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COOPERATION BETWEEN ESCWA AND THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES

Note by the secretariat

Summary

This report reviews and assesses the benefits that have resulted from cooperative endeavours between the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the League of Arab States (LAS), particularly within the context of recent regional and global developments. Furthermore, this report identifies and proposes a number of programme areas in which the two organizations could strengthen their collaboration in support of their respective member countries in the field of economic and social development. The Commission is hereby invited to advise the secretariat on these proposals.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Both ESCWA and LAS have been established with clear mandates to support regional cooperation among their respective member countries. Since its establishment in 1974, ESCWA has cooperated extensively with the League of Arab States (LAS) in promoting the economic and social development of the countries in the region. This cooperation has evolved over the years and has become more diversified both in terms of areas of cooperation and types of activity. Prompted by the new challenges and opportunities that exist at regional and global levels, the secretariat wishes to share its views on the future cooperation between the two organizations, and to invite the Commission to comment and offer suggestions for enhancing existing cooperation.

B. PAST COOPERATION BETWEEN ESCWA AND LAS

2. Cooperation between ESCWA and LAS initially centred on exchanging information, participating in their respective meetings and implementing joint technical cooperation projects on sectoral issues. In May 1983, ESCWA and LAS concluded a memorandum of understanding to strengthen cooperation between them by reinforcing their capacities aimed at serving mutual interests and objectives for regional development. In the early 1990s, this cooperation expanded to incorporate regional preparations for and follow-up to key global conferences, including the following: the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992); the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 5-13 September 1994); the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995); the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 4-15 September 1995); and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), (Istanbul, 3-14 June 1996).

3. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, ESCWA and LAS have been increasingly involved in issues related to peace and security, Arab regional integration and other common concerns. ESCWA actively participates in the general meetings of cooperation between the United Nations system and LAS, the last of which was held in Cairo, 10-12 February 2004. These meetings, which are mandated by General Assembly resolution 56/40 of 7 December 2001, seek to strengthen cooperation between the two organizations within the framework of the Charter of the United Nations. Equally, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 57/46 of 21 November 2002, ESCWA participates in the sectoral meetings between the United Nations and LAS and is set to host the next Sectoral Meeting in Beirut, 16-18 May 2005.

4. Furthermore, the secretariat of ESCWA and the General Secretariat of LAS maintain the exchange of information and, where appropriate, initiate and fine-tune cooperative arrangements on an array of regional and global issues that play vital roles in the development of their respective regions.

5. Recent notable results achieved through the collaborative efforts of the two organizations include the following:

(a) The articulation of a common vision of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian private sector and civil society for rehabilitation and development and the formulation of Palestinian socio-economic needs and priorities;

(b) The establishment of new networking arrangements between the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian private sector and civil society and their Arab and international counterparts, which was formally adopted by the Arab-International Forum for Rehabilitation and Development in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Towards an Independent State (Beirut, 11-14 October 2004), and which resulted in the formation of several partnership initiatives;

(c) The establishment of the Joint Committee on Environment and Development (JCEDAR) by LAS, ESCWA and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) aimed at following up on the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and at providing technical

assistance in a number of areas relevant to the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), including water resources, sanitation and human settlements, trade and environment, and energy;

(d) Technical assistance provided by ESCWA to the Arab Working Group for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), particularly with regard to the development of digital Arabic content; Arabic domain names on the Internet; and the formulation of the Pan-Arab Regional Plan of Action, which is to be presented at the Pan-Arab Conference on WSIS (Cairo, 8-10 May 2005);

(e) The development of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq (ITSAM), including two intergovernmental agreements on road and railways and a draft memorandum of understanding on maritime transport, thereby facilitating the transboundary flows of goods, information, services, persons and, consequently, promoting Arab regional integration;

(f) The capacity building of Arab trade representatives to ensure their effective participation in the biennial ministerial conferences of the World Trade Organization (WTO);

(g) The launch of the Arab Decade for Persons with Disabilities 2004-2013, which aims to empower persons with disabilities, including the victims of conflict, by improving their access to education and vocational training, employment opportunities, information and communication technology (ICT), and civic involvement;

(h) The joint implementation of a local community development project in Yemen;

(i) The joint organization, together with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), of the Regional Arab Population Forum (Beirut, 19-21 November 2004), which renewed the commitments of Arab countries to exert greater efforts towards fulfilling the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), including the formulation of population policies and the integration of population issues and goals in national plans;

(j) Capacity building in the preparation of national reports based on the general guidelines of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

6. In addition to the General Secretariat of LAS and its Ministerial Councils, ESCWA has also worked closely with a number of Arab specialized organizations. Specifically, in the area of sustainable development and environment, where an institutionalized cooperation mechanism has been established, namely, the joint Secretariat of ESCWA, LAS and UNEP/ROWA that services CAMRE, significant and concrete results have been achieved. In some other areas where the cooperation is not yet institutionalized and takes place on an ad hoc basis, the level of achievement was less tangible.

C. COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES OF ESCWA AND LAS

7. ESCWA and LAS have demonstrated their desire to work together in areas of mutual interest and based on the mandates and priorities of the Commission and of the Council of the Arab League. The pattern of cooperation has evolved by building on the comparative advantages of each organization. These are summarized below.

1. *Comparative advantages of ESCWA*

(a) *International mandate for regional economic and social development*

8. As an entity within the United Nations system, ESCWA has the regional and global mandates as well as the access to promote economic and social development for its member countries. Moreover, given its geographical position, ESCWA possesses knowledge of the region, including political and cultural awareness, and the language skills needed to carry out normative, analytical and operational activities to assist member countries. Consequently, ESCWA plays a prominent role in promoting concerted action in the

areas of economic and social development; in increasing the level of economic activity; and in maintaining and strengthening the economic and social relations, both among member countries and with countries in other regions.

(b) *Wide networking and inter-agency coordination*

9. ESCWA is part of the integrated United Nations networks that operate at national, regional and global levels in a number of fields, including political, economic and social. Moreover, given its mandate to coordinate the economic and social development work of the United Nations at a regional level, ESCWA enjoys a direct access to the capacities of United Nations specialized agencies.

(c) *Promoting Arab regional integration*

10. ESCWA has achieved a number of regional integration initiatives, particularly in the fields of transport, environment and sustainable development, and ICTs. Specifically, given the role of ESCWA in promoting Arab regional integration, the Council of Arab Transportation Ministers within LAS has expressed a keen interest to build on ITSAM and its related intergovernmental agreements on road, railways and maritime transport in the region.

2. *Comparative advantages of LAS*

(a) *Comprehensive geographical coverage*

11. While all 22 Arab countries are members of LAS, these countries are divided and grouped into two regional commissions, namely, 13 countries in ESCWA, and 10 countries in the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). Egypt enjoys a dual membership of both ESCWA and ECA. Consequently, given its comprehensive geographical coverage, LAS has a vantage of calling for Arab unity and serving pan-Arab interests.

(b) *Summit-level convening power*

12. LAS possesses the highest convening power in the region, given that the heads of its member countries are represented in the governing authority of LAS, namely, the Council of the Arab League. Moreover, while the Commission of ESCWA is convened at the ministerial level, senior Government officials normally attend its sectoral committees. In the case of LAS, the sectoral councils are held at the ministerial level.

(c) *Coverage in political, economic and social fields*

13. LAS is mandated to cover political, economic and social fields, particularly with regard to improving knowledge on the impact of security threats on socio-economic development. Within that context, LAS made significant contributions to the United Nations publication, entitled "Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change".

14. Given the strong political commitment of Arab countries, the mandate of LAS has a direct impact on the work of ESCWA. Similarly, ESCWA is at hand to provide assistance to its member countries and to Arab countries that are not members, particularly with regard to promoting and implementing the United Nations global and regional agendas and mandates, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While it is difficult to quantify the cooperation between ESCWA and LAS in terms of monetary savings, this cooperation has significantly contributed towards promoting synergies in their respective work and avoiding duplication of activities.

D. REGIONAL AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS

15. The focus of the work of the two organizations has evolved to take into account regional and global developments. Some of the significant changes that have taken place during the past five years include the following:

(a) The adoption of the Millennium Declaration in September 2000;

(b) The structural reform of ESCWA in 2002 aimed at concentrating on the four regional priorities of MDGs, namely, water and energy, social policies, globalization, and information and communication technologies (ICTs); and at focusing on three cross-cutting issues as follows: (i) the empowerment and advancement of women; (ii) national statistical capacity building, particularly to monitor progress towards the attainment of MDGs; and (iii) the special needs of countries and territories emerging from conflict;

(c) Global conferences and high-level meetings, including the following: the International Conference on Financing for Development (Monterrey, Mexico, 18-22 March 2002); the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August – 4 September 2002); and the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (Geneva, 10-12 December 2003);

(d) A number of initiatives proposed to revitalize LAS, including the establishment of a pan-Arab parliament, an Arab security council and an Arab court of justice;

(e) The publication of a report by the Secretary-General, entitled “In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all”, which emphasized the need for the United Nations and regional organizations to play complementary roles in facing the challenges to international peace and security, and the intention to introduce memoranda of understanding between the United Nations and individual regional organizations.

E. PROPOSAL BY THE SECRETARIAT TO STRENGTHEN THE COOPERATION BETWEEN ESCWA AND LAS

16. The secretariat is of the view that the two organizations need to forge a strategic partnership based on their respective comparative advantages, thereby responding to the challenges and opportunities arising from the above-mentioned regional and global developments.

17. Ongoing and possible programme areas in which ESCWA and LAS can strengthen their cooperation include the following:

(a) Pursuing the Plan of Implementation of WSSD with special focus on the management of water and energy;

(b) Developing and making operational ITSAM;

(c) Promoting ICT applications to bridge the digital divide and alleviate poverty by developing an Arabic domain names system on the Internet and by promoting the digital Arabic content;

(d) Developing regional arrangements and mechanisms to promote Arab regional integration in economic, social and cultural fields;

(e) Monitoring and reporting the progress towards the attainment of MDGs in the Arab region;

(f) Advancing and empowering women;

(g) Providing special assistance to countries and territories emerging from conflict, and to the least developed countries;

(h) Strengthening national capacities in the areas of production and dissemination of policy-relevant statistics.

18. In order to enhance the existing cooperation, the secretariat believes that cooperation between ESCWA and LAS should be firmly institutionalized, both at policy and technical levels. Within the context of the latter, the success of JCEDAR could serve as a model. Consequently, the secretariat of ESCWA foresees the necessity of consulting and developing a joint proposal with the General Secretariat of LAS aimed at the following: (a) establishing consultative mechanisms, including a programme and project formulation mechanism; (b) identifying more focused programme priority areas for cooperation; and (c) formulating a draft plan of action to implement those proposals. The outcome of this joint exercise could be reported to the Commission at its twenty-fourth session, which could be convened in April 2006 should the Commission decide to change the timing of legislative sessions under agenda item 12 of the current session.

19. The Commission is invited to comment and offer suggestions on the above-mentioned proposals, in addition to any aspect of the cooperation between the two organizations.
