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**THE ROLE OF ESCWA IN THE COORDINATION OF REGIONAL ACTIVITIES
OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM****Introduction**

1. In the report entitled "The regional commissions in the context of the programme for reform of the United Nations" (E/1998/65), the Secretary-General recommended that yearly coordination meetings, chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General, be held in each of the geographical areas served by the regional commissions to bring together those commissions and all of the United Nations funds, programmes, agencies and other entities engaged in intercountry and regional activities. Such meetings would be held for the purpose of facilitating the exchange of information and promoting coordination and joint action in order to reinforce synergism and prevent the overlapping of activities. The Secretary-General's recommendation was endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1998/46 (annex II), and the regional coordination process was initiated during the first part of 1999 at the headquarters of the five regional commissions.

2. For the ESCWA region the process was launched in Beirut in March 1999 at a meeting chaired by Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette. The meeting brought together representatives of 18 United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies and concluded with the establishment of the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Group (the name was later changed to the United Nations Regional Coordination Group). A second meeting was held in April 1999, and a third in April 2000. A summary of discussions held at those meetings is provided below.

A. MECHANISMS FOR COOPERATION AND COORDINATION

3. During their meetings the members of the Group assessed existing mechanisms for regional inter-agency coordination and cooperation and discussed ways to enhance them and to review priorities for action so that regional issues and requirements might be addressed more effectively. They affirmed their strong commitment to regional cooperation and coordination, concurred on the need to formulate a common United Nations strategy or vision for the region, and agreed that the Regional Coordination Group constituted the most appropriate forum for that purpose. It was acknowledged that any common strategy had to take into account the mandates and activities of each United Nations entity involved. Mention was made of the need to form partnerships with regional, subregional and non-governmental organizations and to take their activities into consideration as well.

4. The Group discussed the importance of institutionalizing inter-agency coordination and cooperation without creating a cumbersome machinery. It was decided that ESCWA would serve as the Group's secretariat and that each fund, programme and agency would assign focal points to facilitate coordination. Those entities would furnish the secretariat with information on their work programmes, meetings, training

activities, joint agreements and major publications. The Group would meet twice a year, with ESCWA responsible for convening the meetings.

5. The members agreed that a Group Web page would enhance cooperation and coordination, and that the information included therein would be more accessible if the page were made part of the ESCWA Web site. (The Web page was created at the end of 2000 and is now operational.)

6. Emphasis was given to the importance of selectiveness in proposing projects for financing to ensure that optimal use was made of available resources. It was agreed that efforts to mobilize extrabudgetary resources should be launched jointly, in view of the increased difficulty of obtaining funds for projects undertaken at the regional level. The consensus was that United Nations entities should formulate solid and innovative project proposals, pool their technical resources, and build awareness among donors of the needs of the region in order to secure the necessary project support. The importance of involving international financing institutions, in particular the World Bank, in regional action was underscored.

B. AREAS FOR COORDINATION AND COOPERATION

7. Members of the Group shared the opinion that Western Asia, while complex and diverse, was culturally one of the most cohesive and homogeneous regions in the world. However, the area was beset by a number of problems including the low level of intraregional trade; the abundance of vast arid and semi-arid areas and the acute scarcity of water resources; high population, labour-force, unemployment and underemployment rates; the low level of competitiveness deriving from an insufficiently trained labour force; environmental problems; high poverty rates; and high rates of illiteracy, especially among women. It was believed that those challenges could be addressed through the coordinated efforts of members of the United Nations system.

8. The Group identified common priorities and the extent to which they overlapped or diverged. Shared concerns related to employment and labour rights, the accession of Arab countries to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement, youth, health, education, poverty eradication, respect for human rights, gender mainstreaming, and the development of human resources. The "humanization" of the globalization process was also singled out as a subject of significant importance. Mention was made of the need to develop a strategic framework for identifying priority areas for action at the regional level.

9. The Integrated Regional Follow-up by the Arab States to the United Nations Global Conferences Project (the Flagship Project), financed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and executed by ESCWA in cooperation with other United Nations entities, Arab Governments and regional organizations, was mentioned as a concrete example of coordination and cooperation within the area. It was noted that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), not one of the original participants, had requested that its concerns be incorporated into the Project objectives and activities and that a UNICEF representative serve on the steering committee.

C. REVIEW OF COOPERATION AND COORDINATION

10. Some 50 joint activities were undertaken, some between members of the Group and others with outside entities, between 1995 and April 2000; around half were carried out by two parties and the remainder between three or more. Around 20 of those activities were still ongoing in April 2000.

11. The activities have involved cooperation between parties at all levels, as follows: (a) thirty United Nations and international bodies including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UNDP, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank, WTO and International Criminal Police Organization (ICPO/INTERPOL); (b) fifteen regional and subregional organizations including the League of Arab States, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization (AIDMO) and Centre for Environment

and Development for the Arab Region (CEDARE); and (c) a small number of NGOs including the Arab Society of Certified Accountants, Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Friedrich Naumann Foundation and Centro di Solidarieta.

12. The joint activities have related to various areas of concern including statistics, economic and social development, energy and natural resources, industry, technology, transport and agriculture. They have been implemented over periods ranging from a few days to several years and have included programmes, studies, expert group meetings, conferences, congresses, forums, symposiums, workshops, training courses, reports and publications.
