

Empowering the poor by law

By Muna Awwad
Star staff writer

Under the patronage of HRH Princess Sumaya Bint El-Hassan, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Commission of Legal Empowerment of the Poor in New York organized last Thursday a seminar entitled "National Consultation on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor in Jordan" as an essential issue for poverty reduction by protecting those who live their lives outside the rule of law.

UNDP Resident Representative, Mr Luc Stevens, explained the program objective by saying, "Poverty is a multidimensional concept that is not only about deprivation of income and the basic means of livelihood and well-being. Poverty also means vulnerability and powerlessness arising



from both lack of knowledge and opportunities for participation. It is evident

that promoting the effective use of laws and legal aid for the poor is essential. It will empower and build the knowledge of the poor and disempowered so that they can successfully use the formal legal systems."

The seminar aimed to generate dialogue and build awareness on the nature and dimensions of legal exclusion of the poor related to the Commission's four thematic areas of focus. "Our initiative of today aims to promote the empowerment of the poor, in particular, by expanding access to four main aspects: Justice and rule of law, protecting property rights, ensuring labor rights, and legally empowering informal business," said Stevens.

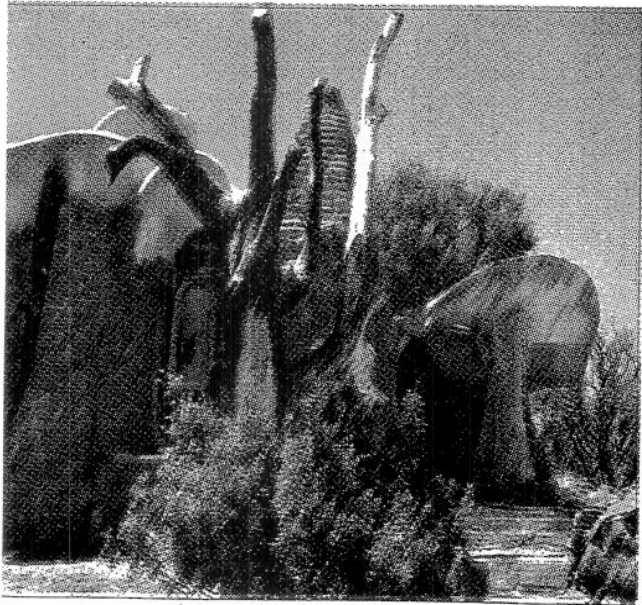
With the support of UNDP's Sub-Regional Facility for Arab States (SURF-AS), four thematic papers in the above mentioned Commission's areas of focus were pro-

duced by national authors, such as Dr Muhammad Shawabkeh who presented a study about labor rights in Jordan, and were presented by them in the meeting.

Senior Policy Adviser UNDP/SURF-AS, Dr Iyad Abu Moghli, narrated a Jordanian lady's story about her need of legal rights and how she was unable to benefit from the rule of law. He said, "A Jordanian lady once told me her story which shows how much the poor need the rule of law to protect their rights. She is responsible for four sons and two daughters of which one is paralytic. She feeds her children by planting a small land near her house in the village and traveling to the city to sell her crop in town. One day a local trader proposed to buy all her produce in order to spare her the effort of marketing the crop herself. He promised her a payment of JD 500 for each season's crop. At harvest time he took the entire crop and never gave her any money afterwards; he said that there is nothing she can do because he alleged that her crop was ruined and that he did not sell it. She couldn't recourse to the law because she would have had to appoint a lawyer, lodge a case; go to the nearest court and wait long months for the final decision; all this procedure would cost more than what she had lost. Out of this injustice we realize how important it is to discuss measures to include the poor within the rule of law."

The meeting was attended by more than 80 participants from government

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academia and the research community, relevant unions, civil society, and media.

At the meeting, the participants were expected through discussion to generate findings and recommendations that aim to improve the capacity of the poor and to enable them to have greater control over their own lives and livelihood. The final national report will be included in the Commission's global report eventually. "New ways of changing the relations between those who have and those who do not have is expected. Not only by taking from the wealthy and giving the poor but also by moving the poor from being just citizens to being trade holders and owners of economy. This new way of change is basically a political

change of relations between aspects of society," said Mr Naresh Singh, head of the Commission secretariat.

Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, Suhair Al-Ali, also assured during the meeting that enabling the poor to ownership is a preferred solution. She said, "This international issue is not only about monetary cooperation but also a cooperation of empowering the poor's right of ownership."

Dividing into four groups, the participants discussed and argued the four main themes of the Commission, first each group separately followed by an open forum which was addressed by CEO of First Strategieh Consulting, Dr Tayseer Al-Smadi, who gave an overview of the main rights and rules of law that should be discussed. "We will be fol-

lowing up different methods in the future such as introducing paperwork, attending meetings, discussions, and cooperation with different organizations so as to include the national final report in the Commission's global report. We are intending to concentrate on all the rights that the Jordanian Constitution has equally provided for all but that are not applied rightly. We are specifying here labor rights, women rights, property rights and particularly the unregulated business sector."

This project will stay under discussion aiming towards a better future for the poor unless the strife for the legal empowerment of the poor marginalizes the issue of poverty itself. ■