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Population Distribution, Urbanization, Internal migration and Development

Statement by

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Chairperson, Distinguish Delegates, Colleagues,

Once again, I wish to thank you for giving the Population and Social Policy Team of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) this opportunity to briefly outline its current work programme in the area of population distribution ,urbanization , internal migration and development.

Mr. Chairman,

Between 1980 and 2005, urban population in the Arab region has increased from 44 percent to 55 percent. At this rate, it is projected that the percent share of urban dwellers will increase to 57.1 percent in 2010 and to 61.3 percent by 2020. However, it is expected that the dynamism of this rural to urban migration process will be mitigated during from 2000 to 2020, and its pace will decelerate. As this process loses momentum, the average growth rate of urban population will decline from 3.5 percent between 1980 and 2000, to 2.6 percent from 2000 to 2020.

To raise awareness of the issue of rural to urban migration, ESCWA dedicated the third issue of its biennial Demographic Profile of the Arab Countries to addressing the implications of internal migration on rural development. The study aimed at highlighting the forces behind population ageing in rural areas and discussing the critical implications of rural to urban migration on rural population. The study also aimed at promoting a holistic strategy to integrate rural women and rural aged

people in the context of development planning. The study disclosed that although the process of ageing in the Arab region is a relatively recent phenomenon, population ageing in rural areas seems to have begun much earlier in many countries, and we expect that it will accelerate. The most important determinants of rural population ageing in Arab countries is a heavy outward migration from rural to urban areas, particularly among male working age groups, and to a lesser extent the urban-to-rural migration of the older population after retirement. The evidence gathered suggests an exodus of people in the age group 15-64 from rural areas in all countries with varying magnitudes. This rural-to-urban shift in population within the Arab countries and the consequent rural population ageing may have far-reaching development implications for rural agriculture, economy, environment, social organization and for the relevant societal institutions including families and households. Because of the speed with which rural ageing is expected to occur, the need for Arab countries to make decisions, establish policies and take concrete steps to integrate this issue in planning development is urgent.

In the area of urbanization and urban development, ESCWA's work in fostering sustainable urban development and social inclusion takes root in its efforts towards the implementation of the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals. It aims to spearhead efforts and initiatives by national governments as well as local authorities, civil society organizations, the private sector and the media, particularly in the five primary areas of urban governance, the right to housing and land tenure, the enhancement of local governance, the alleviation of urban poverty, and community empowerment.

Along this same line, ESCWA held an Expert Group Meeting on "Urban Governance and the Millennium Development Goals: Towards Implementing MDGs' Target 11 'Equitable Cities'" in Kuwait during December 2007. The EGM intended to urge member countries to evaluate what has been accomplished thus far towards alleviating urban poverty and exchanging lessons learned on urban governance in order to counter urban inequities and their associated socio-economic effects.

On the advocacy level, ESCWA annually publishes its Country Profiles on Urbanization and Housing Policies with the aim of monitoring development in housing and urbanization sectors in the region. The profiles provide an overall assessment of the political, economic and social framework of the housing and urban development sector, and they address issues of urbanization, effective urban

governance, housing and social inclusion, the status of women and the security of tenure.

In a similar context, ESCWA issued a study on "Urbanization and Changing Character of the Arab City" which aimed at analyzing the changes that currently affect Arab cities as a result of rural-to-urban migration, population growth and socioeconomic developments, taking into consideration the historical background of the individual city and its social capital. The study, which sheds light on the role of development in shaping the character of the Arab city, consists of a comparative analysis of three case studies: Amman, Beirut and Dubai. Each of these examples has already drawn attention for the significant developments in their economic, social and physical sectors. In addition, ESCWA is currently preparing the Status of the Arab City report, the first in a series, which analyses the implications of urbanization, globalization, and wars and conflicts relative to the sustainability of the city.

Mr. Chairman,

I would like to seize this opportunity to contemplate the fact that continuing to ignore rural people in planning and programming efforts will result in serious implications since such action limits the scope for achieving the ICPD POA and the MDG's. Rural people, especially women and the elderly, are already suffering notable inequalities and inequities. In many countries, their burdens have been increased by dramatically reduced social budgets as governments implement structural reforms.

In closing, we at ESCWA are extremely thankful to the member governments that welcome cooperation with ESCWA and that actively participate with us in our population and development programme. We appreciate their continued cooperation, and we welcome whatever suggestions these governments may wish to share with us on ways that may be of even greater assistance.