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**THE ROLE OF ESCWA IN THE COORDINATION OF THE
REGIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM**
Note by the Executive Secretary
Introduction

1. Regional cooperation within the United Nations system started to gain momentum at the beginning of the 1990s, and since the middle of the decade important strides have been made in coordinating the efforts of the Organization's various agencies. The financial crisis within the United Nations system, together with the demand of member States for closer and more effective cooperation among institutions of the United Nations and the far-reaching effects of globalization trends, augmented by rapid developments in information technology, in the political, economic and social spheres, have necessitated the development of a regional perspective with regard to global issues. Such a perspective is needed to bridge the gap between the national and global dimensions of issues; to forge common policies, norms and standards; to build consensus; and to establish a regional agenda that facilitates access to the global dialogue.

2. In 1997 the Secretary-General prepared a report entitled "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform"(A/51/950) in an effort to address the major challenges facing the Organization. In his report, the Secretary-General emphasized the need to "maximize the institutional effectiveness of the United Nations" and to ensure policy coherence and enhance coordination within the United Nations itself. This call for increased cooperation has also been a central theme in a number of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council.¹

 A. Existing cooperation mechanisms

3. Cooperation in the ESCWA member States is effected through several mechanisms, among them general bilateral agreements such as memorandums of understanding and letters of agreement, specific agreements for funding or the joint execution of projects and other activities in support of programmed activities, supplementary funding and substantive support for programmed activities to facilitate expansion in scope and coverage, joint position papers, joint task forces, joint units, and inter-agency coordination groups.

¹ General Assembly resolutions 50/120 of 20 December 1995 and 50/227 of 24 May 1996 and Economic and Social Council resolutions 1995/50 of 28 July 1995 and 1996/43 of 26 July 1996.

B. The Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Group

4. The ESCWA secretariat has taken groundbreaking steps to facilitate coordination at the regional level through its establishment of the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Group in Amman in 1995.² This Group was created to serve as a forum for United Nations organizations in the ESCWA member States to exchange information on administrative and programmatic issues of common interest, and to explore possibilities for cooperation, the establishment of joint positions and the implementation of joint activities wherever possible. The Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Group held one informal meeting in 1995, marking its formation, and five meetings during the 1996-1997 biennium. Discussions focused on recent events and issues of current relevance to United Nations activities in the region, including follow-up to global conferences, the implications of the United Nations financial crisis, operational activities for development, the move of ESCWA to Beirut, gender issues, information sharing and cost-effectiveness within the United Nations system, and reform in the Organization. The meetings also discussed the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) economic summits and conferences, the first meeting of the Mediterranean Development Forum, and the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People: Promoting Palestinian Human Development.

5. A meeting was held in Amman in April 1998, following the move of the Commission to Beirut, and it was decided to convene subsequent meetings alternately between Amman and Beirut and to continue with cooperation efforts.

C. The First Annual Coordination Meeting at the Regional Level of the United Nations System

6. At its substantive session in 1998, the Economic and Social Council accepted the Secretary-General's proposal that yearly meetings should be held, chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General, between the regional commissions and the relevant entities of the United Nations system engaged in regional and intercountry activities, with the objective of improving coordination and promoting collaborative action in order to reinforce synergism and avoid overlapping.

7. Accordingly, the Deputy Secretary-General called for meetings with each regional commission to review existing or planned mechanisms and arrangements for coordination and consultation among entities of the United Nations system at the planning and implementation stages and to evaluate their effectiveness, and to propose suggestions for strengthening and improving the collective response of the United Nations system to the needs of the regions they serve. These meetings were also to discuss priority regional and intercountry programmes and activities for the purpose of ensuring that decisions on reinforcing collaborative mechanisms were implemented in both the planning and the implementation of programmes.

8. The First Annual Coordination Meeting at the Regional Level of the United Nations System took place in Beirut at United Nations House on 1 March 1999 and was chaired by Ms. Louise Frechette, Deputy Secretary-General. It was attended by representatives of the regional offices of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Development Programme and its Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RBAS), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the

² The group includes ESCWA, the International Telecommunication Union, the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Population Fund, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, the World Food Programme, and the World Health Organization.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

9. As the Meeting progressed it became evident that (a) there existed a strong commitment to regional cooperation, even on the part of the highly specialized agencies; (b) there was a need to build consensus on actions at the regional level and link them to those envisioned at the country level as well as those of other regional non-United Nations organizations and donor agencies; such consensus had to be built on selected priorities; (c) it was necessary to further develop ways of optimizing the use of existing resources; and (d) it was necessary to determine the extent to which inter-agency coordination should be institutionalized. The Meeting stressed the need to arrive at a common "strategic vision" of the role of the United Nations in the next century.

10. The Meeting also recognized that the United Nations and its agencies had a specific role to play in furthering regional cooperation, in view of the Organization's neutrality and comprehensive mandates covering a broad range of specializations. In facilitating regional cooperation, the United Nations agencies must endeavour to capitalize on their comparative advantage and to be agents of change, deliver high-quality programmes, initiate dialogue (for the purpose of conflict resolution), establish synergistic relationships with other regional actors, and make optimal use of the limited resources available.

11. The Deputy Secretary-General stressed the importance of defining a collective regional strategy that concentrated on certain critical issues, taking into consideration the sensitivity of the region and the link between the political and technical dimensions. She also emphasized that the coordination exercise should be simple, workable and transparent and should involve a minimal investment in human resources.

12. The Meeting concluded that the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Group established by the Commission would be the main forum for formulating a common vision for the region and devising a strategy for regional coordination, with ESCWA as the convener.

13. In this capacity, ESCWA intends to convene a meeting of the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Group on 29 April 1999 to discuss mechanisms for responding to the latter's expanded mandates.

14. In its resolution 216 (XIX) of 7 May 1997 on organizational and programme changes and modifications introduced by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia since 1994, the Commission:

"2. *Calls* for the enhancement of the Commission's function as a basic forum for coordinating the economic and social policies of its member States and for the development of its role in supporting regional and subregional projects aimed at expanding economic and social cooperation among member States at both the regional and subregional levels;

"3. *Also calls* for the reinforcement of the role of the United Nations at the regional level, which entails the promotion of the role of the regional commissions in representing the regional dimension of global issues and in integrating United Nations activities at the international, regional and national levels;

"4. *Further calls* for the granting to the Commission, within the framework of the reform of the United Nations system, of a broader mandate for carrying out its activities, including those related to regional technical cooperation projects, and for the strengthening of its role in coordinating the activities of the United Nations agencies and organizations and those of the regional and national organizations concerned, in the region in which it operates, so as to ensure that the United Nations objectives of development, freedom and peace are achieved."

15. The designation of ESCWA as the focal point for regional coordination and for the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Group, which it initiated as the mechanism for furthering regional coordination, constitutes concrete response to the petitions contained in the above-mentioned resolution.
