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PANEL REPORT: FOOD SECURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGING
THE COURSE OF ECONOMIC REFORM IN THE WANA COUNTRIES

ORGANIZER, CHAIRPERSON AND RAPPORTEUR

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PANEL DISCUSSANTS

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The discussants made brief presentations covering the North Africa and Middle Eastern region as a whole (Ahmed Goueli) followed respectively by comments on Egypt, Morocco and Jordan by the other discussants. The general view was that food security in the whole region is confronted by several threats and challenges in the 21st century. Agricultural and forest land is often fragile, hence there is a prime requirement for it to be protected. Dependence of production in the region on rainfed areas creates severe instability in food availability. There is an obvious need for irrigation and water conservation. Closely associated with that is the need to prevent conflict among countries over available supply in the region by negotiation and agreement. That is very much bound up with the need for enhancement of the welfare of the people and improvement of the quality of life, which, in turn, requires political stability. A just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East will contribute greatly to the prosperity and development of all.

Poverty alleviation has to be attacked in two dimensions. The first involves fairly standard prescriptions. Improvement in poor societies comes through education for work and for more general increases in knowledge on health, food and nutrition. Small and micro enterprises need to be promoted as a source of employment and income generation, and they need to be sustained by increasing resources devoted to local R&D. The dominance of young people in the population of the region, though it is an obvious advantage, requires large-scale creation of jobs. Agriculture would benefit directly from more exposure to international agricultural research and technology. Low-quality rural and trade infrastructure limits progress in increasing competitiveness of

exportable products, which is a necessary condition in order to gain foreign exchange. Intraregional cooperation and integration would help with that.

The second dimension involves a change in the attitude of the government and of richer people towards the poor. Encouraging rich people to fulfil their social responsibilities towards satisfying the social expectations of the poor could do this. The gender gap in economic activities is large, which is a closely associated issue. At the practical level two measures are needed. The first is to decentralize the civil service structures and make social provision available in the poor areas with the same level of quality as in the rich. Second, if a government engages in any kind of subsidy, it ought to be aimed at relieving the insecurity of the poor.

At the international level the WTO has an indirect role in food security policies in developing countries. On one side, the distortion of international food markets is encouraging the developing countries to continue implementing their self-sufficiency policies through import substitution practices. Markets are thus lost to the developing world. On the other, the availability of relatively cheap food on international markets is a benefit, but one which is potentially short term, carrying with it the danger of reducing domestic food production capacities in more vulnerable regions.