

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)****REPORT****OF THE TWELFTH MEETING OF THE REGIONAL COORDINATION MECHANISM  
BEIRUT, 13-14 SEPTEMBER 2008****Summary**

The twelfth meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) was held in Beirut from 13 to 14 September 2008. This report gives a brief account of the discussions that were held on each item of the meeting agenda and also summarizes the recommendations that were made and the decisions that were taken at the meeting.

The most pressing global challenges discussed were global economic tensions, the food crisis and climate change. Food security and climate change were also presented as the most urgent development priorities, together with the severe water shortage in the region and lack of effective water resource management. The links between these two issues were stressed as were the ways both have altered the development debate and will indeed affect development in the region, including the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). What emerged clearly from the meeting was that the region's poor were suffering and that regional integration and cooperation to address these multiple challenges were paramount.

With regard to the renewed role and functions of RCM in the Arab region in pursuance of "United Nations Delivering as One" at the regional level the main challenges included: incorporating a firm follow-up mechanism for each RCM subsidiary body to facilitate the monitoring of achievements; harmonizing RCM and Regional Directors' Team (RDT) work; and linking RCM to the Chief Executives Board (CEB) architecture and its three pillars. The fact that RCM would provide a forum for the sharing of expertise and would carry out climate-change mapping exercise at the regional level was welcomed. The presence of the League of Arab States in RCM was seen as crucial to forging a consensus and ensuring regional coverage. The importance of coming to an agreement on RCM's terms of reference (TOR) and adopting them to guide the coordination of work at the regional level was stressed.

Concerning RDT in the Arab States and the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), the benefits of RDT collaboration in a cross-regional context were discussed at length, following a presentation on the successes of the RDT in the African region. In this context, discussions focused on the need for RDT support structures to be flexible in order to maximize the use of the extensive resources available throughout the regions, for it to become more inclusive, establish an accountability framework, clarify its mandate and define how best to support United Nations country teams in their work. Also highlighted at the meeting was the need for the new RDT agenda to address emerging issues, including gender equality and human rights, in addition to progress on the MDGs.

The meeting agreed to the establishment of three proposed thematic working groups (TWGs), subsidiary to RCM, focusing on MDGs in the Arab region, climate change, and food security, respectively. Two new recommendations emerged, added to a number of recommendations of the eleventh RCM meeting which, due to political unrest and conflict in Lebanon, had yet to be fully implemented.

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## **Introduction**

1. The twelfth meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) was convened by Mr. Bader Omar Al-Dafa, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), at United Nations House, Beirut, on 13 and 14 September 2008. The meeting was presided over by Ms. Asha-Rose Migiro, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations.
2. In his opening statement, Al-Dafa welcomed the Deputy Secretary-General Ms. Asha-Rose Migiro, whose presence reflected the importance attached to the role of the RCM in bringing coherence and synergy to the United Nations system at the regional level.

## **I. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. PRODUCTION OF “REGIONAL MAPPING STUDY: PRIORITY AREAS OF WORK IN THE REGIONAL PROGRAMMES OF UNITED NATIONS ENTITIES IN THE ARAB REGION FOR 2008-2009”**

3. The meeting recommended that this study be produced, subject to cost-sharing by RCM entities, and agreed that the following follow-up actions would be required:
  - (a) A copy of a similar study carried out by the RCM in Asia and the Pacific, together with documentation on the methodology employed, and tentative work plan, shall be distributed;
  - (b) RCM entities shall provide information and documentation required as an input to the study.

### **B. ORGANIZATION OF CAPACITY-BUILDING TRAINING FOR RCM ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH AND THE RIGHT-TO-DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK**

4. The meeting welcomed the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ (OHCHR) offer of knowledge-sharing, on the basis of self-financing participation.

## **II. ISSUES CONSIDERED**

### **A. REVIEW OF EMERGING GLOBAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR ACHIEVING THE MDGs IN THE ARAB REGION (Agenda item 2)**

5. One of the regional experts gave a detailed presentation on global economic tensions and the food crisis and their effect on achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and environment policy, especially climate change. The expert noted that global economic challenges were having an impact on the region, contributing in particular to reduced growth as reflected in asset price declines, financial market turmoil, and energy and commodity price increases. Other effects included inflation and its impact on economic stability, and the financial sector crisis. In this connection, policy recommendations for the Arab region included **adapting the demand for oil to increasing prices**, while protecting vulnerable groups; increasing investment in the oil and energy sectors; limiting the secondary effects of price shocks by tightening fiscal policy; and, in dollar pegged economies, tightening macroeconomic policy and undertaking direct fiscal spending to alleviate supply bottlenecks.
6. He explained that the food crisis is a result of long-term structural influences, coupled with short-term factors, and that the immediate problem is one of price speculation rather than a global shortage of food. Lack of investment in agriculture, low productivity and extensive Government control in some countries of the region, have limited the dynamism of the food production sector. The expert stressed that export restrictions are harmful, distort price incentives and discourage production. Direct price controls and direct subsidies tend to be costly to the Government and do not target those most in need. He also indicated that

the food crisis had serious macroeconomic implications and put pressure on inflation, on the balance of payments and on the budget. He recommended that in the short term, the impact on the poor should be mitigated by extending well-targeted social safety nets, expanding conditional cash transfer programmes, and expanding school food programmes.

7. The expert noted that the causes and consequences of climate change are distributed unevenly across countries with climate change posing serious macroeconomic challenges to low-income Arab countries more vulnerable due to their heavy reliance on climate-sensitive sectors, such as agriculture, forestry and tourism. Economic and social development is a powerful way to increase the capacity to adapt to climate change. To enhance economic growth and improve adaptability to climate change, countries must remove impediments to domestic agricultural production and avoid direct price and export controls. Adaptation also requires increased financial and capacity-building assistance, particularly to least developed countries (LDCs) and those most vulnerable to climate change. Arab countries must engage in global efforts to mitigate climate change, but increased financial support from the international community was also needed, additional to existing development assistance rather than at the expense of other sectors, such as health and education.

8. Another regional expert gave a presentation on regional development priorities, including climate change and food security, stressing that global changes have affected the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in both positive and negative ways. The recent economic boom and high income from oil have led to an influx of migrants to the GCC region, constituting the majority of the labour force. This is leaving significant imprints on the social fabric of the country and its cultural values, with the indigenous population fearing to some degree the loss of its local identity. Furthermore, these developments have been accompanied by rising commodity prices, especially food and land, negatively affecting middle-class citizens. Also highlighted was the imprint on the environment left by urban growth, real estate development and investment in mega-projects, which together were generating urgent demand for high-end services. Under the circumstances, strategic development options needed to be adopted which would both safeguard precious resources such as water and promote energy savings.

9. While the Arab countries' contribution to global warming is relatively limited, they are, due to their location in an arid region with limited water resources and low-lying coastal areas, particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. The expert regretted that few measures were currently being taken in the GCC region to adapt to climate change. In the pursuit of increased revenues, the question of "fairness" is not always a priority on agendas of Governments. He noted that capitalism is not in itself a panacea for meeting important development challenges in the region and that Arab Governments' "windfall" revenues should be reinvested to promote human development and democratic values in lieu of investments in mega-projects and the development of the real estate sector. The expert stressed that sustainable development and attainment of the MDGs will not be possible without peace in the region. As long as civil society has little say in development issues and is not empowered to play an effective role as a partner in development, attainment of the MDGs will face serious bottlenecks.

10. A third regional expert made a presentation on the links between the food crisis and climate change, noting how both phenomena have affected the development debate and will indeed affect development in the region, including the attainment of MDGs by 2015. He emphasized that climate change has emerged gradually over the past five decades and is irreversible. To combat it requires both developed countries and developing countries, like China and India, to change their behaviour and consumption patterns. By contrast, the food crisis is a more recent phenomenon, resulting from a combination of many global factors apart from climate change, including the rising demand for food, rising oil and fertilizer prices, a shift of agricultural land to bio-fuel production, declining interest rates, macroeconomic developments and the actions of the financial markets. Hence it is reversible, provided that national Governments make the right kinds of interventions at the appropriate time and over an appropriate period. He cautioned, however, that while the food crisis is reversible, it has immediate effects on the lives of the poor and other vulnerable groups, who have little or no means of adjusting their food consumption patterns. In the case of poor pregnant women, and children, lack of food can cause not only temporary but also permanent effects.

11. There has been a resurgence of the notion coupling food security and self-sufficiency, a drastic departure from the free market solution to the food supply challenge so strongly advocated in the 1980s and 1990s. The current food crisis has led to food export bans and the return of protectionism, raising the question of how the delicate issue of free trade in food versus self-sufficiency and food security should be addressed. The expert stressed that in his view protectionism will further harm Western Asia, as a net importer of food. He then raised three key questions as food for thought: What are the limits of free trade in crisis situations? What should be the role of Government in food supply? What are the effects of both low and high food prices on the region's poor? What emerges clearly is that the region's poor are suffering and that Western Asia as a whole is a net loser in a high food price situation, due to its highly urbanized character and limited agricultural production capacity.

12. Another issue of utmost importance for the region is the severe water shortage and lack of effective water resource management, for which collective efforts are required. At the national level, the likelihood of continuing high oil prices may further hurt the economy of non-oil producing countries. The need for social protection of vulnerable groups in the food crisis was emphasized, citing the success of a public school food programme in Jordan, which has not only contributed to keeping the needy school children in school but has also protected them from child labour.

13. In the ensuing discussion, a representative of the League of Arab States provided a detailed account of the activities undertaken and being planned by the organization to address the food crisis and climate change, including through cooperation with United Nations and Arab organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), ESCWA and Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD). He also noted the key importance Arab ministers give to achieving the MDGs.

14. During the discussion, other participants touched on the challenges faced by policymakers, the role of civil society and the United Nations, regional cultural identity, possible opportunities afforded by addressing these challenges, and the critical role of regional integration in promoting development. Participants raised questions on what short- and medium-term policies would be appropriate and the difficulty policymakers may face given that short-term measures to ameliorate a crisis may be unsustainable or have negative macroeconomic effects. Participants also highlighted the political pressures on policy formulation, noting that the strongest lobbying groups often do not represent the interests of those most vulnerable. The low rate of employment in the region, especially among highly educated women, was raised as a serious issue for concern.

15. The representative of a United Nations agency questioned whether the region was ready to give up some of its entrenched characteristics in order to adapt to a changing world and to introduce these changes in its education curricula. Participants agreed that although globalization may have some impact on the region's cultural identity, the region needs to be able to adapt, and education and information are critical in order for citizens to be able to make informed choices and become instruments of change. Another participant noted that there is a dilemma between cultural identity and the need for a large immigrant workforce in parts of the region, and stressed the need to protect human rights. The discussion highlighted the fact that crises are a "stress test" for the social and economic policies in place, and can be viewed as an opportunity to make meaningful changes at the policy level. Examples were given of possibilities for employment generation in response to climate change, in terms of green job creation and support for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

16. There was general consensus that intraregional cooperation is key to addressing the development needs of the region, and that there had been a decline in regional integration and cooperation in recent years. It was suggested that the region's political and security issues could be a major barrier to regional integration. Participants stressed that help to non-oil producing Arab countries must be intensified and, given that regional concerns such as sustainable investments in water, are often transboundary, there was a need to find regional solutions and to engage the League of Arab States more actively.

B. RENEWED ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF RCM IN THE ARAB REGION IN PURSUANCE OF  
“UNITED NATIONS DELIVERING AS ONE” AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL  
(Agenda item 3)

17. A representative of the ESCWA secretariat made a presentation explaining RCM’s objectives and achievements, the lessons learned from other regions, key challenges, the proposed RCM structure and the action required. The main challenges included: incorporating a firm follow-up mechanism for each RCM subsidiary body to facilitate the monitoring of achievements; harmonizing RCM and the Regional Directors’ Team (RDT) work; and linking RCM to the Chief Executives Board (CEB) architecture and its three pillars. The action required included: finalizing and approving draft terms of reference (TOR); approving, in principle, the formation of thematic working groups (TWGs); incorporating a monitoring and evaluation system in respective TOR to facilitate follow-up; and formalizing the official status of the League of Arab States as a full RCM member.

18. The fact that RCM would provide a forum for the sharing of expertise and would carry out the climate-change mapping exercise at the regional level was welcomed. Participants pointed out the need to clearly define the roles of RCM and RDT, and indicated that the draft TOR were in need of some refinement, requiring further consultations between the RDT and the RCM. In this connection, one participant raised the following three requirements: ensuring efficient and credible coordination and the best use of resources and expertise; building mutual accountability; and reflecting policy and political work in the TOR to remedy the credibility gap that the United Nations suffers in the region. Another participant highlighted the differences between RDT and RCM, seeing RDT as more operational and RCM more a platform for discussing and developing partnerships.

19. The representative of a United Nations agency highlighted the importance of involving in RCM regional development and financial institutions and suggested that instead of building new structures, the existing ones should be strengthened. Another participant stressed the need to agree on the draft TOR and the follow-up mechanism at the meeting. He raised three issues for consideration: the challenge posed by the incompatibility of the two bodies’ geographic regional coverage; the mechanism for identifying regional priorities; and the interpretation of “Delivering as One” in terms of joint consultations at the programme-planning level. It was proposed that the meeting should make use of successful examples of coordination in other regions, noting Africa’s positive experience in particular, and it was suggested that the meeting should focus on acting as one United Nations rather than defining roles and building boundaries.

20. The League of Arab States stressed the importance of its becoming a full member of RCM, in line with Memorandum of Understanding 46 on enhancing collaboration between the United Nations and the League of Arab States.

21. A representative of the ESCWA secretariat, which was also the RCM secretariat, explained the rationale for the TOR and emphasized the importance of coordinating from the outset and of identifying common areas where United Nations entities in the region could work collectively. The presence of the League of Arab States in RCM was seen as crucial to forging a consensus and ensuring regional coverage of the 22 Arab countries. While understanding the need for some refinement of the draft TOR, the importance of coming to an agreement and adopting them to guide the coordination of work at the regional level was stressed.

C. THE RDT IN THE ARAB STATES AND MENA REGION  
(Agenda item 4)

22. The representative of a United Nations agency gave a presentation stressing that the focus of the RDT in the Arab and MENA region is on policy response solutions and measurable improvements. The RDT mandate was broadly defined in the Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review of Operational Activities of the United Nations Development System (TCPOR) for 2004-2007, while TCPOR for 2007-2011 highlighted the

importance of aligning regional technical support structures with the regional bureau in order to provide support to United Nations country teams. Based on the experience of the Southern Africa region, RDTs had come a long way since their inception. The benefits of RDT collaboration in a cross-regional context were discussed as well as the need for RDT support structures to be flexible in order to maximize the use of the extensive resources available throughout the regions. With regard to the RDT in the Arab States and MENA region, the presentation highlighted the need for the RDT to become more inclusive and to establish an accountability framework. Other challenges included clarifying the RDT mandate in a changing policy environment and defining how best to support United Nations country teams in their work. The presentation also highlighted the need for the new RDT agenda to address emerging issues, including gender equality and human rights issues, in addition to progress on the MDGs. Improving the image of the United Nations, suffering as it is from a strongly-perceived credibility gap among average citizens in the region, was also a priority.

23. Another presentation was made on the RCM in the African region, noting that United Nations activities in Africa had increased tremendously over the previous few years. The General Assembly had endorsed the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2001 as a framework for channelling international support. At the regional level, RCM is part of the system-wide operational framework for supporting NEPAD. RCM had enhanced coherence, cooperation and coordination among a wide range of United Nations agencies, along with the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Committees (RECs) working in support of AU/NEPAD; the mechanism operated through thematic clusters aligned to AU/NEPAD priorities. Lessons learned from those experiences included a better understanding of the evolving nature of NEPAD, as well as of the need to align the RCM to the needs, priorities and programmes of the AU/NEPAD and to increase cooperation among participating agencies and RECs. The effective functioning of the cluster system was also central to enhancing efficiency and coherence in the delivery of support to AU and its NEPAD programme.

24. Noting the reference to human rights in the work of RDT, there was some discussion of how human rights should be integrated into programme operation. It was critically important to have a development plan to anchor the work of the RCM. It was pointed out that the baseline should be a United Nations rights-based approach to the programming, implementation and monitoring of human rights norms and gender mainstreaming. In order to be true to the United Nations mandate – to speak for those who do not have a voice – and to uphold the organization's values, agencies would have to be willing to take less popular courses of action in some cases. Doing so would also serve to improve the image of the United Nations, which was perceived, rightly or wrongly, as having inconsistent standards on human rights violations. Agencies might proceed through concise and accurate provision of data on human rights violations in order to indirectly influence the policy debate, in which they do not have a political role by definition, pushing the agenda in a non-threatening and constructive way. Many countries well on track to achieve the MDGs lacked the legal framework and institutions needed to fulfil human rights treaty obligations. In those countries, time and effort must be invested over the long term in order to achieve sustainable change.

25. It was agreed that RCM aimed to achieve the common goal of one United Nations at the regional level. Participating members would have to adapt to the unique characteristics and needs of their regions in order to make the RCM as productive as possible.

D. PROGRESS REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS  
OF THE ELEVENTH RCM<sup>1</sup> MEETING  
(Agenda item 5)

26. A representative of the ESCWA secretariat presented an assessment of the outcomes of the eleventh RCM meeting (Beirut, June 2006) and the status of implementation of nine recommendations and six

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<sup>1</sup> Then known as the Regional Coordination Group for the Arab Region (RCG).

decisions, of which five were policy-oriented and 10 action-based. While two MDG-related joint products were successfully delivered, other recommendations and decisions were only partially implemented or not initiated, due in part to the disruption of RCM work caused by the unstable security situation in Beirut. At the same time, the need to re-examine available human and financial resources earmarked for RCM work and to establish an effective follow-up mechanism was highlighted. During the discussion, a number of participants briefed the meeting on inter-agency activities, which were bilaterally coordinated and could be taken into account in planning future RCM activities that would involve a larger number of RCM members.

27. One participant pointed out the need to move towards concrete and results-oriented recommendations where agencies are held accountable for timely delivery, while another called for a reporting mechanism, whereby each organization would designate a focal point for reporting on progress towards meeting the recommendations of the RCM. Regarding the benefits of learning about and building on the experiences of RCMs in other regions, the example of the Asia-Pacific RCM Regional Mapping Study was raised, the latter having identified priority areas of work in the programmes of the United Nations entities in that region for the period of 2008-2009. One participant highlighted the importance of sharing information and suggested that the RCM secretariat should produce a matrix of activities carried out and provide information prior to its meetings.

28. A representative of ESCWA proposed that in light of the 2005 World Summit outcome, the regional development programme in the Arab region should link development with peace and security, and should focus on transboundary development issues. It was noted that the importance of mainstreaming a human rights-based approach was still not appreciated in the region. An offer was made to provide capacity-building training on this approach to the RCM members, including ESCWA.

29. A representative of ESCWA introduced the booklet “Gender in the MDGs: information guide for Arab MDG reports”, which was a result of collaboration based on the decision taken by the 11<sup>th</sup> RCM meeting. He highlighted the importance of sex-disaggregated statistics to provide guidance for developing gender-sensitive policies. It was noted that the booklet, the first attempt of its kind in the Arab world, had established a statistical framework for incorporating a gender-sensitive perspective in current statistical MDG monitoring/reporting and for the evaluation and follow-up of international agreements such as those contained in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the United Nations Millennium Declaration. It was also noted that improving gender statistics calls for strengthening national statistical systems and improving methodological work in the collection of statistics through capacity building. The importance of securing a sustained Government commitment and raising the awareness of data producers could not be overstated.

#### E. CONSIDERATION OF THE RCM’S PROPOSED TWGS (Agenda item 6)

##### 1. *MDGs in the Arab region*

30. Given that various organizations in the Arab region were mandated to monitor progress towards achieving one or more MDGs and to provide relevant policy recommendations, the establishment of a TWG on MDGs was considered all the more important. There was a need to find more efficient ways to carry out work on the MDGs through the establishment of a formal structure, which could coordinate MDG-related activities and ensure joint ownership and accountability. The TWG should be a robust mechanism with a clear time frame and clearly defined division of labour. It should also promote thematic and policy coherence with the League of Arab States. The results of the 11<sup>th</sup> RCM meeting, notably the production of two key MDG-related reports (“The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2007: A Youth Lens” and “Gender in the MDGs: Information Guide for Arab MDG Reports”), were a good example of cooperation among various United Nations entities. One participant drew attention to the need to ensure that TWG publications should be issued under the name of the United Nations. ESCWA offered to be the convening agency for the TWG. In that connection, it was in the process of earmarking \$50,000 for the TWG, in



addition to in-kind contributions, including one post at the P-4 level. Subject to approval by the General Assembly, there might be another P-3 post, which could be earmarked for this purpose.

31. The following United Nations entities expressed their support for the establishment of the TWG and interest in providing technical support: the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO)-Regional Office for Arab States, the League of Arab States, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Development Programme-Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP-RBAS), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNEP, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODOC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). These entities pledged to support the monitoring of information and to make it accessible to relevant ministries and organizations. It was suggested that ESCWA prepare a proposal including a work plan and accountability framework, paying special attention to the needs of least-developed and conflict-affected countries, such as Somalia, Yemen and the Sudan. It was agreed that mechanisms, guidelines and financial arrangements should be determined at the first TWG meeting and that all TWG members should be committed to providing substantive input and support.

32. One participant proposed that the TWG should undertake a mapping exercise to identify ongoing and already-planned MDG-related activities in the region, including the resources already earmarked for this purpose. Efforts could then be made by the TWG to recommend joint MDG-related activities in the areas where more than one entity was involved for efficient use of resources. Based on the outcome of this mapping exercise, the TWG should also plan for new activities to fill in any identified gaps. The meeting agreed that ESCWA, as the convener, should set a tentative date for the first TWG meeting and prepare and circulate by email an action plan to the members in advance.

33. Participants were briefed on ESCWA's internal arrangements for establishing an inter-divisional taskforce on the MDGs, including the proposed preparation of a report on MDGs in the Arab region. The work of the task force would feed into the TWG's work plan and activities, once endorsed by participating agencies, and could strengthen cooperation with the League of Arab States in achieving MDGs at the regional level. It was suggested that matters relating to the theme and modalities of MDG-related coordination and cooperation should be dealt with by the TWG. In this regard, it was agreed that the TWG should decide on the specific deliverables, including the theme for major reports.

34. Because the MDGs were central and directly related to other global issues, namely, food security and climate change, it was proposed that working linkages among the three TWGs should be developed.

35. The meeting unanimously agreed to the establishment and membership of the TWG on MDGs, which will encompass all United Nations regional entities present at the meeting and the League of Arab States. It also agreed that the TWG would develop its terms of reference, based on the guidelines to be submitted by the RCM secretariat, specifying deliverables and timeline as well as addressing an accountability framework and financial arrangements.

## *2. Climate change*

36. It was noted that climate change is a global challenge that threatens to undermine development gains and the achievement of the MDGs. The impact may be especially large on non-oil producing economies in the region, which depend largely on sectors vulnerable to climate change such as agriculture, fishery and tourism. Attention was drawn to the Arab Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change, December 2007, and the Arab Framework Action Plan on Climate Change (AFAPCC), and to the collaboration between ESCWA and UNEP in support of the League of Arab States. One participant noted the huge knowledge gap with regard to: the exact impact of climate change on various sectors and economic activities in the region; the

economic cost of adaptation to climate change; the mitigation potential, especially in oil-based economies; and the activities undertaken in this area by United Nations agencies at the country and regional levels. He suggested that the region should invest in awareness-raising activities and mitigation strategies, and should focus especially on reducing vulnerability and building resilience as part of an adaptation agenda.

37. A representative of the ESCWA secretariat gave a presentation on capacity-building and awareness-raising for addressing climate change in the Arab Region, outlining the priority areas identified by AFAPCC for addressing climate change at the regional level in line with the global focus areas identified by CEB High Level Committee on Programmes. He noted AFAPCC's emphasis on capacity-building and awareness-raising and suggested an approach for United Nations collaboration on this issue, to include a mapping exercise on United Nations capacity-building activities on climate change, the identification of priority needs in the region and, accordingly, the development of a work plan for collaboration.

38. A recommended set of priority activities was provided, for cooperation in connection with adaptation, mitigation and finance, capacity-building and the reduction of emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. Potential partners were identified and a mapping was provided of related mandates and ESCWA activities planned for 2008-2009 and 2010-2011 for each area. In addition to capacity-building at all levels, the recommended activities emphasized: assessing vulnerability to climate change, strategies for disaster risk reduction, improving energy access to the poor, promoting renewable energy and integrated sustainable land management.

39. A presentation was made on change in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA): Challenges, opportunities and the role of the World Bank, outlining the main work of the Bank with its partners and client countries to: (a) understand the challenges and opportunities of climate change and its economic and social impact; (b) mobilize resources; and (c) provide a mix of policy and financial assistance. The World Bank had developed a corporate strategic framework consisting of six pillars to inform its engagement, primarily at the national level. A briefing was also provided on the establishment of the Climate Investment Funds, namely, the Clean Technology Fund and the Strategic Climate Fund, which were directed towards funding innovative project proposals. The presentation also included an assessment of the effects and manifestations of climate change in the MENA region. Finally, the presenter elaborated on how partnerships could help enhance the implementation of the climate change agenda at the country and regional levels.

40. A representative of ESCWA agreed that the water sector, and agriculture in turn, would be most affected by climate change, eventually causing economic and social repercussions. Presently, 80 per cent of freshwater in the ESCWA region and 60 per cent in the Arab region comes from outside. Given regional vulnerabilities, adaptation should be given priority in order to increase the resilience of member countries to the challenges posed by climate change. One participant noted that the WHO Director-General had identified climate change as a top priority, since it is affecting disease distribution and triggering new health problems. The meeting was informed of the fact that the environment constitutes one of the strategic objectives of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and that at ICAO headquarters a group on International Aviation and Climate Change has been established in order to discuss policy issues and support the ICAO Council in preparation for COP15, to be held in 2009. It was suggested that future RCM meetings could be paperless and that indeed the upcoming Meeting of Parties to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, to be held in Qatar in November 2008, will be paperless.

41. A representative of the UNEP expressed that organization's readiness to coordinate the work of the climate change TWG, which could address the immediate actions to be undertaken in preparation for the Poznan meeting of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change to be held in December 2008, as well as medium- and long-term actions. WHO, UNFPA, ESCWA, and the World Bank noted their interest in joining the TWG. It was stressed that flexibility is needed in terms of participation in the TWG, given the different areas of expertise involved.

42. The development of a draft work plan was proposed, in light of the existing AFAPCC and the conclusions of three presentations delivered during the session, also drawing upon potential opportunities arising from climate change such as job-creation and support for SMEs. Examples were provided of coordination in Africa, including the newly-established African Center for Climate Policy Studies, in collaboration with the Energy and Resources Institute of New Delhi. It was noted that ECA is working on the relationship between the three Conventions<sup>2</sup> in order to bring more synergy to the relevant activities, and that this could bring an opportunity to join efforts on behalf of the North Africa sub-region.

### 3. *Food security*

43. The representative of a United Nations organization gave a presentation on recent developments in the crisis of soaring food prices, noting the inter-linkages with soaring energy and fertilizer costs, and presenting historical price trends. He described the United Nations response and the comprehensive framework for action (CFA), and referred to major funding initiatives, such as the World Bank's US\$ 1.2-billion Global Food Response Programme. The presentation identified the main countries affected by the crisis in the region and stressed that food security risk management should be a priority given the region's susceptibility to price fluctuations. While energy price increases were likely to be permanent, the food crisis could be dealt with. It was stressed that, under the CFA, international consensus on sustainable bio-fuels is a priority, though the subject is highly politicized in the region.

44. There was a presentation by a representative of ESCWA on the global food crisis response program (GFRP), stressing that food prices and food security are priorities for the region, given expected demographic trends and constraints on expanding agriculture. Three areas for intervention were identified: managing overall demand for food; smoothing exposure to fluctuations in import prices; and investing in agricultural productivity. The GFRP objectives are to reduce the negative impact of high and volatile food prices, to support Governments in developing sustainable policies, and to enhance productivity and market participation in agriculture. US\$ 200 million had been allocated to finance programmes in the region's poorest countries, namely Yemen, Djibouti and the West Bank and Gaza. During the discussion, it was suggested that RCM might consider tackling not just the food crisis, but the broader issue of food security within a TWG.

45. FAO expressed its willingness to convene the TWG on food security but would prefer to keep it informal at this stage given that the United Nations High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, headed by FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Bank, is likely to call for the establishment of a regional coordination group.

46. ESCWA stressed the links between the proposed three TWGs on MDGs, climate change and food security, respectively, and pressed for a concrete decision on establishing a TWG on food security. In this vein, UNDP-RBAS noted that FAO's proposal for an "informal" TWG might be problematic if full commitment and joint accountability were to be ensured, and that given the high priority of this issue, a decision on establishing the TWG should be reached.

47. UNDP-RBAS pointed out that other activities are undertaken in the region on the issue of food security and that overlaps should be avoided, therefore the TOR for the food security TWG should be well defined. UNIDO mentioned its work on food safety undertaken in Lebanon since 2001 and expressed its interest in joining the TWG.

48. Agreement was reached on establishing the TWG, convened by FAO, and interest in participating in this TWG was expressed by ESCWA, UNDP-SURF, UNDP-RBAS and UNIDO. UNDP-SURF suggested

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<sup>2</sup> The Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

the need for an open-ended membership, so that interested entities could participate in some of the TWG's future activities. Discussion on the modality for cooperation and coordination, and decisions on the plan of action and deliverables, will be taken up at the TWG's first meeting. FAO will be responsible for presenting a progress report on the implementation of the TWG's plan of action at the next RCM meeting.

F. THE WAY FORWARD AND CLOSING OF THE MEETING  
(Agenda item 7)

49. A representative of the ESCWA secretariat noted that the representation at the twelfth meeting was high in both number and level, clearly demonstrating the commitment of the members to working together to better service the Arab region. The presence of the Deputy Secretary-General clearly signalled the importance attached to the RCM as a potential vehicle for ensuring "United Nations Delivering as One" at the regional level. The meeting afforded the opportunity to learn more about the emerging RDT and to reaffirm the need for increased coordination and collaboration between the two regional coordination mechanisms in the Arab region, building on the RCM's experiences in other regions, especially Africa. As a United Nations family and team working for a development agenda within a broader geographical coverage of the Arab region, the members had frank discussions, expressing differences of opinions on some issues, and were able to compromise in a positive manner.

50. On behalf of the convener of the RCM meeting and the RCM members, the Acting Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCWA expressed his appreciation to the Deputy Secretary-General for her presence and guidance on the first day of the meeting. He thanked the participants for their active participation throughout the course of the meeting and reiterated that ESCWA looks forward to the activation of the TWGs and the timely coordination between the TWG conveners and RCM secretariat.

**III. DECISIONS TAKEN**

A. APPROVAL, IN PRINCIPLE, OF THE DRAFT TOR OF RCM

51. Agreement was reached that in finalizing the TOR for RCM, it would be helpful to define the role and functions of the two regional mechanisms, the RCM and the RDT, through consultations between the head of UNDP-RBAS, as the chair of the RDT, and the Executive Secretary of ESCWA, as the chair of the RCM.

52. Certain follow-up actions were agreed as follows:

(a) The Chair of the RDT was requested to provide comments to guide the finalization of the TOR of the RCM by Sunday, 28 September 2008;

(b) The Chair of the RCM shall circulate the final version of the TOR to all RCM members following the outcome of the consultation;

(c) The draft TOR format for the TWGs should be prepared and circulated to the RCM entities, so as to finalize the format for the use of convening agencies in preparation of the full TOR.

B. AGREEMENT ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THREE TWGS SUBSIDIARY TO THE RCM

53. The three TWGs will focus on the following, respectively:

- (a) MDGs and the Arab region (convening entity: ESCWA);
- (b) Climate change (convening entity: UNEP-ROWA);
- (c) Food security.

54. It was agreed that follow-up actions were needed, as follows:

- (a) A draft action plan for each TWG shall be prepared on potential areas for collaboration;<sup>3</sup>
- (b) Date, venue and agenda of the first meeting should be set and announced to all entities having expressed an interest in joining TWG.

#### **IV. ORGANIZATION OF WORK**

##### **A. DATE AND VENUE OF THE MEETING**

55. The twelfth meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) was held at United Nations House, Beirut, on 13 and 14 September 2008. Seven sessions were held during the meeting.

##### **B. OPENING OF THE MEETING**

56. After thanking Deputy Secretary-General Ms. Asha-Rose Migiro for her presence at the meeting, Mr. Al-Dafa welcomed the participation of more than 20 United Nations regional entities, including the ECA-North Africa Sub-Regional Office, the World Bank and the League of Arab States.

57. He noted that the RCM has proved to be a good vehicle for deriving a common set of policy directives and specific goals and initiatives for joint action. A key achievement of the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting was the agreement to collaborate on joint initiatives, a notable example being the joint production of the report “The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2007: A Youth Lens”.

58. The convener noted that this year’s RCM is expected to take an important step towards enhancing synergy at the regional level through the establishment of working groups on key regional priorities, namely, achieving the MDGs in the Arab region, climate change and food security. He stressed the need to constantly seek out new avenues for regional cooperation and to substantially increase strategic partnerships in order to make tangible progress on the development agenda.

59. In her statement, the Deputy Secretary-General noted that the Arab region is assuming a leading role in development and that United Nations agencies in the region are becoming true south-south partners, notably through their leadership in technical cooperation with other regions.

60. The Deputy Secretary-General stressed that regional solidarity is a key asset in addressing the challenges facing Arab countries, and noted that the disparities in the region between prosperous and poverty-stricken countries have a negative impact on the region’s ability to respond to and meet the MDGs.

61. Emphasizing the consensus underpinning the 2005 World Summit, the Deputy Secretary-General noted that there can be no peace without development, and no development without peace, and underscored the urgent need to focus on the poorest countries and those with special needs.

62. The Deputy Secretary-General noted that today’s emerging challenges are often transboundary, requiring regional solutions, and called on the United Nations family to work together, plan together, and advocate together, building on respective comparative advantages. She highlighted the importance of coordination between the RCM and the RDT in line with ongoing reforms and as a step towards thinking strategically and applying the “Delivering as One” principle at the regional level.

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of the TWG on MDGs, a suggestion was made to carry out an “MDG mapping” as groundwork for the TWG.

63. She stressed the need for the United Nations regional offices to strengthen partnerships with other sub-regional and regional groups such as the League of Arab States, and welcomed the latter's membership in the RCM.

64. In addressing "system-wide coherence" in development work, at the global, regional and country levels, the Deputy Secretary-General stressed that the RCM is setting the normative foundation upon which the United Nations can plan and respond to regional socio-economic priorities.

#### C. PARTICIPANTS

65. The meeting was attended by 54 participants. In addition to three regional experts, these represented 16 United Nations regional offices, three United Nations country offices in Lebanon, United Nations Headquarters, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the League of Arab States.

#### D. AGENDA

66. The following agenda was distributed and followed at the meeting:

1. Opening.
2. Review of emerging global issues and challenges and their implications for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the Arab region.
3. Renewed role and functions of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) in the Arab region in pursuance of "United Nations Delivering as One" at the regional level.
4. The Regional Directors' Team (RDT) in the Arab States and MENA region.
5. Progress report on the implementation of the recommendations of the eleventh RCM meeting.
6. Consideration of RCM's proposed thematic working groups (TWGs):
  - (a) MDGs in the Arab region;
  - (b) Climate change;
  - (c) Food security.
7. The way forward and closing of the meeting.

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