develop public policies and adopt multisectoral approaches aimed at improving the provision of adequate housing for low-income groups and ensuring equal access to social services and basic infrastructure.

*Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development*

20. For the Arab region, further integration into the global economy and enhanced intraregional trade cooperation, as envisioned in Goal 8, is of particular importance. As yet, trade has had less impact on the economies of Arab countries than of other countries in the world. Intraregional trade accounts for only 11 per cent of total Arab trade, a figure far below the corresponding figure in other world regions. Such performance may be attributed to many factors, including the lack of complementarities between Arab economies, non-compliance by many Arab countries with their obligations under trade agreements, the absence of credible dispute settlement mechanisms, high transaction costs, and excessive regulation and legislation. However, most Arab countries have taken serious steps towards liberalizing trade and introducing measures to facilitate integration into the world economy. As of June 2007, 12 Arab countries were members of the World Trade Organization (WTO), while six countries were engaged in membership negotiations.

21. Goal 8 also emphasizes the financial efforts which must be undertaken by developed countries in order to promote development in LDCs. Official development assistance (ODA) to Arab countries decreased throughout the 1990s by 58.6 per cent, partly as a result of widespread scepticism over the role of foreign aid in development. However, since then, it has steadily increased, in part as the result of large debt forgiveness grants provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee members to Iraq in 2004 and 2005. Distribution of ODA between the Arab subregions and countries is far from equitable, because geopolitical reasons, economic interests and past colonial ties often prevail over developmental needs when decisions concerning aid allocation are made by

major donors. Against that backdrop, it is essential for donors to conform to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, endorsed in March 2005, which lays down a practical, action-oriented road map for improving the quality of aid and its impact on development, particularly on MDG attainment.

22. With very few exceptions, access to information and communications technology (ICT) in the 22 Arab countries has increased steadily since 1990. Nevertheless, the region lags considerably behind the world average in terms of fixed telephone lines, personal computers and Internet users. Moreover, disparities between Arab countries remain very high. The digital divide is most noticeable when comparing the advanced GCC member States with many poorer Arab countries.

### **III. ACHIEVING MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE ARAB REGION: MAIN CHALLENGES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **A. CONFLICT AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY**

23. Five countries in the Arab region, namely, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia and the Sudan, are still riven by armed conflict and internal civil tensions. Those conflicts have caused, and continue to cause, extremely high direct and indirect losses. According to latest data, some one third of the Iraqi population is living in poverty. Similarly, an estimated 50 per cent of Palestinian households live below the poverty line, while a significant proportion of the population in Somalia and the Sudan is estimated to be living in extreme poverty. School enrolment rates have dropped by over 6 percentage points since 1990 in Iraq, and by over 16 percentage points since 1999 in Palestine, largely as a result of the Separation Wall and numerous checkpoints and roadblocks. The negative impact of those conflicts extends to neighbouring countries, and to the region as a whole, through the influx of refugees, reduced private investment and pressure on public infrastructure. As the result of weak educational systems and lost employment opportunities, such conflicts have the potential to provide an attractive outlet for frustrated young people and lead to their recruitment to armed resistance against occupation and injustice and into extremist factions. Restoring peace and stability in the Arab region is therefore imperative.

#### **B. POVERTY**

24. Goal 1 is of crucial importance to the Arab region, particularly because it is closely linked to all other development areas. Regional and subregional averages conceal some significant geographic and social inequalities. Available information on poverty profiles in the region indicates that there are wide disparities in the incidence of poverty between countries, and between rural and urban areas. While the GCC countries appear to have met MDG targets 1 and 2 by most indicators, and some countries in the Maghreb and Mashreq subregions may also do so if positive trends continue, there are no indications that Arab LDCs or Iraq and Palestine will be able to reach those targets unless the current political and economic conditions change and regional and international support is increased. Action against poverty in the region must focus on social inclusion, the protection of economic and social rights and job-creation policies. Policies must also specifically address rural areas, given that the incidence of rural poverty in most Arab countries significantly exceeds that of urban poverty.

25. Progress towards MDG target 1 requires continued improvement in the conditions of poor persons, in the context of sustained growth in output. If growth falters and average income levels slide, then redistribution policy is liable to collapse or fall short of its commitments. Output growth provides the basis for a sustained increase in income for poor persons and, simultaneously, ensures a revenue base for a sustained flow of finance for social provision. Economic growth is therefore a key element in any strategy for combating malnutrition and hunger.

26. The economic performance of the Arab region since 1980 has been far from satisfactory. Average gross domestic product (GDP) growth did not exceed 2 and 3 per cent during the periods 1980-1989 and



1990-1999 respectively, approximately matching population growth rates. Partly as a result of that poor growth record, some Arab countries have fallen behind other developing countries in terms of human development. There has been some growth recovery in most Arab countries since 2002 as a result of overall favourable macroeconomic conditions and the rise in oil prices, but the sustainability of that recovery remains in doubt. In many Arab countries, a combination of relatively low levels of savings and investment and a bias towards low productivity capital-intensive investment, namely, in housing and real estate, has resulted in a much smaller number of jobs being created than are needed to close the unemployment gap.

27. Hunger and malnutrition are also influenced by the magnitude and scope of social provisioning and lifestyles, including the child-rearing, dietary and health practices of households. Studies consistently emphasize the importance of universal basic social services in the fight against malnutrition among children under five years of age. The mother's education, access to safe water and sanitation, low-cost micronutrients and fortified foods, immunization and quality primary health care are all examples of instrumental interventions in the fight against malnutrition in children, mothers and adults. Creative and dynamic social protection can go a long way towards combating poverty. Cash transfers, employment guarantees, public works, low-cost credit and microcredit, feeding programmes, subsidized baskets of basic food items, and compensation for those afflicted by natural calamities and internal conflict are all cases in point. While progress has been made, Arab countries have yet to tap the full potential of social provisioning.

28. Combating poverty and hunger requires funds and resources. Higher and more sustainable output growth can only be achieved if both public and private investment activities are enhanced. Expanding and upgrading social provisioning calls for the allocation of larger amounts from the public coffers for that purpose. While countries must effectively mobilize their domestic resources, several Arab countries, especially LDCs, require funds in excess of those available to their respective Governments. However, poverty reduction in a country should not solely be the concern of the national Government, but should also involve civil society and the private sector: Governments must ensure an environment in which they can operate freely. Regional frameworks and structures for intraregional cooperation must be increased and upgraded in order to ensure a continuously expanding intraregional flow of public and private funds and resources to countries that have serious gaps in savings, foreign exchange and absorptive capacity.

29. Effective and relevant social and economic development frameworks and policies for MDGs assume timely follow-up of poverty trends and in-depth knowledge and analysis of the profiles of poor persons, including age, sex, household size, education, profession, employment status, geographic location, ethnicity and access to basic social services. Countries of the region need, therefore, to exert adequate efforts to maintain a comprehensive, detailed, reliable and timely database on poverty.

30. Social and economic development frameworks and policies, which ensure that the rights of all segments of the population and, specifically, the poor are addressed, can be effectively implemented only with sufficient political support and in a stable context. Political commitment is indispensable for guaranteeing the mobilization and allocation of adequate resources for pro-poor interventions and, ultimately, the protection of all human rights. Political action to prevent, mitigate and/or eliminate conflict and social strife is a vital pillar in any meaningful and sustainable poverty-reduction process. That also requires policies to respect, protect and realize human rights.

### C. YOUTH AND DEVELOPMENT

31. Youth currently constitute the largest demographic category in the Arab region. The age group 15-24 numbered some 66 million in 2005, the equivalent of 20.6 per cent of the total population; while in 1980, the equivalent was 33 million, or 19.5 per cent of the total population. It is projected that in 2020 the youth population will be 78 million, the equivalent of 18.2 per cent of the total population in the Arab region. The percentage of youth in the population varies slightly across the subregions. In 2005, the Maghreb and the Mashreq had the largest youth populations, namely, 21.7 and 20.9 per cent of total population, respectively.

In Arab LDCs, that figure was 20.4 per cent, while in the GCC countries, youth constituted 18.1 per cent of the total population.

32. Youth are stakeholders in and beneficiaries of progress towards MDG attainment. Their lives will improve significantly as targets related to poverty reduction, universal education, gender equality, and health and environmental sustainability are met. Young people constitute the social group most affected by the lack of adequate education, and they are also strongly affected by poverty and other gaps in development. Youth are the key to achieving faster progress towards MDG targets, because they represent the human capital needed to foster development.

#### 1. *Youth and MDGs*

33. All eight Goals address issues that, directly or indirectly, affect the lives of youth. Goal 1 is pertinent to young people because poverty manifests itself in health problems, insufficient education and the lack of employment opportunities. The lack of productive work for young people has a number of highly damaging economic and social consequences, including, in some cases, extremism and violence.

34. Goal 2 provides the major linkage between Goal 1 and the other Goals. Lack of basic education further exacerbates poverty and also thwarts achievements in respect of gender equality, awareness of HIV/AIDS and maternal health.

35. Goal 3 acknowledges the fact that young women grow up in a world of unequal opportunities, and that their empowerment is linked to all other MDGs. The key rights of young women include the right to equal access to education and work, equal political participation, and reproductive health education. The right to non-discrimination is one of the key provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is enshrined in all core human rights treaties.

36. Goals 4, 5 and 6, which are all health-related, implicitly refer to youth, because that age group accounts for a large proportion of those most likely to benefit from policies that promote the achievement of those Goals. Goal 4 is of particular relevance to young girls, because child mortality is highest among adolescent mothers. Goal 5 seeks to improve maternal health, which includes addressing adolescent pregnancy. Youth should be given priority in addressing Goal 6, because HIV/AIDS is having a devastating effect on the lives of young people, particularly on young women.

37. The major environmental issues facing the region, which are the concern of Goal 7, revolve around the reduced quantity of water available for human consumption, lack of sanitation, land degradation and access to sustainable sources of energy, all of which impact on youth, which is exacerbated by increased international and urban-rural migration and accommodation in slums or temporary shelters with low levels of hygienic conditions and services.

38. The specific aim of Goal 8 is progress in the areas of trade and market access, development aid, debt relief, the availability of essential drugs and access to ICT, which can help youth to increase their skills, capacities and productivity levels and thus enable them to find decent employment. Goal 8, target 16, aims to develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth and constitutes the only specific mention of youth in the MDGs.

39. A participatory approach, in which youth are given appropriate support and opportunities to become a potentially powerful force for the achievement of MDGs is likely to ensure their long-term sustainability. Countries are gradually realizing that greater investment in youth education, employment generation and health, as stipulated by a human rights-based approach to development, is essential. As a result, international commitment to the right of youth to development and participation has increased in recent years.

## 2. Education and employment

40. Education and productive employment are key elements of youth development in the Arab region, and all MDGs emphasize the importance of the education-employment nexus.

### (a) *Access of young men and women to education*

41. Universal primary education is the first step towards improved quality of life. Education is not only a human right in itself, but also an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized young people can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities. Education also plays a vital role in empowering women, safeguarding children from hazardous labour and sexual exploitation, promoting human rights and democracy, protecting the environment and controlling population growth.

42. The Arab region has made tangible progress in respect of primary education and literacy in recent decades. However, particularly in LDCs, increases in primary enrolment levels are often followed by relatively low secondary enrolment rates, which may be attributed to a number of factors which differ for boys and girls. In several countries, poverty remains a major barrier to schooling: many young people must work and help to support their families. Poor families frequently cannot afford the enrolment costs and other expenses associated with secondary education. Low female enrolment rates often reflect cultural biases and stereotypes. Barriers to female enrolment include early marriage and pregnancy, a reluctance to allow women to attend schools that are not near their homes and the fact that they are the first to suffer in case of financial limitations.

43. In tertiary education, enrolment rates in many Arab countries actually favour women, in part because of lack of job opportunities and negative attitudes towards women working outside the home, which drives women to engage in tertiary education as a second choice, and in part because female students achieve higher grades in university admission exams. Furthermore, male students are more likely than female students to study abroad. The attractiveness of foreign education to Arab youth indicates that the qualitative and, often, quantitative supply of university education cannot meet demand, especially in postgraduate education. That situation is exacerbated by admission requirements, which are frequently more stringent in the home country than in some foreign countries. Both types of supply limitation account for the preference for foreign education by those students who can afford it.

44. Notwithstanding the aforementioned observations, tertiary enrolment rates in the Arab region remain lower than in Latin America and East Asia. Low returns on higher education and uncertain labour market outcomes are the main factors underlying low enrolment in universities across the Arab region. Low enrolment rates have often coincided with declines in quality, as public education systems face tight budgets. The relevance of education to market demand has become one of the most debated education issues in the Arab region.

### (b) *Quality of education*

45. It is difficult to evaluate the quality of education in the Arab region because of the lack of quantitative data and the absence of any standardized measurement for comparison between Arab countries and the rest of the world. However, most research indicates that the quality of education in the Arab region has not improved, and that there is a severe mismatch between the labour market and the education system. That is reflected in the fact that unemployment rates are sometimes highest among individuals with intermediate and upper levels of educational attainment. In Tunisia, for example, the unemployment rate among young people with higher education is over 40 per cent, compared with about 25 per cent for those with primary education.

In Jordan, the unemployment rate is over 30 per cent among secondary school graduates and 15 per cent for university graduates, compared to 8 per cent for those with only primary education.

46. That phenomenon is in part the result of educational systems that are geared towards preparing students to serve in the public sector, which, in most Arab economies, used to be the primary employer of educated new entrants to the labour force. With the move towards more market-based economies, the introduction of new technologies and greater integration into the world economy, the demand for particular skills is increasing, making much of the material taught in existing public education systems obsolete. Arab economies have created significant mismatches between the human skills demanded by new enterprises and those available in the work force, leading to an extended and difficult transition period when graduates are trying to find work. Studies show that Arab countries clearly lag behind many other developing countries in human capital formation, primarily because of lack of progress in educational quality.

47. Arab students tend to perform worse than most of their counterparts in international assessments. Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2003 indicates that educational standards in participating Arab countries were below the international average both in mathematics and sciences, with a larger gap in fourth grade performance than in eighth grade. In the mathematics test for the eighth grade, Arab countries obtained an average score of 393, which is far below the international average of 467. Lebanon ranked first among the participating Arab countries, achieving a score of 433. In sciences, only Jordan, with a score of 475 for eighth-graders, exceeded the international average of 474, while the remaining Arab countries recorded average scores well below the international average.

48. Many factors contribute to the low outcome of the education process in the Arab region. Children are often brought up in neopatriarchal home and school environments which, combined with archaic rote learning methods of education, have the potential to stifle creativity and problem-solving abilities, and discourage free and independent thinking. Moreover, the insufficient allocation of funds for education has translated into low teacher salaries, limited teacher training, lack of adequate facilities and overcrowded classrooms, all of which have led to a decline in the quality of teaching provided. In a number of Arab countries, the quality of education is also adversely affected by the lack of an appropriate school environment. Schools often lack buildings, classrooms, libraries, laboratory equipment, sports facilities and facilities for social and cultural interaction where students are given free reign to express their opinions. Highly centralized and tradition-bound school administrations also have an adverse influence on the quality of education. Reform is constrained not only by inadequate financial resources but also, in some countries, by restricted freedom of thought, action and initiative in addressing the problems facing educational administrations and the teaching profession.

49. Other factors that adversely affect educational quality include education policies and curriculums. In most Arab countries, the former lack a clear vision of educational objectives. There is little or no exchange of ideas and best practices between countries and, in some cases, coordination within a country is lacking. That has led to the weakening of intellectual ties between Arab countries. Cooperative efforts and the exchange of experience between countries, particularly in the areas of graduate studies and research, could contribute to an improvement of the Arab educational systems. Curriculums in most Arab countries are outdated and based mainly on rote learning, which is not conducive to creative thinking. The failure of curriculums to keep up with contemporary developments and techniques has worsened the divide between education in the Arab region and the rest of the world. Furthermore, systems are burdened with a large number of poorly qualified teachers and instructors. Students graduating from high school with low grades are generally disqualified from admission to such high grades-demanding faculties as medicine, engineering and sciences, and are directed instead to less demanding disciplines which often include education and teacher training. The already defective education system thus perpetuates its deficiencies.

50. Conflict-ridden countries, namely, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia and the Sudan, continue to suffer from the disastrous effects that the ongoing violence has had on the quality of education. In Palestine, a drastic fall in

educational standards is the legacy of the wide-scale school interruptions resulting from the closures and mobility restrictions enforced by the Israeli authorities. The majority of the schools in the West Bank, especially Government schools, are overcrowded and have limited resources, with only a few offering extra-curricular activities. Educational standards in Iraq have also severely deteriorated because hundreds of teachers and students have been killed or kidnapped, thousands more have fled, and those who remain face daily threats of violence. Teachers are fleeing the country on a daily basis, leaving schools without experienced staff, while many parents are opting not to send their children to school because of the general insecurity in the country. If current levels of violence persist, schools and universities are likely to continue to lose staff and students.

(c) *Youth employment*

51. The Millennium Declaration devotes particular attention to decent work. The need to generate jobs for young people in the Arab region is pressing: youth, who account for over 20 per cent of the total population, suffer from a rate of unemployment which, at 25 per cent in 2005, was almost double the regional average. Young people's chances of finding employment are low because of their lack of work experience and the occupational skills required by potential employers. Youth employment is an important factor in community participation, active citizenship, autonomy and independence. In contrast, the lack of productive work opportunities for young people in many countries of the region perpetuates poverty and has the potential to contribute to crime, substance abuse, violent conflict and the rise of political and religious extremism.

52. In addition to recording the highest regional unemployment rate in the world, the Arab region continues to have the lowest labour force participation rate, estimated in 2003 at less than 60 per cent for adults and less than 40 per cent for youth. There is also ample evidence that underemployment, in the form of fewer working hours per week and irregular work assignments, is widespread. The economic activity of youth has decreased in most Arab countries, mostly because of the increasing number of young people who remain in the education system. The low participation rates are also attributed to rates among young women which continue to be low despite a marginal increase from 23 to 25 per cent between 1995 and 2005. Female labour participation is below 30 per cent in most Arab countries, the exceptions being the Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic. Palestine, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have female participation rates well below 10 per cent, largely the result of prevailing social norms affecting women and their access to work in those countries.

53. It is traditional in the Arab region for men to serve as the main breadwinner, while women are primarily concerned with raising children and managing households. Since many employers expect women to drop out of the labour force for an extended period of time in order to raise children, they have a preference for hiring men. Furthermore, in most countries in the Arab region, women who choose to work tend to favour work in the public sector, largely because of the perception that such public service professions as teaching and nursing are appropriate for women. Job opportunities for women outside the public sector, by contrast, are often limited to low-paying employment with little potential for growth.

54. In the Arab countries, a large number of young men and women will continue to enter the labour market every year, resulting in greater pressure to absorb new entrants. On the demand side, the stagnation of most Arab labour markets results from a combination of insufficient growth and the structural weakness of economies. On the supply side, inadequate educational standards, the lack of functioning labour market institutions and the difficulty of moving from the public to the private sector contribute to the observed trends in labour markets. As a result, youth are often concentrated in the informal sector, engaging in occupations that do not have the benefits and security of regular employment. Lack of opportunity renders young people particularly vulnerable to poverty. Young women are more susceptible to unemployment and, in particular, long-term unemployment, depriving society of the chance to make use of their full capacities and qualifications and widening the gender gap.

### 3. *Other challenges*

55. Despite noteworthy achievements, the political, social and economic systems of the Arab region have not evolved in a way that effectively meets the changing needs of the rapidly-growing youth population. Arab countries do not consistently ensure full protection for youth human rights, including the right to life, education, health and freedom of expression, association and assembly without discrimination of any kind. Youth in the region must often deal with racial, sexual, linguistic, religious, political, ideological, national, social or class discrimination.

56. In most Arab countries, the freedom of youth is restricted, they are excluded from active participation, and lack equal opportunities and representation. Albeit efforts to address those problems have recently been made in a number of Arab countries, improvements in youth participation have generally been both slow and inadequate. That may be attributed to a number of factors, including regional conflicts, which have prioritized political matters at the expense of social concerns; poor economic performance, which has resulted in very high youth un- and underemployment rates; lack of appropriate youth strategies and programmes; and lack of understanding of the essence of civil society and its duties, because its role has been restricted by Government interference and bureaucratic controls to social relief, rather than overseeing and promoting youth policies.

57. In addition to those factors, the contemporary Arab landscape suffers from a democratic deficit and a general crisis of political empowerment, which inevitably affects the young and may instil in them a sense of isolation, uncertainty and insecurity. Similarly, the social, cultural and institutional contexts demonstrate little appreciation of the value of freedom of thought and expression or democratic practices. Young people have few opportunities to discuss and resolve their concerns, articulate their expectations or pursue their future needs.

58. Gender imbalances have also hindered economic and social development in the Arab region. In many parts, young females face the challenges of early marriage and childbearing, disruption of education, discrimination in the labour market and deprivation of political rights. Most of those challenges stem from deeply-rooted, traditional views about gender roles in the family and society. Albeit impressive progress has been made towards achieving gender equality in enrolment levels, women's education has not resulted in higher participation in the labour force or better representation in the political sphere.

59. If the Arab countries are to achieve MDGs, they must take advantage of the forthcoming demographic window of opportunity. The extent to which young people succeed in their choices is related to the opportunities with which they have been presented and the assets they have accumulated. The first thing policymakers must consider is how poverty and inequality among young people inhibit their access to education, health and employment. In order to stimulate economic growth and promote social equity, consideration must be given to adopting a new paradigm of development that takes into consideration national specificities. The underlying approach should highlight the unique social and cultural priorities of each country, while making use of the universal wisdom and experience gained from the successes and failures of development policy in other developing countries.

60. Based on that, a youth policy framework guided by three main objectives may be established. The first objective is to create an enabling macroeconomic and institutional environment, because that is a prerequisite for offering young people better opportunities in life. The second objective is to expand the knowledge, skills and capacities of young men and women. Educational development in the Arab region is largely seen as a quantitative exercise that can be addressed by funding more schools, teachers and textbooks. Educational policies must focus on improving the qualifications of and incentives for teachers, students and school administrators. The third objective is to promote and strengthen youth participation in decision-making processes. Young men and women should be provided with the opportunity to voice opinions, participate in public decision-making and shape community priorities and service delivery.

#### **IV. ACHIEVING MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE ARAB REGION: THE WAY FORWARD AND FUTURE COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS**

61. Future progress towards MDG attainment in the Arab region depends to a large extent on whether Governments succeed in more adequately addressing the needs of young people and making better use of the potential offered by the youth bulge. With some 25 per cent of young people in the Arab region unemployed and the number of new labour market entrants steadily increasing, there is mounting pressure on Arab Governments to generate decent jobs and income-earning opportunities. Both the demand and the supply sides of labour markets must be addressed. The latter involves increasing educational standards, tailoring school curriculums to the needs of the labour market, and facilitating moves between the private and the public sector. At the same time, it is crucial to promote active citizenship among young people, capitalize on the catalytic role of youth as agents of social, political and economic transformation, and increase health awareness and environmental responsibility among that demographic group.

62. The wide disparities in living conditions between Arab subregions and individual countries call for intensified regional and South-South cooperation. At the midpoint between the adoption of the Millennium Declaration and the target date for the attainment of the Goals, it is clear that Arab LDCs and countries in conflict conditions must make much faster progress if they are to reach the Goals and their targets by 2015. That will require not only intensified policy efforts in those countries, but also more generous and effective financial assistance from developed countries and a further strengthening of regional cooperation between Arab countries. At the economic level, the lack of regional integration represents a significant obstacle to higher and more equitable growth. In addition, intraregional migration contributes significantly to the brain drain experienced by several Maghreb and Mashreq countries and Arab LDCs. Sustainable solutions to such issues will require new dialogue and closer partnership. Regional cooperation can also play a major role in accelerating progress towards social and environmental development goals. Sharing best practices and expertise in education and health can contribute to significant improvement in the respective indicators. With respect to the environmental dimension, sustainable development studies have frequently highlighted the need for more and better coordination of water and energy policies in Arab countries. In addition, common strategies are indispensable in addressing such transboundary environmental issues as pollution and desertification. The promotion of cooperation and dialogue between Arab countries at the economic, political and social levels should therefore figure high on the development agenda.

63. The attainment of MDGs in most ESCWA member countries is, to a large extent, dependant on increased rural development, thereby reducing the current rural-urban divide. The 2007 MDG Report for the Arab Region emphasizes that rural areas lag behind urban areas in all the development dimensions addressed in the Millennium Declaration. Disparities are particularly large in school enrolment and attendance, gender equality, maternal and infant mortality, access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, as well as in access to ICT. Rural areas frequently suffer from a lack of sufficient private and public investment, resulting in poor infrastructure, a lack of or low quality educational and health services, and a low rate of technological progress. Governments of ESCWA member countries, in cooperation with bilateral and multilateral donors, must therefore direct more resources to rural development initiatives and projects. Institutional and organizational capacity-building among the rural poor must be at the centre of any development strategy. In recent decades, there have been several successful rural development efforts in ESCWA member countries. In Oman, successive development plans focused on providing infrastructure and educational and health facilities in rural areas, while at the same time promoting development in different economic sectors, including agriculture, fishing, tourism, and industry. In recent years, Egypt achieved impressive results in several development areas, most importantly in access to education and health services. Hence, sharing experiences, best practices and knowledge in the area of rural development will benefit all member countries.

64. As highlighted in the 2007 MDG Report, most Arab countries face severe water shortage problems, and water will be a key factor in the future development of the region. As yet, progress towards MDG target

10, halving, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, has been fairly slow and the rural-urban divide remains large, especially in the Maghreb and the Arab LDCs. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities is not only a goal in itself, but is also central to the achievement of other MDGs. It reduces the transmission of such diseases as diarrhoea and contributes to an improved nutritional status, thus improving the overall health status of the population. Water is also a vital driver of economic growth and poverty alleviation, serving as a major input to agriculture and most industries. For almost all Arab countries, water resource management therefore remains central to sustainable development and poverty reduction.

65. ESCWA aims to replicate the success of the 2007 MDG Report for the Arab Region, which benefited from collaborative efforts between United Nations agencies in the Arab region and the League of Arab States, and from the topical focus on youth development issues. Based on the major findings of the 2007 MDG Report, several research areas may be identified for future collaboration: (a) strengthening regional cooperation for development, with special focus on supporting LDCs and countries in conflict conditions; (b) promoting rural development, with special focus on agriculture; (c) the impact of conflict and political turmoil on progress towards MDGs in the Arab region; and (d) water resource management as a tool for sustainable development.

66. On the basis of its positive experience of covering the entire Arab region in the 2005 and 2007 MDG reports and cooperation with the League of Arab States, ESCWA recommends continuing with that approach. In May 2007, the Economic Commission for Africa and ESCWA concluded an agreement aimed at supporting the North African region and promoting the coherence and synergies of United Nations development work in order to accelerate regional integration processes in the Arab region in close collaboration with other international and regional organizations and, in particular, the League of Arab States.

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