



Social Exclusion in the ESCWA Region: Determinants and Indicators

Aide Memoire for the Expert Group Meeting
Beirut August 1-2, 2008

Summary

The Social Development Division (SDD) at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is planning an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) to introduce and review its work on social exclusion in the region. SDD has undertaken field work in Lebanon, Egypt, and Yemen, and has produced a consolidated report of its initial findings and analysis.

The EGM will take place in Beirut, Lebanon, on August 1-2, 2008 to review and validate ESCWA's definition of social exclusion in the ESCWA region, and the findings of the field work with a view to develop further the qualitative and quantitative analysis of social exclusion. The meeting will bring together between 15 and 20 regional and international experts to review the consolidated report and provide input into the potential and policy relevance of a social exclusion approach.

Background and Objectives

ESCWA's work on Social Exclusion is part of the United Nations Development Account Project, "Interregional Cooperation to Strengthen Social Inclusion, Gender Equality and Health Promotion in the Millennium Development Goals," initiated in 2006.

The Millennium Development Goals placed the welfare of the global poor and their right to development at the center of policies and programmes of UN and other major development agencies; they follow a generalized and over-arching trajectory of commitment to human rights broadly conceived and to sustainable economic growth that benefits the less advantaged. This global Development Account project, in turn, aims to provide "policymakers with a set of additional targets and indicators within the existing MDG framework that would help them measure the progress made toward the Millennium Development Goals" in ways that take into account the inclusion of vulnerable social groups.¹

The project, thus, aims to supplement the general thrust of the MDGs with specific targets and localized indicators that measure the determinants of exclusion and which take into account the challenges and differences facing the different regions in their progress towards the MDGs. The premise of the project is that **certain disadvantaged groups in different societies are not adequately addressed by the general targets of the MDGs**; that women, despite the gender-specific indicators already included in the MDG framework, continue to lag behind in terms of equality and empowerment; and that "adequate" health care not only remains inaccessible for many, but it is *unequally* so. The project then posits at the outset that a focus on the "poor" broadly defined does not address the needs and

¹ ESCAP Project Document.

experiences of many groups in society whose disadvantage, lack of access, and inequality cannot be explained by, or limited to, economic deprivation or underdevelopment. While the region as a whole may be said to be lagging behind in terms of achieving the targets set out in the MDGs, the generalized focus of the MDGs does not address variations within societies that place some at an even further distance from the benefits envisioned in those targets.

Social Exclusion: The Concept

While the MDGs address inequality generally, they do not address discriminatory processes which make some groups face greater inequality than others. In order to localize the general focus of the MDGs, it was necessary to begin by identifying processes of exclusion in the region that lead to inequality, vulnerability, and disadvantage. Discrimination, stigmatisation, institutional and environmental barriers to equal access and opportunity, play a role in producing discriminatory inequality.

ESCWA deliberately chose to focus on societal processes that distribute disadvantage and deprivation—and conversely developmental benefits—unequally. ESCWA's premise is that such inequality cannot be relegated to natural or inevitable processes. Rather, there may be systematic unfair processes or discriminatory mechanisms that cause such inequality. The basis of a social exclusion approach is that such processes or mechanisms have to be addressed by developmental discourses for the general benefits of the MDGs to reach all.

Social Exclusion places a subject at an unfair disadvantage from others similarly situated; it results in the curtailment of that subject's social, economic, and/or political rights, his or her ability to access services and goods, as well as the ability to be an active member in society.

The Country Studies

ESCWA's pilot project on Social Exclusion has proceeded by conducting three qualitative country studies to establish a methodology and identify areas for future research on social exclusion in the region. The country studies were undertaken in Lebanon (representative of a conflict-ridden society), in Egypt (a most populous country and a diversified economy) and in Yemen (a Least Developed Country). In each country, groups that may be termed socially excluded were identified and then monograph interviews were conducted with individuals (male and female) belonging to those groups—examples are Sudanese refugees in Egypt, Persons Living with HIV/AIDS in Yemen, and working children in Lebanon.

While ESCWA offered a definition of social exclusion upon which groups were identified, it was important to allow **individual narratives** to give content to the concept of social exclusion. Analysis of individual narratives then allowed us to identify a preliminary list of lead determinants of exclusion. Those determinants, in turn, chart out areas where social, political, legal, institutional, and cultural factors intersect to create the experience of social exclusion. It is those areas that must now be investigated and where work must be initiated.

“My mother wasn’t a real mother, not like other mothers.... I am too powerful for her now, because I am on the street now, I am like the kids on the street.”

Khaled, 15, Street Child, Egypt

“I cannot get married because my children will never be able to go to a school or vote or get a real job. I cannot even move around freely. I stay in the neighbourhood and do not venture out...”

Jamal, undocumented, Lebanon

“I don’t let my daughter go out because bad things could happen to her. It would have been different with a boy.”

Mother of Menna, 15, who suffers from Down Syndrome, Egypt.

“The Akhdam are at the very bottom. Everyone treats us like that. If a beggar is white, they are not called Khadameen...”

Salma, a woman from the Akhdam group, Yemen.

Expected EGM Outcomes

The EGM will bring together experts, academics, and activists who are invested in the plight of excluded groups in the region and are committed to a creative and rigorous approach to policy making and analysis. Discussion will focus on the findings as well as the research methodology necessary to capture social exclusion and to make it a useful and meaningful tool of analysis in the ESCWA region. The expected EGM outcomes regarding the concept, the findings, and the prospects are as follows:

1. Concept: probe the concept of social exclusion and ESCWA's definition of it for the region as something distinct from poverty reduction.
2. Findings: discuss the findings of the qualitative analysis taken of the experiences of excluded individuals. (A draft consolidated report of the findings will be shared with participants under separate cover.) Working sessions specific to particular groups profiled will aid in building a policy-relevant framework for addressing the exclusion of these groups.
3. Prospects: propose a way forward in terms of research into social exclusion as well as advocacy and programming. In addition, address the possibilities of moving from qualitative to quantitative analysis of social exclusion.