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## Development experts focus on legal empowerment of underprivileged



Deputising for HRH Prince Hassan, HRH Princess Sumaya addresses a consultation on the legal empowerment of the poor on Thursday (Petra photo)

By Dalya Dajani

AMMAN - It has been 10 days since Ehab last left his two-room basement apartment in the eastern suburb of Jabal Al Akhdar. The 34-year old said it is just too expensive to take a taxi to see friends.

Ehab, who is physically-challenged and has been unemployed for the past 10 years, has few means to improve his life, emotional support is rare and efforts to attain his rights to engage fully in public life have been in vain.

It is a dismal reality for Ehab and many other vulnerable segments of the population, who, in the face of social and economic exclusion, see little hope to empower themselves for a better future.

But leading development experts are seeking to bring the rights of the underprivileged to the forefront of national attention.

During a meeting hosted by UNDP yesterday, the National Consultation on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, brought together civil society organisations, academic institutions, government officials and underprivileged members of the community to examine the nature of legal exclusion and to help foster greater action.

The interactive sessions focused on four key areas affecting the underprivileged, namely access to justice and rule of law, property rights, labour rights and the informal sector.

Without full legal protection in these areas, the poor will continue to lose out on opportunities to better their lives and contribute positively to the development of their countries, according to experts.

They explained that poverty could be both a cause and a consequence for human rights violations, noting that people whose rights are denied, such as victims of discrimination, disability and persecution, are likely to be poor.

These people find it nearly impossible to enter the labour market, as they have very little chance to access basic services or resources, they said.

In her working paper on access to justice, human rights lawyer and activist Reem Abu Hassan noted that in many communities, the poor do not get their rights to education, health and residence.

Hassan said some people have no access to justice due to obstacles such as lengthy court procedures, expensive trial fees and the lack of financial means.

Yesterday's sessions also examined the legal status of ownership rights of the poor.

Jordan's economic, political and human rights progress has placed it in a good position for implementing a legal empowerment agenda, according to Executive Director of the Commission on Legal Empowerment Naresh Singh.

This, however, requires citizens and leaders to work together for the common good, he noted.

"Groups of citizens must be able to work together to maximise gains for themselves without doing so at the expense of others and demand the freedom to make decisions of their own on issues that concern the use of common-pool or public goods," said Singh.

On the other hand, the leadership should "distribute power in such a way that the political system becomes more pluralist and groups have access to complementary resources through the market, the state, or other relevant institutions", he added.

Jordan's national consultation is part of series organised by the commission worldwide. Similar consultations took place in East Africa, East Asia, Europe and Central Asia and Latin America last year.

The final national report will be included in the commission's global report.

Participants are expected to generate findings and recommendations to improve the capacity of the poor to have greater control over their own lives.

UNDP Resident Representative Luc Stevens also referred to the prevailing vulnerability and powerlessness of the poor yesterday.

He said promoting the use of law and legal aid for the poor and disempowered is essential to empower them and build their knowledge "to ensure that corporations and governments deliver on commitments and actually pay redress for violations to poor citizens".

Deputising for HRH Prince Hassan, HRH Princess Sumaya welcomed yesterday's meeting as a crucial platform to raise the voices of the poor worldwide, highlighting the need for ethical laws for citizens' basic legal protection to recognise their homes, assets and hard work.

Princess Sumaya said despite positive achievements across the globe, millions continue to be denied basic rights.

She called upon global leaders to establish strategies for the prevention of violations and to promote a human rights framework for policy making, human rights education and the empowerment of individuals.

*7 September 2007*

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