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Item 6 (c) of the provisional agenda

**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY ON THE
ACTIVITIES OF THE COMMISSION****RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE
AND THE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**Introduction

The document entitled "Report of the Executive Secretary on the activities of the Commission: progress achieved during 1996 in the implementation of the programme of work for the biennium 1996-1997; report on the work of the Statistical Committee at its second session (E/ESCWA/C.1/19/4(Part I)/Add.6) contains the actions and recommendations of the Statistical Committee. The present report contains the recommendations of the Committee on Social Development.

Report of the first session of the Committee on Social DevelopmentA. Organization of work1. Date, venue and objectives of the session

1. The first session of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) was held on 25 and 26 March 1997 at the temporary headquarters of the Commission in Amman.
2. The ESCWA secretariat organized the session pursuant to resolution 198 (XVII) of 31 May 1994 on the establishment of a committee on social development within the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia which was endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1994/27 of 26 July 1994 on the establishment of a committee on social development within the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

3. The objectives of the session, in addition to increasing coordination and cooperation between the countries of the region and the ESCWA Social Development Issues and Policies Division, were as follows:

(a) To review the progress achieved by the Social Development Issues and Policies Division in the implementation of the subprogramme on the improvement of the quality of life in 1995 and 1996;

(b) To present the subprogramme on the improvement of the quality of life as contained in the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001;

(c) To present the programme of work of the Social Development Issues and Policies Division for the biennium 1998-1999;

(d) To follow up the resolutions and decisions of the United Nations global conferences related to social development and Arab plans of action at the regional level;

(e) To review the reports of member States on the follow-up of these conferences.

2. Participation

4. The first session of the Committee on Social Development was attended by representatives of 12 ESCWA member States as well as observers from 15 Arab, regional and international organizations.

3. Opening of the session

5. His Excellency Mr. Mohammad Kheir Mamser, Minister of Social Development in Jordan, opened the session by welcoming the participants to the first session of the ESCWA Committee on Social Development and expressed the intention of the new Government in Jordan to continue to develop various programmes and plans that promoted integrated social and economic development. He concluded his statement by wishing the participants success in their meetings and by expressing the hope that during these meetings priorities could be established for the work of the Committee in the region and ways to support and activate the Committee for the welfare and secure future of mankind could be examined.

6. The Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCWA made a statement on behalf of the Executive Secretary in which she welcomed the participants and said that she was proud and pleased that the first session of the ESCWA Committee on Social Development was being held. In her statement, she emphasized the link between social development and comprehensive sustainable development, saying that the issues of social development were of primary importance in bringing about changes in the quality of life. She also pointed out that while efforts had been made by the countries of the region at various levels to meet the challenges and respond to the problems of social development, and while progress had been achieved in providing services in other vital areas, there was still a need for major changes in attitudes and in social and productive behaviour and for the freeing of latent human capabilities, especially those of women and youth, in order to complete the process and achieve the goals of social development. She explained that meeting these challenges required a comprehensive view of the overall goals, and called for developing an appropriate strategy and examining plans and transforming them into programmes of work and practicable projects.

7. In his statement, the Chief of the Social Development Issues and Policies Division stressed the importance of the human factor in the development process and pointed to the need for action on the non-material aspects of development to allow people to reap the benefits of the development process and to become both the goal of this process and its executors. He touched upon the main social problems facing the countries of the region and presented the work programme and planned activities of the Division in the context of examining and evaluating the problems and challenges facing social development in the region. He emphasized the importance of having an integrated work programme for the Division, particularly for following up the implementation of the resolutions, decisions and recommendations of United Nations global conferences at the regional level.

4. Election of officers

8. The session participants unanimously elected the following officers from among the members of the Committee on Social Development: His Excellency Mr. Mohammad Kheir Mamsar, Minister of Social Development in Jordan, as Chairman; Mr. Abdel Rahman Al-Khezendar, Adviser and Assistant to the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour in the Syrian Arab Republic, and His Excellency Mr. Hani Riyadh Ali, Ambassador of Egypt in Jordan, as Vice-Chairmen; and Mr. Sadeq Abdel Karim Al-Shehabi, Deputy Minister of Social Affairs at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Bahrain, as Rapporteur. Ms. Zuhaira Kamal, General Director of the Department for the Planning and Development of Women's Participation of the Palestinian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, was elected Chairman of the Drafting Committee.

5. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work

9. The Committee adopted the agenda (E/ESCWA/SD/1997/IG.1/L.1) as amended.

B. Discussion

1. Progress achieved by the Social Development Issues and Policies Division in the implementation of the subprogramme on the improvement of the quality of life in 1995 and 1996 (Agenda item 5)

10. Under agenda item 5, the Committee discussed the document entitled "Progress achieved by the Social Development Issues and Policies Division in the implementation of the subprogramme on the improvement of the quality of life in 1995 and 1996" (E/ESCWA/SD/1997/IG.1/3).

11. The Committee also discussed the activities mentioned in the above document which had been undertaken by the sections and the unit responsible for fulfilling the requirements of the subprogramme on the improvement of the quality of life during 1995 and 1996, including the following:

(a) Major activities of the Human Development Section

The major activities of the Human Development Section in 1995 and 1996 included: (i) preparing technical studies which dealt with combating poverty, human development, social trends in the region and the social implications of structural adjustment; (ii) providing advisory services which focused mainly on the

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creation of networks for sustainable human development in the member States and the provision of assistance to some countries in the preparation of their human development reports; and (iii) carrying out field projects, including the pilot project on local community development in Arab rural areas which was implemented in Egypt and the Syrian Arab Republic and the establishment of the Arab Regional Computer Training Centre for Blind Women in Jordan.

(b) Major activities of the Women and Development Unit

The major activities of the Women and Development Unit in 1995 and 1996 included: (i) carrying out research and preparing studies, including the updated "Review and assessment of the progress achieved for the advancement of Arab women in the light of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies", as well as a series of studies on women and development; and (ii) carrying out field activities and providing technical and advisory services to member States in preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, and providing advisory services to some member States related to the preparation and formulation of local and national strategies for following up the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women.

(c) Major activities of the Human Settlements Section

The major activities of the Human Settlements Section in 1995 and 1996 included: (i) carrying out research and preparing studies, including a regional perspective on the conditions of human settlements in the ESCWA region and studies on upgrading the housing environment, on the condition of towns and villages in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and on poverty and shelter. The Section also issued the biannual News Bulletin on Human Settlements in the Arab World in cooperation with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and the League of Arab States; (ii) providing technical assistance, including technical advice on the rehabilitation of the urban environment taking into account the needs of the disabled, and on community development and housing policies; and (iii) carrying out regional preparations for the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), which included organizing three Arab preparatory meetings and the Regional Expert Group Meeting for Habitat II, participating in the review of the Habitat II agenda which was adopted in Istanbul in June 1996, and following up the Conference by convening the Symposium on Environmentally Sustainable Human Settlements Development in Desert Regions in cooperation with the United Arab Emirates University in Al-Ain.

(d) Major activities of the Population Section

The major activities of the Population Section in 1995 and 1996 included: (i) monitoring population trends in the ESCWA region through the publication of population estimates in the periodic Demographic and Related Socio-economic Data Sheets and through the publication of the Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region 1995, and building a database for demographic estimates and projections; (ii) facilitating regional cooperation in the area of population policies by strengthening population policies in the Arab countries and supporting the efforts of national population councils and committees in the formulation and implementation of their policies (specific activities included carrying out training programmes, organizing meetings for the heads of national population councils and committees in the Arab world, and building a database on population policies); and (iii) disseminating population information through the publication of the annual Population Bulletin of ESCWA.

12. Discussion of the progress achieved focused on the importance of the following:

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(a) Strengthening coordination at the national level; providing information and facilitating its exchange among countries; and developing special indicators for various aspects of social development (those relating to women, human settlements, population and human development) taking into consideration the request of the member States to use the official data and statistics issued by them;

(b) Devoting attention to social integration issues including the provision of all forms of support to marginalized groups and to people with special needs;

(c) Strengthening coordination mechanisms for the implementation of social development programmes and activities which have generally dealt with following up the issues raised at the global conferences, addressing the contentious issues about which the Arab States expressed reservations and developing realistic indicators to follow up these issues, particularly for areas relating to the role of women and the development of civil institutions;

(d) Discussing the possibility of issuing a unified Arab social report similar to the Unified Arab Economic Report and considering the formulation of a strategy for sustainable human development;

(e) Drawing upon the experience gained from community development activities and coordinating efforts to disseminate information on this experience for the benefit of others;

(f) Creating national networks concerned with human development, women and development and human settlements as well as networks of national population councils, with ESCWA providing support to countries where such mechanisms have not yet been established, and strengthening the role of non-governmental organizations;

(g) Establishing a link between ESCWA studies which should be comprehensive and multidisciplinary, and the needs of the member States so that such studies can contribute to solving the problems faced by these countries in the area of social development.

13. At the end of the discussion, the Committee members commended the efforts of the Social Development Issues and Policies Division and expressed their appreciation of its activities and its technical competence. The Committee also made its first of set of recommendations, collectively referred to as recommendation 1:

(a) ESCWA should develop its information system so that it can receive and distribute information related to social policies, programmes and measures, particularly since the member States have expressed their readiness to provide ESCWA with such information and have acknowledged the importance of its dissemination;

(b) ESCWA should call upon the member States, Arab funding organizations and regional and international donors to provide financial and human resources support to ESCWA to enable it to carry out its programmes of work, and to monitor and follow up the recommendations of the above-mentioned global conferences and Arab plans taking into consideration the reservations expressed by Arab and Islamic countries with regard to some of the resolutions and recommendations of these conferences on the basis of Islamic Shariah law and Arab traditions and values;

(c) ESCWA should devote increased attention to public information in its programmes and activities and should inform the member States of the substance of its developmental projects in order to maximize the benefits to be gained from these projects.

2. The medium-term plan, subprogramme for the improvement of the quality of life for the period 1998-2001
(Agenda item 7)

14. Under agenda item 7, the Committee discussed the document "Medium-term plan, subprogramme for the improvement of the quality of life for the period 1998-2001" (E/ESCWA/SD/1997/IG.1/5). Although issues pertaining to the improvement of the quality of life are indivisible and interdependent, the subprogramme, which is implemented by the Social Development Issues and Policies Division, is geared towards achieving the objectives of the medium-term plan (MTP) in four separate yet complementary areas within the context of the improvement of the quality of life, namely human development, women and development, human settlements and population.

15. In the area of human development, the subprogramme aims at promoting an integrated approach to community development and at alleviating poverty by encouraging production and supporting income-generating activities. It also aims at supporting partnerships between governmental and non-governmental bodies, mobilizing and enhancing civil society institutions, and promoting the cultural dimension of development.

16. In the area of women and development, the subprogramme aims at following up the gender-related recommendations emanating from the global conferences, providing support to the family as the basic unit of society, raising awareness with regard to legislation and institutional support mechanisms, building the capacities of non-governmental organizations, and sensitizing society to gender-related issues including partnership and participation.

17. In the area of human settlements, the subprogramme aims at monitoring and analysing the problems resulting from rapid urbanization and social change, promoting the understanding of the needs and problems associated with human settlements, and strengthening the capacity of Governments of the region in formulating appropriate policies and strategies for sustainable human settlement development.

18. In the area of population, the subprogramme aims at enhancing the capabilities of the region in the fields of demographic analysis and population policies and at increasing awareness of the population situation and of the interrelationship among various population factors and between these factors and sustainable development.

19. The presentation of the MTP was followed by a discussion of the methods used to formulate this plan, its scope and the importance of regional considerations.

20. At the end of the discussion, the Committee made the second set of recommendations, collectively referred to as recommendation 2:

(a) ESCWA should include in the MTP issues related to democracy, human rights and combating poverty in the broad sense of the term;

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(b) ESCWA should widen the scope of its human settlement activities to include supporting and strengthening local councils;

(c) ESCWA should clarify family-related concepts in line with the framework established by the Arab countries that participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women, with the Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2005, and with the recommendations adopted by the Arab Conference on the Formulation of a Unified Arab Programme and a Follow-up Mechanism for the Action Plan of the Fourth World Conference on Women: the Conference of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs.

3. Subprogramme on the improvement of the quality of life:
programme of work for the biennium 1998-1999
(Agenda item 8)

21. Under agenda item 8, the Committee discussed the document entitled "Programme of work of the Social Development Issues and Policies Division for the biennium 1998-1999" (E/ESCWA/SD/1997/IG.1/6). This work programme aims at promoting regional cooperation in harmonizing social policies and setting standards and regulations for improving the quality of life. Through this programme, support will be provided to the member States to encourage them to take an integrated approach to following up the recommendations of the global conferences.

22. Within this framework and through multidisciplinary studies, surveys, meetings, technical assistance and human and institutional capacity-building, the activities related to human development, the eradication of poverty, governance and participation, and the role of non-governmental organizations will continue to be critical. In addition, the databases and information on human development, women and development, human settlements and population will be further refined and updated. The programme also calls for a number of recurrent publications and information services.

23. This work programme, which forms part of the subprogramme on the improvement of the quality of life in the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001, is an integrated programme through which issues related to human development, the advancement of women, human settlements and population are addressed within the context of the major activities of the three sections and the Women and Development Unit; these are summarized as follows:

(a) The activities of the Human Development Section include combating poverty through a thematic study on poverty and youth and related policies; preparing an Arab human development strategy; giving special attention to following up the implementation of field projects for community development; and combating unemployment by monitoring the social implications of structural adjustment policies;

(b) The activities of the Women and Development Unit include following up the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women in a comprehensive manner; continuing to work on building and updating its database; adopting innovative approaches to the alleviation of poverty; and studying the effects of the popular participation of men and women and the role of non-governmental organizations;

(c) The activities of the Human Settlements Section include studying population, urbanization and poverty issues; supporting cooperation and coordination among international and regional organizations;

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following up the decisions of Habitat II; and building a database on policies and measures related to human settlements;

(d) The activities of the Population Section include monitoring population trends in the ESCWA region on a continuous basis through the building of a database on population estimates and projections; strengthening regional cooperation in the area of population policies by providing training, organizing meetings and building information systems; disseminating information on population issues; and following up global conferences in an integrated manner.

24. Discussion of the subprogramme on the improvement of the quality of life for the period 1998-1999 focused on the importance of establishing a mechanism for following up global conferences related to social development and on the assistance that ESCWA should provide to national committees in this regard.

25. At the end of the discussion, the Committee made its third set of recommendations, collectively referred to as recommendation 3:

(a) The proposed programme of work and priorities should be approved, taking into consideration the comments made by the participating representatives;

(b) ESCWA should work on completing the social development database and should provide training to relevant State institutions on how to create national databases;

(c) Taking the priorities of the member States into account, ESCWA should support regional coordination in the exchange of information and expertise as part of the follow-up action on the recommendations of regional and global conferences such as the International Conference on Population and Development, the World Summit for Social Development, the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements and the Fourth World Conference on Women;

(d) ESCWA should provide technical assistance to member States and non-governmental organizations in the formulation of social development projects, the establishment of policies and the follow-up of their implementation, support of the institutional infrastructure, and the development of the human resources of social development institutions;

(e) ESCWA should keep the member States informed about the programmes and activities of the organizations and institutions working for the advancement of women to enable these countries to benefit from their capabilities;

(f) ESCWA, in cooperation with member States and international organizations, should support non-governmental organizations, strengthen their association with national councils and committees, and support their institutional infrastructure and their contributions to social development programmes.

4. Follow-up of United Nations summit meetings at the regional level: International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Istanbul, 1996)
(Agenda item 6)

26. Under agenda item 6, the Committee discussed the document entitled "Follow-up of United Nations summit meetings at the regional level: International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), [and] the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Istanbul, 1996), as well as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992) and the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993) (E/ESCWA/SD/1997/IG.1/4).
27. In this document it is stated that ESCWA, in view of its mandate and the nature of the tasks assigned to it, constitutes the appropriate forum within the United Nations system for addressing issues of economic and social development in Western Asia. ESCWA encourages and supports development efforts by providing a framework for cooperation and integration at the regional and subregional levels. The Social Development Issues and Policies Division, through its three sections and one unit, is responsible for working at all levels to improve the quality of life in the region.
28. Now that the common major problems and issues that have arisen in connection with the recommendations and plans of action of the recent global conferences have been identified, international and regional organizations face the challenge of setting up specific operational mechanisms for the implementation of projects and programmes which respond realistically to the follow-up requirements outlined at the global conferences while also addressing the needs and development priorities of the member States.
29. In the light of the fact that the United Nations global conferences have been able to identify the major problems and challenges connected with the recent global changes and in view of the new development trends and requirements, ESCWA decided to review and analyse the plans of action and recommendations adopted by these conferences as well as the Arab plans of action with the aim of identifying common issues and problems and establishing integrated, multidimensional and multidisciplinary programmes and activities to be implemented regionally. ESCWA has taken this approach in accordance with the resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly on activities in follow-up of global conferences and with the efforts of the United Nations Secretariat related to the implementation of the recommendations of the above-mentioned global conferences. ESCWA has sought to coordinate its own efforts and has initiated regional cooperation in the formulation of a regional programme of action to implement the plans of action of the global conferences by proposing specific regional activities that take into consideration the conditions in the region and respond to the needs and orientations of the member States.
30. The proposed programme of action was prepared following a preliminary analytical review of the plans of action and programmes of the global conferences to identify common issues and topics. Some of these issues were incorporated in the proposed programme because of their importance and level of priority in the Arab region in comparison with other issues, while some were incorporated in the ESCWA programme of work for the biennium 1996-1997 and were further emphasized in the draft programme of work for the biennium 1998-1999.

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31. Discussion about the follow-up of United Nations global conferences focused on four main points:

(a) The importance of following up a final report to be issued by an international team on the relationship between full employment and sustainable development based on the country studies prepared by the organizational representatives who are members of the international team. This report is particularly important because its contents will reflect the commitment of the United Nations agencies to formulate the necessary plans for implementing the resolutions and decisions of the global conferences;

(b) The importance of unifying the approach taken by the member States in the preparation of national reports so that a common understanding can be reached which allows for an accurate identification of country conditions, the evaluation of follow-up measures and the provision of the appropriate recommendations;

(c) The importance of defining mechanisms for following up the recommendations of global conferences at the national level in preparation for the adoption of these mechanisms at the regional level. In this context, ESCWA should play a major role in facilitating the exchange of experiences and the flow of information from the international level down to the regional and then national levels;

(d) The importance of ensuring that the report mentioned above provides detailed information on the goals of the activities contained therein and on the participation of countries, as well as other details on potential projects and areas of work.

32. At the end of the discussion, the Committee made its fourth set of recommendations, collectively referred to as recommendation 4:

(a) ESCWA should call upon member States to support the work of national committees on population, human settlements and women and development as well as human development networks, and to form such committees where they have not yet been established in order to follow up the recommendations of global conferences and the Arab plans of action and to implement them nationally in accordance with each country's conditions and laws;

(b) ESCWA should support the national committees in the areas of human development, women and development, human settlements and population, and coordinating its efforts with them and providing them with the technical assistance available;

(c) ESCWA should finalize the regional programme of action for following up the global conferences, taking into consideration the comments made by the member States regarding their special needs and priorities and their requests to participate in certain regional activities;

(d) ESCWA should coordinate its efforts with the secretariat of the League of Arab States and its specialized organizations and with the United Nations and its specialized agencies in the implementation of activities in follow-up of the global conferences.

5. Reports of the ESCWA member States on the follow-up of United Nations summit meetings at the national level

33. The representatives of Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic participating in the first session of the Committee on Social Development presented individual national reports on their follow-up of the decisions and recommendations of global conferences at the national level. These reports included the results of the activities undertaken by each of these countries and areas in following up the recommendations of the global conferences at different levels. The reports were distributed to the session participants and brief presentations were made on their main points.

6. Other matters

34. Following a proposal made by the Drafting Committee, the participants agreed that the second session of the Committee on Social Development should be held at ESCWA headquarters at least two months before the twentieth session of ESCWA in May 1999. ESCWA was requested to call for the meeting at that time.

35. ESCWA was also requested to present at the second and all subsequent sessions of the Committee a report on one important social issue related to human development, women and development, human settlements or population. It was recommended that this request should constitute a standing item on the agendas of future sessions.

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