

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

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**THE EFFECTS OF SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUITY ON SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT IN THE ESCWA REGION**

Briefing Papers

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PREFACE

On the occasion of holding the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg from 26 August to 4 September 2002, and in light of the lack of necessary information in Arabic regarding the strategies, policies and actions needed to achieve sustainable development in the region, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), as a continuation to its efforts in the field, has issued a number of Briefing Papers identifying primary issues regarding sustainable development in the region. ESCWA trusts that the enclosed Briefing Papers will provide all those concerned with appropriate information on issues of vital importance to the process of achieving sustainable development in the Member States.

The Summit aims to emphasize international commitment to achieving sustainable development through:

1. Assessing implementation of Agenda 21;
2. Reviewing the challenges and opportunities to achieve sustainable development;
3. Suggesting actions and required institutional and financial arrangements to achieve sustainable development;
4. Identifying means to support institutional structures nationally and regionally.

Throughout the past years, ESCWA has incorporated the proposals set out in Agenda 21 into its various activities, especially in the fields of energy, water and environment. As a result, ESCWA has published numerous technical documents, has held various expert group meetings and has provided its Member States with technical assistance and advisory services in the field.

Within the preparations for the forthcoming WSSD, ESCWA -in collaboration with the Technical Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment (CAMRE) in the League of Arab States and the United Nations Environment Programme Regional Office for West Asia (UNEP/ROWA)- has held various preparatory meetings which ultimately led to the preparation of the regional assessment report identifying the achievements and requirements of sustainable development in the Arab region, the Arab Ministerial Declaration, and the Joint Arab-African Ministerial Declaration. ESCWA has furthermore prepared a number of publications, namely; a study on sustainable development planning in the region, a regional assessment report on the achievements and constraints to sustainable development, and a study on governance and the institutional framework for achieving sustainable development in the region.

In this regards, ESCWA has issued some 18 Briefing Papers that deal with the themes that were set out in Agenda 21. The Briefing Papers could be divided into three main sections:

The First Section in the Field of Energy: Contains ten papers displaying the possibilities of achieving sustainable development in the field including: (1) The

ESCWA energy sector characteristics in the region; (2) Energy and Agenda 21: the objectives and progress achieved in its implementation; (3) The challenges and opportunities for achieving a sustainable energy sector; (4) The activities undertaken by ESCWA in the field of energy and sustainable development; (5) Development of renewable energy technologies and application; (6) Efficient and rational use of energy in the building sector (domestic and commercial); (7) Efficient and rational use of energy in the industrial sector; (8) Greenhouse gas abatement in the ESCWA transport sector; (9) Greenhouse gas abatement in the ESCWA power sector; and (10) Energy and Gender perspectives in sustainable development.

The Second Section in the Field of Water: addresses the most important issues to achieving sustainable development in the water sector and the provision of sufficient water to meet the economic and social developmental needs. This section includes: (11) Water and Agenda 21, Chapter 18; (12) An integrated management of water; (13) Water supply management; and (14) Water demand management.

The Third Section in the Social and Economic Fields: takes into account the actions undertaken in the regional preparation of the WSSD and the issues of utmost social and economic concern in the region's States, including: (15) Role of ESCWA in regional preparations for the WSSD; (16) The effects of peace and security on sustainable development in the ESCWA region; (17) The effects of socioeconomic inequity on sustainable development in the ESCWA region; and (18) The effects of poverty and unemployment on sustainable development in the ESCWA region.

The abovementioned Briefing Papers were prepared by ESCWA and selected regional specialists, to be published sequentially prior to the WSSD in Johannesburg. Furthermore, ESCWA will issue a booklet containing summaries of the 18 Briefing Papers in the English version.

ESCWA trusts that these efforts contribute to shedding light on the important strategies, policies and mechanisms needed to achieve sustainable development in the region, and provide the Arab leaders, decision makers, researchers, and media persons with a simple and explicit review of the possibilities and means to achieve sustainable development, including the institutional and technical actions required for such an achievement. The Briefing Papers aim to identify priority issues to be discussed during the WSSD, and the degree to which these issues relate to the needs and perceptions of ESCWA countries, in order to assist Member States in deciding their positions towards the issues presented at the Summit and assessing the possibilities of implementing its recommendations and programmes.


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Beirut, 16 / 4 /2002

CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Preface.....	i
Acronyms and Abbreviations.....	iv
<i>Chapter</i>	
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Population and Health.....	2
III. Access to Public Services.....	3
IV. Education and Illiteracy.....	5
V. Empowerment of Vulnerable Groups.....	6
A. Women.....	6
B. Children and Youth.....	7
C. The Elderly and Disabled.....	7
D. The Role of the Arab Family.....	8
VI. Non-Governmental Organisations and the Private Sector.....	8
VII. Governance for Sustainable Development.....	9
VIII. Platform and Priorities for Action.....	10
A. Managing Population Growth.....	10
B. Education and Illiteracy.....	10
C. Social Integration and Governance.....	10

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

I. INTRODUCTION

Population, health, education, employment, social integration, governance and empowerment are all socioeconomic issues of crucial importance to sustainable development in the ESCWA region. This is because each contributes to the ability of countries to effectively govern human settlements, manage natural resources, generate economic growth and respond to socioeconomic inequities. Generally, two parallel tracks have been pursued by governments of the ESCWA region to address these issues: (1) direct actions to assist the most in need; and (2) public reforms to improve the provision of health, education, infrastructure, information technology and employment.

Over the past decade, ESCWA Member States have witnessed marked improvements in health, fertility rates, education and literacy, as well as a strengthening in the status of women and an expanded role for civil society. However, this progress has been achieved in face of increasing population pressures, fluctuating economic conditions, prevailing unemployment, continued poverty and unresolved regional conflicts.

Economic growth and public spending – financed primarily by oil revenues – have allowed ESCWA Member States to better respond to the region's socioeconomic needs over the past decade. However, growth has come at a price. Public expenditures have become increasingly unsustainable as debt repayments encroach on social spending and environmental investments. Changing consumption patterns have led to increased stress on the environment. In response, civil society is growing stronger and is addressing local concerns. However, participatory and more effective governance is still needed.

Nevertheless, while important gains have been achieved, disparities in social progress and income equality remain pronounced. Differences between ESCWA Member States are paralleled within each country, especially along rural-urban lines and among marginalized groups. Accordingly, while the majority of people in West Asia now have better access to basic public services, important gaps in health, education and welfare persist. Progress on the social front has also slowed as compared to previous decades and lags behind progress made by other developing regions. As the ESCWA region faces the future, government, civil society, and the private sector have important roles to play in improving health and education and expanding opportunities for economic and social integration for vulnerable groups, particularly the poor, women, elderly and marginalized.

This brief reviews the issues, trends and challenges that characterize the socioeconomic dimension of development in the ESCWA region and the effects it has had on efforts to achieve sustainable development over the past decade. A platform of priorities for action is then offered to highlight the key factors

fomenting of socioeconomic inequity in the ESCWA region – demographics, education, governance and social integration – and to recommend constructive means for moving closer towards sustainable development during the coming ten to twenty years.

II. POPULATION AND HEALTH

The links between population, health and sustainable development are complex, particularly in the ESCWA region where environmental resources are finite and population pressures are great. Understanding the ways in which population and environment are linked requires consideration of a variety of socioeconomic concerns, including gender roles, health, education, literacy, employment and governance. Key policy questions and implications for ESCWA Member States are: how to use available land resources and scarce water resources to produce food for all; how to promote economic development and equity of socioeconomic opportunity; and, in doing so, how to improve social welfare in an environmentally sustainable way.

The population of the ESCWA region continues to increase at a fast rate and was estimated at 169 million in 2000. This level is expected to reach 357 million by the year 2025 assuming constant population growth rates. The growing population strains natural resources and the assimilative capacity of the environment. It increases demands for water, food, services, and urban space, and increases consumption and waste, which places additional pressures on the environment.

On the bright side, the population annual growth rate has moderately declined to 2.4 percent. While ESCWA Member States view fertility figures differently, there has been a significant evolution in the region's perception about fertility. During the mid-1980s, most countries of the region considered their fertility rates to be low to satisfactory. However, by 1997, the great majority had shifted positions and now consider fertility rates to be too high or satisfactory. This shift translates into increased support and implementation of policy instruments that are further reducing population growth rates.

Nevertheless, as a result of decades of high fertility in the region, children and youth represent one-third to over one-half of the population in ESCWA Member States. The increasingly younger population place pressure on governments to increase and improve basic social services and create new employment and economic opportunities. However, economic development in many ESCWA Member States has failed to keep up with population growth or to provide an adequate number of new jobs. This is one of the most significant socioeconomic challenges to sustainable development for the region.

Rapid population growth also exacerbates other developmental problems in the region. As population levels increase, so does urbanization. Urbanization is further enhanced by increased rural-urban migration and industrialization. These trends have resulted in higher demand for food, increased consumption and production of industrial and municipal waste, strains on education resources, expansion of the informal housing sector and slums, as well as the loss of green spaces to infrastructure development. Pressures to increase social spending for growing populations competes with pressures to improve the quality of services. High population growth rates of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Yemen have added to the already existing housing crisis in these countries.

Health services in the ESCWA region have significantly improved over the last few decades. However, an imbalance remains that favours urban areas over rural areas. Indicators of life expectancy improved for both men and women, while maternal and infant mortality levels reveal the health conditions of women and children in the region have generally improved. However, regional averages often disguise variations among and within countries in the region.

For instance, despite progress, most successes are not applicable to countries witnessing military conflicts such as Palestine and Iraq. The health situation in these countries has drastically deteriorated. Iraqi children suffer from high rates of malnutrition (23 percent of children under the age of five) and rising infant mortality rates (131 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1999). In Iraq maternal mortality is currently the leading cause of death in the last ten years for women of reproductive age. Life expectancy at birth has fallen from 60 years for males and 63 years for females in 1990 to 58 and 60 years for males and females respectively in 1999. These figures are lower than those reported in 1980. While the statistical impact of the recent escalation of violence in Palestine has not been recorded, it is assumed that mobility restrictions, closures and military incursions have had adverse and long-lasting effects on health. Yemen, emerging from decades of war, also faces considerable challenges to improve the health of its population.

The burgeoning youth profile of the ESCWA region raise another set of health concerns. Moreover, the ESCWA region still lags behind health advancements of countries with comparable levels of per capita income. This is perhaps partly due to inequities and inefficiencies in public health service delivery

III. ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

Economic growth in the ESCWA region regularly experiences cyclic fluctuations and volatility associated with regional instability and fluctuating oil production and prices. The last decade was no exception. During the 1990s, governments geared their efforts towards reversing the economic legacies of 1980s by implementing economic reforms

and trying to maintain positive GDP growth. Although structural reform programs achieved positive gains, the burden of reform did not fall equally on all sectors of society. Efforts to reduce poverty in the region were also not as aggressive during the 1990s as in previous decade due to lower oil revenues. Inefficiencies in converting GDP gains into human development also persisted and can be partly attributed to the mal-distribution of public resources. Income inequality thus remains an issue of concern in most countries, with the gap widening between rural and urban areas and the rich and poor in urban centres. Moreover, population pressures, combined with relative fiscal austerity as compared to the 1980s, resulted in serious qualitative deficiencies in public services.

During the 1990s, governments of the region endeavoured to improve public services, primarily by addressing access issues through comprehensive five-year development plans. Improvements were recorded in the provision of public services, such as healthcare, access to safe water and sanitation in almost all ESCWA Member States. The region also recorded marked improvements in education, literacy and some social programs. Stronger social safety nets are now evident throughout the region, e.g., Jordan, Oman and Yemen.

Nevertheless, significant discrepancies remain between the GCC countries and others in the region, particularly those countries struck by civil wars and unrest. For example, in Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, 100 percent of the urban population has access to fresh water, while the percentage drops to 82 in Egypt. Access to sanitation by urban populations ranges from 93 percent to 100 percent in most GCC countries, but only 40 percent of the urban population in Yemen have access to sanitation and 77 percent in Syria.

Furthermore, inefficiencies in welfare and social assistance programs remain prevalent. Inadequate data on the poor and their needs has resulted in the inefficient targeting of assistance and the misallocation of resources. Global economic downturns, the slowing pace of regional economic growth and population growth also forced many countries in the ESCWA region to rethink their social service strategies. Declining oil revenues has even caused some GCC countries the rethink public expenditures on social assistance programs. This poses serious implications for the future of the welfare state.

In face of these constraints, ESCWA Member States need to redress the unbalanced provision and access to basic services that effect major groups of the population, namely those in rural, remote and marginalized communities in urban areas. Urban-rural discrepancies in the provision of public services are particularly pronounced in countries in or emerging from conflict.

The concentration of migrant labourers, refugees and the displaced in marginalized urban areas around several cities in the ESCWA region has also prompted the emergence of shantytowns that lack access to electricity, water and sanitation networks. While the region's most-poor might reside in rural areas in some countries, the most vulnerable often are in urban settings living just at the brink of poverty. For instance, while Jordan has made great strides in providing government assistance to women, the elderly and the disabled, its policy focuses on the "always poor" and has neglected the "sometimes poor" who are particularly vulnerable to economic reforms and external shocks. Efforts for post-war/post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation need to be mobilized. However, unrest in the Middle East and the world often challenges efforts towards development.

There is also an important gender dimension to questions of access to social services. Women and children generally suffer the most under extreme poverty and bear the brunt of economic downturns and environmental degradation. With civil conflicts and emigration continuing to plague the region, the number of female heads of households has increased. The situation for women and children in Iraq and Palestine, particularly in refugee camps, are among the worst in the region.

IV. EDUCATION AND ILLITERACY

By the 1970s, most countries in the region had adopted policies and taken measures to improve educational standards. Progress has been significant, with GCC countries witnessing among the highest levels of school enrolment for girls at all levels of education throughout the 1990s. In some countries, such as Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE, more than 100 girls enrolled for every 100 boys, thus achieving full school enrolment at several levels of education. In other countries the gender gap persists in favour of males.

Over the past few decades, public expenditures on education in the Arab region have exponentially risen. It represents about 5.1 percent of GDP compared to 3.8 and 5.5 percent for developing and developed countries, respectively. In spite this progress, there remains significant problems, such as the high rate of school drop-outs, the overall low percentage of girls enrolment relative to boys, low enrolment rates in rural areas especially among girls, disharmony between education and market needs and the deterioration of educational quality. It is expected that the education sector will require increase in budget allocation from the countries of the region to meet the needs of the growing population, a situation that some national budgets will not be able to bear.

On the positive side, illiteracy is being eliminated in the region through initiatives that promote increased school enrolment. This has become a regional approach despite the fact that illiteracy among individuals over 65 years old remains significant. Despite

improvements, illiteracy rates remain high when compared to illiteracy rates of countries at similar income levels. Furthermore, youth illiteracy remains high in some countries. For instance, gains made in Iraq have deteriorated severely over the last decade. From a gender perspective, the gap between female and male illiteracy levels persists, although female literacy has increased. One of the largest improvements in female literacy rates in the region took place in Saudi Arabia where illiteracy dropped by 19 percent for women between 1995 and 2000. In the UAE and Qatar, female illiteracy is lower than male illiteracy. Yemen has the highest female illiteracy rate in the region at 75 percent.

V. EMPOWERMENT OF VULNERABLE GROUPS

Individuals and institutions are the basic contributors to social capital formation. Growing disparities in wealth, unemployment, education, job insecurity, create inequities that marginalize vulnerable groups such as women, children and the elderly. Equity issues also interact with growing resource scarcity and environmental degradation. As governments have become less interventionist and more decentralized, the role of civil society has become increasingly important in building social capital and representing private interests.

Women. While much progress has been achieved over the past decade in improving the education, health and employment levels of women in the region, illiteracy and employment remain problems. Work performed by women remains underestimated and undervalued. Women are also the hardest hit during recessions and periods of high unemployment and still suffer from *de facto* discrimination, if not *de jure*.

Nevertheless, most governments have taken serious steps towards improving the social, economic and political integration of women. By December 2000, nearly all countries had established national machineries for women to address women's issues at the national level. More women ran for elections and practiced their suffrage rights, whether at the municipal (Jordan and Qatar), parliamentary (Egypt and Lebanon) and even the presidential (Yemen) level. In Saudi Arabia, women were allowed for the first time to attend a Consultative Council meeting and, in Yemen a woman was appointed Minister of Human Rights. Saudi Arabia also signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, albeit with some reservations. The region also enacted several supportive laws and policies. This constitutes increased acknowledgement of the critical role of women in society and policy-making.

Women have also increased their contribution to the formal economic sector, although obstacles persist. Figures indicate that women's labour force participation is lowest in the Gulf countries, except for Kuwait. Kuwait has the highest female labour force participation rate in the region at 31 percent, while the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia

have the lowest female labour force participation rates. Working females in the ESCWA region also generally tend to receive lower estimated earned incomes than males. In Lebanon, one of the more gender-equal countries of the region, male salaries are 27 percent to 50 percent higher than those of females.

Empowering women has positive multiplier effects on other aspects of human development. For example, studies show that increased female education and literacy is correlated with decreased fertility, while income controlled or earned by women is more likely to be spent on human development. Precisely because of multiplier effects, working towards gender equality in the ESCWA region is crucial to sustainable development. Although more gains can be made in improving female access to education, literacy, health, the most significant challenges of gender mainstreaming in the region lie in advancing women's political and economic participation and by law and in practice.

Children and youth. **The region's youth could be the engine for sustainable development if educated properly and managed productively. However, decades of high fertility in the region has resulted in an ever-increasing number of young people, which are challenging the ability of governments to increase and improve the provision of education, employment, healthcare and social services. For instance, although gains have been made in increasing school enrolment over the last decade, youth illiteracy remains high in some countries, and the quality of education remains low in many others. Poor academic achievement and disconnect with jobs on the market reflect the need to improve the quality of education provided.**

As youth seek to join the labour force, pressures to expand employment opportunities are great. This is placing tremendous pressure on governments to expand economic opportunities quickly. This is challenging since the region has traditionally invested in capital-intensive industries, particularly in the petroleum sector, which provide limited opportunities for bolstering national employment rosters. Economic diversification beyond the capital-intensive oil sector is thus crucial to supply adequate employment for the growing population. Should the region be unable to supply new jobs, poverty, unemployment and public debt will likely dramatically increase.

Housing is also becoming a rather an acute problem in several countries in the region where yesterday's youth are entering the housing market. The problem is two-fold: in some countries population pressures have resulted in a shortage of housing; and in others, new entrants to the job market are unable to find jobs nor afford housing. Socially the implication is that unemployed men are unable to marry as the cultural prerequisites for marriage usually entail employment and housing. This generates significant potential for dissatisfaction and unrest.

The elderly and disabled. The population composition of the elderly (over 65 years of age) in ESCWA Member States is considerably smaller than the population of children (0-14) and is growing at a slower pace than that of other regions. By contrast, the number of disabled individuals in the region is growing. The scale and scope of the disability challenge affects all age groups and has increased due armed conflicts, civil unrest and the physical occupation of lands in Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon and Kuwait.

While social welfare programs in most countries of the region have improved over the last decade, public expenditures on social programs providing care for the elderly and disabled remains less than adequate. This is a particular challenge in conflict areas. For instance, over 32 percent of poor families in the West Bank have a disabled family member, which illustrates the growing linkage between disability, poverty and conflict. Conflict also exacerbates unequal distribution of services to the disabled in rural and urban areas.

The Arab family. Where public services are inadequate, the Arab family has traditionally filled the gap in the provision of social services by assisting members in need due to cultural and religious values. However, through the process of the social transformation, the structure of the Arab family has been gradually shifting from the extended to the nuclear form in both cities and rural areas of the region. The increased entry of women into the labour force has also put a strain on the family's ability to perform domestic functions related to the care of children, the sick, disabled and elderly family members. As a result, community associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become increasingly important forces in support of social integration.

VI. NGOs AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Since UNCED, the number of NGOs registered in the region has significantly grown, as has participation in NGOs, community groups, private voluntary organisations, business associations and labour syndicates. These trends are fuelled by: (1) new government decrees facilitating NGO registration and freedom of activity; (2) increased international funding for NGO activities; and (3) the recent transformation of many charity groups based on kinship, ethnicity, and religion into more socially integrated service organisations. This change is particularly evident in cities where marginalized groups with traditionally limited access to public services. NGOs have been particularly effective in increasing environmental awareness, organizing clean-up campaigns and building local capacity.

An important trend in NGO development has been their gradual shift from welfare providers to social advocates. NGOs in the region increasingly seek dialogue with government counterparts so as to solicit participatory approaches to decision-making

as well as forge synergies between programs. Government recognition of the non-governmental sector as potential partners in development has led some governments in the region to revise laws to facilitate the collaboration on community work. Nevertheless, more communication is needed in order to support better consultation and coordination between political institutions and public stakeholder groups.

As in the case of NGOs, there has also been a rise in the number of private business associations in the region, as well as an increase in their membership. However, the number of entrepreneurial networks remains limited because of scale and scope differences between large firms and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), which contribute most to regional employment. Government efforts to strengthen the private sector are also evident. For instance, economic reforms have been undertaken to encourage privatisation. Private sector participation in the provision of environmental services and the use of licensing fees have also become more common. However, privatisation raises key concerns regarding how to ensure access to public and social services by poor and marginalized communities while allowing service providers to secure reasonable profits. This has created social-political obstacles for governments seeking to privatise water, sanitation and transportation services.

Despite the growing role of NGOs and the private sector in promoting development and social integration, complex government systems and prevailing cultures, traditions and political norms in some countries impede public participation in decision-making processes. This is because centralized systems of governance are generally organized from the top-down and cannot easily tolerate participatory bottom-up approaches, public pressure or public systems of accountability. Furthermore, the advocacy role of civil society has not been strong enough to influence the decision-making process. They are, however, demanding a greater role in the governance process, which sometimes runs against the more cautionary, incremental approach taken by governments.

VII. GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Good and effective governance is a challenging prerequisite to achieve sustainable development. It includes strengthening the institutional and legal frameworks, nurturing equitable participation in decision-making, approaching policy-making from an inter-disciplinary approach, and promoting effective participation by civil society.

More than ever in the ESCWA region, civil society, community groups and NGOs have been encouraged to inform and partner with governments on projects. Major achievements include improvements in land use planning and completion of environmental impact assessments prior to permitting approval. There has also been progress in the management of cities and towns and attempts have been made to

strengthen the performance of local councils in order to promote better urban governance.

Effective public participation, as noted in Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, is also based on adequate access to information. Since 1992, the region's interest in sustainable development has generated greater effort to incorporating environmental considerations in decision-making. Progress has been made possible thanks to advancements in cost-effective information and communication technology, the mass media, and the establishment of more effective monitoring and reporting networks. However, the persistence of poverty, limited human resources and weak urban institutions need to be addressed. Governments and local authorities in the region do not always have sufficient resources to improve the quality of life of their people. Civil society institutions are thus emerging to fill the gap. The current institutional set-up is unable to ensure the integration of all stakeholders in sustainable development decision-making. Therefore, participation and partnerships in government and civil society are imperative to promoting social integration and inclusiveness and achieving sustainable development goals.

VIII. PLATFORM AND PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

Managing population growth, improving education and literacy, increasing social integration and strengthening sustainable development governments are among the key socioeconomic factors influencing sustainable development in the ESCWA region. These issues are noted below and are expounded upon in regional sustainable development assessment reports for the ESCWA and Arab regions.

A. MANAGING POPULATION GROWTH

Fast population growth rates and imbalances in population distribution have resulted in increasing demands and pressures on finite natural resources and limited urban services. Population policies should be developed with a view to increasing women's access to information and services on family planning and childcare. Illiteracy must be addressed as a critical factor influencing population growth rates.

B. EDUCATION AND ILLITERACY

The region needs to improve the quality and quantity of education, with special attention paid to the needs of young people and the disabled. Countries are encouraged to review and develop their education policies to commit to a broad-based action plan to better the quality of education, improve efficiency in educational spending and eradicate illiteracy.

C. SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND GOVERNANCE

Social integration entails the implementation of programs aimed at improving equity of access to public services for the most vulnerable, namely women, children, the elderly, the disabled and the poor. Good governance requires the strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, information dissemination, public participation, and improving accountability and transparency. There is thus a need to develop regional strategies and programs to support social integration and strengthen governance for sustainable development in the ESCWA region.

