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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

**REPORT****EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON  
GOVERNANCE AND CONFLICT RELAPSE  
BEIRUT, 31 MAY 2011****Summary**

The expert group meeting (EGM) on Governance and Conflict Relapse, which took place on 31 May 2011 in Beirut, was aimed at bringing together experts in the field of governance and development in order to provide enriched discussions pertaining to the possibilities of improving governance practices in the Middle East, as well as exploring ways to break the vicious cycle of governance deficit and conflict relapse. The meeting examined the root causes of conflict and poor governance in the region from economic, political, financial and social perspectives.

Participants made a number of recommendations pertinent to conflict-afflicted member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) region. They underscored the need to look at both conflict and governance as a regional phenomenon, to employ and educate youth in order to prevent conflict relapse and ensure that development practitioners coordinate aid with national Governments, while guaranteeing the development of indigenous governance practices.

This report summarizes the main debates and concerns raised by governance and development experts in a variety of contexts. Albeit not comprehensive, it aims at conveying the plethora of strategies and recommendations advanced during the EGM for coping with the challenges of developing sound governance practices to eradicate conflict and build sustainable peace and development.

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## **Introduction**

1. The report of the Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict points to the fact that the post-conflict phase is subject to significant insecurity and political uncertainty. However, the end of hostilities tends to generate high expectations for the provision of tangible political, social and economic gains. The report lists support for the provision of such basic services as water, sanitation, health and primary education among the most frequently requested assistance, in addition to economic revitalization and the restoration of core Government functions, in particular basic public administration and public finance.<sup>1</sup> Such provisions and functions cannot be met without either sound governance practices or mechanisms.
2. In a background discussion document for the Seventh Global Forum on Reinventing Government entitled *The Challenges of Restoring Governance in Crisis and Post-Conflict Countries*, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) concluded that “without effective governance institutions – an effective Government, a strong private sector, and a vital civil society – little can be done to bring about peace, reconstruct war-torn countries, and stabilize political, economic, and social conditions”.<sup>2</sup> Effective governance is therefore a necessary, albeit not the only, precursor to peacebuilding.
3. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), through its regional role and diverse areas of expertise, is uniquely situated to examine the challenges involved in governance reform under crisis conditions. The Section for Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues (ECRI) hopes that this deliberative exercise will help advance the prospects for development and sustainable peace under crisis, not only for planners and practitioners in the region but also in other post-war areas, confronting similar challenges, or other similar conditions of political instability or socio-economic uncertainties.

## **I. RECOMMENDATIONS**

4. The expert group meeting (EGM) concluded its deliberations with a number of recommendations for development practitioners, Governments and the ESCWA secretariat.

### **A. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

5. Set forth hereunder are the principal recommendations adopted by the participants at the EGM at the conclusion of their deliberations:
  - (a) A multilevel approach to governance is required in order to capture the differences in strategies to address governance deficit at a local, national and international level. Hence, the importance of studying how Governments can intervene to assist one another is crucial. By the same token, the dynamics between countries in the ESCWA region need to be further studied in order to better understand and encapsulate the feasibility of strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms that have the express purpose of impacting upon the quality of governance;
  - (b) Since governance variables (such as weak State institutions, unsuitable socio-economic policies and foreign interventions) are interacting, addressing one will ultimately have an impact on the others. Therefore it is important to treat governance as a phenomenon that affects all institutional aspects instead of addressing governance deficit with ad hoc, isolated initiatives that do not actually address the root cause of the problem;

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict, 11 June 2009, A/63/881-S/2009/304.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Department of Economic Social Affairs and United Nations Development Programme, *The Challenges of Restoring Governance in Crisis and Post-Conflict Countries*, ST/ESA/PAD/SER.E/I01, pp. 1-2.

(c) It is crucial to switch the focus from short-term solutions to long-term strategies. The long-term commitment of all stakeholders, national and international, will facilitate the emergence of sound development strategies, resilient to conflict, which reemphasize good governance practices and sustainable development in line with national vision and aspirations;

(d) Transformational change in the region needs to occur with the support of the international community. Addressing youth needs and aspirations will be essential for the success of this transformation;

(e) Governance reform should ensure that human rights remain at the forefront for it to truly succeed in the long term. Sustainable development is a human right, and scrupulous adherence to human rights and citizenry participation is what ensures development success.

## B. RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENTS

6. A number of recommendations were made to Governments, the most important of which include the following:

(a) Dismantling systems to reform governance, by purging institutions of supporters of the former regime, is not the answer, since it encourages “predatory” practices among those who will lose power. A focus on enhancing citizenship should be sought instead of “security” solutions;

(b) Decentralization is a powerful tool for governance reform, but needs to be done gradually. Fiscal decentralization, with local property tax collection could be an important first step. Land administration and taxation are very important because of their multiplier effects on other governance outputs. By the same token, poor administration has detrimental consequences on the quality of local governance;

(c) Political and economic (both public and private) monopolies abound in the ESCWA region, undermining the emergence of competitive institutions and industries. Therefore, competition must be fostered and monopolies regulated, at both political and economic levels;

(d) In carrying out development projects, scrupulous attention should be paid to the standards contained in international human rights treaties and conventions that the State has signed and ratified. Participation of the public in the articulation of development policies is the best guarantee for the success of those projects.

## C. RECOMMENDATIONS TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

7. The following recommendation was made to civil society organizations:

Civil society is a key player in governance reform. Indeed, governance practices should be developed along the lines of a national vision that also takes into account the needs and aspirations of citizens.

## D. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ESCWA SECRETARIAT AND THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

8. The following recommendations were made to the ESCWA secretariat:

(a) A distinction needs to be made between governance reforms that keep authoritarian regimes or occupiers in place, and governance reforms that prepare countries for statehood, requiring accountability from governance systems;

(b) Further analysis is required to determine the most efficient tools to implement governance reform: limiting “public goods” to only essential services delivery could imperil a broader notion of public goods, such as the notion of the “State”. For example, a rentier State could very much accept to deliver services while suppressing any dialogue for State-building;

(c) Governance reforms should focus on the “purse” of rentier States, to demand accountability and transparency. The international community should advocate for this;

(d) It is important not to turn governance reform into a technical issue or a “guide”, since this jeopardizes the development of sustainable institutions, as it only focuses attention on very technical aspects, and the short term;

(e) Contracting out public services should be a partnership between public and private actors, with strong management for both purchasers and providers. Technical assistance to enable the State to manage these services is essential in this context.

## **II. DISCUSSIONS TOPICS**

### **A. SESSION I: THE GOVERNANCE DEFICIT AND CONFLICT RELAPSE**

9. In the first session, panelists discussed the link between governance and conflict patterns in the ESCWA region. The variables of governance deficit in the region – weak institutions, repressive public discourse, international factors and lack of political will – were explained and their effect on conflict relapse highlighted. Possible avenues to address such variables as donor coordination, development of indigenous governance practices and focus on service delivery were explored. This was followed by an analysis which demonstrated that countries in the ESCWA region have overall poorer performance indicators compared to other developing countries with similar income levels. Therefore, a panelist argued that governance reform has the potential to decrease the probability of conflict relapse, due to a demonstrated high correlation between underperforming governance indicators and the high number of conflicts in the region.

10. The panelists also debated the definition of governance itself, since is not an easily defined concept. A word of caution was raised, since governance shouldn’t be treated as being homogeneous. Governance has certain implications at a local level but also in both regional and international arenas. A panelist pointed to the fact that a regional perspective to the approach to governance reform was missing: the example of Spain was used to illustrate how – with the assistance of European States – this country was able to move away from being an autocracy to a viable democracy.

11. An important point noted was that bad governance practices are entrenched in ESCWA member countries because they have ensured stability. In the past, societal expectations and the desire for stability precluded the need for conflict to bring about reform. During the Arab Spring, it was clear that citizens, especially youth, had challenged the stability argument and the status quo. Panelists debated whether good governance itself could bring stability and if conflict should be avoided at all cost, arguing that a crisis can bring about change. However, panelists agreed that conflict for the sake of change – one that brings about excess death, civil war, slow development, strengthens repression and limits democracy – should be avoided.

12. A root cause of poor governance highlighted is the existence of a “power structure” above the State that is inherently unaccountable. One panelist pointed out that this power structure is found in rentier States, where elites use rents to buy allegiances and strategically distribute gains. This power structure often dictates policies, undermining the legitimate channels of both policy and decision-making, and hence, is at odds with public institutions. Indeed, the power structure undermines the rule of law itself, as there are no laws to regulate its actions. However, mention was made that, in order to address the ESCWA regional governance deficit, one should not recommend the abrupt dismantling of such power structures without first analysing the consequences, as happened with the “de-Baathification” of the Iraqi Government in 2003. In this case, the overall system collapsed and civil strife ensued.

13. As the link between quality of governance and the probability of conflict relapse was established, the next panel focused on the question of whether essential service delivery could be an instrument to address governance deficit and facilitate reform.

## B. SESSION II: ESSENTIAL SERVICES AS A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE?

14. During this session, panelists explored the benefits and challenges of focusing on essential service delivery in conflict-affected countries, so as to bring about governance reform. A distinction between governance and the delivery of essential services was proposed, as governance itself is both a highly political and technical process. It was argued that the approach of turning political processes into technical ones is fundamentally inaccurate and ineffective. A panelist cautioned the participants to carefully study the correlation between governance and conflict, as correlation is not synonymous with direct causality. Treating this relationship as an over-simplified technical issue would turn reform initiatives into “guides”, jeopardizing the development of sustainable institutions, and focusing attention on day to day issues. The point was made that those who are most able to implement governance reforms are those with the most knowledge and the least likely to implement them (hence the need to develop political will).

15. The suggestion for contracting out the sovereign functions of the State was met with significant criticism, since it would lead to a dysfunctional State. A recommendation was made to create a distinction between contracting out the functions of Government and the services that Governments do not have the capacity to provide. This point also raised debate, as other panelists argued that contracting out services to private providers depoliticized the process of service provision. Another argument in favour of contracting out services to the private sector was that it would allow States with weak capacity and limited resources to avoid the heavy demands of directly providing services, enabling them to focus on the “stewardship” roles of planning, policy development, setting norms and standards, financing, oversight and regulation. However, it was acknowledged that contracting out services could undermine State-building efforts if it resulted in bypassing the State and in neglecting the long-term goal of national-capacity development. Also, contracting out services could appear to contradict the aid effectiveness principles of “partner Government ownership” and of accountability towards citizens. An important caveat was raised, that the management of contracting is most effective when there is a basic functioning infrastructure, which might not always be the case in conflict settings.

16. A panelist pointed to the fact that “rents” were the hidden variable for the governance deficit in the ESCWA region. Undeniably, the rentier State – one that benefits from external rent – is liberated from the need to extract income from its domestic economy; hence it can spend with neither the need to extract taxes from the population nor the corresponding consent or checks and balances. It was further explained that “rentierism” has been the status quo in the Arab world, but did not need to be its destiny. It was asserted that natural resources were not the problem per se, but rather the poor handling of the institutions that manage them. Demanding political reform would then mean renegotiating a social contract that would give bargaining power back to citizens, and this could be achieved by removing the “purse” from rentier States through the following actions: the management of resources by the readjustment of indicators to measure real economic standing, such as an adjusted net national income instead of GDP, and the development of human resources, including all national assets in the budget, among others.

17. The issue of decentralization was then discussed and its costs and benefits analysed. It was explained that the overall trend toward urbanization in the Middle East invited the discussion of creating a system that is more decentralized and better able to cater to diverse needs. However, Governments that have been traditionally centralized perceive decentralization as a macroeconomic and infrastructural loss of control. Also, in conflict contexts, Governments use instability as an excuse to maintain centralization. Lastly, it was noted that the threat of territorial cessation can be a driver of decentralization. As a conclusion to this specific topic, fiscal decentralization, beginning with the collection of property taxes at the local council level was suggested, since it is a stable revenue source which has had evidence of success in Jordan that other countries could learn from. Also, it could be used in parallel with land-management reform, one of the greatest challenges in conflict and post-conflict scenarios.

18. The topic of corruption in the public sector was discussed by panelists; not only from a criminal perspective, but also from the profound implications it has on the quality of governance and the ability of a

country to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Because of corruption and fund diversion, poor populations receive less public services, poorer quality of services and/or have to forgo essential services altogether. Addressing this issue is of essential importance, not only for development, but also because it is one of the biggest demands of citizens in the uprisings of the Arab Spring. Panelists also cautioned against technical solutions to corruption, or initiatives executed on an ad hoc basis, since they only exacerbate the problem and do not tackle root causes of governance deficit. Also, given both institutional and economic sectoral heterogeneity, unique and specific corruption and the corresponding strategies are required. It was recommended to address corruption on a sectoral basis.

19. As the discussion on the importance of providing essential services, while reemphasizing good governance practices in the public sector closed, panelists moved on to debate the need to generate political commitment from decision makers to challenge the status quo and the obstacles that reformers could encounter in conflict and post-conflict settings.

### C. SESSION III: THE WAY FORWARD: INCENTIVES, SUGGESTIONS AND APPROACHES

20. The first discussion of this session revolved around the notion that sustainable development is a human right, and hence, all development initiatives needed to scrupulously adhere to them. This included the respect for the right of an individual to exercise his/her citizenship, and not only be a passive recipient of public services. One of the panelists pointed out that political leaders are responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights, since by virtue of being rights, they are the entitlement of citizens, and any violators should be held accountable. This would require strict adherence to the rule of law, express linkage to the scope and standard of each human right as detailed in international law, and accountability for violating or failing to respect, protect or fulfill them. The “do no harm” policy was highlighted, since some development initiatives exacerbate the violation of human rights by the exclusion of marginalized groups, women, or adhering to a “cultural status quo”. Therefore, development initiatives need to empower citizens to participate at all stages of public policy formulation in a way that is active, free and meaningful (not only during elections) and to exercise their rights.

21. The issue of power-sharing agreements and political will was then addressed. The point was made that power-sharing agreements institutionalize governance challenges that arise during or even before conflict. Therefore tackling some of these challenges can undermine the very foundation of the State, which makes the resolution of these challenges almost unattainable. By the same token, since these governance deficiencies have such fundamental implications, tackling them is rarely at the top of the political agenda. The point of fighting governance challenges from a sectoral perspective was again made, with the argument that public service delivery is a good instrument for both reconciliation and the preservation of communal peace.

22. Two case studies were presented during the EGM, to illustrate the impact of political dynamics on the delivery of services. The first case was Lebanon – a confessional State – with ample evidence to suggest that the geographical allocation of public resources is driven neither by equity nor by considerations of efficiency, since the rule of sectarian balance is applied, regardless of need or economic logic. An econometric analysis demonstrated that both sectarian polarization and fractionalization have highly significant effects on the ability of an area to attract development funds in Lebanon. The implications are detrimental to development, as those most in need, the poor and marginalized communities, are not the ones necessarily receiving adequate services. The second case presented was Palestine. The point was made that when a leading authority (in this case, the Palestinian Authority) does not operate under conditions of sovereignty, it is unable to define and implement a consistent political framework or national plan to build the necessary institutions. Also, an over-reliance on international donors to provide services, and the division of decision-making between the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, undermines the ability of Palestine to dictate public policy or implement development strategies. Indeed, given current institutional arrangements, at least three groups are inevitably involved in the policymaking process: Israel, the international community and Palestinian parties.

23. A final presentation analysed the drivers behind revolutions, particularly the recent uprisings during the Arab Spring. Since the idea of an all-powerful “totalitarian State” has been challenged, it is important to inquire what stability means in this new context. A visual explanation was offered to illustrate flexible systems that adapt to outside pressures. Rigid systems, like most authoritarian States, on the other hand, can endure pressure without adapting up to a point, after which they collapse. The idea of reform was challenged, since all revolutions imply a replacement of an older order that always tries to make a comeback. Finally, it was mentioned that the Arab Spring will have enormous implications for the Arab-Israeli conflict, for Islamists and for current regimes, requiring a systemic reinvention.

### **III. OBJECTIVES**

24. The main objectives of the meeting were to:

- (a) Examine the relationship between governance, peacebuilding and development;
- (b) Propose practical approaches and applicable recommendations to strengthening State institutions, preventing conflict relapse and building long-term sustainable peace in the ESCWA region;
- (c) Engage experts in a discussion on the above-mentioned topics.

### **IV. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING**

#### **A. VENUE AND DATE**

25. The EGM on Governance and Conflict Relapse was held at United Nations House in Beirut on 31 May 2011.

#### **B. PARTICIPANTS**

26. The EGM was attended by experts from the ESCWA region, Europe and the United States of America, with experience in governance and development in conflict-affected countries, and by civil society actors (see the annex for a full list of participants).

#### **C. OPENING**

27. The meeting opened with a speech by Mr. Youssef Chaitani, Officer-in-Charge of the Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues Section (ECRI) at ESCWA. Mr. Chaitani underscored that ESCWA does not work in a vacuum, but as the voice of those it represents, continually seeking to work with them in full partnership on setting priorities, and planning, implementing and evaluating activities, so as to be an active support to them in the present and a solid partner to them well into the future.

28. He noted that this EGM will be instrumental in directing the work of ESCWA in the period ahead, in accordance with the priorities and concerns of member countries.

#### **D. AGENDA**

29. The EGM was organized along three panels of experts that deliberated on the following themes:

- (a) Session I: The Governance Deficit and Conflict Relapse;
- (b) Session II: Essential Services as a Catalyst for Sustainable Peace?
- (c) Session III: The Way Forward: Incentives, Suggestions and Approaches.

30. Mr. Chaitani chaired the first session of the EGM. H.E. George Corm, Former Lebanese Minister of Finance and Professor at L'Université Saint-Joseph chaired the second session followed by Mr. Ragihd



El Solh, Consultant at the Issam Fares Center for Lebanese Studies, who chaired the third session. The final discussion and recommendation session was chaired by Mr. Vito Intini, First Economic Affairs Officer at ECRI. This last session consisted of a discussion by a panel of experts of the main conclusions and recommendations.

#### E. DOCUMENTS

31. A draft of the background paper, The Governance Deficit, Conflict Relapse and De-Development in the ESCWA Region: An Overview, was submitted to participants prior to the meeting. No official United Nations documents were submitted during the EGM.

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