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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT
**OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON SOCIAL
EXCLUSION IN THE ESCWA REGION
BEIRUT, 1-2 AUGUST 2008**

Summary

The Expert Group Meeting on Social Exclusion in the ESCWA Region was organized in Beirut on 1 and 2 August 2008 by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). The meeting provided an opportunity for discussion of the draft report, Social Exclusion in the ESCWA Region, and to gather feedback and suggestions from regional and international experts. Discussions focused on the concept of social exclusion and its role in tackling problems of poverty, disadvantage and exclusion in the region.

While noting the methodological challenges that accompany the use of a relatively new concept in the region, the meeting stressed the importance of charting new ground in tackling the intersection of poverty and discrimination. In this context, experts highlighted the role of the draft report as an advocacy tool that could place such issues, and the groups affected by them, on the agenda of Governments and development partners in the ESCWA region.

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Introduction

1. The Expert Group Meeting on Social Exclusion in the ESCWA Region was held at the United Nations House in Beirut on 1 and 2 August 2008 and organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). Its objective was to introduce and review both the fieldwork on social exclusion carried out by ESCWA in Lebanon, Egypt and Yemen, and the consolidated report of the initial findings and analysis. In addition to 26 regional and international experts, the meeting was also attended by representatives from the embassies of Yemen and Jordan and a number of ESCWA staff members.
2. After brief opening remarks and introduction of the participants, the meeting held two sessions on day 1. *Session I: Conceptual issues* was moderated by Ms. Hania Sholkamy and included an opening presentation by Mr. François Farah, former Chief of the Social Development Division of ESCWA (SDD), who set out the rationale for the work on social exclusion and the background to the project, followed by a keynote address by Ms. Naila Kabeer of the Institute of Development Studies, who discussed the value of a social exclusion approach for practitioners in the developing world. *Session II: Findings* was moderated by Mr. Baqer Al Najjar and included a presentation by Ms. Maisaa Youssef of SDD, who provided an overview of the main findings of the report. The afternoon concluded with two simultaneous working group sessions that delved deeper into the mechanics of exclusion and possible policy interventions for particular excluded groups. The second day commenced with the final session, *Session III: Steps forward*, moderated by Mr. Ali Abdel Gadir Ali, in which discussion centred on the possibilities for quantitative analysis of social exclusion and included a presentation by consultant Ms. Mary Deeb on scenarios for analysis and measurement of social exclusion.
3. Throughout the sessions, presentations were followed by intense discussion; this report provides a summary of those discussions and the conclusions drawn from them.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

4. To clarify the working definition of social exclusion in the report and provide a better formulation of the relationship between social exclusion and poverty.
5. To build on data gathered and analysis undertaken by other agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the context of the Human Development Report.
6. To consider the next steps for the project in terms of feasibility, taking into account time and budgetary constraints, and the ESCWA mandate. In this context, a number of suggestions were made, but three distinct approaches emerged most strongly for further analysis of social exclusion:

(a) Group analysis: Significant work has been done in Southeast Asia and China to analyse the intersection of discrimination and poverty. The premise of such work is that excluded groups are not compared to the rest of the population; the focus is on how a characteristic such as ethnicity or disability intersects with poverty, not how the disabled compare to the rest of the population. The aim is to capture the multiplicity inherent in social exclusion;

(b) Advocacy: A consensus was reached on the importance of the work on social exclusion as advocacy work. This was supported by a number of experts and a range of viewpoints;

- (i) From a budgetary perspective, the work on social exclusion is intended to provide a catalyst to engender interest in issues that are not covered by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in order to secure the interest of other partners, especially at the country level;
- (ii) The problem is too substantial to be solved by one study or a single report. One of the merits of a social exclusion approach is to mainstream the problems and put them on the agenda. The aim is to see what could be done at the policy, programme, civil society and research levels;

- (iii) The ESCWA mandate already specifies its role as an advisory body. The focus should therefore be on setting out the evidence and direction needed by member country governments, guidance on how they could be encouraged to adopt such advice, and the reasons why. Given the burden that social exclusion places on member countries, a demand must be created for dealing with it and it must be clearly demonstrated that just as poverty is not randomly distributed, nor is social exclusion;
- (iv) Methodologically, monographs and personal narratives lend themselves naturally to advocacy, as they help to sensitize people to the problems faced by excluded groups;
- (v) The closer a country comes to attaining the targets of the MDGs, the more significant social exclusion becomes, and this can be a way to convince policymakers of the importance of tackling such exclusion. When a country starts from a very low level of development, it is easier to demonstrate the results of achieving the MDGs; when it gets closer to reaching its target, however, social exclusion works to hinder progress.

(c) MDGs and underperformance: A number of countries will fail to meet the MDG targets and the national development plans of certain countries have systematically omitted specific groups, meaning that inequality and injustice are not randomly distributed. The convergence of factors that produce systematic exclusion must therefore be considered statistically. In this scenario, a descriptive analysis of exclusion is linked to public spending in order to provide a policy analysis at the conceptual, performance and impact levels.

II. DISCUSSION TOPICS

A. CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

1. *Social exclusion in context*

7. The concept of social exclusion is not yet widely used in the region and the work of ESCWA represents an attempt to shift the focus onto particular groups among the poor who are less likely to benefit from development strategies and the MDGs. The concept, therefore, will be refined as the work continues and will benefit from newer methodologies and further discussion of the issues that it covers.

8. A reservation was expressed that the concept of social exclusion is European in origin and of limited relevance to the ESCWA region. It was posited that the concept was formulated and applied in developed countries with fully-evolved welfare systems and is therefore far removed from the concerns and environment of developing countries. New concepts are always advanced by international development agencies when in fact older concepts of poverty or injustice suffice to analyse problems faced by the disadvantaged in the developing world.

9. In counterbalance of this view, the argument was advanced that the concept has evolved beyond its initial European usage and is used differently by ESCWA and others in the development field. Many examples of its use outside Europe were cited, notably in South Asia and Latin America. Moreover, it was stressed that the concept allows for the formulation of a framework to capture the intersection of a multiplicity of issues; this intersection is not always captured by discourses on poverty. Historically, the concept was adopted by practitioners in the developing world, who saw in social exclusion the conceptual and analytical space to bring together two strands in development studies that had traditionally been seen as separate: an economic focus on poverty and a sociological focus on discrimination. Social exclusion as an analytical tool is thus able to consider the interplay between resource-based models of injustice and identity-based models of injustice very specifically.

2. Social exclusion and poverty

10. Discourses on reducing poverty in the ESCWA region tend to focus on ways of reducing income poverty for large segments of the population, with little attention given to specific groups who face obstacles on the basis of their identity. Such groups as people living with HIV/AIDS, ethnic groups, migrant workers and refugees are insufficiently addressed by research on poverty. Consequently, a focus on groups and categories of the excluded brings a nuance and a refinement to the discourse on poverty in the region, while at the same time moving social exclusion in a direction which is specific to the concerns of the region.

11. The multiplicity of issues and processes covered by social exclusion was deemed an important addition to the debate on the reduction of poverty in the region. However, a clearer definition of the relationship between poverty and social exclusion was urged. Social exclusion addresses the intersection of poverty with issues of discrimination and identity, and does not deny the primacy of poverty as a core development issue in the region.

B. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

12. Overall, the richness and complexity of the information gained in monograph interviews was commended. It was also noted that monographs lend themselves naturally to advocacy work, as they sensitize the audience to the problems faced by excluded groups and to the intersection of the issues and processes in their exclusion.

13. Two challenges remain, however. The first is how to measure social exclusion. Here, many suggestions were made as to how to draw on already available data and view it from a new perspective. The alternative option of conducting statistical analysis on the basis of new surveys may prove too costly and ambitious a project for ESCWA at present. The second challenge involves looking at policy options and “uplifting” indicators out of the qualitative work already done. ESCWA will continue to work on this option in the next phase of the project.

C. PROGRAMME ISSUES

14. The Development Account project “Interregional cooperation to strengthen inclusion, gender equality and health promotion in the Millennium Development Goals” is multi-regional, and different regional commissions have adopted different strategies to arrive at supplemental indicators for the MDGs. Most have focused on desk reviews and consultations with relevant ministries to draw a map of excluded groups whose needs may better be captured by supplemental indicators. The rationale for focusing on particular groups, such as youth or women, builds on work already done at the regional level. While the end product of the project concerns supplemental indicators, the budget and timeframe of the project position it more as an awareness-raising project to encourage governments to consider excluded groups at the national and regional levels.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE

15. The Expert Group Meeting on Social Exclusion was held at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon, on 1 and 2 August 2008.

B. OPENING

16. Mr. Walid Hilal, Officer-in-Charge of ESCWA-SDD, gave the opening address, welcoming the participants. Mr. François Farah, former Chief of ESCWA-SDD, then gave an introduction to the importance of addressing social exclusion, highlighting the growing global interest in this issue.

C. PARTICIPANTS

17. The meeting was attended by 18 experts from nine ESCWA member countries and one expert from the United Kingdom. Seven participants attended from United Nations sister organizations, including the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and UNDP, and nine staff members from ESCWA. A list of participants is provided in the annex to this report.

D. AGENDA

18. The agenda of the meeting was adopted.

E. DOCUMENTS

19. Background information and all documentation pertaining to the meeting, as well as the full agenda and presentations, are available at: <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=790E>.

Annex

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