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For immediate release

Rejuvenating 'social economies' in the Arab region

Workshop on how to unlock the 'decent work' potential of Arab cooperatives

Beirut (ILO News) – Cooperatives, which employ over 100 million people globally, could be a driving force for employment, growth and decent work but remain under-utilized in the Arab region, according to representatives of governments, workers' and employers' organizations, and cooperatives from six Arab countries gathered in Beirut, Lebanon from November 23-26.

The sub-regional workshop organized by the International Labour Organization's Regional Office for Arab States brought together representatives from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory, Syria and Yemen in efforts to unlock the 'decent work' potential of Arab cooperatives.

Historically, cooperatives in the region have been predominantly state-driven, male-dominated, and weakened by outdated regulatory and legislative restrictions. However, recent achievements in the occupied Palestinian territory, Lebanon and the UAE have raised hopes that cooperatives could contribute to raising a portion of the estimated 140 million impoverished Arabs above the poverty line.

Cooperatives – which are autonomous, jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprises that address common social, economic and cultural needs – have been integral to the ILO Lebanon Recovery Fund's programme to support local socio-economic development in war-affected areas of South Lebanon after the 2006 war.

“Cooperatives have created jobs for women in south Lebanon, helping them to improve their living standards,” said Daad Ismail, head of an agricultural cooperative in the village of Deir Qanoun. “They have also strengthened social bonds within the community, expanded social networks to neighbouring villages, led to better quality products, and revitalised our local economies.”

Earlier this year, the occupied Palestinian territory pioneered the development of a new draft cooperatives law based on ILO Recommendation 193 concerning the Promotion of Cooperatives, the first of its kind in the region.

“With technical support from the ILO, and together with social partners, we have completed the drafting of a new cooperatives law that is in the final stages of ratification,” said Ghazi Salameh Abou Daher, Director of the Cooperatives Department at the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Labour. “We have also integrated a three-year plan for the rejuvenation of cooperatives into our national employment strategy.”

After taking stock of the state of cooperatives in the region and globally, participants in the four-day workshop emerged with a blueprint for an “Action Plan for Cooperative Development” on Friday (November 26) in the realms of job creation and the reform of legislation and regulatory frameworks.

With support from the ILO, the plan aims to rejuvenate the Arab cooperative movement through knowledge-sharing, capacity development, institution building, gender mainstreaming, improved production and marketing techniques, and technical support for legal reform.

“Cooperatives are a powerful resource for job creation and the promotion of decent work that has been largely untapped in our part of the world,” said Nada al-Nashif, Regional Director of the ILO Regional Office for Arab States. “Through this workshop, social partners have reached a significant consensus on the way forward for the rejuvenation of social economies.”

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2012 as the International Year of Cooperatives, highlighting the contribution of cooperatives to sustainable development. In adopting resolution 64/136, the Assembly noted that cooperatives impact poverty reduction, employment generation and social integration.

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