

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be addressing you today, and I am pleased to welcome all the experts and participants at this Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on protecting the Arab Family from poverty through employment, social integration and intergenerational solidarity.

The Doha International Family Institute (DIFI), which has Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), is organizing this EGM as part of the preparations for the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family 2014 and in response to the resolutions of the United Nations' General Assembly and Economic and Social Council, which highlights the importance of designing, implementing and monitoring family-oriented policies, in collaboration with international civil society organizations.

Since the proclamation of the IYF, the international community has recognized the role of families in achieving progress. However, there is no specific family framework or any long-term plan of action that caters to the Family as a whole. Families are rarely the focus of major policy initiatives, which often target women and children separately, and not as a family unit.

The Millennium Declaration has also not addressed the family, and many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will be difficult to attain unless the strategies to achieve them focus on the family. With the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the IYF falling on the eve of the 2015 target year for achieving the MDGs, it is important to recognize the role of the family in these development goals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The General Assembly of the United Nation has encouraged all countries to take a holistic approach when setting policies and initiatives that target poverty

reduction, and promote social integration and work life family balance. Although the Middle East and Northern African (MENA) countries differ in terms of resources and economic progress, these are no doubt pressing issues in this part of the world. Despite important achievements in terms of human development, MENA countries are facing many challenges. The recent financial and political crises in the region highlight the fragility of the situation and question the sustainability of current development strategies. The social plight and economic instability in many Arab nations signal the magnitude of these challenges and further reiterate the need to reconsider current development policies.

Achieving poverty reduction and promoting social integration depends largely on the expansion of productive and decent employment opportunities. In MENA countries, unemployment mainly concerns the youth segment of the population. Many young Arabs are finding it very difficult to find meaningful employment and affordable independent housing, making it difficult for them to start their own families. In fact, the high level of unemployment is one of the main sources of social disruption that caused the Arab Spring.

Parallel to that, the increase in the number of educated women in the MENA region has led to greater participation of this demographic in the labour market. Although it remains lower than many other countries, working women in the Arab world are finding it more and more difficult to reconcile their careers with their family life. Promoting work life and family balance, however, is not simply a matter of giving aid to women or families. This is a new model which needs society needs to assimilate with at all levels. Policies such as parental leave, child benefits and access to affordable childcare, which are aimed at creating a balance between work and family responsibilities, will be addressed at length by the panel.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Multigenerational families, with strong ties based on intergenerational support and reliance, although still common in the MENA region, are rapidly declining in numbers. Families are becoming smaller as a growing number of young people postpone marriage, stay single, get divorced and live longer with their parents. These developments impose new demands on the family and on society as whole. In this context, strategies that promote intergenerational stability at all levels are required.

Given the vast implications of the subject at hand, appropriate collaborations at regional levels are required to enable more effective assessments of the various factors impacting the Arab family, as well as to facilitate data collection and encourage the exchange of knowledge and expertise. The Doha International Family Institute (DIFI) sees this EGM as an important platform to gather comprehensive, evidence-based knowledge on trends and developments affecting Arab families today, and to use this important exchange of knowledge to put forward a sound framework of policy recommendations that address the family as a unit.

This EGM will undertake a comprehensive review of what has been achieved in the MENA region, highlight challenges and successes, explore best practices and key learning, and provide policy recommendations that we hope will guide policy makers in MENA countries to accelerate the integration of the family perspective into policies and strategies to reduce family poverty in the region.

Thank you.