



Report

Fourteenth session of the Committee on Social Development Beirut, 8 June 2023

Summary

The Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held its fourteenth session in Beirut on 8 June 2023. The session's work focused on the issue of inequality in the Arab region, based on three documents addressing the Arab inequality pandemic, inequality in employment, and practical initiatives to increase social and economic equality.

The agenda items also included follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations made by the Committee on Social Development at its thirteenth session, technical cooperation activities, and the activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability and of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform.

The present report sets out the recommendations made by the Committee on Social Development at its fourteenth session, and the main issues discussed by participants.

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Introduction

1. The Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held its fourteenth session in Beirut on June 8 pursuant to resolution 198 (XVII) of 31 May 1994, endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1994/27 of 26 July 1994, concerning the establishment of a committee on social development at ESCWA, and in accordance with the recommendations issued at the thirteenth session of the Committee on Social Development, held online on 22 and 23 September 2021.

2. The Committee on Social Development aims to increase the participation of member States in setting priorities and formulating recommendations to promote social development in the Arab region, and to follow up on their implementation. The present report sets out the recommendations made by the Committee at its fourteenth session, including recommendations to ESCWA member States and to the ESCWA secretariat, the main topics for discussion, and the most prominent points raised by participants.

I. Recommendations made by the Committee on Social Development at its fourteenth session

3. At the close of its fourteenth session, the Committee on Social Development adopted a set of recommendations, some addressed to member States, and others to the ESCWA secretariat.

A. Recommendations to ESCWA member States

4. The Committee on Social Development made the following recommendations to member States:

(a) Welcome progress in implementing the activities in the ESCWA programme plan on social development issues, and in carrying out the technical cooperation activities presented to member States;

(b) Take note of the activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability and request it to continue its work, with a focus on raising awareness on how to achieve sustainable and inclusive community development for all;

(c) Take note of the activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform and request it to continue its work, with a focus on extending social protection coverage to informal and irregular workers and on early warning systems;

(d) Emphasize the importance of developing social policies based on knowledge and evidence through South-South exchange of experiences, and allocate more resources to providing data disaggregated by sex, age, geographic location, income and disability status;

(e) Work to reduce growing social and economic inequalities by adopting fair and just policies, and strive to not neglect any person or geographical location by instilling the principles and concepts of social justice in policy reform;

(f) Intensify efforts to enable all members of society to enjoy decent and productive work, including through reforming legislation, providing services to support unpaid care work, and facilitating digital access;

(g) Regularly inform the ESCWA secretariat of the efforts of member States in the field of social development policies and programmes, so as to highlight and disseminate best practices regionally and internationally.

B. Recommendations to the ESCWA secretariat

5. The Committee on Social Development made the following recommendations to ESCWA member States:

(a) Continue providing technical assistance to member States to support the formulation of national policies and strategies that adopt an integrated and holistic approach to inclusive social development, promote social justice, and take into account the needs and aspirations of groups at risk, in particular older persons, persons with disabilities, women and young people;

(b) Continue examining the various forms of social and economic inequality, and provide practical recommendations aimed at developing public policies that address them, guided by successful global and regional experiences, especially those among the countries of the South;

(c) Continue developing interactive tools that support knowledge- and evidence-based decision-making, and provide customized training on the use of these tools;

(d) Continue supporting member States in eradicating poverty in all its forms, and propose practical and effective solutions to achieve Goal 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to improve livelihoods;

(e) Support the efforts of member States to strengthen social protection policies and increase their efficiency and effectiveness;

(f) Continue supporting member States in developing a workforce that responds to the changing demands of labour markets, by identifying the skills required by employers and facilitating the transition of young people, women, persons with disabilities, the unemployed and informal workers to the labour market;

(g) Support the efforts of member States in developing policies and strategies aimed at integrating persons with disabilities in society, so as to increase their participation in the development process;

(h) Continue coordinating with regional organizations, such as the League of Arab States, and United Nations organizations on issues of common interest;

(i) Strengthen the activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability and of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform, in particular activities related to supporting policy reform;

(j) Work towards holding annual meetings of the ESCWA Committee on Social Development; and take the necessary measures, in accordance with United Nations rules and procedures, to intensify regional efforts to address the accelerating and multiple social challenges faced by member States.

II. Topics for discussion

A. Follow-up issues

1. *Implementation of activities under the ESCWA programme plan and of recommendations made by the Committee on Social Development at its thirteenth session*
(Agenda item 4)

6. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/3](#), the representative of the ESCWA secretariat made a presentation on progress in implementing the activities of the ESCWA programme plan since the thirteenth session and the recommendations made by the Committee at its thirteenth session. She reviewed ESCWA working method and the areas of work of the Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster,

which included poverty reduction, social protection, gender equality, issues of persons with disabilities, migrant issues, issues of older persons, social justice, decent work, capacity-building for young people, and urban development. She said that ESCWA had been working on those areas in collaboration with a large number of partners, including United Nations organizations, regional organizations, notably the League of Arab States, civil society organizations, research centres, and universities. The activities had focused on the following three main pillars reflecting the ESCWA working method: facilitating consensus by organizing meetings at all levels; generating knowledge by publishing studies and research papers; and developing user-friendly and practical public policy tools, and translating knowledge into technical support programmes.

7. She presented a video prepared by the ESCWA secretariat that had included some of the tools developed by ESCWA to support countries in formulating integrated social policies, including the Multidimensional Poverty Index Assist Tool; the ESCWA Skills Monitor; the Index Simulator for Policymakers in the Arab Region (ISPAR); the Social Justice Policy Gap Assessment Tool (PGAT); a tool for integrating older persons; and a tool for building urban economic resilience.

8. In the ensuing discussion, the representative of Libya praised the programmes implemented by ESCWA, stressing that those programmes simulated reality and contributed to the achievement of the SDGs, and that they were important for developing social work and addressing crises, commending in particular the programmes related to social protection, decent work, and multidimensional poverty. In Libya, those topics had been grouped within a unified programme under the social protection framework, comprising the following social protection sub-themes: the labour market and social insurance. He also noted his country's work with ESCWA on disability, including programmes implemented to integrate persons with disabilities, and work to develop laws in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). He commended the ESCWA technical support programme, and expressed his hope that more programmes would be adopted to support the implementation of social policies.

9. The representative of Tunisia outlined the social safety programme targeting poor and low-income groups in Tunisia, indicating progress in the implementation of the programme that was based on the concept of multidimensional poverty. The programme ensured the completion of a national register of poor families, and relied on a new model for targeting the poor. He asked about the link between the ESCWA multidimensional poverty tool and the scoring system. He also stressed that Tunisia was interested in implementing those tools, and in developing unified indicators and databases to measure poverty in the Arab region.

10. The representative of Mauritania expressed her appreciation for the efforts made by ESCWA in the field of social protection, noting the need to strengthen social protection and build the capacity of workers in the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Persons with Disabilities. She said that Mauritania had reached advanced stages in the preparation of a social register, which would make it possible to know the nature and size of vulnerable groups, and facilitate intervention procedures. She also stressed the importance of ESCWA supporting the efforts of Mauritania in that regard, particularly in terms of how to rely on data to plan and deliver programmes to the most vulnerable.

11. The representative of Egypt noted the technical support provided by ESCWA to meet country needs. He said that the tools offered were numerous and rich with information, thus highlighting the question of how to make the best use of those tools and choose the most appropriate among them according to the specificities of each country. He also addressed the need to know which tools had been tested and proven effective and successful in other countries. He recommended standardizing national surveys and including their results in a reliable report on the situation of Arab countries, so as to facilitate comparison between them.

12. The representative of Oman requested examples of countries with which the Committee had previously collaborated, for presentation at future sessions, so as to compare the level of progress achieved and to serve as a model for other countries to implement similar experiences. She said that the assessment and evaluation of each country's economic or social policy status was carried out through integrated monitoring according to

government publications and calculations, but such figures could sometimes be misleading and unfairly calculated, meaning that they did not reflect all the efforts made on the ground, because partner stakeholders might not have had the tools to carry out accurate monitoring.

13. The representative of Yemen thanked ESCWA for its support. She noted that collaboration with ESCWA on capacity-building in the field of social protection would begin the following month. She said that she hoped to present that experience and review the achievements at the next session of the Committee on Social Development.

14. The representative of Morocco thanked ESCWA for its efforts in promoting rapprochement between countries to exchange experiences. He said that the social protection programme in Morocco was based on the following three main themes: services provided, human resources, and targeting mechanisms. The experience of Morocco in social protection was reflected in a programme that included mandatory sickness coverage, family allowances, a unified social register that included vulnerable groups, and a national population register that included all Moroccans. He added that the problem with targeting did not lie in the design of the adopted mechanisms, but in the technical problems on the ground. Adopted mechanisms must take into account the specificities of each country, and those of regions within the same country. He said that all countries were required to develop legislative frameworks to regulate the social work profession and to strengthen the welfare economy, given its prominent role in job creation.

15. The representative of Somalia noted ESCWA technical support in combating poverty, strengthening social protection, and integrating persons with disabilities. He said that social protection was a national priority, and requested that ESCWA provide support in training and refining citizen expertise to help them graduate from social protection programmes.

16. The representative of the State of Palestine noted the close collaboration with ESCWA in several areas, especially the multidimensional poverty strategy to be launched in late June 2023. He also noted the completion of a project on strengthening social protection, whose components included a national social register, a case management programme, and a national referral system. He discussed global crises and their repercussions for all countries, and the Israeli occupation of the State of Palestine, its economic implications and its impact on poor and marginalized groups. He stressed the need to invest existing resources in ministries and employ them for the benefit of social protection systems, and to improve coordination and cooperation mechanisms between the Government and civil society.

17. The representative of Jordan emphasized the specificities and differences between each country in terms of requirements, capabilities and capacities in addressing social issues. He noted the progress made by Jordan in providing cash assistance through a programme that classified families from the poorest to the least poor, adding that the available possibilities contributed to the inclusion of a large number of families applying for such assistance. He also noted progress in implementing a social protection strategy, economic and political modernization programmes, and women's empowerment programmes.

18. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic noted the great efforts made by his country to maintain the social protection network, which no longer met people's needs because of the war. He indicated the need to review and evaluate such networks, and enhance their role in assisting vulnerable groups. He thanked the efforts made by Arab countries and United Nations organizations to support his country, and said that more support was needed to bridge the gap of needs created by the war, the economic blockade, and the earthquake. He reviewed some of his country's current priorities, namely assistance in establishing a national social register and in preparing a protection strategy based on multidimensional poverty indicators.

19. The representative of the ESCWA secretariat said that the ESCWA Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster worked on 10 portfolios. The social protection file, despite its importance, was not the only file that the Cluster was concerned with. With regard to data standardization, she said that there was a dedicated statistics section at ESCWA that cooperated directly in that regard with statistical offices in

Arab countries. It gathered data to provide comparisons between countries, and worked to serve each country separately using national data. She added that ESCWA was working to implement regional programmes, generate and disseminate knowledge, draw conclusions and translate them into national projects that took into account the specificities of each country, and that the ESCWA technical support programme took into account the specificities of those countries based on their own request. The Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster contributed to more than half of the technical support that ESCWA provided to countries, but the presentation had covered only five countries due to time constraints.

20. The representative of the ESCWA secretariat indicated that the Multidimensional Poverty Index Assist Tool helped countries calculate multidimensional poverty at the national level, and prepared comparisons between countries. The tool permitted changing the criteria used in calculations and seeing the results in real time, and made it easier for decision makers to consider different scenarios. Another advantage of the tool was to simulate shocks and identify their impact on multidimensional poverty. As for the targeting process, he stressed that ESCWA had other specialized tools in that area.

2. Technical cooperation activities (Agenda item 5)

21. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/4](#), the Committee on Social Development considered the technical cooperation activities implemented by the ESCWA secretariat since the thirteenth session of the Committee. The representative of the ESCWA secretariat gave an overview of technical cooperation activities. She said that ESCWA had intensified its efforts to support Arab countries in several development areas by transferring its internal regional and sectoral expertise to those countries, and by translating the findings of its regional studies into programmes and projects aimed at building the capacity and skills of representatives of various ministries. She also explained that the technical cooperation programme was implemented at the request of countries, and took into account the specificities and needs of each country. She indicated that ESCWA received a quarter of all requests for technical support sent to the United Nations Secretariat, but that the budget allocated to the ESCWA technical cooperation programme did not match the size of the requests, at only 12 per cent of the United Nations technical cooperation budget. She added that 8 of the 10 countries with the highest level of support globally from the United Nations were ESCWA member States. She explained that 50 per cent of the applications submitted to ESCWA fell into the social sector, and that the Committee had received 260 requests since its thirteenth session.

22. Representatives of the ESCWA secretariat from the Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster took turns reviewing progress in implementing technical cooperation activities in selected member States, with the aim of summarizing how activities would be implemented in collaboration with relevant ministries in response to requests from countries for technical support. The countries included were Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Mauritania. The reviews indicated that activities carried out in member States since September 2021 fell into the following three categories: advisory services to support countries on issues related to public policies, capacity-building workshops, and field projects. Since the thirteenth session of the Committee, and based on the reviews, ESCWA had provided support in the following areas of social development: social justice, poverty reduction, social protection systems, labour market opportunities, women's economic empowerment and the care economy, inclusion of persons with disabilities, rights of migrants and older persons, skills development for young people, and urban development.

23. In the ensuing discussion, the representative of Egypt said that the reviews demonstrated a desire to develop many often-costly strategies. He proposed preparing specific policies rather than strategies, since the implementation and follow-up of strategies required the establishment of new administrative structures and their integration into a country's development plan. He added that the definition of inequality was unclear and not standardized. The concept must therefore be defined according to the various views and experiences related to it. He stressed that it was important to document examples of successful and effective initiatives, expertise, practices and experiences resulting from cooperation between countries and ESCWA, and to share them with other countries.

24. The representative of Libya suggested distributing studies and information through a special platform to optimize their benefit, especially given the lack of sufficient material resources to organize technical cooperation activities.

25. The representative of Mauritania said that more technical support in the field of capacity-building and training was needed, and that it was important to strengthen institutional capacity and build the competencies of workers in government departments and institutions, especially in the fields social protection and persons with special needs, where there was a significant need for programmes specifically targeting the training of workers in those fields, and those in charge of formulating strategies.

26. The representative of the Sudan shared his country's experience in collaborating with ESCWA, stressing the importance of the knowledge provided in ESCWA technical support, and its prominent role in activating cooperation frameworks at several levels and in various fields, especially in view of the complexities and difficult circumstances that the Sudan went through during the period of democratic transition, and recently as a result of the emergence of conflict and violence. He also noted the need to focus on the formulation of national strategies based on the specificities and priorities of each country.

27. In response, the representative of the ESCWA secretariat explained that social development issues in general were not addressed in a uniform and country-wide manner, stressing that ESCWA took into account the specificities of each country. She added that ESCWA had already established, at the request of countries, sub-governmental groups comprising members from all countries, such as the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform and the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability. Those groups served as platforms or practical channels through which the results of studies, best practices and technical tools were presented, with a view to disseminating successful experiences. With regard to capacity-building, she said that ESCWA was working to rationalize its financial resources, given their limitations, by holding regional workshops if it received similar requests from several countries on a specific topic, or if a new concept was to be presented to countries. At the national level, she indicated that capacity-building activities were carried out within the framework of an integrated project, resulting in a national guide or strategy.

3. Activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (Agenda item 6)

28. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/5](#), the representative of the ESCWA secretariat made a presentation on the activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability conducted since the thirteenth session of the Committee, and the alignment of its activities with technical support provided by ESCWA. He said that technical support on disability had included regional and national activities within the following six areas: developing strategies and policies, developing the classification of persons with disabilities, promoting inclusive community development approaches, supporting families in early intervention, promoting inclusive education, and integrating persons with disabilities into the labour market. He summarized the establishment, functions and activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED), in particular the sixth and seventh annual meetings of the Group to discuss regional priorities.

29. In the ensuing discussion, participants stressed the importance of standardizing terminology on persons with disabilities, drawing on those in CRPD, especially in countries that had ratified the Convention. Participants enquired about how the autism spectrum was classified, how it was diagnosed, and which intervention programmes were required for such cases. They also asked about the procedures that the Ministry of Health should adopt within health facilities to protect persons with disabilities. One participant enquired about page 7 of the document submitted under the present agenda item that set out the IGED members' responsibility to "develop and implement biennial work plans and review performance based on desired outcomes at each formal meeting", and asked what was meant by developing work plans for IGED or plans at the national level.

30. In response, the representative of the ESCWA secretariat said that the United Nations had adopted the designation "persons with disabilities", which was at the heart of CRPD, and had excluded labels that classified a person. However, he emphasized the importance of respecting the right of each country to choose the title it deemed appropriate. As for the autism spectrum, he said that there was a special classification that focused on a person's ability to function, which was different from intellectual disability, and therefore the methods of intervention in that case were also different. He praised the current efforts of Oman to integrate people on the autism spectrum in education. He added that the two most important topics that should be addressed in the Arab region were the societal approach and early detection and intervention, adding that the early intervention model depended on families and fundamentals, and was concerned with supporting families rather than working directly with children.

31. He said that integrating disability in all areas was important, adding that ESCWA had experiences that could be shared on the subject of integrating disability into primary health care. He noted that IGED was responsible for setting priorities and developing and implementing biennial action plans.

4. Activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (Agenda item 7)

32. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/6](#), the Committee considered the activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform conducted between its thirteenth and fourteenth sessions. The representative of the ESCWA secretariat made a presentation in which he explained that the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform was composed of more than 20 senior representatives of government institutions and high-level policymakers involved in various social protection policies and programmes, such as social assistance, social insurance, health care, and labour market revitalization policies. The Expert Group had been established at the twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development in 2019, as one of the Committee's technical groups, and had tackled its key objectives. He said that the functions of the Expert Group included strengthening coordination and cooperation at the regional level in the following areas: formulating social protection policies, stimulating national and regional discussions, exchanging experiences and information among member States, discussing proposals on technical cooperation between member States and ESCWA, expanding the scope and improving the quality of social protection programmes, and following up on issues in the period between Committee sessions. He reviewed the main activities and themes of the Expert Group between the thirteenth and fourteenth sessions of the Committee on Social Development. He presented the proposed priority thematic areas for the next phase, which included the following elements: self-assessing existing social protection systems and reform needs, shifting social protection programmes from humanitarian response to government-led implementation, and translating social protection strategies into feasible action plans. He explained that the eighth meeting of the Expert Group would focus on data analysis to formulate evidence-based policies in the field of social protection, address the situation of the so-called "missing middle", and extend social protection coverage to include informal and irregular workers.

33. The representative of Iraq said that the reform of the entire social protection system under the auspices of the World Bank and the United Nations had begun in Iraq, and that it would cost \$4 million. She added that capital had increased in the lending fund of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs by 400 billion dinars from the provision of loans between 20 million and 50 million dinars, provided that the borrower employed between one and three workers and was included in social security, thus contributing to the graduation of a large number of social protection beneficiaries, especially since social protection had been allocated nearly 7 trillion dinars from the general budget, benefiting 8 million individuals, including persons with disabilities. She explained that privileges in the law were numerous in many areas, such as education and employment in the public and private sectors, given that the law granted every employee who had a family member with a disability the right to paid leave to fully devote themselves to their care. She added that Iraq needed the support of ESCWA in preparing national policies or strategies for persons with disabilities, and technical studies on how to graduate working-age people from the social welfare system, especially young people.

34. The representative of Morocco said that there was a need to define the conceptual framework of social protection, especially since Morocco considered the topic of social protection to be more comprehensive than social welfare or health services, and linked it to risk management at various stages of an individual's life (from childhood to old age). He noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had made social protection an urgent necessity, and that Morocco had had a successful experience in that context through an initiative that had provided cash transfers to workers who had lost their jobs during the pandemic. Morocco had also launched social protection programmes that were implemented in several stages, starting with the health phase, then family compensation, compensation for job losses, and pension reform, leading to the social welfare phase that included older people and vulnerable groups. He stressed that social protection systems were important, and as was providing information to target people in vulnerable situations.

35. The representative of Yemen said that the war and political conflicts in her country had resulted in significant damage to social protection systems, causing them to stagnate. She praised the effective role played by the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in providing the necessary support to launch interventions within the Social Welfare Fund in Yemen, which targeted about 8 million individuals. She also noted the ongoing efforts to reform an important part of the Fund's work related to data, and expressed her hope that the reform of other parts would be completed at later stages.

36. The representative of Oman stressed her country's desire to benefit from the expertise of ESCWA in implementing a comprehensive and effective social protection system. The following questions were posed to the ESCWA secretariat: If a social protection system was adopted, how could we ensure the financial sustainability of the system's programmes and projects? How could we ensure that the system was resilient enough to weather shocks, economic crises and disasters? How could we ensure that the social protection system was inclusive, and that some groups and segments automatically received direct support in the light of sudden changes, disasters or economic crises? What guarantees, programmes or mechanisms had developed countries adopted to ensure that the unemployed who received financial support would graduate within the specified time limit, so that they would not be excluded from the system while remaining unemployed?

37. The representative of the State of Palestine stressed the importance of standardizing the concept of social protection, noting the need to ensure integration in the work of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform and other committees and groups, so that procedures and activities were not duplicated or fragmented, especially since social protection was considered the umbrella of social work. He added that the State of Palestine looked forward to an early social warning system that would contribute to addressing social and economic crises through local social safety nets.

38. The representative of Tunisia said that work was under way to implement a transformation programme to establish a minimum social protection floor, in partnership between ESCWA, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). He suggested that the programme be disseminated to all Arab countries to standardize terms and concepts related to social protection.

39. The representative of Bahrain said that his country was working according to an integrated development strategy in its various dimensions. It was also adopting a promising national vision to benefit from all capabilities and resources in order to achieve the aspirations of citizens and meet their needs in the education, health, housing, social, environmental and other sectors, so as to balance between the three dimensions of sustainable development. He added that the Government had introduced advanced social protection policies and had adopted numerous legislation and laws to that end, affirming the human right to live in a safe, healthy and sustainable environment. He said that Bahrain had launched a package of projects and initiatives aimed at enhancing social protection for various groups and segments of society in accordance with the Community Partnership Initiative, with the aim of bringing about quantitative and qualitative change in the conditions of those groups at the economic and social levels.

40. In response, the representative of the ESCWA secretariat explained that the concept of social protection did not fall under a universal definition, but that some recurrent, common and often overlapping elements were linked to the life cycle and required ways to ensure the integration of the components of social insurance, social assistance and labour market policies.

B. Inequality in the Arab region

1. The Arab inequality pandemic (Agenda item 8 (a))

41. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7\(Part I\)](#), the Committee on Social Development considered the item on the Arab inequality pandemic. The representative of the ESCWA secretariat made a presentation that included an overview of inequality in the Arab region, which continued to record a high and increasing degree of inequality in many economic and social indicators, creating a vicious cycle in development outcomes. He said that the Arab region had recorded the highest levels of inequality worldwide in terms of income inequality. The income of the richest 10 per cent of earners in the region had equalled about 58 per cent of the total income earned in 2021, compared with 36 per cent of the total income in Europe in the same year, noting that Europe was the region with the highest equality standards. He added that the pandemic had caused a significant increase in income inequality, with many people with precarious jobs losing their income altogether, while the wealthiest had benefited from new opportunities. The Arab region had had 37 billionaires in 2019, whose total wealth was estimated at about \$108 billion. That amount was equal to what was owned by the poorest 110 million people in the region, or the two poorest countries in the region.

42. He said that inequality was often measured only from an income perspective. However, inequality spanned far beyond that measure: it was multifaceted and existed within the same country's population groups, that is, between genders, different age groups, and persons with and without disabilities, and between rural and urban populations; and between various Arab countries. He added that inequality could take many forms, including unequal access to services, resources and opportunities such as health, education and energy, or unequal access to development outcomes. Those inequalities could overlap, meaning that women and girls with disabilities could have difficulty accessing health care, and poor children in rural areas could suffer from inadequate access to education and to water and sanitation services.

2. Inequality in employment (Agenda item 8 (b))

43. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7\(Part II\)](#), the Committee on Social Development considered the item on inequality in employment opportunities in the Arab region. The representative of the ESCWA secretariat made a presentation that provided an overview of unemployment in the Arab region, particularly from the perspective of inequality and the inability of some marginalized population groups to access decent work opportunities owing to the barriers they faced. He stressed that it was difficult to break the vicious cycle between poverty, inadequate jobs and inequality, explaining that decent work opportunities were crucial because they enabled and protected people from falling into poverty or insecurity, and promoted social inclusion and cohesion. Decent work for all yielded significant social and economic rewards, particularly in terms of productive work, fair income, workplace security, social protection and equal opportunities. Decent work promoted equal, cohesive and peaceful societies, transformed economies into productive, innovative and dynamic economies, and provided workers with protection under labour legislation and basic safety protocols. However, dwindling opportunities for formal employment in the Arab region and limited labour governance frameworks further excluded a large number of individuals from access to the basic income needed to care for themselves and their families, thereby increasing their social exclusion and neglect, and leading to increased poverty and inequalities. He indicated that women, young people, persons with disabilities, older persons, persons living in rural areas and migrants were the most vulnerable groups, whether in terms of large disparities in access to decent work and or in terms of social exclusion.

3. *Practical initiatives to increase social and economic equality*
(Agenda item 8 (c))

44. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7\(Part III\)](#), the Committee on Social Development considered sub-item 8(c). The representative of the ESCWA secretariat reviewed practical initiatives aimed at promoting social and economic equality in the region, in accordance with the results of global lessons that demonstrated the consequences of not addressing inequality. She noted that the success of policies to reduce inequality depended on adopting an approach based on the following three main themes: strengthening solidarity; achieving concrete effects; and gaining credibility and citizens' trust. Inequality was a phenomenon that could worsen if not addressed. It was a political option, and therefore reducing inequality required political will. She reviewed a range of practical initiatives aimed at achieving the following objectives: realizing sustainable social and economic development and political stability; ensuring universal and equitable social protection by adopting a progressive tax policy; providing social assistance to vulnerable groups and social insurance to all workers, including informal workers and migrants; investing in human capital by ensuring universal access to health care, education and quality technology; providing decent jobs; promoting solidarity and inclusion of excluded groups so that no one was left behind; and formulating and implementing integrated and coherent policies.

45. In the ensuing discussion, the representative of Egypt said that document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7 \(Part I\)](#) contained two striking new definitions of poverty, namely the definition of chronic poverty and of transitory poverty. That reality added a new dimension to the issue of dealing with poverty, which distinguished between the severity of the situation when dividing the poor into groups. He asked ESCWA to develop a tool in the coming period, if possible, that was guided by State data, and provided indicators of chronic and transitory poverty. He added that document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7 \(Part II\)](#) addressed an important problem, namely the Arab region's behavioural barriers. He expressed his hope that ESCWA would provide technical support to overcome those barriers given that they intersected with other areas, such as poverty, the economy and employment.

46. The representative of Morocco thanked ESCWA for the practical tools it had developed to facilitate the standardization of concepts and the formulation of policies and strategies without neglecting national specificities, thereby supporting decision-making procedures. He reviewed the experience of Morocco in gender equality. The country had implemented several programmes for women's advancement, including a unique programme in partnership with local governments aimed at empowering women and strengthening their activity in the economic sector.

47. The representative of the Sudan said that there was a need for institutional interventions in some Arab countries, and that some countries were suffering from geographic inequality, including the Sudan, stressing that inequality threatened the national fabric and national security. He addressed the issue of the displacement of the poor in the Sudan from the countryside to the outskirts of cities, where living conditions were better than in the states, but which remained substandard for providing education and employment opportunities. He requested the development of existing city belts, and strengthening them through a sound social protection system.

48. The representative of the ESCWA secretariat noted that poverty encompassed transitory or permanent and chronic phenomena, affecting several generations within a family. Determining whether poverty was transitory or chronic required consideration of data over time within the same family; some countries had already taken such action. He added that ESCWA was in the process of preparing a study on social mobility, which adopted a methodology similar to that of a study that had examined families moving from one social status to another over time. He said that ESCWA was ready to elaborate on the issue if Egypt wished to submit a request for technical support in that regard.

49. He said that the skills analysis in the ESCWA Skills Monitor illustrated the problem of how job opportunities were published in the Arab region, which excluded certain groups because of the way they were

presented rather than because of their need for specific skills. Such findings highlighted the need to change societal attitudes rather than behaviours, and that was linked to laws. He explained that ESCWA was providing technical support to Lebanon, for example, to prepare a draft law on flexible work that could change perspectives on the distribution of roles within the family, and in turn of roles in society.

**C. Date and venue of the fifteenth session of the Committee
on Social Development**
(Agenda item 9)

50. The Committee decided to hold its fifteenth session at ESCWA headquarters in Beirut in June 2024, provided that no other member State submitted a request to host the session.

D. Other matters
(Agenda item 10)

51. The representative of Egypt proposed the addition of a new agenda item on the future work of the Committee. In the ensuing discussion, participants agreed that the Committee on Social Development would hold annual meetings to keep abreast of multiple and rapid social developments and challenges, especially within the framework of the broad social development agenda. Participants included a recommendation to the ESCWA secretariat in that regard among the recommendations made by the Committee on Social Development at its fourteenth session.

**III. Adoption of the recommendations made by the Committee
on Social Development at its fourteenth session**
(Agenda item 11)

52. At its final meeting, the Committee on Social Development adopted the recommendations of its fourteenth session, as set out in paragraphs 4 and 5 of the present report.

IV. Organization of work

A. Date and venue

53. The fourteenth session of the Committee on Social Development was held at ESCWA headquarters in Beirut on 8 June 2023. Its work was divided into two meetings, at which participants discussed the agenda items as adopted.

B. Opening

54. The fourteenth session of the Committee on Social Development was opened by Ms. Mehrinaz Elawady, Leader of the Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster. She delivered a statement on behalf of the ESCWA secretariat, in which she welcomed participants. She said that the fourteenth session of the Committee on Social Development was held immediately after the second Arab Forum for Equality, with the aim of completing the discussion on the region's priorities of ensuring a decent life for all, and on the social policies necessary to achieve that goal. She stressed the importance of the Committee on Social Development in coordination and cooperation with the aim of alleviating suffering, finding practical solutions, and preparing effective and inclusive policies for all, especially given rapid global developments and their impact on the Arab region. She added that she looked forward to holding the meetings of the Committee more frequently so that it could tackle challenges, respond to growing needs, and revive the hope of young men and women in the Arab region.

C. Participants

55. A total of 18 ESCWA member States participated in the session. The list of participants is set out in annex I to the present report.

D. Election of officers

56. Article 18 of the Rules of Procedure of ESCWA provides that member States shall assume the presidency of the subsidiary bodies of the Committee on a rotating basis, in Arabic alphabetical order, as established by the United Nations. In accordance with that rule, the representative of Kuwait chaired the fourteenth session of the Committee on Social Development. Participants elected the representatives of Lebanon and Libya as vice-chairs, and the representative of Egypt as rapporteur.

57. In a welcoming speech, the representative of Kuwait, Mr. Hamad Saleh Al-Khalidi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Social Affairs, thanked participants for their trust and expressed his hope that the meetings of the fourteenth session of the Committee on Social Development would be successful. He also thanked Qatar for the great efforts it had made during its presidency, and ESCWA, in particular Ms. Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary of ESCWA, for the interaction and organization shown by the Committee in its activities and programmes.

E. Agenda and organization of work

58. At its first meeting, the Committee on Social Development adopted the agenda for its fourteenth session, as set out in document [E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/L.1](#). At the request of the representative of Egypt, a topic was added under item 10 of the provisional agenda, which addressed the future of the work of the Committee and how to develop it and increase its effectiveness, especially in view of accelerating challenges. At the same meeting, the Committee approved the organization of work as set out in document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2023/L.2](#).

F. Documentation

59. Annex II to the present report sets out the list of documents submitted to the Committee on Social Development at its fourteenth session.

Annex I

List of participants

A. ESCWA member States

Algeria

Mr. Abdel Malik Oramdan
Chargé d'Affaires a.i.
Embassy of Algeria to Lebanon

Bahrain

Mr. Kamil Ramadan First Secretary
Embassy of Bahrain to the Syrian Arab Republic

Egypt

Mr. Raafat Shafeek Mohammed
Advisor for the Ministry of Social Solidarity for
Strengthening Social Safety Net Programs and
Executive Director of Takaful and Karama
Conditional Cash Transfer Program
Ministry of Social Solidarity

Mr. Atef Mohammed Mohammed Al-Shitani
Health Conditionality Advisor
Takaful & Karama Program
Ministry of Social Solidarity

Iraq

Ms. Zikra Abdul Rahim Allah Dada
Head of the Authority for Persons with Disabilities
and Special Needs
Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

Mr. Amer Saleh Nayef
Journalist at the Ministry of Labour and Social
Affairs

Jordan

Mr. Barq Saleh Dmour
Secretary General of the Ministry of Social
Development

Mr. Khalifa Aref Shraideh
Director-General of the alternatives to shelters for
persons with disabilities department
Ministry of Social Development

Mr. Ghazi Ziyadat
Director of the Office of the Secretary-General
Ministry of Social Development

Kuwait

Mr. Hamad Saleh Al-Khalidi
Assistant Undersecretary for Social Welfare
Ministry of Social Affairs

Ms. Nadia Hussain Al Kout
Director of External Relations Department
Ministry of Social Affairs

Mr. Bader Musharraf Al-Enezi
Head of Data and Financial Analysis Section at the
Cooperative Supervision and Inspection
Department
Ministry of Social Affairs

Lebanon

Mr. Adel Al Shabab
Expert at the Ministry of Social Affairs

Libya

Mr. Ali Faraj Mukhtar Al-Soud
Social Expert
Ministry of Social Affairs

Mr. Hafiz Abdul Qadir Khalifa
Director of the International Cooperation Office
Ministry of Social Affairs

Mr. Nader Mohammed Saleh
Office of the Minister of Social Affairs

Mauritania

Ms. Umm Kulthum Hamidino
Technical Advisor in charge of Gender
Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family

Morocco

Mr. Abdul Ahad Bin Hallam
Advisor to the Minister of Solidarity, Social
Integration and Family
In charge of strategy and cooperation

Mr. Rashid Al-Qadida
Director of Social Development
Ministry of Solidarity, Social Integration and
Family

Oman

Ms. Laila bint Ahmed bin Awad Al-Najjar
Minister of Social Development

Mr. Mohammed bin Ali bin Mohammed Al-Saadi
Director General of Social Welfare
Ministry of Social Development

Mr. Mohammed bin Humaid bin Abdullah Al-
Kalbani
Director General of Social Development in Dhofar
Governorate
Ministry of Social Development

Ms. Wadha bint Salem bin Khalfan Al-Alawiya
Director of the Department of Women's Affairs
Ministry of Social Development

Ms. Fatima bint Hilal bin Amer Al-Rajhiya
Director of Communications and Media
Department
Ministry of Social Development

Mr. Haitham bin Salem bin Humaid Al-Qari
Coordinator of the Minister
Ministry of Social Development

State of Palestine

Mr. Ahmed Majdalani
Minister of Social Development

Mr. Asim Khamis
Undersecretary of the Ministry of Social
Development

Saudi Arabia

Ms. Anfal Al-Omar
Advisor at the Office of the Undersecretary for
Social Solidarity and Empowerment
Ministry of Human Resources and Social
Development

Mr. Ahmed Abdulrahman Al-Fadel
Skills Strategy Expert at the Skills and Training
Agency
Ministry of Human Resources and Social
Development

Somalia

Mr. Yousef Mohamed Adam
Minister of State for the Ministry of Labour and
Social Affairs

Mr. Mohammed Abdul Rahman Nazif
Member of the People's Assembly
Advisor to the Ministry of Labour and Social
Affairs

Sudan

Mr. Jamal Al-Nil Mansour
Undersecretary of the Ministry of Social
Development
Ministry of Social Development

Syrian Arab Republic

Mr. Yasser Abdul Ahmad
Assistant to the Minister of Social Affairs and
Labour.
Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour

Mr. Mahmoud Al-Kawa
Director of Non-Governmental Organizations
Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour

Tunisia

Ms. Turkia Al-Shaibi
Adviser to the Minister of Social Affairs

Mr. Thamer Benali
Deputy Director of the Government Work Follow-
up Office
Ministry of Social Affairs

Yemen

Ms. Najlaa Ahmed Omar Awad
Executive Director of the Social Welfare Fund
Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor

B. Arab and regional organizations

Palestinian National Foundation for Economic Empowerment

Ms. Sylvia Kharouf
Economic Empowerment Advisor

Annex II

List of documents

Title	Item	Symbol
Provisional agenda and annotations	3	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/L.1
Organization of work	3	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/L.2
Implementation of activities under the ESCWA programme plan and of recommendations made by the Committee on Social Development at its thirteenth session	4	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/3
Technical cooperation activities	5	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/4
Activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability	6	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/5
Activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform	7	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/6
Inequality in the Arab region	8	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7
The Arab inequality pandemic	8 (a)	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7(Part I)
Inequality in employment	8 (b)	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7(Part II)
Practical initiatives to increase social and economic equality	8 (c)	E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/7(Part III)
List of documents		E/ESCWA/C.2/2023/INF.1