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REPORT

EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON THE PREPARATION FOR THE MDGS 2007 AMMAN, 26-27 FEBRUARY 2007

Abstract

UN agencies in the Arab region and the League of Arab States (LAS) are undertaking a collaborative effort to produce a report on the MDGs covering all 22 Arab countries, the 2007 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) report for the Arab Region, **"The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2007: A Youth Lens"**. The report would serve as an awareness raising and advocacy tool and would therefore adopt a human-interest led, user-friendly style to appeal to a broad audience - policy makers, statisticians, academia, development experts, media, and the general public.

The Expert Group Meeting serves as an important step in the process of producing the Report as it allows for discussion among the development community and for an exchange of ideas and perspectives. Several presentations by consultants and different UN agencies took place over the two days in order to enrich the Report with a strong policy content and perspective. Moreover, a youth roundtable and a government discussion session were held on the first and second day of meetings in order to include a properly reflective youth perspective and to incorporate government suggestions and comments.

Significant policy recommendations were made, both with respect to the content of the MDG Report and with respect to the attainment of the MDGs. These policy recommendations included harmonizing national and international statistics, customizing the MDG Report to the Arab region, and giving more weight to issues pertaining to conflict.

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Introduction

UN-ESCWA organized an Expert Group Meeting for the preparation of the “UN 2007 MDG Report for the Arab World” in Amman, Jordan from 26 to 27 February 2007. The meeting brought together Government officials from twelve Arab countries, representatives of the League of Arab States (LAS) and of various regional youth NGOs, regional experts on youth development, as well as representatives of UN agencies in the Arab region. The major objective was to identify policies for enhancing the role of youth as active agents towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. To this end, the meeting included several presentations by relevant experts with topics ranging from gender empowerment and youth employment to youth health and educational issues and environmental issues. Moreover, a youth roundtable and a discussion session entitled “Policy Outlook from a Government Perspective” were held on the first and second day of meetings, respectively, in order to enrich the content of the 2007 MDG Report by including different perspectives and helpful suggestions.

I. Policy Recommendations

Policy recommendations during the expert group meeting referred to the content of the upcoming UN 2007 MDG Report as well as to the cooperation between Governments of Arab countries and regional UN organizations. There was a general consensus for the need to harmonize national and international statistics, particularly in the areas of education, health, and employment. In addition, they agreed that national efforts have to be increased to improve the coverage and accuracy of data reporting. Several Government officials highlighted the importance of customizing the MDG’s to the Arab region. They agreed that more weight should be given to conflict-related difficulties and to the obstacles that conflict places on making progress towards the attainment of the MDGs. Some government representatives emphasized the need to create additional forums for the exchange of ideas and experiences between Arab countries in their efforts to attain the MDG’s. Several Government officials asked the UN organizations to assist in estimating the costs of attaining the MDGs, and accordingly, to offer financing solutions.

II. Presentations and discussions

A. Human Rights and Rights-Based Approach to Achieving the MDGs

The presentation was presented by Mr. Fateh Azzam from UN- OHCHR and highlighted the importance of a right-based approach. The presentation emphasized that political, social, and economic development begins with people’s right to development. It also outlined the benefits of a participatory approach and the effect of such an approach on ownership and effectiveness. Inequality was an issue of particular importance, whereby the presenter stated that the Arab world includes not only gender inequality but also socio-economic inequality and the marginalization of minority groups. Furthermore, Mr. Azzam stressed on the necessity to fight corruption in the Arab world as it acts as a major obstacle to development by impeding the implementation of the development recommendations found in MDG Reports.

B. Integrating a Gender Perspective in the MDG’s

Ms Jazairi, from the Center for Women at ESCWA, presented on “Gender equality: A vehicle for the achievement of all MDG’s”. She began by remarking that gender is present in only one goal. Subsequently, she described the situation of women in the Arab world in terms of education, poverty, inequality, health and child issues and environment and attempted to mainstream gender in every goal and not restrict gender issues to Goal 3. Ms. Jazairi concluded by insisting on the linkages between the MDGs, CEDAW and Beijing, advising policy-makers to revert to the aforementioned in order to attain the MDG’s.

C. Gender Empowerment and Participation

The presentation was presented by Ms. Dana Malhas from UNIFEM and highlighted the value of the MDGs in promoting the gender equality agenda. The presentation argued that gender equality is not well reflected in

the global targets and indicators as revealed in the gender-blindness of the income-poverty eradication goal. Further, Ms. Malhas pointed out the deficiencies in Goal 3 which caters to gender equality and how the target for that goal and the associated indicators fail to capture the real situation of women by failing to monitor actual level of girl's enrolment and track completion rate, as well as failure to acknowledge the importance of tracking the informal sector. The presentation concluded by drawing linkages between the MDGs, CEDAW and Beijing.

D. Demographic Profile in the Arab World and Youth Development

Mr. Chaaban, professor at the American University of Beirut, offered a presentation of his paper and began by explaining that Arab countries are currently faced with the highest youth cohort in their modern history. According to Mr. Chaaban, despite the growth in the population of Arab youth they are now more educated and marrying at a later age than before. He highlighted that, nevertheless, one in every three young Arab persons is unemployed and that gender bias against young women's university enrollment and labor participation is pervasive. Further, he argued that against a backdrop of rising frustration among the youth in the region, Arab policy makers need to act quickly. He concluded by highlighting the need for a revision of the prevailing social and economic contract in the region towards more and better provision of public goods as such a revision is central to addressing the challenges faced by the Arab youth.

E. Youth Employment and Education

Ms Nassar, professor at the University of Cairo, presented on "Youth Employment and Education". Her approach was to study and analyze the employment and education situation of the Arab youth using the MDG indicators. Accordingly, she highlighted specific guidelines that could help in empowering the Arab youth, of both sexes, by maximizing their opportunities to lead a good and decent life and to contribute to their home country and region's development process. Ms. Nassar argued that empowerment of the youth can only be achieved through an intricate policy framework which focuses on ensuring that youth are not only beneficiaries but also the active agents of the success and the progress toward the attainment of the MDG's. She concluded by recommending that the right to development, gender issues, challenges pertaining to conflict, and good governance, should be incorporated in the overall formulation of policies.

F. Good Governance and the Millennium Development Goals

Khalil Gebara of the Lebanese Transparency Association, presented his paper on good governance and the MDGs. The paper highlighted the linkages between good governance and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals by focusing on the status of good governance in the Arab countries. In particular, he focused on the effects of the lack of good governance on the region, emphasizing that the reason the Arab world is behind in implementing the MDGs is weak public governance, which is manifested in all interaction initiatives between the citizens and the state. Mr. Gebara noted that the region suffers greatly from corruption, weak quality of administration, transparency, and accountability, which makes it fall short compared to its global counterparts. He then highlighted the need to empower youth, to participate in public life, promote better educated labor force, and tap on potential human resources, in the Arab region, which in turn will stimulate economic growth, and gradually reach sustainable development. Stating that youth in the Arab region have always been marginalized and deprived of their political rights and the right to express their opinions, he, nevertheless, argued that the Arab region has now reached a turning point whereby young people are asking for change, more transparency, the respect of their rights, and for accountable governments.

G. Health Issues and the Youth

The presentation was presented by Ms. Rima Afifi-Suweid, professor at the American University of Beirut. The presenter first offered a summary of the health and health behaviors profile of youth in the Arab World, emphasizing that much more research is needed to understand the health issues and concerns of youth. Indeed, according to the presenter, most available data focus on cigarette smoking, alcohol, drug abuse, and

obesity. Ms. Afifi-Suweid then discussed dietary behavior, reproductive health issues of the youth, violence, and mental health of youth in the Arab world. Subsequently, she framed this health status, behavior, knowledge, and attitudes within an understanding of social determinants of health in the Arab World and concluded with recommended directions for future understanding of youth health and well being in the Arab World.

H. Social, Cultural, and Political Participation of Male and Female Youth

The presentation was presented by Ms. Mona Fayad, professor from the Lebanese University and highlighted the persistence of high illiteracy levels in the Arab world despite an increase in enrolment rates, and the persistence of high unemployment levels despite an increase in education levels. Ms Fayad emphasized the importance of family and the youths environmental surroundings for the formation of his/her character, stressing on the gender bias this creates as family ties in the Arab world are intrinsically linked to fatherhood, thus sidestepping the role of women and somewhat ignoring the needs of girls. The presenter also noted the demographic changes and the high percentage of youth population that exists in the Arab world, stressing on the need to perceive this new demographic reality as an opportunity in the region. Accordingly, she emphasized the need to implement new policies catering to youths and the importance of altering the educational system to the specific needs of the youth in the region. Moreover, Ms. Fayad touched on the important issue of unemployment and the consequent immigration of youths in the Arab world to find employment elsewhere. Political participation of youths was highlighted as an essential issue and the benefits of a participatory approach to decision-making were outlined. She concluded with a set of policy recommendations regarding job creation, protection of youth, and empowerment of women.

I. Trends in Health Issues and the Youth

Mr. Krishna Belbase from the UNICEF gave the presentation on youth and health, emphasizing that the MDG goals are closely related to the present and the future of the youth and that youth development is a critical foundation for human development. Mr. Belbase then gave a detailed account of the trend and progress of the four health related MDGs over the time period 1975-2005. The presenter also highlighted the linkages between maternal health, child health, and youth health and the need to address the three simultaneously and efficiently. To that end, Mr. Belbase presented data on infants born with low birth weight and children under five years of age who are underweight in the Arab world. Subsequently, he presented data on early marriage, particularly on the percentage of girls who have ever been married between the age of 15 and 19, and those that have given birth by age 18, in addition to data on contraceptive prevalence in the region. The presenter also offered data on HIV and the students who smoke. He noted that the issues affecting the youth in the LDCs, for example, were different from those affecting Middle Income Countries, and from those affecting the well-off countries. In particular, reproductive health, malnutrition and girls education are among the key issues in the LDCs while smoking, over nutrition, and unsafe practices are among key issue in affluent countries.

J. Environmental Issues and the Youth

The presentation by Mr. Iyad Abumoghli of UNDP identified the environmental issues in the Arab world, the importance of engaging the youth in achieving the MDG pertaining to environment, and policy options and recommendations. He started off with sharing data on the proportion of the population in the region using improved drinking water sources and the proportion of the population using improved sanitation facilities. Following he highlighted the importance of involving youth, arguing that current unsustainable and excessive use of natural resources will deprive the young generation from the opportunities to sustainably use these environmental resources and that the health of young people is influenced by the state of the environment. Furthermore, he argues that access to water and sources of energy, for example, have a direct impact on young females, as young girls are requested by their families to drop education in order to provide access to water. Mr. Abumoghli then outlined several policy options, such as, mainstreaming sustainable environment education into school and college curricula, including it in informal education, encouraging

governments, youth organizations and NGOs to collaborate in developing sustainable production and consumption behaviors awareness programmes, encouraging rural development banks and other commercial banks to provide incentive loans for entrepreneurial youth. Moreover, among the presenter's recommendations were providing incentives such as grants or micro-finance for youth to work for safe and clean water and renewable energy in their community, adopting in any national youth strategy a decision for the inclusion of youth representatives of both genders in decision-making processes, and establishing National Youth Councils and within those establishing environment and sustainable development committees. Mr. Abumoghli concluded with good examples and best practices in the Arab world.

K. MDG-Based Development Strategies in Conflict and Post-Conflict Countries

The presentation presented by Mr. Ingo Pitterle from EAD-ESCWA aimed at providing a socio-economic analysis of development priorities in conflict and post-conflict countries. To that end, it first examined the role of several factors potentially linked to the outbreak of violent conflict, including poverty, inequality, natural resources, demographic structure, and the lack of significant trade relations. Subsequently, it presented an assessment of the economic impact of violent conflicts highlighting in particular the detrimental effects on human capital and total factor productivity. Based on the findings of the first two parts, it then provided an overview on policy priorities for conflict and post-conflict countries. In that context, the presentation stressed the role of regional and global cooperation in conflict-prevention activities and in rebuilding the economic and social infrastructure in countries emerging from conflict.

L. Social and Economic Development Strategies that lead to Rapid Economic and Human Development

Mr. Hatim Hatim from EAD-ESCWA presented on "Social and Economic Development Strategies that lead to Rapid Economic and Human Development". He began by enumerating the conceptual underpinning and key features of the MDG's. He then underlined the importance of integrating the economic and social dimensions of development in any policy framework, particularly in the MDGs. Emphasizing that the attainment of the MDGs is not an automatic or natural outcome of market forces and a natural by product of economic stability and liberalisation policies. Subsequently, Mr. Hatim defined social policy and argued that there are two channels for attaining the MDG's. Following an intricate explanation of the social provisioning channel and the personal income channel, he then described the existing economic and social situation in the Arab region. Against this backdrop, Mr. Hatim listed the requirements for sustainable progress towards the attainment of the MDG's, stressing the importance of both private and public sectors in attaining the MDG's while noting the irreplaceability of the public sector as the sole provider of much needed public goods. He concluded by highlighting the importance of attaining the MDG's for the well being of the countries of the region.

M. Employment and Decent Work Policies for Youth in the Arab States

This presentation was given by Tariq Haq from the ILO and focused on youth-specific difficulties in transition from education to employment. Some of the issues highlighted revolved around the "Catch 22" problem of lack of employment experience and the "insider-outsider" effects related to strict labour market regulations. Mr. Haq then incorporated these issues into the regional context before delving into the main features of the Arab labour force, which include employment being predominantly in services and an apparent bias towards the public sector. Subsequently, Mr. Haq outlined the youth dimension within the main features in the region, whereby there are three million new youth entrants to the labour market annually, leading to pressure to create jobs just to maintain current unemployment levels. On the gender aspect, he defined some main features of the female labour market noting that average female unemployment rate was 9% points higher than the male rate in 2005 and that unemployed women are mainly young new labour force entrants. The presenter concluded with a very thorough argument on the need for a comprehensive employment policy. Some key recommendations include the need for interventions on the

supply and demand side of the labour market and their better matching for enhancing employability, promoting employment and improving social security, promoting entrepreneurship, promoting intra-regional mobility, reviewing product market regulation, which can constrain employment growth for young people, and improving wage policy.

N. Roundtable with Youth NGOs

A round table with youth NGO's was organized on the first day of the EGM, in which youth raised issues important to them. The moderator of the round table was Mr. Adib Nehmeh and using a deliberative approach he divided the topics pertaining to youth into political issues, social, economic, and environmental issues, and personal issues. Several important concerns were raised during the round table such as issues pertaining to political participation, unemployment, relations with parents and "The Social Framework".

On the political level:

- Several participants seemed convinced that they are unable to change the existing reality and that their voice is not heard among the political elite in our region. This, in turn has rendered them indifferent to what is happening around them. Furthermore, the participants declared that their needs are not taken into consideration. They criticized the fact that youth are almost inexistent at the Ministries of Youth in our region and that a young MP of seems far-fetched. They also noted that they are, in general, not aware of the political culture surrounding them and of their political abilities and how to wield them to make change.

On the social, economic, and environmental level:

- Some participants raised the issues of unemployment and poverty. Several participants said that there should be a social contract in order to reduce poverty among the youth and reduce the gap between male and female youth in education. One participant said that there is imbalance between education output and labor market demand which creates unemployment and frustration. Another issue that was raised relates to the cohesion of the Arab family: Is it a natural thing? (number of divorces, number of maltreated women or children, ...)
- Several participants also raised the issue of "The Social Framework" meaning not being able to operate beyond its frontiers. Some said that all change must happen within the framework and is forbidden beyond it. The moderator insisted that a framework is essential for life to continue because without the framework everything becomes erratic (ex. Water in an uncontained surface).

On the personal level:

- The issue of the relation of youth with their parents was raised. There is misunderstanding between youth and their parents and among them is the mix between male and female youth.

O. Policy Outlook from a Government Perspective:

A discussion took place with government officials:

- Dr Nabil Al-Nawwab, from UN-DESA, said that he had three recommendations. Firstly, he voiced his disappointment at the weakness of statistical reporting and the general lack of statistics in Arab countries, noting that statistics are an important tool for policy-making. Secondly, he said that the attainment of MDG's is a long dynamic process, whereby the first phase involves setting goals to be met, the second phase sets higher goals, and so on. Thirdly, he affirmed that there is a lack of statistics pertaining to youth and highlighted the related dangers of such a technical weakness. According to Dr. Al-Nawwab, in order to circumvent the said dangers, there is a pressing need to make a small census covering all the goals on youth and use the results as input in the report.
- The delegate from Egypt raised the issue of the difference in development within the countries of the region and even within a country itself. This issue has been raised in the context of attainment of the

MDG. He also raised the issue of the cost of attaining the MDG's. He said that financing this cost should be one of the recommendations of this EGM. He also encouraged more cooperation from the Arab countries in attaining the MDG's. He also recommended that countries focus on policies and programmes for attaining the MDG's as well as reducing poverty. He demanded that a Matrix be built by all countries in order to monitor the attainment of the goals.

- The delegate from Lebanon said that the Lebanese government finalized an economic and social reform plan which was presented at the Paris 3 Donor Conference. The aims of the plan are to: reduce poverty and attain the MDG's. It was the fruit of several meetings between the government and NGO's.
- The delegate from Palestine raised the issue of customizing the MDG's to our region's needs. He argued that more weight should be given to conflict-related difficulties and to the obstacles that conflict places on development. He also highlighted the administrative costs of aid, arguing that only a portion of aid is actually channeled towards a country's needs.
- The delegate from Saudi Arabia insisted on the need to harmonize the data accumulated by UN agencies and the national data. The delegate argued that national data should be used in the MDG report.
- The delegate from Syria said that his country prepared the National Development Report 2005. He affirmed that his country attained all the goals except those pertaining to poverty.
- The delegate from Tunisia said that their development plan is comprehensive and it aims at increasing development and creating work opportunities. It also aims at a more equitable distribution of wealth. Furthermore, it aims at reducing the proportion of the most vulnerable groups to poverty.
- The delegate from the United Arab Emirates stated that his country has found a viable solution for the youth unemployment issue. The government created technical faculties from which students get professional and technical courses. Subsequently, when a government institution is in need of new employees it approaches these faculties to find employees.
- The delegate from Algeria stressed the importance of using national data. He also insisted on exchange of ideas and experiences between Arab countries in attaining the MDG's. In addition, he emphasized the importance of media in spreading the MDG's among the population. He called for establishing a fund to finance projects for youth.

III. Meeting Organization

A. Date and Venue

The meeting was held at the Radisson-SAS Hotel, Amman-Jordan on **26 and 27 February 2007**.

B. Opening statement and agenda

Mr. Tarek Alami Officer-in-Charge at EAD-ESCWA welcomed the participants from the different Arab governments, UN agencies, and consultants and thanked their attendance at the 2007 EGM on the Preparation for the MDGs 2007. Mr. Alami then briefly highlighted the importance of the MDGs as a measurable agenda for the Arab world and explained that the MDG Report is the product of a collaborative effort among the UN agencies and, for the first time, the League of Arab States. Mr. Alami outlined the difference between the upcoming report and the previous MDG report whereby the 2007 report will have a youth focus and will highlight the cross-cutting issues of gender and conflict. Accordingly, Mr. Alami explained the reasoning behind a thematic report and then provided demographic evidence for the significance of approaching the MDGs from a youth perspective. He emphasized the importance of having an EGM as it is vital to the participatory process of producing the Report as it allows for discussion among the development community and for an exchange of ideas and perspectives.

The Agenda comprised of nine presentations dealing with human rights, gender, employment, education, health, and good governance on the first day, 26 February 2007. The first day then concluded with a youth roundtable. The schedule for the second day, 27 February 2007, included four presentations dealing with environment, conflict, employment, and strategies to attaining social and economic development. The second day concluded with a discussion session among all the participants which aimed at understanding the policy outlook of government officials. The agenda was agreed upon, and the EGM commences accordingly.

IV. Participants

**Expert Group Meeting
on the Preparation of the
2007 Millennium Development Goals report in the Arab Region**

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UNESCWA

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Expert Group Meeting for the preparation of the UN MDGs Report in the Arab World 2007
Amman, Jordan, 26-27 February 2007

Provisional Agenda

Monday, 26 February 2007

8:30-9:00 Registration

9:00-9:15 Opening Session

Opening speech, Tarik Alami (ESCWA-EAD)

9:15-10:00 **Human Rights and Rights-Based Approach to Achieving the MDGs**
Presenter: Fateh Azzam (UN-OHCHR)

Integrating a Gender perspective in the MDG's
Presenter: Rania Jazairi (ESCWA-Center for Women)

10:00-10:30 Discussions

10:30-11:00 Coffee Break

11:00-12:00 **Demographic Profile in the Arab World and Youth Development**
Presenter: Jad Chaaban (AUB)

Youth Employment and Education
Presenter: Heba Nassar (AUC)

12:00-12:30 Discussions

12:30-13:45 Lunch

14:00-15:00 **Health Issues and the Youth**
Presenter: Rima Afifi-Suweid (AUB)

Social, Cultural and Political Participation of Male and Female Youth
Presenter: Mona Fayad (Lebanese University)

15:00-15:30 Discussions

15:30-17:30 **Roundtable with Youth NGOs**

Moderator: Adib Nehmeh (UNDP)

Tuesday, 27 February 2007

9:00-10:00 **Environmental Issues and the Youth**

Presenter: Iyad Abumoghli (UNDP)

Governance in MDG-Based National Development Strategies

Presenter: Khalil Gebara (Lebanese Transparency Association)

10:00-10:30 Discussions

10:30-11:00 Coffee Break

11:00-12:00 **Social and Economic Development Strategies that Lead to Rapid
Economic and Human Development**

Presenter: Hatim Hatim (ESCWA-EAD)

MDG-based Development Strategies in Conflict and Post-Conflict Countries

Presenter: Ingo Pitterle (ESCWA-EAD)

**Youth Friendly Policies to Address the Key Concerns of Arab Youth: Youth
Employment, Decent Work, Social Protection**

Presenter: Tariq Haq (ILO)

12:00-12:30 Discussions

12:30-13:45 Lunch

14:00-16:00 **Policy Outlook from a Government Perspective: A Discussion Session**

Moderator: Tarik Alami (ESCWA-EAD)

16:00-16:30 **Any other business and closing**

16:30-17:30 **Informal meeting of drafting committee of the UN MDGs Report in
Arab World 2007**

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