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**SELECTED ISSUES ARISING FROM THE FIRST SESSION OF THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON POVERTY REDUCTION PRACTICES**

(Item 6 of the provisional agenda)

**REVIEW OF SELECTED ISSUES ARISING FROM POVERTY  
REDUCTION PRACTICES**

**SUMMARY**

At its first session, held in Bangkok from 30 June to 2 July 2004, the Subcommittee on Poverty Reduction Practices discussed and made recommendations on a number of issues related to the poverty reduction strategies of ESCAP. In its deliberations, the Subcommittee discussed possible future activities for ESCAP.

The present document provides an update of selected poverty reduction issues discussed by the Subcommittee as well as a summary of the outcome of the Expert Group Meeting on Rural Development and Rural Poverty Reduction, held in Bangkok on 19 and 20 May 2005. The Committee is invited to review the document and provide further guidance on the needs of member countries and possible actions or strategies for poverty reduction.



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## **Background**

1. The Subcommittee on Poverty Reduction Practices held its first session in Bangkok from 30 June to 2 July 2004.
2. A summary of the key issues discussed by the Subcommittee was presented to the Commission at its sixty-first session (E/ESCAP/1334).
3. The present document contains an update of the activities of ESCAP on selected poverty reduction issues. The Subcommittee discussed these issues as areas to be incorporated into the ESCAP poverty reduction strategy. Furthermore, the document contains the recommendations of the Expert Group Meeting on Rural Development and Rural Poverty Reduction held in May 2005.

## **I. HOUSING THE URBAN POOR**

4. Millennium Development Goal 7, target 11, calls for a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. In order to achieve this target, it is vital that options be found to provide adequate housing for the urban poor in suitable locations at affordable prices. Across Asia and the Pacific, numerous innovative approaches to low-income housing have emerged and are being implemented by a range of actors, often in partnerships, that include government, civil society and the private sector. The approaches have proven to be effective means to improve the lives of the urban poor.
5. Building on these experiences, ESCAP has started a three-year regional project, funded from the United Nations Development Account, to strengthen the capacity of policymakers and operational officials to initiate effective housing programmes for the urban poor. The project follows a two-track approach, a regional track and a country track, and will enable stakeholders to experiment with innovative practices locally while learning from each other's experiences and tapping knowledge already available in the region.
6. Under the regional track, an online regional resource facility is being established that will promote the acquisition and transfer of knowledge on low-income housing practices in order to build the capacity of the staff of government agencies and departments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to design and implement more effective urban low-income housing policies and programmes as part of their poverty reduction efforts. In order to establish a facility that meets the needs of the region, it will initially serve as a virtual forum for a flow of knowledge to and from national and local staff involved in the country track. The facility will include reference materials and online training courses and serve as a virtual space for the country-track counterparts to communicate with each other. Once the facility is operating and refined, it will be open to policymakers and practitioners working on low-income housing across the region and internationally.
7. Under the country track, ESCAP is assisting four of the region's least developed countries (Cambodia, Mongolia, Nepal and Timor-Leste) in building their capacity to implement effective low-

income housing policies and programmes. This includes the sensitization of government and its partners to different housing options, the implementation of a demonstration project and training. In Cambodia and Timor-Leste, these activities focus on testing options to operationalize the recently formulated national housing policy. In Mongolia, the activities have a strong housing-rights element.

8. As part of the country track, the project is organizing national dialogues that bring together stakeholders (such as central and local government departments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and international aid agencies) from across the country. Such dialogues have been held in Cambodia (April 2005) and Mongolia (June 2005); dialogues in Nepal and Timor-Leste will be organized at the end of 2005. In Cambodia, the dialogue focused on the growing housing problems in the country's secondary towns and the opportunities for local governments and non-governmental organizations to learn from the experiences in Phnom Penh. In Mongolia, the dialogue provided opportunities for extensive discussions on ways to increase the housing supply for low-income households, on the strengthening of existing housing rights legislation, and on funding for environmentally friendly and low-cost housing technology and construction materials.

9. While the focus of the project is on low-income housing, the project also gives attention to the promotion of (lower-) middle-income housing delivery by the private sector, as it is difficult to improve the housing conditions of the urban poor unless the housing demand from other income groups is also met. In addition, the project gives considerable attention to housing finance for both the urban poor and middle-income groups, as an effective housing finance system is essential to improve housing conditions in a country. The project is studying current housing finance demand and supply in Cambodia, Mongolia and Timor-Leste with technical support from the Government of France, with the aim of formulating proposals for the development of a housing finance sector in those countries.

10. The project is organizing demonstration projects in Battambang (Cambodia), Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia), Kathmandu (Nepal) and Dili (Timor-Leste). The purpose of the demonstration projects is capacity-building and the project will establish "urban resource centres" in selected countries in order to ensure sustainability of the capacity-building efforts.

11. Because urban low-income housing projects require interventions in a number of areas (including land, infrastructure, housing construction, community organization etc.), ESCAP tries to develop coalitions of government agencies, non-governmental organizations and their donor agencies to implement the demonstration projects. As the main focus of the project is to build the capacity of the government and other stakeholders to design and implement effective housing policies and programmes, the project also seeks to establish partnerships with other international aid agencies that can follow up on the capacity-building by assisting the Governments concerned in the implementation of actual housing programmes. The organizations involved with the country projects include the

United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), the German Development Service (DED), the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights and the World Bank.

## II. HOUSING RIGHTS

12. The ongoing work of ESCAP in identifying innovative practices in poverty reduction has led to an additional consideration: their relation to a rights-based approach. Such an approach implies recognition of people as key actors in their own development, an assessment and analysis of the claims and responsibilities of different stakeholders involved in the practice, the capacity needs of all stakeholders to meet their obligations, and the degree to which the practice is guided by human rights standards and principles. Work on the relationship between innovative practices in poverty reduction and the rights-based approach is still in a preliminary stage.

13. In June 2004, ESCAP organized a three-day Regional Dialogue on Housing Rights, in collaboration with UN-HABITAT, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions. The key objectives of the Dialogue were to improve the understanding of the practical use of a rights-based approach and to facilitate dialogue between actors in a position to operationalize housing rights. Guidance was sought from the participants on the future work of ESCAP and the United Nations Housing Rights Programme on housing rights issues. The Dialogue produced a set of recommendations outlining specific actions that countries could take to secure housing rights. Since the Dialogue, two of the countries have taken direct follow-up actions and several others have planned follow-up activities as follows:

(a) In Cambodia, the Municipality of Phnom Penh appointed a Housing Rights Officer to focus specifically on this aspect of low-income housing (one of the recommendations of the Regional Dialogue).

(b) In Mongolia, the realization, implementation and monitoring of housing rights, was selected as one of three key themes for the National Dialogue on Housing Rights, held in Ulaanbaatar on 2 and 3 June 2005, as part of an ESCAP Development Account project on housing the urban poor. A three-day training programme specifically on housing rights is being scheduled for the first week of November 2005. The training has been requested as a result of the above Dialogue, where many participants felt a need for more exposure to the principles and tools involved in securing housing rights.

(c) In Sri Lanka, consideration is being given on how to integrate housing rights in the reformulation process of the national policy for the housing sector.

(d) In Thailand, the Dialogue stimulated further thoughts on holding an international symposium on architecture and human rights in Bangkok during 2005.

(e) In addition, the Dialogue led to a practitioner's forum on the theme of housing rights organized by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and held in Bangkok on 14

December 2004 with Miloon Kothari, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, as guest speaker.

14. A key insight from the Regional Dialogue is the complexity of the issue of housing rights, and the need to build trust and to find a common language between the stakeholders engaged in housing rights (ranging from lawyers to practitioners working on low-income housing in the field). While the organization of such dialogues was one of the key objectives of the Regional Dialogue, more work is required in this area. ESCAP has consequently reformulated the Dialogue recommendations into more “user-friendly” language, and continues to identify mechanisms to bridge the gap between those emphasizing the need to introduce legislation to protect housing rights and those emphasizing effective housing programmes to realize housing rights.

15. Another insight drawn from the Dialogue was the need for more concrete examples of implementing housing rights in practice, of good practices and of operationalizing the many laws and conventions already in place. While several such examples were presented at the Dialogue, there is a need for a critical documentation of these and other practices to guide and motivate those working on integrating a rights-based approach into their ongoing work.

16. The recommendations from the Regional Dialogue were presented as part of the future programmatic work of ESCAP at the first session of the Subcommittee on Poverty Reduction Practices. Efforts are now being made to integrate the rights-based approach into the overall work of the Division. This includes the integration of a rights-based approach in the principles of the Division’s work on poverty, including its inputs into the second regional report on achieving the Millennium Development Goals, which was published in September 2005.<sup>1</sup>

### **III. POVERTY AND ENVIRONMENT**

17. To explore options of improving the working and living conditions of informal sector waste pickers, commonly known as “scavengers”, ESCAP is undertaking demonstration projects to integrate decentralized community-based solid waste management in the formal solid waste management systems of selected towns in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam. Informal waste pickers often collect recyclable solid wastes on open dumpsites, which is hazardous to their health. By the time such wastes reach the dumpsite, they have been soiled and damaged, reducing their resale value. Moreover, about 70 to 80 per cent of solid wastes generated in towns and cities are organic in nature. This means that, even if all the recyclable wastes were taken out of the system, 70 to 80 per cent would still have to be disposed of.

18. The approach proposed by ESCAP promotes the establishment of decentralized solid waste treating facilities within neighbourhoods to recover recyclable materials at the source, thereby

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<sup>1</sup> *A Future Within Reach: Reshaping Institutions in a Region of Disparities to Meet the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, sales No. E.05.II.F.27).



increasing their resale value, and to compost organic waste. Such facilities are expected to be operated by the communities themselves and would engage waste pickers who would go from door to door to collect pre-sorted recyclable and organic waste. At a neighbourhood treatment centre, the recyclable wastes would be sorted and sold to junk dealers, while the organic wastes would be composted and sold to a fertilizer company. The waste pickers would earn their income by charging collection fees for door-to-door pick-up and by selling recyclable wastes and compost. Sorting and treating wastes in clean and controlled environments at the neighbourhood level provides them with a more stable income as well as more hygienic working conditions.

19. A further innovation of the project is an approach to composting that uses manual aerobic “windrow” and “box methods”. The composting process is closely monitored to ensure an optimum temperature. This ensures a virtually odour-free process that can be undertaken within residential and commercial areas.

20. Many local governments and non-governmental organizations have tried to compost solid wastes but have not succeeded because they were unable to sell large amounts of compost. This issue has also been addressed in the project. Compost is sold to a fertilizer company that adds further nutrients to it, converting raw compost into organic fertilizer that is not only cheaper than chemical fertilizer but also replenishes the soil with organic matter, thereby increasing crop yield. Thus, the project converts urban waste into a resource for rural areas.

21. Based on the principles of decentralized, community-based resource management and recovery, ESCAP is planning to start a project on water and sanitation. The project, funded by the Government of Germany, will document innovative practices in decentralized community-based water and wastewater management, and initiate demonstration projects in two countries to develop models for water and wastewater management. The project is expected to start in early 2006.

#### **IV. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

22. Information and communication technology (ICT) has been identified as another component of the work of ESCAP on poverty reduction. Poor women and men are often excluded from the benefits of ICT and cannot benefit from the opportunities that these technologies offer in terms of income, access to services or participation in public affairs. Among the poor, rural poor are especially disadvantaged because of low connectivity and literacy rates. In order to overcome these disadvantages, community telecentres are being established in many countries, but only a few of them have proved able to provide sustained benefits for the community.

23. The Government of Malaysia and its partners have successfully implemented rural community ICT service projects in various parts of the country. The projects include the IT community centres of the Selangor State Government covering over 60 locations, and the e-Bario project servicing a remote community in Serawak, as well as several others in various stages of

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development. Together, they represent a substantial body of experience from which good practices can be drawn and lessons learned.

24. However, many of these experiences have not been extensively documented, synthesized or shared in the region as a basis for capacity development for other countries. The project on capacity development for effective design and delivery of rural community ICT services seeks to improve the success rate and positive impact of rural community ICT services in the region through the analysis, documentation and dissemination of the Malaysian experience. The project, financed by ESCAP and the Government of Malaysia, is currently under implementation.

25. Three practices have already been selected and are in the process of being documented: InfoDesa, Rural Internet Programme and e-Bario. The first two are broad government programmes for the establishment of community telecentres. The last one is a specific intervention to connect a very remote community via satellite. The experience with these three government initiatives will be supplemented by the documentation of community-based rural telecentres. ESCAP is compiling these case studies and developing a guidebook from which the major lessons from the case studies will be extracted.

26. ESCAP has partnered with the National Institute of Public Administration of Malaysia (INTAN) to develop a guidebook that will analyse the main lessons learned from the Malaysian experience. The guidebook will be based on a number of interesting case studies drawn from the experience with rural telecentre in Malaysia.

27. Documentation of the experiences is undertaken by INTAN and partner institutions in Malaysia following guidelines developed by ESCAP. The guidelines consist of a set of questions to the person undertaking the documentation so that no important aspect of the analysis is left out. The guidelines pay specific attention to the participation of stakeholders in designing and managing the centres, to the sustainability of the practice, to the potential for replication of the experience in another context, and to the policy issues that surround the practice.

## **V. MICROFINANCE**

28. The International Year of Microcredit (2005) has brought global attention to the importance of microfinance. The Monterrey Consensus of the International Conference on Financing for Development recognized the importance of microfinance for enhancing the social and economic impact of the financial sector. In particular, it called for financial institutions to facilitate access to finance, including equity financing, for micro-enterprises and for the promotion of private-sector financial innovations.

29. A Round Table on Poverty and Microfinance was organized by ESCAP in collaboration with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in New York. The Round Table, which was held to observe the International Year of Microcredit, provided a forum for experts and practitioners to

exchange views on ways to promote microfinance as a tool for reducing poverty and achieving internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration.

30. Microfinance is a broad term that includes credit unions which facilitate poverty reduction in many countries. The Round Table indicated that the promotion of microfinance requires an understanding of the environment under which a country should formulate a national microfinance strategy and delineate the role of each player. An appropriate regulatory framework to support microfinance development has to be sought in each country's own context. Equally important is capacity-building in understanding customers and markets, and having the right product pricing and design. Moreover, there should be coordination between sectors in order to have a shared vision on microfinance.

31. The sustainability and outreach of microfinance remain a major challenge as there is still disproportionately large unmet demand compared with the supply. There are concerns about the extent to which the poor can share the burden of the sustainability of the microfinance sector. Another concern is that various interest rates offered by different schemes and organizations, while affordable by the poor, may not be financially sustainable and may require a constant influx of external funds. Thus, there is still room to improve the access and quality of microfinance services through improved market conditions. There is a need for a careful examination of the areas (such as health and education) where subsidized microfinance intervention may be more appropriate than market-oriented microfinance services.

32. Cases from Thailand show a key role for community-based microfinance as a tool for building capacity and empowering the poor. Microfinance assists the poor to gain confidence through active community involvement in planning and decision-making. In Bangladesh, microfinance institutions have become effective intervention tools for poverty reduction, covering 13 million households.

## **VI. RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES**

33. A better coordination and integration of development planning and poverty reduction in urban areas and their surrounding rural areas may benefit the poor in both areas. Due to improved communication and transportation, the links that exist between urban and rural areas may be exploited to find markets for rural labour, goods and services in urban areas and to provide urban goods and services in rural areas.

34. In 2003, ESCAP held an Expert Group Meeting on Rural-Urban Linkages in Siem Reap, Cambodia, to review available research and literature as well as UNDP/UN-HABITAT pilot projects in Indonesia and Nepal. As a result of the meeting, ESCAP initiated a project on rural-urban linkages with funding from the Government of Japan.

35. The objective of the project is to test integrated planning mechanisms to strengthen physical, economic and social linkages between small cities or towns and their surrounding rural areas in order to fulfil the potential of these cities and towns for creating jobs, reducing poverty and redirecting rural-urban migration away from mega-cities. The project achieves this by identifying and testing planning practices and local level development strategies that utilize rural-urban linkages as the basis for poverty reduction initiatives and by strengthening the capacity of the stakeholders, including government institutions, in the selected cities or towns to undertake poverty reduction programmes based on rural-urban linkages.

36. Phase I of the project documented case studies in Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines and carried out a demonstration project in Cambodia. Phase II of the project will start in late 2005 and will implement demonstration projects in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

37. The final outcomes of this project will be a better understanding of the role of rural-urban linkages in poverty reduction and the dissemination of the experiences and lessons learned through capacity-building. The results of the project will be compiled in a "toolbox" containing the case studies, the results of the demonstration projects, and guidelines for the replication and scaling up of the good practices on rural-urban linkages.

## **VII. ORGANIC PRODUCE**

38. Experiences from within and outside the Asian and Pacific region have demonstrated the environmental, economic and other benefits of green and organic agriculture as well as the trading opportunities it has provided for developing countries. Consequently, the International Symposium on Pro-poor Certification Systems for Green and Organic Produce was organized by ESCAP and the Government of China in collaboration with the China Green Food Association (CGFA) to review the impact of domestic and international certification systems for green and organic produce on poor producers as well as the possibilities for alternative systems and support measures.

39. The Symposium noted that the development of domestic markets for green and organic produce in many countries was still in its infancy compared with the more mature export markets, but that there was a rapidly increasing demand for organic produce from the growing urban middle class in the region. Domestic and especially local markets for green and organic agricultural products offered opportunities to reduce poverty among poor farmers in the region, while promoting locally produced food could further stimulate the local market.

40. A major problem faced by poor producers of green and organic food, in particular women farmers, is the certification of their products. Poor farmers in Asia and the Pacific have to overcome a myriad of obstacles in accessing green and organic certification, particularly for export markets. Low literacy rates among farmer families hampers their understanding of green and organic standards along with their capacity to comply with systematic record-keeping and documentation requirements. The costs of individual certification for a multitude of markets cannot be absorbed by the low outputs

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from usually small landholdings that lack economies of scale. The formation of green and organic farmers' groups and the establishment of group guarantee and internal control systems for green and organic produce offers the best prospects for poor farmers to obtain certification at low cost and should be actively supported. A close producer and consumer relationship which makes production, processing and marketing transparent to the consumer may entice sales based on trust without the need for certification.

41. Support for poor farmers to undertake green and organic farming should, however, go beyond the introduction and organization of group guarantee certification systems and should include training and technical advice on organic farming practices and documentation, support during the conversion period, access to credit facilities, buy-back arrangements and marketing plans, and the development of information networks among farmers. The involvement of the private sector was considered essential, as had been demonstrated by experiences in China and India.

42. An important factor hindering the development of the green and organic sector in the Asian and Pacific region was the lack of information sharing. ESCAP and CGFA developed OFGF.NET as an information exchange platform. CITYNET, LOGOTRI and OFGF.NET are the three regional organizations established by ESCAP as important regional information platforms. CGFA made continuous efforts to promote OFGF.NET in international organizations in Asia and the Pacific such as ESCAP, ASEAN and APEC. As the facilitator of the OFGF Secretariat, CGFA will continue to make a contribution to information exchanges among Asian and Pacific countries in developing green food and organic farming.

43. The 2005 Symposium called on ESCAP, CGFA and the China Green Food Development Centre (CGFDC) to organize an Asian and Pacific forum on green and organic production, processing and trade to explore the possibility of establishing an Asian and Pacific alliance for green and organic produce (APAGOP) and of formulating its charter and principles. Its members would be non-governmental organizations, the private sector and farmers' organizations. The goals of the Alliance could include:

(a) To promote the production, processing and trade of green and organic produce with the aim of reducing poverty among producers of green and organic produce, particularly women;

(b) To assist countries in the development and introduction of pro-poor and simplified certification and guarantee systems, local standards, and simplified procedures to improve poor farmers' access to the market;

(c) To promote regional standards and a regional certification and labelling system for green and organic produce that is up to international standards and recognized among the countries of the region.

44. The Alliance would achieve its goals through the exchange of information, the identification, documentation and dissemination of good practices, and the organization of exchange visits and training.

## **VIII. OUTCOME OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND RURAL POVERTY REDUCTION**

45. The Expert Group Meeting on Rural Development and Rural Poverty Reduction was held in May 2005. The objective of the meeting was to identify emerging issues in rural poverty reduction and rural development, while providing guidelines for the future work of ESCAP. The results of the Expert Group Meeting together with other analytical work being carried out by the Division will be incorporated into a forthcoming ESCAP publication on emerging issues in rural poverty. Below is a summary of issues highlighted at the Meeting.

### **A. Research**

46. Research is needed into the measurement of rural poverty in order to capture the “real” movements in the rural society and economy. Studies should focus on agriculture, rural employment, rural consumption and nutrition, and rural demography. ESCAP should promote the publication of poverty maps by countries in the region, disaggregated by geographical area, gender, and urban and rural areas.

47. Research should also be conducted on the trends in rural poverty and the impact of rural poverty reduction and rural development programmes and policies on rural poverty, on the links between good governance, economic growth and rural poverty reduction, and on a definition of pro-poor economic growth from the perspective of the rural poor.

### **B. Knowledge management**

48. Because rural poverty reduction requires a holistic approach and countries could learn from each other’s experiences, there is a need for consolidated and efficient regional networks of organizations involved in rural poverty reduction. It is equally important to build synergies between regional institutes and organizations.

49. There is a need for regional and subregional networks and dialogues between stakeholders to formulate alternative poverty reduction paradigms, and to exchange good and bad rural poverty reduction practices. ESCAP should strengthen its role as a regional convener of policymakers, experts and development agencies, and provide an independent platform for policy dialogue on rural development and rural poverty reduction at the regional and subregional levels. Based on the outcomes of these policy dialogues, ESCAP could promote United Nations thematic collaborative agreements on rural poverty alleviation and sustainable rural development with country-level stakeholders aiming at mobilizing technical and financial support for participating countries from donor agencies.

50. There is a need to manage local knowledge to empower the poor for rural poverty reduction while turning institutions dealing with rural development into “learning” organizations capable of incorporating local knowledge and capabilities into their policy formulation and implementation process.

### **C. Substantive issues**

51. While the rural population increasingly depends on non-agricultural rural and urban employment for additional income, there is still a large potential for income generation in the diversification and value-added agro-based activities in the rural sector. Gender issues in rural poverty reduction and rural development require urgent attention. These include women’s education (even short courses) and microcredit for women.

52. Rural cooperatives of small farmers should be reintroduced to provide access to credit, markets and investments, but this requires an enabling policy framework with clear legislation, simplified regulations and entrepreneurial capacity-building.

53. The role of the private sector in rural development and the commercialization of biodiversity could be further explored. Small farmers and other rural poor need to become more competitive in the light of continuing globalization.

54. Capacity-building at the local level (local government, communities, local leaders) is critical for a successful decentralization and devolution of authority and local consultations. Local councils and the role of women therein need to be strengthened. The introduction of good local governance, including law and order, and accountability are critical. Local governments need to play a major role in environmentally sustainable rural development. Land registration and transparency in land titling are critical for rural poverty reduction. There is a need to build local capacity in land administration and land-use planning.

55. The Committee is invited to review the issues and activities described in the present document and provide further guidance on the needs of member countries and possible actions or strategies for poverty reduction. It is welcome in particular to make suggestions as to good and innovative practices in the region that may be shared, scaled up or replicated in other member countries.

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