

الأمم المتحدة
اللجنة الاقتصادية والاجتماعية لغربي آسيا

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Thank you Mr. Chair, and please accept my congratulations on your election to this session of the Commission on Social Development.

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of ESCWA, I am pleased to address this session of the Commission on the priority theme of poverty eradication, taking also into account its relationship with social integration and full employment. Being the review year, it is useful to take stock of where we stand in the battle against poverty and the goal of creating a truly inclusive society for all.

In Western Asia, millions of people face several obstacles to social integration, including poverty, unemployment and social insecurity. The MDGs 2010 report forecasts that three developing country regions (including Western Asia) are unlikely to achieve the target of halving extreme poverty by 2015. This would not only take away some of the gloss of achieving that target at the global level, but also focus attention on corrective measures required to accelerate progress in implementation in lagging regions.

According to the MDGs 2010 report, the proportion of people in Western Asia living in extreme poverty tripled between 1990 and 2005. Due to fast population growth, the numbers of extreme poor in the region rose almost four-fold – from 3 to 11 million – over the same period. In addition, it is estimated that large numbers of vulnerable people lie on the edge of poverty in the region.

For the Middle East and North Africa as a whole, in 2005, the numbers of people estimated to live on less than USD 2 a day (51 million) was almost five times greater than those living under USD 1.25 a day. This vast number of people living marginally above the extreme poverty line gives an indication of the extent of vulnerability of low income groups to negative income shocks, such as the recent global food, fuel and financial crises.

But while income measurements based on international poverty lines are critical to monitor global and regional trends, poverty assessments must go well beyond the mere lack of adequate income. This calls for greater attention to the multidimensional nature of poverty, as elaborated in *Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development*, including access to health and education; inadequate housing; discrimination and exclusion; and lack of participation.

The benefits of initiatives focused on alleviating income poverty and ensuring access to social services can only be maximized if accompanied by socially inclusive policies targeting the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including the youth, the elderly and people living with disabilities. Inclusive societies that successfully integrate all social groups into the development process are better equipped to maintain social cohesion during times of crisis, and to avoid social upheaval and decline into poverty in economic downturns. At the same time, these issues cannot be seen in isolation from sustained economic growth, the availability of employment opportunities and adequate social protection.

Social protection is vital to improve the capacity of vulnerable groups to manage livelihood risks that pushes them into poverty. The debate between proponents of universal social protection and targeted or conditional approaches will live on but if the poor can benefit from both approaches, they should certainly be implemented, according to national priorities and resource availability. While conditional cash transfers can often succeed in lifting vulnerable groups out of poverty, universal social protection systems can achieve these goals even more effectively and ensure the creation of permanent social protection floors

Ladies and Gentlemen

Ensuring decent employment for all should be considered as the central platform for pro-poor development policies, given that unemployment remains the most urgent socio-economic development challenge in the ESCWA region. A comprehensive social development strategy should thus target employment generation and enhanced job quality, notably for vulnerable groups. Generating sufficient employment opportunities and decent work is the key to combating

poverty, building human capabilities, and promoting a more equitable and inclusive process of social development in the region.

In Western Asia, several governments have responded to the recent global economic crisis by stimulating job creation through increased investment in infrastructure. Some governments have also adopted measures to support workers through job and skills training and more elaborate social protection systems. Bahrain, for example, has launched an unemployment insurance scheme that is financed by contributions equally shared between workers, employers and the Government. By disseminating these and other innovative national initiatives, ESCWA also aims to facilitate the exchange of good practices in the areas of social protection and poverty reduction at the regional level.

ESCWA is committed to working with our member countries to put in place institutional frameworks and mechanisms that support an integrated approach to poverty reduction, based on social protection, social integration and employment generation.

Thank you.