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REPORT

EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON POVERTY STATISTICS
BEIRUT, 10-12 SEPTEMBER 2002

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Introduction

1. At the beginning of the new millennium, the issue of poverty remains a multidimensional global phenomenon. While the human situation improved more in the past century than during any previous stage in history, the eradication of poverty still demands much of the attention of policy and decision makers in the majority of countries, including those in the Arab region. At the Millennium Summit of the United Nations, heads of State and Government adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration, in which they recognized their collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level, and identified key objectives, including the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. To that end, they resolved to halve the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day.

2. Against that background, in view of the importance of poverty statistics and in accordance with the efforts of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to unite its endeavours with those of all others involved with the issue, ESCWA organized, in cooperation with Paris 21 and the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRTCIC), the Expert Group Meeting on Poverty Statistics that was held in Beirut from 10 to 12 September 2002.

3. The objectives of the meeting were:

(a) To exchange expertise on the measurement of poverty, in its various dimensions, and the use of statistics in formulating national poverty eradication policies;

(b) To propose the necessary indicators for the measurement of poverty in ESCWA member countries and to identify the statistical sources used. Such indicators will assist the countries of the region to monitor progress towards the development goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger that is included in the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

4. At the meeting, discussion focused on the following issues:

(a) Overview of the theoretical and practical expertise of international organizations in measuring poverty;

(b) The need to provide the statistical data necessary for measuring poverty, evaluate its availability and sources, and consider the needs of member countries for the building of national capacities in that field;

(c) Poverty statistics as a tool for policy formulation.

I. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. ORGANIZATION AND PARTICIPANTS

5. The expert group meeting on poverty statistics was held in Beirut from 10 to 12 September 2002. It was organized by ESCWA in cooperation with Paris 21 and the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries.

6. Participants included experts from national statistics offices in Arab countries who have been involved in the implementation of family surveys and the handling of data relating to poverty measurement. Representatives of United Nations organizations and agencies working in that field also attended, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

B. OPENING

7. Ms. Mervat Tallawy, Executive Secretary of ESCWA, made an opening statement in which she welcomed participants. She said that while poverty was a global, multidimensional problem, statistics relating to the measurement and analysis of that phenomenon had yet to reach the requisite standard in many developing countries. She noted that the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his statement to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which was held in Johannesburg in 2002, had affirmed the need for Member States to formulate a plan for implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and to focus on the two issues of poverty and the environment. Against that background, the Executive Secretary urged the countries taking part in the meeting to provide and develop poverty-related statistics and to accord such statistics high priority in the work of central statistical bodies.

II. PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

8. During the three sessions of the meeting, a number of papers were presented, dealing with the issues that were itemized previously. This section of the report includes a summary of those papers.

A. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL EXPERTISE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN MEASURING POVERTY

1. *Food and Agriculture Organization estimates of food deprivation*

9. The FAO representative expounded the methods adopted by the Organization to measure food deprivation. He explained that such methods are based on comparisons of food consumption, expressed in terms of calory intake, with a certain energy requirement norm. The proportion of the population with food consumption below that norm is considered underfed. Using that measure, it is possible to identify those persons whose food consumption level is insufficient for body weight maintenance and work performance. The speaker then considered the sources of data, which include special surveys on food consumption. The most commonly undertaken type of survey however is the household income and expenditure survey, which provides data on the size of a family's expenditure on food and other socio-economic characteristics and demonstrates the relationship between expenditure on food and the social position of the family.

2. *Poverty reduction in the Middle East and North Africa, 1970-2000*

10. The representative of the World Bank discussed the endeavours exerted by that body with respect to poverty reduction. A paper was presented that had been prepared by Richard Adams and John Page on poverty in the Middle East and North Africa during the period 1970-2000, comparing the situation in that region with the rest of the developing world. According to that study, less than 2.5 per cent of the population in the region is living on US\$ 1 per day or less. The reasons for that relatively low figure include certain socio-economic practices, the ability of poor persons to benefit from periods of economic growth and, above all, migration and migrant remittances. Moreover, the mean income of the poorest quintile of the population has been a significant factor in reducing poverty levels. Various studies were conducted during the 1990s with a view to estimating the extent of poverty in the Middle East and North Africa, and results showed that, while poverty levels had fallen in Morocco and Tunisia, they had risen in Egypt and Jordan. However, the data extrapolated from country studies shows diversity in the current attempts to measure poverty in the region.

3. *Outcome of Rio Group work on poverty statistics*

11. The representative of the Rio Group presented a review of its work on poverty statistics. The Group was established in 1996 within the framework of the Statistical Commission of the United Nations. It comprises experts in the field of poverty measurement who have an impact on local communities. The aim of the Group is to exchange the expertise between international organizations and other groups that are working on the measurement, analysis and use of poverty statistics and, in particular, groups that work directly with national statistical bodies. Certain of the Group's activities were reviewed, including the organization of conferences on issues related to poverty measurement and the preparation of a report covering best practices in the field of poverty statistics. Participants were urged to attend the forthcoming meeting of the Group, at which it is planned to discuss that report.

B. DATA AND POVERTY STATISTICS NEEDS IN ESCWA MEMBER COUNTRIES

1. *Methods of collecting poverty data in ESCWA member countries*

12. An expert from Cairo University reviewed methods of measuring the various types of poverty, be they material or human, with a view to explaining the differences between those methods and their respective advantages and disadvantages. The expert said that the study of poverty involves four stages, namely: (a) the identification of poor persons; (b) the identification of their characteristics; (c) the identification of the causes of poverty; and (d) the identification of poverty eradication policies. It was essential that quantitative data complemented qualitative data embodying the experience of poor persons and their methods of dealing with poverty. She referred to certain studies on poverty measurement that had been carried out by ESCWA member countries, noting that, when it came to differentiating between the poor and the non-poor, those studies varied with respect to their definitions of standards of living, their measurement units and their definition of the poverty line.

2. *Regional poverty statistics studies*

13. The national experiences of certain Arab countries in measuring poverty were reviewed. Those countries were Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen. The review focused on the methodology employed in measuring and estimating poverty, the sources of data used, deficiencies in the data and the ability of the methodology employed to register social and economic changes.

C. POVERTY STATISTICS AS A TOOL FOR POLICY FORMULATION

1. *Poverty monitoring systems and the Millennium Development Goals*

14. The UNDP representative presented a paper on poverty monitoring systems and the Millennium Development Goals. He noted that such systems aimed to provide decision makers and planners with accurate information on the status of poverty and on the progress made towards set development goals. They included the formulation of a dynamic programme for measuring and monitoring the impact of poverty on national policies and strategies, including policies on the allocation of resources and social budgeting and fiscal and monetary policies. Such systems may monitor the effectiveness and value of social service provision, the empowerment of poor persons, income distribution mechanisms and good governance. Those systems may be applied at all levels within a country, provided resources are available.

2. *Building analytical capacities in order to improve the production and use of high-quality statistics*

15. On behalf of the representative of the World Bank, Mr. Ahmed Hussain presented the work undertaken by the World Bank Institute in building analytical capacities to improve the production and use of quality statistics. He reviewed the training workshops that had been organized by the Institute in order to build capacities for the production and analysis of poverty statistics. Such workshops were aimed at policy makers and the producers and users of poverty statistics, and took place as part of the Poverty Analysis Initiative launched by the Institute with a view to improving poverty statistics through a poverty analysis programme. The aim of the initiative was to increase the use and analysis of data relating to the measurement, monitoring and evaluation of the impact of poverty. The Millennium Development Goals had strengthened this initiative by increasing demand from national statistical bodies for the production and dissemination of quality data.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

16. In the course of the discussions held throughout the Meeting, participants reached certain conclusions and made the following recommendations:

(a) Poverty is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon that can be measured using various indicators that embody the concept of poverty. It is therefore necessary to review the regional priority list of indicators, as recommended by the Workshop on Development Indicators that was held in Beirut from 12 to

14 November 2001, in order to reflect changing national situations and monitoring-related activities, in addition to international development commitments and the priorities of each country;

(b) The national statistics offices in the ESCWA region play an important role in providing key information needed for the preparation of Millennium Development Goals reports, United Nations Development Assistance Framework-Common Country Assessments and poverty reduction strategies, as applicable. Those offices should therefore strengthen cooperation with the national bodies responsible for development, monitoring and planning;

(c) There is a need for deeper analysis, in order to provide greater understanding of the extent and nature of deprivation and of the causes and consequences of poverty in the countries of the region. To that end, it was recommended that national statistical offices should take the necessary measures to collect and disseminate data;

(d) The importance was stressed of qualitative research on poverty as an integral part of quantitative work. It was therefore recommended that qualitative studies should be carried out in addition to quantitative studies, and should include participatory studies, in-depth interviews, focus groups and auto-evaluation studies;

(e) It was recommended that ESCWA should take the necessary steps with a view to forming a technical task force for poverty statistics, comprised of members with a variety of special poverty-related skills. The aim of such a task force would be to coordinate and formulate standard statistical concepts and definitions for the region, in cooperation with the Rio Group, which is part of the Statistical Commission of the United Nations;

(f) There is a need for cooperation with regional and international organizations with respect to the building of national capacities in the field of poverty measurement and related statistical activities. The establishment of partnership between ESCWA, the World Bank and Paris 21 is to be encouraged. There is also a need for training with respect to the analysis and evaluation of data on poverty and for the quality thereof to be improved. Indicators and policies must be formulated and qualitative studies carried out; workshops and seminars held and training courses conducted in the workplace. Sources of funding for such activities should be researched by ESCWA in cooperation with other international organizations;

(g) Participants commended the endeavours of the Rio Group to assemble the various experiences of poverty measurement, thereby making it possible to use a variety of methods and a range of statistical standards and sources in order to measure poverty in accordance with a number of different concepts and frameworks. Participants therefore urged the countries of the region to take an effective part in the activities of the Rio Group, with a view to the exchange of regional expertise, and to become involved in the preparation of the Group's report on best practices;

(h) Neutrality, independence and objectivity must be maintained in statistical work, especially when measuring and analysing poverty statistics;

(i) In view of the relationship between poverty and work in the informal sector, including agriculture, and marginal occupations, especially with reference to women and children, there is a need to improve the instruments for collecting data in those fields, in order to increase awareness, and to draw up policies and intervention programmes that will effect change;

(j) Given the multidimensional nature of poverty, its manifestations, definitions and concepts, and in view of the fact that it constitutes a denial of basic human rights, it was recommended that national statistics bodies, in all their activities, should respect State commitments to international human rights norms, including the right to development, when preparing statistical indicators relating to poverty, in order to ensure that they are consistent with international conventions and instruments;

(k) Participants commended the endeavours exerted by the countries of the region with respect to the gathering, dissemination and analysis of statistical data in general and poverty statistics in particular. They also commended the efforts exerted by ESCWA in that regard and in building the national capacities of the countries of the region, and the part played in the meeting by ESCWA and, in particular, the fact that it had posted meeting materials on the Internet.

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Annex II

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Symbol	Title
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/INF.1	Information note
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/L.1	Proposed organization of work
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/2	FAO Estimates of Food Deprivation
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/3	Holding the Line: Poverty Reduction in the Middle East and North Africa: 1970-2000
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/4	Methodological and Operational Challenges of Poverty Measurement
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/5	Poverty and Methods of Measuring it in the ESCWA Region
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/6	Poverty Measurement in Egypt
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/7	Poverty Statistics in Jordan
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/8	Poverty and Economic Fragility: The Approach Adopted by the Department of Statistics and Related Indicators (Morocco)
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/9	The Palestinian Experience of Poverty Measurement
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/10	Poverty Measurement in Tunisia
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/11	Poverty Statistics in Yemen
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/12	Poverty Monitoring Information and Reporting Systems, and MDG: A Suggested Model
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/13	Capacity Building Programme to Support PRSP and MDG Initiatives at the World Bank
E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/WG.2/14	Measuring Poverty in Yemen: Experience from the PIMS