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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia**

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Item 10 of the provisional agenda

**CALL FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
COMMISSION, TO BE HELD IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE TWENTIETH  
SESSION OF ESCWA IN 1999, AND DISCUSSION OF THE  
ROLE OF THE COMMISSION IN THE COMING CENTURY IN  
VIEW OF INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS**

Note by the Executive Secretary

1. ESCWA was established in 1974. By 1999, when a quarter of a century will have elapsed since that time, the region and the world will have witnessed radical and unprecedented changes, occurring at a breathless pace in all fields. Such changes have already led to a revolution in the production and communication of information as well as to increasingly globalized world economies. The most prominent change at the economic level may well be the trend to liberalize trade in goods and services, with the removal or lowering of tariffs and other barriers to maximize trade exchange among various regions. Economic growth and development are no longer principally reliant on the availability of natural resources; rather, they rely on scientific and technological capacities, which have come to constitute the basis for progress, and the ability of a given society to adjust to rapid changes. The current age has been rightly described as the age of information, in so far as knowledge has come to be both a basis and an incentive for progress.
2. Such a development may be compared to the first revolution in the history of mankind—the agricultural revolution—which transformed production patterns and the very fabric of man's life. It was truly the force behind the rise of ancient civilizations in the Arab region and on the banks of rivers in China, India and elsewhere. In a way, it may be regarded as superior to the European industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century, which ushered in the "industrial age" which entailed basic worldwide economic and social changes, though varying from one region to another. The current knowledge-based revolution constitutes a challenge to developing countries, the ESCWA region included, as it offers them a chance to join the developed world. The precondition of this is, however, that these countries undertake the institutional changes needed for a smooth assimilation of the achievements of the scientific revolution and utilize them in overcoming their underdevelopment. In this context, it may be noted that development has come to be perceived as closely related to a given society's willingness to change, regardless of its level of natural resources. The current trends will acquire greater momentum and influence during the next century.
3. Though the age of globalism has dawned on the world, this is only one side of the coin; the other is regionalism. The global nature of current problems does not invalidate the fact that regional conditions are region-specific. Hence the importance of discussing regional blocs and organizations. An example is

the question of development which, by definition, has global dimensions; however, solutions to development problems have always been regional. The history of the developing countries since the end of the Second World War shows that regional distinctions have emerged and crystallized from the 1960s onwards. At the end of the Second World War, it was possible to distinguish between only two sets of countries: the industrial and the poverty-stricken. Over the last four decades, however, distinctions began to appear among the developing countries themselves. Countries of Eastern and South-East Asia have left, or nearly left, the old set of developing countries to constitute the newly industrialized States; they have, therefore, become significant competitors in world trade. Similarly, most or many Latin American countries are on their way out of the old set of developing countries; perhaps they will, at a point in time not expected to be too far away, join the set of the newly industrialized States. However, some sub-Saharan countries in Africa have experienced abysmal deterioration which has led to despair.

4. The Arab region, south and east of the Mediterranean, appears to be a candidate for the next round of departures from the "old set". The countries of the region have not yet reached the stage of self-propelled development attained by the countries of the Pacific Rim. Indeed, the former are not even near that stage, nor are most Latin American countries. However, they have not been beset by the despair that has afflicted some sub-Saharan States. The Arab region now stands at a crossroads between hopes of success and fears of failure. The region has, on the credit side, all the requirements for success and should therefore be able to pass the test and join the club of the newly industrialized countries. On the debit side, however, the region is not completely immune to the possibilities of flunking this examination. The real chance of success that this region has—and it is a real chance indeed—is contingent on hard work and the capacity for development and adjustment to the realities of the age. This is a rare and highly exciting historical period. And it is in this context that the responsibility of ESCWA should be viewed, in one of the most important and sensitive regions of the world—a region still in the process of being formed.

5. Established even as these developments were taking place, the Commission has witnessed unfavourable circumstances at the level of the region as a whole. Wars and internal strife have taken place, wasting a substantial portion of the region's resources, both financial and human, which could have been directed to the achievement of socio-economic development through economic cooperation and integration. The region is doing all in its power to overcome the political, social and economic obstacles that have so far hindered the achievement of its goal of economic progress; this alone could have enabled it to rise to the level of the newly industrialized countries, especially in Asia. A factor that should help the region in this regard would be the achievement of a just solution, in the course of the next decade, to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This should ensure that the region and the nations of the region utilize all resources in achieving economic progress. It must be noted in this connection that the founders of ESCWA had envisaged an important role for the Commission in support of regional development and cooperation in Western Asia. This is hardly, however, a fitting occasion to enumerate the obstacles that have hampered ESCWA in fulfilling some of its tasks, as these obstacles are dealt with in detail in many of its documents.

6. It is fitting, though, to note that the success of a given organization depends in the final analysis on the will of its member States, and the roles they believe to be appropriate for them in the context of world and regional changes. The occasion of marking the elapse of a whole quarter of a century since the establishment of ESCWA, occurring in 1999, that is, right on the eve of the twenty-first century, should provide the member States with a fitting opportunity to rethink and reconsider the role and the functions ESCWA should undertake in the next century. This is necessary in order to enable the Commission to serve as a useful means of developing regional cooperation among its States, as well as between the region and the

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rest of the world, especially those regions linked to Western Asia by economic interests resulting from geographic proximity. A redefinition of the role of the Commission is in line with the new orientations of the United Nations, especially the United Nations' reconsideration of its role 50 years after its establishment. The member States may find it fitting in 1999, during the twentieth ESCWA session, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Commission, and to seize that opportunity for a reformulation of the role of ESCWA, in harmony with world and regional changes. Member States may find it also fitting to do this within the framework of a new vision, perhaps to be included in a declaration to be adopted by the twentieth session, identifying the priorities believed by the States to be the right basis for the activities of ESCWA in the future. This will be helped by the document on "Programme and organizational changes and modifications made by ESCWA since 1994" (E/ESCWA/19/5), which is submitted for review at the present session.

7. Any such "new vision" must be based on the perceived changes and trends in the world economy. One of these is the change to a market economy, which is what the economies of the region are heading for, in varying degrees. Another factor which will have important implications for the region's economies (which must be prepared to be adequately competitive in an increasingly globalized world economy) is the strong trend to lift all restrictions which still cripple trade. This will be done, as expected, in the context of a freer exchange of ideas and information, in a world becoming increasingly small owing to the "communication revolution", the advance towards democracy, the exercise of human rights, and the strengthening of the institutions of civil society in all spheres. All of these factors should help to create a new economic environment in the ESCWA region, particularly if a just peace is established. A new economic environment will require a different perspective on the means of achieving economic integration in the ESCWA region, with economic activity in the future to be based primarily on the private sector, which naturally requires a major modification of the role and functions of Governments and intergovernmental organizations, including the United Nations. The representatives of the ESCWA member States may find it fitting that the silver jubilee of ESCWA be marked by inviting their heads of State to attend the opening ceremony of the twentieth ESCWA session. The presence of heads of State would not only mark this great occasion, but should secure the adoption of a declaration embodying the member States' vision and commitment to inviting ESCWA to translate the vision into programmes and activities. This should, however, be preceded by an in-depth study on "ESCWA in the twenty-first century". A number of eminent intellectuals from the region may then be invited to consider and approve the study as a basis for the new vision, in the light of which the role and tasks of ESCWA in the next century will be defined.

8. The silver jubilee of ESCWA is an excellent opportunity for its members to express their support and recognition of the role of the Commission in bolstering development in the region. ESCWA should confirm its role as a major forum in coordinating and harmonizing the economic and social policies of its member States, as a means of enhancing economic cooperation and integration among the region's countries. Armed with the support of its members, ESCWA will be able to deal more effectively with regional and world developments, owing to its nature as a neutral, technical body. This should include expansion in those fields of economic cooperation with neighbouring countries that are linked to vital interests to the member States. The commemoration of the ESCWA silver jubilee will also create an opportunity to evaluate regional economic cooperation, and to consider the role played by regional and international intergovernmental organizations in this connection. This could help to establish a new approach consistent with regional and world economic developments.

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