The first regional workshop on social protection reform in Arab countries

25 to 28 February 2019

UN House, Beirut
Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the United Nations House in Beirut. It is an honour to open this workshop on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Region, which focuses on one of the most pressing issues currently facing our region: social protection. Demands for universal access to basic social protection and for the equitable redistribution of resources have become increasingly pronounced worldwide, and the Arab region is no exception. Social protection is a key policy tool for reducing inequality and poverty, and for protecting against lifecycle risks. Together with labour market policy, social protection is crucial to ensuring social inclusion and social justice, and to delivering on the 2030 Agenda’s promise to “leave no one behind”.

Across the world, social protection systems are becoming increasingly complex and are subjected to intense pressures. The forces of globalization, internal and external migration, and rapidly changing labour markets are producing new risks and vulnerabilities and unprecedented social realities. Conflict in several Arab countries has made it harder, but also more critical, to meet those severe challenges. As such, social protection systems must undergo significant and fundamental reforms in order to provide adequate support to all population groups.

The increasing complexity of social protection systems requires ever closer cooperation between a wider range of stakeholders. We are therefore honoured to welcome the Minister of Social Affairs of Lebanon, Mr. Richard Kouyoumjian; and the Minister of Labour, Mr. Camille Abousleiman, to this workshop. Your participation highlights the Lebanese Government’s focus of social protection policies as a means to address social and economic challenges, and to increase people’s trust in the capacity of Government to protect and support.

I would also like to warmly welcome Ms. Mai Farid, Assistant Minister of Finance of Egypt; and Ms. Maha El Rabbat, Executive Director of the MENA Health Policy Forum. We greatly appreciate your attendance.
The current workshop also benefits from the participation of distinguished government experts from various ministries and agencies, including ministries of planning, social affairs, education, health, governance, and finance. We also welcome the support of specialists from the World Bank, the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and OECD, and of academics from the American University of Beirut and the American University in Cairo. Only through concerted efforts can we build solid, comprehensive and coherent social protection systems that ensure access to basic social guarantees for all.

We have a long and challenging path ahead. The region is suffering from high informality and youth unemployment rates. Social insurance systems are challenged by fragmentation, resulting in struggles to extend coverage and maintain financial sustainability. Basic public services, like health and education, are overburdened, which translates into unequal opportunities for human capital formation. All these issues are further compounded by high levels of internal displacement and migration.

Nonetheless, almost all Arab countries are currently reforming their social protection systems. Consequently, the main objective of this workshop is to exchange expertise, knowledge and experience to guarantee success. Furthermore, the workshop encourages a systems approach to social protection. In order to adapt to new social and economic realities, social protection systems must be better integrated across their different components. They should facilitate social and labour market mobility and provide support for people to invest in their future.

In line with the mandate of ESCWA to use its convening power and to facilitate regional cooperation and integration, I am proud to open this first regional workshop on social protection reform. I wish you every success in your work.

We at ESCWA are ready to support you to the best of our ability.

Thank you