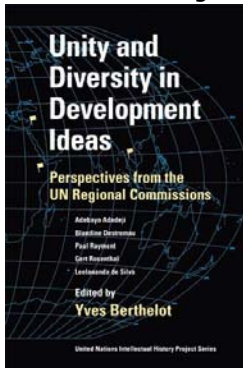




## UN Regional Contributions: Western Asia

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) was the last of the UN's five regional commissions to be created. Its birth was in 1973, after a long and painful gestation, reflecting the political tensions and instabilities of the region and "the problem of Israel." When founded, it was called ECWA, the Economic Commission for Western Asia, but in 1985 its name was changed to add the "social" to



development, which had become more prominent over the previous decade. An account of ESCWA's history by Blandine Destremau, "Striving For Regional Integration," can be found in one of the books in the UNIHP series, namely in Yves Berthelot's 2004 edited volume, *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions*.

*Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions.*

The West Asian region and the membership of ESCWA are heterogeneous in size and population and are economically highly unequal. In geographic area, its fourteen member countries range from the 598 square kilometers of Bahrain to the over 2 million square kilometers in Saudi Arabia and Sudan. In population, the region ranges from less than a million of population in Bahrain and Qatar to over 60 million in Egypt. In wealth, the differences in per capita income in 2005 (in PPP dollars) ranged from under \$1,000 in Yemen to about \$4,000–\$5,000 in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria to \$15,000 in Saudi Arabia and between \$25,000–27,000 in Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait. Although disparities can be found in all regions covered by UN regional commissions, they are so huge in this case that one would hesitate to call "West Asia" a region, the more so since it actually straddles two continents. The political problems in the region are also quite extraordinary.

These diversities define the three broad categories of countries making up the region: the sparsely populated, oil-exporting, desert countries enjoying large revenues, grouped in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait,

Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates); the densely populated countries with some natural resources and somewhat diversified economies (Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria); and the poorer and least developed countries (Sudan, Yemen, and Palestine).

For many years, efforts to create a UN regional commission for the Middle East were stymied by the problem of how to combine respect for the principles of universality and non-discrimination, strongly supported by western states, and the profound enmities between Israel and its Arab neighbors. But this was not the only source of tension and instability. Conflicts within and between Arab states have plagued the region, including border differences—all long-pre-dating the two wars in Iraq. To bypass these difficulties before ECWA was created, the UN established in 1963 an Economic and Social Office in Beirut to serve as a regional body for the Middle East. Later, Israel, a UN member since 1949, was admitted to the Economic Commission for Europe "on a temporary basis" in 1991.

As a contributor to ideas about development, ECWA was founded with a three-fold mandate: to identify development problems; to raise awareness of the impact of these problems and the policies that may assist in their solutions; and to serve as a forum for the exchange of ideas about these problems and solutions among ECWA countries. Destremau summarizes ESCWA contributions in the three main decades as follows. Each decade, she notes, was dominated by war and highly charged political events.

### The 1970s: The Initial Years and the Age of Prosperity

In the 1970s, there were three politically and diplomatically dominating landmarks: the October 1973 war; the international recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1974; and the Camp David Agreement signed by President Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel, leading in 1979 to a peace accord between the two countries, which was witnessed by U.S.



president Jimmy Carter. As Destremau writes, "This bilateral agreement has symbolized the division of Arab countries, which have stigmatized the Egyptian compromise" (315).

Economically, the 1970s were years when ECWA concentrated on the priorities of building regional cooperation—institutionally, sectorally, and technically. With the three-and-a-half-fold increase in oil prices in 1973–74 and a further substantial increase in 1979, development funds from the oil-exporting countries were available in plenty to support regional initiatives. In turn, ECWA was able to support human and institutional structures and to give high priority to water resource development. ECWA was, in fact, the first regional commission to elevate water security to priority status. The commission also developed a work program focused on the needs of the least developed "countries" in the region—at the time, Yemen and Palestine because Sudan only became an ECWA member in 2008. ECWA took the lead in collecting data on the effects of war and occupation on the people of Palestine.

The impact of the oil-price increases was another area of ECWA analysis. Skyrocketing oil prices proved a mixed blessing, massively increasing incomes of the countries with oil but also increasing the region's dependence on world trade, western technology, and immigration—both of numerous unskilled workers and also of skilled professionals. Also, it further complicated the economic situation of the region's oil-importing countries. ECWA tried to help member states develop patterns of economic growth directed to more balanced medium and longer term development—with emphasis on food security, modern industry, social security, and efficient public administration. However, ECWA's ideas were far from accepted by the oil boom countries, and only Jordan and Yemen really benefited.

Nor were ECWA's ideas for regional cooperation readily accepted. ECWA's strategy had three major components: the strengthening and improvement of regional and national planning; the development of ways to adapt technology to improve productivity; and the development of an integrated approach to rural development. ECWA worked with the Food and Agriculture Organization on its agricultural strategy and with the UN Industrial Development

Organization on its industrial strategy. But the surfeit of oil revenues made it easy in many cases to pursue approaches that gave priority to political prestige rather than to profitability, economic efficiency, or even rationality. ECWA's work on industry was largely abandoned in the early 1980s.

In education and health progress was much better, thanks to strong financial and government support for staffing, national and international, as well as for equipment and the construction of schools, clinics, and hospitals. Child mortality, illiteracy, and fertility all fell rapidly. Nevertheless, high levels of inequality remain, and poverty and deprivation remain relatively high. Relative to their levels of per capita income, human development rankings for many of the region's countries remain low.

By gender indicators, the international ranking of many ECWA countries is even lower. However, this has not prevented ECWA from producing important analysis and giving an important lead in the area of women and population studies. ECWA has compiled statistics on the situation of women. It has also drawn attention to the rapid rates of population growth—the region itself more than doubling from 76 million in 1974 to 160 million twenty-five years later. Though the sensitivity surrounding population policies has inhibited ECWA from taking a stand in favor of measures to slow population growth, undoubtedly its provision of data has helped to raise awareness of the issue—and by the early twenty-first century, fertility rates in the region, though still high, had nearly halved from their levels when the regional commission was founded.

## The 1980s: The Years of Recession

Between 1980 and 1986, Arab oil revenues fell by three-quarters, causing devastating setbacks to the incomes of governments and households within the region. In parallel, there were serious falls in financial support to the region, intra-regionally and internationally. Recession in the Gulf States spread to all other countries of the region, through the reduction of trade and aid and through declines in the remittances from workers in the high income countries. The ECWA region experienced a lost decade for development, as in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, though mostly as a result of



declines in oil prices rather than from accumulated debt. Debt did, however, strongly rise in some countries—Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Yemen, for instance.

These setbacks, in turn, brought increased influence to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as policies worldwide shifted away from planning and public spending and to the emerging neoliberal agenda. Private sector production was encouraged. Integration into the global economy became a policy preoccupation of ECWA, with an emphasis on free markets and regional trade, thereby following the general trend of the decade. However, trade patterns remained unbalanced—with exports being mainly of oil and agricultural products and a high proportion of imports coming from Europe and other western economies.

Notwithstanding these drastic changes in its policy approach, expanding intra-regional trade remained a priority. In 1985, ECWA published an ambitious and wide-ranging study of economic integration, analyzing the inter-relationships between integration, economic development, and sub-regional cooperation, and the role of the private sector. The study also covered the development and integration of financial markets. The idea of an Arab Common Market was strongly supported by ECWA, and, in words at least, by most of the region's governments. But political rivalries and existing structures and vested interests of production hindered progress. However, by 1998 an Arab Free Trade Agreement was negotiated with a ten-year implementation period.

By the late 1980s, ECWA was giving more attention to social issues, especially those arising from the changes in labor markets and population. Member states requested a change in name to the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. Population, migration, and labor market issues were treated with ever greater importance while the economic agenda moved ever closer to the orthodoxy of free markets and free trade. But issues of refugees and displaced persons had remained serious challenges and high on ESCWA's agenda.

## **The 1990s and Beyond: Globalization and New Regional Perspectives**

The 1990s opened with the Gulf War, an event strengthening—at least in appearance—the dominance of the United States within the region, already enhanced globally by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under the umbrella influence of the United States, a peace process between Israel and its neighbors began. A peace treaty was signed between Israel and Jordan—but no solution was found to terminating Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. After 2001, the situation deteriorated into an armed conflict, the "second intifada."

The Gulf War had left a major ecological disaster in Kuwait, which, with preparations for the UN Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, brought environmental issues to the fore. ESCWA also continued to press for the better management of shared resources, especially water. Regional integration efforts in the 1990s were increasingly set in the context of globalization. ESCWA used its influence to conclude a series of multilateral trade agreements within the framework of the World Trade Organization, pressing for privatization, micro-enterprises, and entrepreneurship.

Economically, the 1990s brought important changes to ESCWA's previous priorities and approaches. The Gulf countries began to follow the recommendations of the IMF as did Lebanon and Syria, while others (particularly, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen) entered formal programs of structural adjustment. ESCWA itself adopted the new dominant economic orthodoxy and defended the neoliberal ideas and theories conveyed by the IMF and World Bank, a trend started in the 1980s, as we have seen. These gave priority to the promotion of market-based economies, de-regulation, the privatization of public enterprises, and the opening of markets to foreign trade and inflows of private capital. ESCWA has also encouraged close cooperation between the private sector and universities within the region in order to promote research and development.

Over the 1990s, increased attention was being given globally to poverty reduction. ESCWA adopted the orthodox position of pursuing neoliberal policies of growth combined



with measures for poverty alleviation and social development. In several reports, ESCWA drew attention to the fact that in most countries, spending on education and health was being reduced as a percentage of total capital expenditure while military spending was being increased. In 2005, military spending was greater than public spending on health for the twelve ESCWA countries for which there was data. Military spending also exceeded spending on public education in seven of the eight countries for which data were available.

Regarding the war itself, ESCWA's 1994 report *The Impact of Crises on the Social Situation in the ESCWA Region* analyzed the impact of the Gulf war on the region as follows: "Most countries in the region are still attempting to deal with the general decline in socio-economic conditions, which were greatly exacerbated by the series of crises and finally the Gulf War. These conflicts have drained economic resources, which have been directed to security and armaments instead of development. They have also influenced the geographical distribution of population, contributing to urbanization and the primacy of major cities...They have also contributed to increasing unemployment and poverty" (2). Much the same could no doubt be said at present, following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the prolonged aftermath of occupation.

## Conclusion

The ESCWA region has changed profoundly over the last half century—economically, politically, and also culturally. In the 1970s, oil revenue surged in the oil-producing states, changing the landscape of these countries as their main towns increasingly changed into affluent consumer capitals, visibly dominated by modern skyscrapers. Israel also developed with ever more modern highways and buildings, mirroring many affluent parts of the United States, its main supporter. Meanwhile, Palestine has remained impoverished, with high proportions of the population unemployed and living in dire poverty, an extreme and depressing contrast. This divide has dominated the political context in which ESCWA has operated. To the south, Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen have been obviously much poorer, although they have experienced

improvements in per capita income and human development.

Over the almost four decades of its existence, ESCWA has grappled with the tensions and diversities of this difficult context. It has focused on regional cooperation, planning, social development, and more controversially, on issues of gender, environment, and poverty within the region. Sometimes ESCWA has served as a channel for bringing mainstream UN ideas into the region and to a lesser extent as a channel for taking regional ideas into the wider UN world. But often, the tensions of the region have led ESCWA to adopt coping strategies—creating committees, discussion groups, and expert meetings to slow down the process of formulating or adopting policy guidelines rather than simply proceeding to adopt them. Sometimes a more positive coping strategy has been to shift ESCWA's emphasis toward more practical activities and technical assistance at the bilateral level. It has also shifted attention to less controversial issues such as alternative energy, transport, rural development, and micro-credit.

Nonetheless, ESCWA has built up legitimacy and made a difference—especially in areas such as gender and environment and to a lesser extent poverty reduction. On several issues, ESCWA has been ahead of the curve, initially facing resistance but in time getting difficult issues onto official agendas. This is the case with population, food security, water, and diversification. ESCWA's role as forum for Arab intellectuals has helped in these respects.

Palestine has been a major preoccupation. Destremau summarizes this role and its achievements as follows: "ESCWA's handling of the issue of Palestine has legitimized it among member states and has united them behind the commission's position. It has steadfastly striven for Palestine to be given full status as a member state, it has testified to the effects of Israeli colonization on Palestinian economic and social conditions, and it has carried the voice of the Middle Eastern states to the international powers. On this extremely sensitive issue, which is central to the region but raises many points of view, the commission took a clearly practical stand and drew attention to socioeconomic issues rather than limiting itself to the political question" (355).



In terms of ideas, ESCWA has tended to be a follower rather than an innovator. For most of its life, ESCWA has been a mirror of the evolution of international thinking about development emerging in other parts of the world. Again as Demestrau summarizes:

The underlying drive behind the commission's activities and ideas has been to influence the policies and attitudes of its member states toward rational decision-making—basically understood as Western rationality....Until the end of the 1990s, ESCWA did not take into account culture or identity, although they play an important role in the region. In spite of their apparent neutrality, their 'self-evident' and technocratic nature, most of ESCWA's activities and discourses are not devoid of ideas. Indeed, this may well be the form that ideas take when economic and social affairs are handled in the absence of open and verbally expressed political competition. They become apparently depoliticized and pragmatic, denying that the dominant orthodoxy represents only one of the possible paths to development and that other alternatives exist. More than ideas, then, the regional commission certainly conveys an ideology....[T]he ideas carried by the regional commission in the economic field have generally been vehicles for the dissemination of a global model of capitalist development, based on and legitimized by the ideologies of modernization and the homogenization of the modes of thinking, living, consuming, organizing, and ruling (356).

In summary, ESCWA of all the UN regional commissions has had to deal with the most complex political and volatile situation in and between countries straddling two continents. The ongoing war in Iraq has made the commission's work even more complicated. In this light, it is impressive that it has been able to take advantage of global preoccupations to address in its own region such sensitive issues as gender, population, labor conditions, and migration. This is an illustration of the fact that the commission was a follower rather than an initiator. In light of the global crisis that began in 2007, the questioning of the single path proposed by recent patterns of globalization, and

the shift of economic initiatives to Asia, it is imperative that ESCWA's policy ideas play a more innovative and integrative function in the future.

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