UN-ESCWA
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

UN-DESA
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Development Account project

On

"Participatory Human Development in Post-Conflict Countries"

Summary report on three e-discussions held within portal of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

On

Participation in public policy processes; Media and development; and Social integration: towards achieving inclusive participation in Western Asia

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Acronyms

ESCWA	**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia**
UN-DESA	**United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs**
DA	**Development Account**
UNDP	**United Nations Development Programme**
CSOs	**Civil Society Organizations**
MDGs	**Millennium Development Goals**
NGOs	**Non-Governmental Organizations**
SPDS	**Social Participatory Development Section**

I. Background

1. Three electronic discussions were held as part of the ESCWA subregional project on participatory human development in post-conflict countries. The project targets four post-conflict and conflict-afflicted member States: Iraq, Palestine, Yemen and Lebanon. and aims at enhancing government and civil society participation in post-conflict Western Asia countries, specifically on matters of initiating social policy dialogue and contributing to the various phases of social processes including formulation, implementation, and monitoring. The project comprises **9 activities** of capacity-building, networking and normative nature, among which the holding of 3 electronic forums on three interrelated thematic areas.

2. ESCWA draws upon its regional experience base, systematically weaving together key operational and policy lessons identified and good practices, and providing a forum for participants to address concrete issues and challenges facing them in their country/community.

II. Context and purpose of electronic forums

3. The electronic forums were organized and managed by the Social Participatory Development Section in the Social Development Division at ESCWA, and were operated under a web portal created specifically for this purpose called "Towards an Inclusive Participatory Social Development in the ESCWA region", and established within the website "Participatory Development In Western Asia" (http://pdwa.escwa.org.lb). The 3 e-forums took place around three broad interdependent themes and within a specific timeframe (table 1).

Table 1- E-forums themes and date of activation

E-forum theme	Period of activation	URL link
1. 'Participation in Public Policy processes'	1 July – 30 August 2010	http://pdwa.escwa.org.lb/forum-participation.php
2. 'Media and Development'	1 August – 30 September 2010	http://pdwa.escwa.org.lb/forum-media.php
3. 'Social Integration: towards achieving inclusive participation in Western Asia'	1 September – 30 October 2010	http://pdwa.escwa.org.lb/forum-social.php

Overall goal and purpose

All in all, the electronic forums aimed at triggering discussions on the above-captioned social-related issues that feed into the broad portal theme. This mainly aimed to find room for possible suggestions, ideas and experiences on practical strategies to be adopted in the Arab

region to promote public-civic participation in public policy processes, enhance media role in the social domain, as well as further social integration through a participatory process. It also aimed at creating a network to share best practices, as well as establish innovative and collaborative development solutions, and facilitate partnerships among users of the portal. All in all, the three e-forums were an opportunity to explore means and tools for creating an inclusive society and a more engaged civil society, including the Media, in development efforts, as well as capturing its interconnection with peace-building and conflict prevention and its expected outcome in terms of ensuring inclusive participation of all stakeholders in the social domain and the decision-making process.

The e-discussions were facilitated, summarized, exchanged and translated in both English and Arabic, as is the case of the hosting website where all narratives, synopsis and shared documents were incorporated in both languages. This attempt aimed at reaching out to a larger number of users and stakeholders who have a vested interest in the social development arena in the Arab world and elsewhere. Despite the limited duration of the e-forums, the latter succeeded to attract 25,000 visitors to the e-portal, of which 120 persons subscribed to the discussions, while only 52 actively participated in the discussions offering a total of 376 contributions.

Relevant readings were linked to the website to raise awareness and enhance knowledge about the subjects tackled in the e-forums. The statistical poll embedded in the website has stated a number of 383 downloads of readings, reports, advocacy material and publications that were systematically uploaded on the website.

Participants in the 3 e-forums discussions

This open and multi-stakeholder e-discussion was made up of 49 experts from 11 countries that are actively involved in creating and fostering an inclusive society and a more engaged civil society, including the Media, in development efforts. The experts were drawn from governments, non-governmental organizations, universities, social development activists and partners. The diversity in experience and area of work of this electronic practice allowed for an interesting and enriching exchange of ideas and country experiences, and shored up a truly participatory approach that constitutes the pillar of such initiative.

At the inception stage of the e-forums, ESCWA built a database of experts and other stakeholders involved in the social sphere and dispatched an invitation letter spurring them to take part in each of the three e-forums. ESCWA Information Center also played a vital role in expanding the number of participants by sending an invitation to its 5,000 member-based roster. All the more, and with a view to further enhancing inter-regional and inter-institutional perspective of the network discussions, ESCWA spurred the first-round targeted participants to extend the invitation to their colleagues in their respective Countries of residence, being from government, civil society, private sector, Media or local-based entities, who could have interest in this electronic knowledge-sharing workspace. Increased

participation in the network from social practitioners was viewed as an opportunity to further strengthen its relevance and quality.

Generating **376 responses** from experts, practitioners and policy-makers from diverse countries and stakeholder groups, the e-forums presented a rich array of perspectives and some actionable recommendations for consideration by ESCWA and the larger international community.

Table 2- Distribution of participants in the 3 e-forums as per country and number of contributions

Country	Number of Participants			Total of Participants	Number of contributions			Total of contrib.
	1st forum	2nd forum	3rd forum		1st forum	2nd forum	3rd forum	
Lebanon	6	3	3	12	35	13	21	69
Syria	7	3	1	11	14	7	2	23
Iraq	3	3	5	11	13	18	6	37
Palestine	2	1	3	6	17	2	22	41
Egypt	1	1	0	2	20	16	0	36
Jordan	1	1	0	2	1	17	0	18
Yemen	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
Bahrain	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
KSA	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
Canada	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
U.S.A.	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
Total	**22**	**14**	**13**	**49**	**102**	**75**	**52**	**229**
E-Forum's Moderator	1	1	1	3	53	41	53	147
Total with Moderators	**23**	**15**	**14**	**52**	**155**	**116**	**105**	**376**

Rules

Ground rules were put into vigor in order to limit the contributions of participants to a maximum concise and precise input and avoid controversial subjects that may flame up vulgar or profane verbal attacks. Those rules were captured in the e-forums homepage section (http://pdwa.escwa.org.lb/fora.php)

The moderators/facilitators

Three Moderators were selected from a handful of social experts and as per specific selection criteria, to actively and efficiently moderate discussions in each of the assigned electronic forum. They were respectively assigned to trigger discussions on specific issues related to the e-forum theme, as well as share and promote best practices of relevance to the forum subject, offer well-grounded comments to participants on their contributions, establish

innovative and collaborative development solutions, as well as facilitate partnerships among users of the portal and promote interactive discussions on issues of immediate relevance to ESCWA's agenda. All three moderators were requested to prepare, individually, a full-fledged report of 25 to 30 pages emanating from each e-forum, which recapitulates main discussions, presents an assessment of each e-forum processing, including setbacks, challenges faced and lessons learned, and concludes with a number of conclusions and recommendations that were drawn out from users and the moderators themselves.

Noteworthy is that the three moderators presented a total of **147 contributions**, out of which 53 were drawn in the first e-forum on "Participation in Public Policy Processes", 41 in the second e-forum on "Media and Development", and 53 in the third e-forum on "Social Integration".

The methodology used by the 3 moderators in this assignment included a desk review of publications and reports on each of the 3 subjects tackled. It also entailed a thorough reflection on the set questions tailored by ESCWA under each e-forum, and on a series of other questions that were addressed and raised by the forum members. They all utilized the moderation technique relying on the pre-determined open questions. Additionally, each moderator triggered its own strategies and case studies as a means to review and assess concrete examples of success or setbacks with regards to each e-forum theme. Below a brief snapshot of each appointed moderator versus the tackled e-forum (table 2).

Table 3 – Appointed Moderators in the 3 e-forums

E-forum theme	Moderator & Nationality	Snapshot on Moderator
1. 'Participation in Public Policies'	Mr. Nader Said FOQAHAA' (Palestinian)	Mr. Foqahaa' holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the Western Michigan University-USA, with specialization in Sociology of Development, Research Methodology, Social Movements, Criminology & Social Problems. He also has a Master's Degree in Economics. He is the Founder & current President of the Arab World for Research & Development (www.awrad.org). He produced a considerable number of reports, papers and publications on social-related issues for a handful of United Nations Commissions and agencies as well as other International and regional organizations.
2. 'Media & Development'	Mr. David IBRAHIM (Lebanese)	Mr. Ibrahim is a freelance journalist with expertise in media development and crisis/conflict management. He holds a European Master's degree in Diplomacy and Strategic Negotiation, and is one of the six winners of the "Peace Journalism Award" granted by UNDP & AFP Foundation. He is also a Trainer in the investigative journalism, and the founder and moderator of the "Objective reporting in conflict situations" facebook page. Mr. Ibrahim has published extensively in several national and regional refereed journals.
3. 'Social Integration	Mrs. Ibtesam AL-ATIYAT	Ms. Al-Atiyat is a professor of Sociology at St. Olaf College-USA, and holds a PHD degree in Political Sociology, and a Master's

towards achieving inclusive participation in Western Asia'	(Jordanian)	Degree in Sociology. She published a number of articles and research papers on several cross-cutting social issues in the Arab region. To her experience count serving as a consultant and senior research fellow at Kettering Foundation (USA) with proven expertise in deliberative democracy, community development and civic education. She is also the founding member of the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy based in Lebanon, and serves on board of SIGI- Jordan, and the Jordanian Women's Union.

The Award-winning prize

With a chief aim to sensitize the contribution of participants, especially in the Arab world where such a practice is not very common, and with a view to galvanize a maximum number of members adding value to the discussions, the project managing team launched an Award-winning contest by including all members' inputs and insights into a multi-country competition to win the '***best ESCWA e-forum contributor award***'.

Upon completion of the scheduled e-forums, three best contributors were selected from each e-forum, which were respectively awarded a **Platinum Certificate** for first place, a **Golden certificate** for the second place and a **Silver certificate** for the third place. A Committee of three Senior Social Affairs Officers at ESCWA oversaw, evaluated and judged the participants' contributions anonymously throughout the discussions process, and announced the winners a month after the closure of the three e-forums.

Needless to say that such an incentive constituted a vital tool to encourage and underpin the promising contribution of participants from all spheres. It also gauged a greater number of interventions and ensured a qualitative substantive input in each of the 3 e-forums.

The e-forums consolidated report

In order to document the main e-forums findings, including members' and moderators' insights and views, a consolidated comprehensive report was produced to provide synthesis of the e-discussions undertaken within the three key thematic subjects and present an assessment of such an electronic practice, as well as capture a number of conclusions and recommendations drawn out from the e-discussions, and touch base on the use of this portal and dissect the way forward. While the original detailed report was issued in Arabic language, the present report constitutes a briefing supporting document for non-Arabic speakers who would like to have an overview of the overall e-forums discussions and outcomes.

Part III- The electronic forums

With a view to frame up inputs of contributors in the above-captioned e-forums themes, SPD Section tailored some guiding and stock-thinking questions that would stoke participants' contributions. Below are the posted questions under each of the three e-forums followed by a synthesis of main discussion findings.

1st e-forum : "Participation in Public Policy Processes"

1) *How would you describe the relationship between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and government entities in your country?*

2) *What is the role that Civil Society Organizations look up to play? What are the mechanisms needed to achieve this role?*

3) *What are the operational tools that are needed to enhance the stakeholders' role in affecting governments' agenda and public policies? (*stakeholders = civil society organizations, private sector, media practitioners, social actors, local leaders, etc.*)*

4) *What are the challenges and problems facing CSOs when striving to impact policy decisions?*

5) *Unsound development policies could trigger conflicts and result in uninformed decisions and undesirable development outcomes. How do you think participation can contribute to conflict prevention and conflict resolution, especially in your conflict-prone area?*

6) *Do you have any examples of strategies, good practices and mechanisms that you would like to share in terms of enhancing public-civic participation?*

Major Findings

It turned out from the various participants' inputs that the performance of CSOs in the Arab countries varies depending on the historical, political, cultural, and legislative conditions in which they exercise their activities. It also varies depending on the size and sources of funds of those organizations, their regulatory and administrative structure, their goals, the variety of their activities, their geographical coverage (local, national, regional or international), and also their financial and administrative independence. In most cases, the relationship between Governments of the Arab countries and CSOs remains unclear and dominated by tension, dispute, and implicit conflict over the legitimacy of working for and representing the interests of the people, and who possesses that legitimacy. More specifically, the public-civic relationship greatly varied among the participating countries in the discussions, whereby it ranged from being confrontational in **Egypt** in view of the sporadic

government's control over CSOs work, to being relatively congruent and democratic in **Lebanon** despite CSOs struggle to outstrip the prevailing sectarianism that sometimes curbs their work. In **Palestine**, the relationship of CSOs with the Government appears to be more symbiotic as they partner with the Government in service delivery and the design of national plans, noting that this relationship is sometimes affected by the political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. CSOs in **Iraq**, on the other hand, lack a structural mechanism for cooperation with government institutions, and suffer from the strong influence of political and religious parties as well as weak institutional capacities. In **Syria,** the majority of CSOs focuses on charitable work, and manages to secure Government's partnership in areas that the latter identifies as a priority. In **Yemen**, CSOs are either considered by the Government to be competitive organizations or inconsequential that should be affiliated to the Government and work in tandem with the Government's priorities and programmes, whereas in **Jordan**, and despite some success stories, the government views CSOs as a threat rather than potential partners.

'In order for CSOs to be able to play their role effectively, they should have the freedom of expression and assembly and should have access to information. They should also strengthen their individual and institutional capacities and activate multi-level working networks capacities, through programmes addressed by international organizations such as ESCWA'.

With regards to the role that CSOs look up to play, the discussants agreed that this role ranges from being a mere charitable and humanitarian role to a more institutionalized role based on development participation, lobbying and monitoring. This role can be summarized in practicing influence over decisions and public policies, supporting government institutions in public service delivery, monitoring the work of the Government and developing a sense of ownership and trust in the Government through the identification of roles and responsibilities, stimulating citizenship and promoting civil culture, reversing negative trends and conducts, raising public concern for development issues, releasing and disseminating information and exchanging experiences, and developing coordination and networking relationships. Furthermore, while the monitoring role that CSOs opt to play is not favored by governments for fear of unveiling corruption or obstructing hidden agendas, CSOs can act as intermediaries between the people and the Government on the one hand and can have an intrinsic role in preventing conflict and be instrumental in the post-war recovery process. Participants also stressed that CSOs can work hand-in-hand with the private sector and the Government to further socio-economic development through small local enterprises that are well-regarded by citizens since they directly serve their interests and have direct tangible outcomes. However, discussants agreed that in order for CSOs to be able to play their role effectively, they should have the freedom of expression and assembly and should have access to information. They should also strengthen their individual and institutional capacities and activate multi-level working networks capacities, through programmes addressed by international organizations such as ESCWA. However, in view of the prevailing constitutional political regimes in the Arab region that do not equally guarantee democracy and human rights, participants were strongly skeptic about having a genuine participatory role for CSOs.

As to the operational tools needed to enhance stakeholders' role in affecting governments' agendas and public policies, participants agreed that stakeholders should have a participatory understanding and mutual agreement on social issues, they should avail themselves with democratic modes of work, cooperation forms, strong and influential Media, independent funding, cohesive mechanisms in grassroots, civil society-oriented agenda, as well as civic awareness and culture among individuals, groups and decision-makers. It was also noted in this spectrum that CSOs' impact and influence stem from their coalition and coordination with diverse social actors, such as the Media, private sector associations, political parties and trade unions, etc. Accordingly, participants agreed that CSOs should exert more efforts in terms of (1) understanding the challenges they face and devising achievable goals; (2) possessing in-depth knowledge of policies in order to be able to dissect it, criticize it and offer appropriate alternatives that meet with the public opinion's interests and needs; (3) focusing the work of CSOs on specific areas of specialization rather than addressing dispersed issues; and (4) addressing the causes and constituents of problems rather than only resolving them.

'Participatory development -if well implemented, through dialogue forums, participatory mechanisms and impact-based projects and programmes- could prevent conflict, end it, or be instrumental in the post-war recovery process, as well as create an environment of peaceful coexistence.'

However, and according to participants, CSOs face various constraints and challenges that cripple their endeavors to influence public policy decisions**,** namely (1) the occupation and conflict situation that leads to lack of stability, decline in democratic practices, erosion of citizenship and the sense of affiliation (namely in Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon), decrease in the respect of Human Rights, and the draining of human and financial resources; (2) The socio-political nature of regimes that are mainly characterized by the prevalence of sectarianism and factionalism (namely in Lebanon and Iraq), the predominance of regional and sectarian party politics (Palestine), the single-party-system (Egypt and Syria), and gender discrimination; (3) The centralized decision-making process that is mainly limited to government institutions where decisions are taken based on a top-down approach; (4) Lack of proper practice of the rule of law, whereby most of the Arab laws dominate over, interfere in and suspect the work of CSOs, which further cripple the role that CSOs look up to play; (5) Absence of qualified individual and institutional capacities that enable civil society to engage in the policy processes at all levels, which undermines the achievement of equitable social policies and the development of effective and results-oriented partnerships of All and for All, especially for people in most need; (6) Concealment of the political–trade union work, whereby CSOs, trade unions and workers' federations are marginalized from the decision-making process, and in cases where CSOs are engaged in the State's project and agenda, they are engaged with no clear definition of the standards and levels of participation; (7) Absence of citizenship culture within the social contract, which leads to a 'client-provider' relationship between CSOs and the Government, improper practice of democracy, and weakness in the culture of participation; and (8) CSOs' dependence of funding on factions and parties, the Government

or even international organizations, which make them tied to agendas that may not correspond with the actual priorities and needs of the communities.

Concerning the role of CSOs in conflict prevention and conflict resolution, the discussants laid out a number of reasons that contribute to the aggravation of social problems and the resurgence of conflicts, among which the following: the variance in multi-national, sectarian, and religious affiliations; the rampant corruption and absence of social justice and equality in the region; the absence of adequate and needs-oriented policies and the absence of qualified institutional capacities. Accordingly, the discussants agreed that participatory development -if well implemented, through dialogue forums, proper participatory mechanisms and impact-based projects and programmes- could prevent conflict, end it, or be instrumental in the post-war recovery process, as well as create an environment of peaceful coexistence. By simply enhancing public-civic participation, this can foster a democratic culture that promotes dialogue, interest aggregation, conflict mediation and reconciliation, which positively reflect on the impediment of violence. For example, in cases where states are weak, or have failed, and are experiencing conditions of widespread conflicts, civic engagement in policy formulation can offer the institutional basis for public service delivery and can ensure reintegration of once marginalized groups and appeases their feeling of alienation, thus minimizing the risk of regression into a state of conflict.

Despite the challenges faced by CSOs in this arena, participants shared examples of strategies, good practices and well-based mechanisms that helped promote participation in public policies and community development. In **Palestine**, for example, the health sector that was equipped with qualified cadres and possessed extensive experience and had a wide geographical spread, was able -to some extent- to play an influential role in formulating health policies and assist the Government in providing health services to the public. In post-war **Lebanon**, CSOs strenuously worked in close coordination with regional and international organizations (e.g. ESCWA) on issues related to development-based project management, academic education, and small enterprises. One of the major documented examples is the initiative of "Baladi, Baldati, Baladiyyati" (1996) that succeeded to hold the municipal elections in due course after being postponed by the Executive Authority; this is in addition to other good examples that were scored in building social consensus for economic reforms and long term development, increasing the direct delivery of social and economic services, improving natural resource management and environmental protection through collective action, and promoting effective governance by fostering transparency and accountability of public institutions, and the monitoring of parliamentary elections. In **Egypt,** however, the non-governmental organization "Dar Al-Orman" successfully worked on local community development initiatives, poverty alleviation activities, and public service-delivery (health, social and entertainment), but minor impact was made on the policy-making process. Concurrently, in **Jordan**, the 2004 National Human Development Report represented one instance where the Government gave CSOs the authority to assess the status of human development in the country. Other successful experiences were also shared in this context namely the Economic and Social Council and the sectoral development projects that uphold decentralization and promise the expansion of the circle of public policy-making. **In Syria**, on the other hand, the Syrian Trust for Development constituted a good example of participation

in view of its achievements made in the advancement of education, culture and rural development. This is in addition to the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs that authorized CSOs to work on issues that were previously untapped, including issues related to child labor and begging. However, these kinds of partnerships raise questions about their legitimacy and independence, and the real ability of CSOs to influence policies.

2nd e-forum : "Media and Development"

1) *How active and dynamic are the Media in social issues in your country?*

2) *How can the Media promote and advocate development-related issues in a way that better captures and triggers public interest?*

3) *A considerable number of Media outlets tend to prefer reporting political and entertainment events rather than social development issues. What would be the proper mechanisms that can trigger the media to take part in the social domain and to better cover development issues?*

4) *What are the factors -- individual and institutional -- that can enable or hinder the Media in influencing decision-makers' decisions and enacted policies?*

5) *How can the Media contribute?*

6) *How can we redress Media's role in decision-making positions? Do you have any examples of strategies, good practices and mechanisms that you would like to share?*

Major Findings

'Although most Arab countries have made notable progress in modernizing media regulations, profound restrictions persist in promoting Media role in development, which are mainly related to State censorship, limitations on freedom of expression, licensing systems, restrictive press laws and inadequate knowledge of social development challenges among journalists.'

Participants initiated their discussions by giving an overview of the current situation of the media in their respective countries, which reflected concrete differences and varieties in the ability of the media to play and perform its legitimate role. The **Jordania**n media, for example, has managed to publicly address some issues of corruption, public service short-comings, and livelihood problems, despite prevailing restrictive legal obstacles. **Lebanon**, on the other hand, has an extensively active Media and a considerable number of Media institutions that are predominantly focused on political issues rather than social challenges, which glaringly shows the media's preference for political and entertainment reporting over social development issue coverage. In **Palestine**, some media programs address social development issues, but they are usually seasonal and superficial, and occasionally lack qualified capacity and focused specialization, which obviates their role in shaping the audiences' attitude and even influencing the decisions of policy-makers. In

Iraq, despite the existence of some interactive television programs that discuss citizens' needs, the Media is unable to present alternatives or proposals for reform, and thus falls too short from having a lead role in social development. Concurrently, social development issues in **Syria** are not well-received by the media actors compared to political and economic issues, namely with respect to analytical social programs and surveys that can change actual trends or affect the decision-making process.

> *'The media is able to contribute to greater public awareness, concern and debate which lead to greater involvement in decision-making on issues affecting them and their societies.'*

Moving the discussions on a complementary front, participants unanimously agreed that although most Arab countries have made notable progress in modernizing media regulations, profound restrictions persist in promoting Media role in development. These restrictions are mainly related to State censorship, limitations on freedom of expression, licensing systems, restrictive press laws and inadequate knowledge of social development challenges among journalists. More specifically, and despite the symbiotic role that the Media can play in influencing public policy, contributing to conflict resolution and promoting participation in the social development process, the response of Arab Media to issues of development is still weak, due to the following constituent reasons: (1) lack of proportionality between the size of media institutions and the allocation of time and resources to social development issues; (2) state control over media institutions and the absence of the role of the ministries of information; (3) limited margin of freedom and protection available to the Media and media personnel; (4) traditional policies and lack of capacities to cope with technical modernization; (5) lack of funding supporting media development; (6) and the growing divisions and tendencies of consumption and extremism. Moreover, according to participants, despite the fact that most countries in the region guarantee freedom of expression, they either lack the necessary implementing legislation, or have adopted contradictory laws that neutralize the rights and work of the Media. Furthermore, although social issues are occasionally addressed, they are neither properly dealt within a development framework, nor are they subject to a sustainable follow-up. In this sense, participants agreed that even if interest in social matters is expressed, it is seldom institutionalized or even formulated within a tangible, structured and strategic plan.

Participants agreed that Arab media sector involvement in social development must be able to facilitate access to information in order to enable well-informed citizens to take an active role in dialogues that impact their lives. They also stated that the Media is able to contribute to greater public awareness, concern and debate, which lead to greater involvement in decision-making on issues affecting them and their societies. They also agreed that the media is well placed to become an intermediary between most important social development stakeholders, regardless of whether or not it is considered to form part of the private sector,

> *'The Media plays an important role in the creation and success of a strong civil society structure as it provides an enabling environment for civil society to raise public awareness of social challenges, their causes and consequences, and creates diverse coalitions which can influence the policy agenda and supports lobbying activities aimed at Government representatives.'*

or organs of the Government. Accordingly, the Media plays an important role in the creation and success of a strong civil society structure as it provides an enabling environment for civil society to raise public awareness of social challenges, their causes and consequences, and creates diverse coalitions that can influence the policy agenda, as well as supports lobbying activities aimed at Government representatives. Most participants stressed in this context the need to increase media-driven dialogue between citizens and Government, between citizens and political parties and between groups of citizens, as a means to provide policy-makers with a clearer view of the needs of citizens and support the legitimacy of State authorities and the consent of the governed. They also stressed the role of the Media in resolving and preventing conflicts through mediating dialogues, increasing concern on public affairs, and spreading a culture of tolerance and citizenship. According to participants, the Media is well positioned to stimulate real democratic participation and to protect public interest by framing issues for discussion, provide relevant information, reflect diverse social views, and disseminate the outcome of this process to a broad audience in a meaningful and relevant way.

All the more, and according to participants, the Media is able to promote and advocate development-related issues provided that concerted efforts are exerted in terms of: (1) raising journalists' awareness and competency in the field of investigative journalism and building their capacities through specialized training courses and workshops; (2) promoting freedom of expression and democratic practices, and limiting government intervention in Media-related tasks; (3) promoting public participation in development projects and policy discussions through the Media; (4) translating social news and stories into stylistically and substantively alluring reports that appeal to audiences and stimulate feedback; (5) allocating space in media reports on issues related to gender mainstreaming and women empowerment; (6) organizing competitions for best audiovisual program/documentary and written reports addressing critical social development issues; (7) using the Internet as a platform to network and exchange knowledge and lessons learned from one another on issues related to social development and participation in public policy processes; (8) urging Media leaders to involve in social development as a means to enable well-informed citizens to take an active role in dialogues that impact their lives; (9) publishing opinion polls on public interest in social issues covered by the media.

Media actors should act as a mobilizing agent that strengthens civic engagement and facilitates public participation on issues of public interest, as well as play a watchdog role that checks abuses and enhances accountability and transparency in public governance.

Throughout the discussions, certain individual and institutional factors were perceived as crucial to enable the Media to influence decision-making and contribute to conflict resolution. In this context, participants focused on the importance of dialogue in influencing decision-making, reducing conflicts, and establishing a culture of tolerance and citizenship. They also stressed the need for media actors to maintain transparency and integrity in collecting and disseminating information, and to act as a mobilizing agent that strengthens civic engagement and facilitates public participation on issues of public interest, as well as play a watchdog role that checks abuses and enhances accountability and transparency in public governance. They also agreed that the Media should focus discourse on common

grounds to resolve differences and keep away from defamation and slander, as well as exert efforts to raise awareness and public interest on issues that promote dialogue, interest aggregation, conflict mediation and reconciliation, which positively reflect on the impediment of violence.

As to the proper means needed to improve and upgrade the role of the Media in the social domain, participants commonly presented a number of suggestions that can be summed up in the following: (1) permit the Media to play its full role and execute its task without State interference or any act of suppression (ensure freedom of access to information); (2) focus on issues of concern to citizens, like corruption, as evidenced by the Iraqi example in which raising the issue of corruption resulted in the resignation of an involved minister; (3) Form strong bridges for coordinated and complementary efforts between the Media and civil society, which is vital to proposing, implementing and critiquing government strategies. In fact, civil society and the media will benefit more by seeing their aspirations met more effectively through collective action; (4) encourage professional competition to attract a greater public attention; and (5) spread awareness on the ability of the Media to transmit development messages advocated by civil society organizations and the public to decision-makers, as well as its ability to provide feedback on any progress made or any obstacles that may have been encountered

3rd e-forum : "Social Integration: Towards Achieving Inclusive Participation in West Asia"

1) *A "society for all" must be equipped with appropriate mechanisms that enable their citizens to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives and shape their future. What kind of mechanisms do you think should be availed to fulfill this accomplishment?*

2) *What are the kind of participatory tools and processes needed to achieve social integration? And what is the kind of plans, strategies and projects that can uphold this goal?*

3) *What do you think is the operational relevance of the concept of "Social Integration" for peace building and conflict prevention?*

4) *Do you have any specific examples of indigenous and culturally-oriented mechanism that was used as a means to achieve social integration?*

5) *Do you have any examples of strategies, good practices and mechanisms that you would like to share in terms of enhancing social integration?*

Major Findings

In this e-forum, participants stressed the relevance of social integration and social inclusion in the Arab countries in view of the volatile political instability, increased conflict, worsened unemployment, exacerbated poverty, and the unjust exclusion of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. The exclusion of these segments has had economic and social impact, and has been a main reason for failure to meet the MDGs in the region. Participants discussed

and elaborated the concept of social integration and jointly agreed that a "society for all" can only be achieved through implementing democracy and imposing the rule of law as well as through advancing the rights of all individuals and securing a space for interaction and integration. In addition to stressing the need to ensure social justice, and an independent, honest and fair judiciary, participants enumerated a number of socially excluded segments that should be given particular attention in future plans, namely women, youth, foreign workers, detainees, people with special needs, immigrants and refugees.

Participants agreed on the importance of achieving a cohesive and equitable "society for all" that requires, among others, a process of institutional capacity-building and dissemination of values that enable all people to participate in the social, political and economic life. However, for participants, social integration will remain elusive if it is not supported by a democratic rights-based approach that operates under a proper rule of law, which safeguards human rights, civic freedoms and social justice. In this context, participants stressed the relevance of promoting a culture of citizenship, especially in view of the resurging religious and ethnic conflicts in the region, such as the sectarian crisis in Lebanon, the Sunni-Shiite-Kurdi divisions in Iraq, and the Fatah-Hamas conflict in Palestine. According to participants, very few national efforts were exerted to advance social integration and very few policies were designed to ensure full participation of social groups and individuals in the social, economic and political spheres, which contributed to the emergence of "second-class" citizenship, comprised of women, migrants and refugees. In this realm, discussants highlighted the issue of "justice", which is breached by unequal constitutional rules and unjust rule of law. In this respect, participants agreed that achieving a "society for all" requires a common respect for human rights, which represents a problem in itself since there is no consistency on the general framework of human rights in the region. The influence of religious groups in "exclusionary" countries like Jordan and Egypt has been growing, according to many participants, due to the absence of democracy. The impact of political instability and occupation, especially in Iraq and Palestine, was also viewed as a main obstacle to ensure social integration of minorities, and other marginalized groups.

'A "society for all" can only be achieved through implementing democracy and imposing the rule of law as well as through advancing the rights of all individuals and securing a space for interaction and integration'.

In order to integrate all people into the development process, participants proposed a number of measures and tools that should be thoroughly considered as a means to align the concerns of vulnerable social groups with national development goals and plans. A summary of the proposed measures and tools are listed below: (1) the need to integrate all people into the development process and public policy processes; (2) create opportunities and resources that shore up the participation of all social groups in the process of policy development as well as the economic growth

'Social integration will remain elusive if it is not supported by a democratic rights-based approach that operates under a proper rule of law, which safeguards human rights, civic freedoms and social justice.'

and social progress; (3) promote a culture of democracy, citizenship, solidarity and justice; (4) define and dissect a dynamic relationship between governments and CSOs; and (5) design anti-discriminatory legal provisions. All the more, the integration of Arab women in politics constitutes a heavy challenge to social integration endeavors due to a prevailing "male patriarchal society" and common religious traditions. Serious efforts are therefore needed, which go beyond establishing "quotas" for women representation, to promoting a new vision of social roles and formulating gender-sensitive legislations and budgets. Youth, on the other hand, though better educated than previous generations, face escalating unemployment challenges, which require activating youth organizations and strengthening the role of youth-related government institutions that help empower the youth and strengthen the role of young people in society. Also, foreign workers, who constitute a considerable proportion of the labor force in the Arab region suffer from discrimination and persecution due to the absence of legal protection measures and appropriate institutional structures that deal with their cases. Despite several countries' efforts to protect these groups, the persistence of marked inequality and exclusion significantly curbs the achievement of social integration in the region. Among other socially excluded groups, the discussants pointed out to the detainees and former detainees, people with special needs, displaced people, and refugees, and emphasized the need to establish legal frameworks and institutional structures that protect their rights and resolve their problems in an effective manner.

According to participants, social integration is crucial and symbiotic to build peace and prevent conflict in the region; a region that tremendously suffers from acute political instability, failing social justice, minimal participation, unjust dominance of tribal divisions and sectarianism, and weakness of citizenship. Social integration is therefore considered to be an indicator of political harmonization and the attainment of social stability, security and safety. Discussants agreed in this realm that socially inclusive policies play an important role in rebuilding the social fabric in many conflict-afflicted countries, including Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine. Concurrently, and as per the discussants, CSOs hand-in-hand with the private sector, can serve as important partners and mediators in reflecting the needs of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups and in impacting social policies. The media was also considered by participants as an important partner in this endeavor, as it can play an influential role in promoting a culture of participation, sensitizing public interests, and providing information and support for social solidarity.

'social integration is crucial and symbiotic to build peace and prevent conflict in the region'

Many successful examples were presented by participants with regards to achieving or contributing to a socially inclusive society in their countries, among which the case of Jordan where the amendment of the "Personal Status Law" was supported by a great popular participation and by women and Islamic movements. Imperfect as the adjustments were, this reflected a spirit of participation and openness of the government to civil society. Another example is the "Chehabian" reforms in Lebanon that took place in the sixties, and which gave birth to many development projects upholding marginalized groups and isolated areas, and tied up social bonds among the regions. These reforms were mainly translated in building roads, establishing schools and health centers and extending water networks. Further

examples of social integration strategies were shared among participants, including: (1) addressing the factors that hinder women integration in the social, economic and political spheres; (2) establishing mutual recognition and respect of different societal segments; and (3) strengthening the family role in providing welfare and social protection, which constitutes a fundamental basis against exclusion and marginalization.

Part IV- Conclusions

The discussion on the three areas revealed similarities in the situation of vulnerable policies in the region. The political instability and arising conflicts were seen as the main reason behind the increased number of vulnerability, unemployment, corruption, and inequality across the region. The corruption, failure of leadership and lack of accountability that grips most governments further aggravated the situation. Accordingly, participants concluded that in order to ensure effective social development policies that can achieve sustainable human development, a full comprehension of and investment in the concept of participation is needed, which subsequently calls for an expansion in democracy and freedoms and the concept of citizenship in the Arab region. They also joined views that the political capacity of CSOs is assessed according to the degree of their qualitative and quantitative influence on policy, which comes to a conclusion that influencing policy is largely linked to democratic practices and the political system openness to democratization. Discussants also concurred that the process of participation in policy development is still in its infancy and needs time to evolve to become a consolidated and institutionalized approach with well-defined binding mechanisms. This necessitates the development of appropriate frameworks that systematize, organize, and regulate participation in policy and programme development, so that it is addressed as a right and a duty; a process that requires from CSOs to further develop its technical capacities and skills, strengthen its organizational structure, and maximize its coordination and cooperation with the private sector and the Media. Discussants also concluded on this subject that the pressures exerted by international organizations towards institutionalizing government-civil society relationship, have served well the work of CSOs towards securing funding and implementing independently their social agendas, which moved CSOs' work from executing mere public awareness programs to investing in lobbying and advocacy-based programs that are based on debate and public dialogue. A common conclusion was also retrieved from the discussions, namely that in spite of the international support provided to CSOs, the concept of participation and networking is still not implemented, especially in countries suffering from occupation, conflict and lack of democracy.

The overwhelming conclusion of most discussants in the Media e-forum, was that public access to information and its full engagement in the public realm through expressing its interests and views via the mass media is very important and crucial. They also stressed the relevance of the Media and the role that it can play as a partner in the development process. They all look up to a more active Media that can serve as a communication channel between citizens and the government, constitute a space to social groups who might otherwise be excluded, and act as an advocate for social development and public participation in policy processes and a mobilizing agent for sharing lessons and publicizing best practices.

Participants also noted that the Arab Media involvement in social development must enable well-informed citizens to take an active role in dialogues that impact their lives and further forge its gradual transition to "participatory Media". They also concluded that in order to enhance the role of the media as a key player in realizing participatory social development, governments must undertake a thorough revision of relevant laws to help establish an enabling environment that promotes more governmental openness and public participation in decision-making. In addition, discussants concluded that media practitioners should regularly obtain up-to-date information from reliable sources – which can only be achieved through freedom of expression – and should ensure the analysis and interpretation of this information in its own context and away from political influences.

Under the "social integration" e-forum, participants noted that opportunities vary, and conditions of equality in power and resources diminish according to gender, social class, urban-rural distribution, ethnicity, and tribal, sectarian and family affiliations. They also concurred that citizenship is weak and relative to the sub-identities of ethnic, religious, zonal, and tribal nature, and that the design of public policies is limited to "elite" people in the decision-making sphere, which fail from meeting the needs and interests of all groups. Discussants also unanimously agreed that occupation and conflicts have adverse effects on the components of social solidarity, especially with regard to political stability and community development, which further accelerates the politicization of sub-identities and increases trends of exclusion and national destabilization. Projects of democratization and political reform were also considered by participants to be faltered, and that there is huge disparity between discussing social justice, equality, and the rule of law and their actual application.

Part V- Recommendations

Some of the recommendations that emerged from the discussions under the three e-forums are listed below.

A. Recommendations related to participation

(a) Promote the concept of civil society and non-inherited affiliations, thereby enhancing the level of community's participation;

(b) Ensure the rights of expression and assembly for civic groups based on common goals and interests;

(c) Recognize that civic engagement is a core value of good governance;

(d) Invest in civic education and spread a culture of participation through schools, universities and the Media;

(e) Foster civil society by developing supportive legal frameworks (with rights of association), providing assistance with grants and training, and developing partnerships through joint projects and delegated service delivery;

(f) Establish mechanisms, processes, practices and two-way capacities that enable government-civil society participation;

(g) A need for Governments to ensure an open and transparent policy-making process amenable to external scrutiny and review;

(h) Strengthen coordination capacities through (1) instruments like dedicated internet sites, guidelines and training; (2) building networks of public officials that enable sharing of lessons; (3) encouraging innovation by disseminating examples of good practices and reward innovative practices;

(i) Participatory processes need to adhere to the principles of transparency and democracy. If participation is manipulated, the result will be uninformed decisions and undesirable development outcomes;

(j) Ensure adequate financial, human, and technical resources if public-civic participation in policy-making is to be effective;

(k) Promote the establishment of decentralized systems as a means to facilitate participation and reduce bureaucracy.

B. Recommendations related to media

1. Endorse laws that protect journalists and preserve their rights to work, which can help establish an enabling environment that promotes more governmental openness and public participation in decision-making;
2. Enable journalists to regularly obtain up-to-date information from reliable and accurate sources, which can only be achieved through legislation on freedom of expression that guarantees public access to government data, documents and records, as well as proceedings of official meetings and decision-making processes;
3. Build the capacity of Media actors through holding workshops and networks that enhance their reporting skills and further knowledge and experience-sharing;
4. Launch awareness campaigns and secure financial contributions to build up specialized development media outlets;
5. Emphasize the relevance of investigative journalism in addressing development issues;
6. Encourage Media outlets to produce development-related programs and reports, by engaging them in development-oriented seminars and conferences;
7. Spur the Media to go beyond sectarianism and focus more on issues of public concerns;
8. Conduct surveys and research-based studies that monitor and assess audiences' interest in development issues.

Related to "Social Integration"

9. Develop a comprehensive national vision stemming from Copenhagen commitments, which serves as a new social contract between citizens and the State on the basis of mutual respect, justice and equality;

10. Abolish discrimination against marginalized groups, including women and minorities, whether it is stipulated by law or based on practice of social norms that treat these groups as "second-class" citizens;

11. Forge the implementation of the rule of law and strengthen judicial integrity;

12. Adopt measures that reinforce the presence of marginalized groups and minorities in institutions and decision-making positions;

13. Involve CSOs and marginalized groups in decision-making and policy formulation;

14. Fight against the culture of exclusion and promote political awareness, mutual tolerance and acceptance, through programs and school curricula that call for peaceful coexistence;

15. Establish Social and Economic councils and social monitoring institutions that provide qualitative and quantitative information on different social groups and ensure their inclusion in Governments' and Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGOs) agenda;

16. Involve marginalized groups in the decision-making process, and build their capacities in order to ensure their full social, economic and political engagement through formal and informal channels (CSOs, community organizations);

17. Tailor gender-sensitive national development plans that meet the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups;

18. Review the national budgets in light of the needs and aspirations of different groups;

19. Involve civil society in the public policy processes and stir up its responsibilities with regards to representing marginalized groups and giving voice to them;

20. Sensitize governments to apply policies that encourage the integration of vulnerable groups, strengthen mechanisms of transparency and accountability, engage civil society in this arena, and urge the private sector to embrace its social responsibility.

Part VI- Lessons learned from the e-forums

The e-forums have added value to the work of the SPD Section, UNESCWA and galvanized the outcomes of the project itself. The use of e-forums had advantages and disadvantages, which are listed below.[tell us which ones are advantages and which disadvantages]

(a) Online conferencing proved time- and cost-effective for the Section, since it brought participants from dispersed geographical locations together in one platform for a multicultural dialogue on a theme of common interest to all;

(b) Participation can be maximized as participants do not have to travel or devote time to face-to-face meetings or seminars;

(c) Sourcing and circulating new material by hot-linking to other sites or posting new material on the website was easy;

(d) The e-forum practice allowed participants to come in and out of each forum, and still catch up with the proceedings of discussions, which is difficult in face-to-face meetings where participants are unable to recapture what has transpired in their absence. Text-based communication proved to be a valuable resource for follow-up use, and certainly made the writing-up of the e-forums consolidated report easier.

(e) Since participants are disembodied with no physical presence, they were freed from some of the stereotypes that can hinder their interactive communication. They were more likely to assess others on what they say rather than on their age, race or physical condition. The spread ideas had a greater chance of standing and falling on their own merit.

(f) This electronic platform gave time for reflection; It gave participants time to review previous messages, check references and take an amount of time to compose their respective contribution. Many participants felt more comfortable to write down their thoughts and excelled in expressing their views in writing, rather than expressing their views verbally in an intermittent manner.

(g) This electronic practice freed participants from time zones, since the system is available for 24 hours, which enabled participants to participate in local time without jeopardizing their other professional or personal commitments.

In controversy, this electronic discussion availed some constraints that should be taken into account in future similar practices:

a) Moderating online conferences proved to be challenging since the moderator needs to spend a good deal of time carefully crafting messages so as not to be misinterpreted, and checking in with participants to make sure they are in synchronization with the whole group.

b) It was proved to be hard to establish and maintain online group synergy, with people coming on- and offline at random. In general, participants found it more difficult to socialize or form a connection with other participants than in a face-to-face forum/meeting. Knowing this, it should be explored the possibility of using photographs and a small profile of each participating member, especially if sustaining the participants as a group is one of our underlying objective.

c) Ironically, the greatest benefit of online conferencing – i.e. flexibility of access — became a liability when efforts were exerted to spur people to move to a more profound analysis of a certain topic within the 3 e-forums. This online conferencing allowed people to take breaks whenever the going of discussions got tough, thereby making the discussion sometimes not synchronized.

d) All three e-forums were bilingual, as is the case of the hosting website. Although moderators were urged to post their messages and comments in both English and Arabic, they eventually declined this request in view of the exclusive participation of Arabic-speakers. Failure to attract English speakers in the discussions was thereby detected.

e) Because the conference is Web-based, people had to be always reminded to visit the website and contribute to the discussions, and sometimes to complement some of their substantive contributions that were left behind. As a result, barriers need to be low and motivation has to be particularly strong.

f) Need for constant technological support with adequate technical capacity to resolve arising technical problems: During the three e-forums processing, participants experienced a range of technical frustrations that stemmed from a number of causes — slow computers, slow modems, overworked servers, institutional firewalls, etc. That said, the technical requirements for web-based online conferencing are generally relatively low, and should be therefore galvanized.

g) It was also proved that as part of the e-forums conference planning, thorough consideration should be made to stir up the motivation of participants and, wherever possible, build-in incentives to increase the level of motivation. Out of this experience, participants' motivation in response to the Award-winning prize has brought the most weight to bear on the outcome of the online conference. This motivation was high for a combination of reasons:

- *High need for the information*: Those who participated the most were those who had the greatest need for the information, and those who could actively apply it to their work.
- A strong will to win one of the three UN prize awards as best contributions to each of the 3 e-forums.
- *Sense of responsibility*: In the e-forums, people had agreed in advance to participate and clearly felt a need to fulfill their commitment. Those who were participating in a professional capacity needed to make sure they represented the interests of their organizations.
- In the 3 forums, participants were constantly encouraged to participate; several people came online in response to the repeated calls and e-mails made by the project managing Section.