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ESCWA

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

ESCWA Approach to Key Social Groups and Emerging Issues in the Arab Region



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The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is an active regional partner in several United Nations initiatives on the situation of key social groups, notably young people, older persons and persons with disabilities, and on emerging development issues, such as social justice, which are critical to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The present brochure summarizes the recent activities of ESCWA, with a focus on why these issues are vital to the development of the Arab region and how ESCWA supports its member States in those areas.

I. Young People

In the Arab region, young people represent a critical and significantly large socio-demographic group, whose safety and wellbeing underpin efforts to implement the SDGs. From a demographic perspective, the youth bulge is a highly-pronounced characteristic of the region, as nearly 60 per cent of the total population is under the age of 30. Projections for 2030 and 2050 indicate that many countries will have large portions of their young populations living in urban settings.

When investment is strongly geared towards building young people's human capital and productivity, the resulting demographic dividend drives development and prosperity. However, in the Arab region, decent human development for young people has not been achieved across the board, as evidenced, for example, by inadequate standards of health services and high unemployment rates. This challenging situation, resulting from decades of development deficits affecting 72 million young men and women, is exacerbated by dangerous conflicts that have unravelled societies, placed young people in grave danger, disrupted their education, and forced many into irregular migration and displacement.

In 2012, ESCWA launched a six-year research programme on youth development based on the World Programme of Action on Youth (WPAY), aimed at promoting inclusive and participatory development in line with SDG target 16.7 on ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and

representative decision-making at all levels. Placing special emphasis on youth participation in the Arab region is a strategic approach adopted by ESCWA to address youth marginalization and exclusion from policies that directly affect them, and consequently help tackle the tremendous challenges and risks they face. Enhanced inclusion and participation better equip young people to act as agents of change capable of shaping the future for themselves and their communities, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Youth participation has gained importance in the Arab region among many Governments, civil society organizations and young people. Some Arab Governments have started involving young people in policymaking. ESCWA recognizes this development as an encouraging step in the right direction, and seeks to create sustainable channels for participation built on trust and full respect for the rights of young people, who are demanding greater voice and autonomy to shape their own future. Young people in the region want to enjoy freedom of expression, information, peaceful assembly and association. Those values are enshrined in the 2030 Agenda - without them youth empowerment cannot take place.

In this context, over the period 2015-2017, ESCWA implemented an inter-regional field project to enhance the participation of young people in decision-making processes in three countries, namely Jordan, Kuwait and Tunisia. Throughout the project's phases, regional consultations and training activities, ESCWA brought together young people, youth-led and youth-focused non-governmental organizations and representatives from relevant ministries and departments to explore how young people can strengthen their voice and impact in public life and policies that affect them.

A training programme was developed and rolled out in the participating countries, a manual on youth participation in decision-making in the Arab region was designed by experts in collaboration with young people, and a broad range of knowledge products were prepared and compiled into an online toolbox, including a regional analysis report and a brief on young people and the SDGs with special focus on SDG-16 on promoting peaceful and

inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

ESCWA is committed to building upon previous achievements in the area of youth empowerment, and will dedicate a 2018-2019 flagship publication to young people's issues. At the inter-agency level, ESCWA will continue collaborating with the United Nations Inter-Agency Technical Task Team on Young People to implement its 2018-2020 work programme, and will partner with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to finalize the United Nations Strategy for Youth, Peace and Security in Arab States.



II. Older Persons

The Arab region is currently experiencing an unprecedented increase in the proportion and absolute number of older persons. In 2015, the total number of older persons (aged 60 and above) in Arab countries was estimated at around 26.5 million (7 per cent of the total population), and is expected to nearly quadruple to over 100 million in 2050 (15 per cent of the total population).

As the region's population rapidly moves towards old age, and with several countries already at an advanced transition stage (notably Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia), there are a host of challenges that undermine the prospect of ageing with dignity. At the forefront of those obstacles are poverty, unemployment, inadequate social protection systems, and emerging changes in family dynamics. Moreover, deteriorating security conditions increase the vulnerability of older persons as protracted conflicts continue to undermine development in the region. All those factors raise legitimate concerns about whether the older persons of today, and of tomorrow, can age with dignity.

Another major concern is the insufficient attention, efforts and investment currently allocated to address older persons' needs, since most Governments are focusing on young people's issues. Governments would be better equipped to tackle those competing priorities if they consistently adopted an integrated and life-cycle approach to development planning, where each age group in the population is taken into consideration.

At the global level, there are three major frameworks designed to address the issue of ageing and achieve the wellbeing of older persons: the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), especially its Programme of Action and the Cairo Declaration on ICPD beyond 2014 in the Arab region; the 2002 Madrid International Programme of Action on Ageing (MIPAA); and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs.

The 2014 review of the ICPD Programme of Action in the Arab region indicated that many countries had made measurable efforts over 20 years to achieve progress at the policy and institutional levels in response to ageing. According to the third regional review of MIPAA in May 2017, the institutional arrangements on ageing vary widely across the region, in the form of a governmental department, national committee or policies. However, the socioeconomic conditions of today's older persons in the Arab region remain vulnerable, and future generations of older persons are likely to face similar challenges if interventions are not immediately undertaken.

ESCWA is supporting the efforts of its member States to translate the fundamental principle of the 2030 Agenda (“leaving no one behind”) into their policies and, in doing so, to adhere to all agreements and mandates to protect the human rights of older persons. The ESCWA Social Development Division addresses the silent advent of ageing and its consequences in the forthcoming Population and Development Report, entitled Prospects of Ageing with Dignity in the Arab Region, to be launched in 2018. Based on a rigorous demographic, socioeconomic and cultural overview of ageing, the report investigates various factors that perpetuate and intensify the vulnerability of older persons. It attempts to fill a significant research gap, align current development planning with future needs, and provide evidence-based projections on requirements and services to meet the needs of older persons today and by 2030.

ESCWA is also taking the lead in championing ageing issues at the regional level through various platforms, including major regional consultations such as the third regional review of MIPAA; and the eighteenth meeting of the Heads of National Population Councils, held in Amman in November 2017, in partnership with the League of Arab States and UNFPA.

In addition, ESCWA supports its member States in addressing the issue of ageing within the framework of an ongoing field project designed to strengthen national capacities for integrated, sustainable and inclusive population and development policies in the Arab region. The project aims to build the capacity of national stakeholders, namely government institutions and civil society organizations, to jointly integrate inclusive population priorities in development policies and ensure their effective monitoring and evaluation.

In the context of this project, ESCWA is supporting the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs to implement a policy-development process aimed at reducing selected duties and taxes imposed on older persons to improve and increase their participation in society. In Morocco, ESCWA is supporting the Ministry of Family, Solidarity, Equality and Social Development in developing a national strategy on older persons. It organized a workshop in February

2017 on the theme “Towards a strategic framework for older persons in Morocco” that brought various governmental and non-governmental stakeholders together to discuss priorities and challenges.



III. Persons with Disabilities

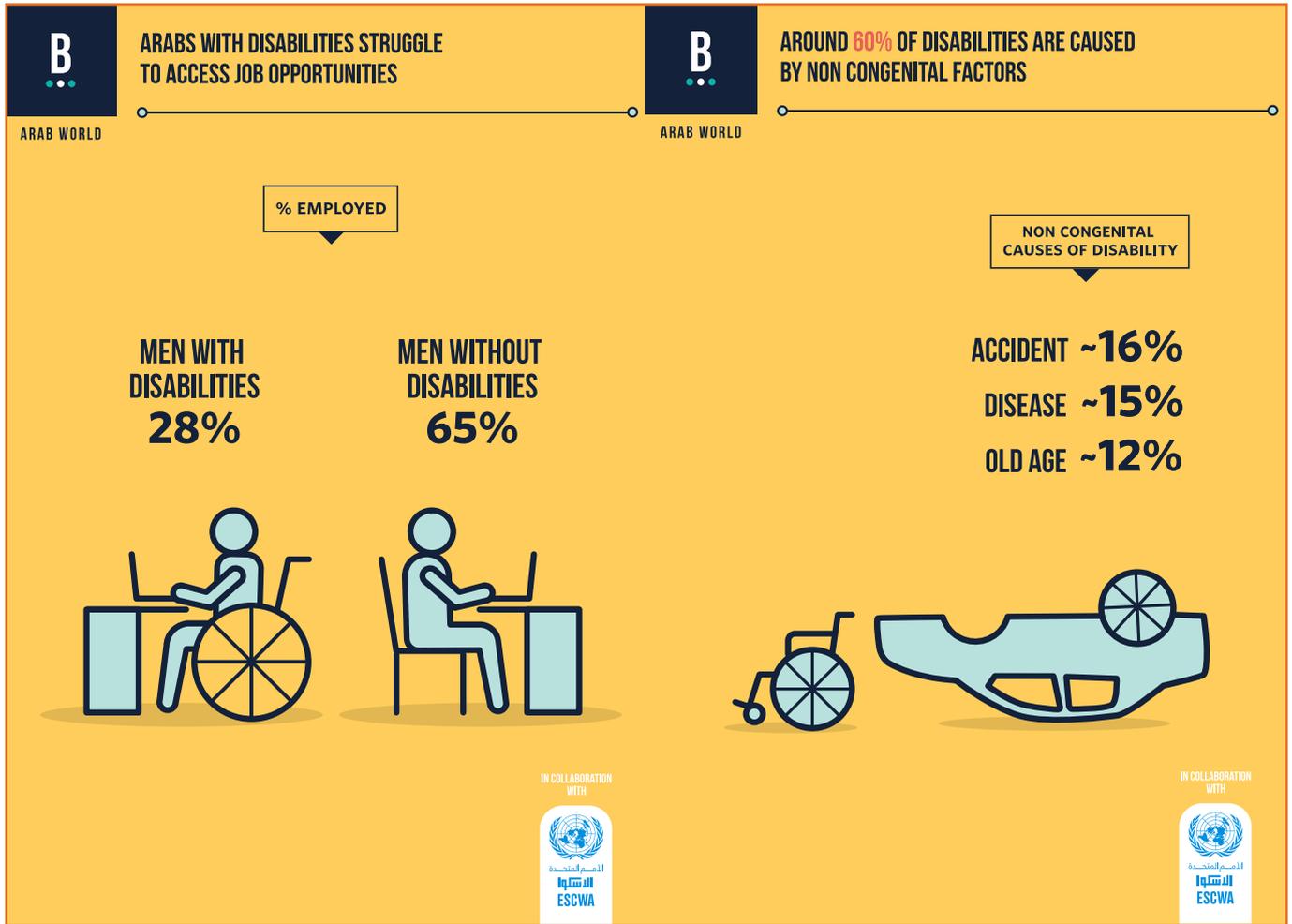
The 2011 uprisings in several Arab countries highlighted the multiple vulnerabilities of Arab societies. Hidden dimensions of poverty, marginalization, exclusion and discrimination came to light, and called Governments to action. In this context, the vulnerability and marginalization of persons with disabilities gained attention, with Governments pledging to better include persons with disabilities in the development process.

This increased commitment is reinforced by the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. The aspiration to leave no one behind explicitly includes persons with disabilities, who are mentioned three times in the 2030 Agenda’s Declaration. Furthermore, while all SDGs apply to everyone, persons with disabilities are explicitly referred to in seven of the SDG targets.

SDGs with targets and indicators that directly refer to persons with disabilities

Goal	Target	Indicator
1 End poverty in all its forms everywhere	1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable	1.3.1 Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems, by sex, distinguishing children, unemployed persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, newborns, work injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable
4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations	4.5.1 Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, indigenous peoples and conflict affected, as data become available) for all education indicators on this list that can be disaggregated
	4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all	4.a.1 Proportion of schools with access to: (a) electricity; (b) the Internet for pedagogical purposes; (c) computers for pedagogical purposes; (d) adapted infrastructure and materials for students with disabilities; (e) basic drinking water; (f) single sex basic sanitation facilities; and (g) basic handwashing facilities (as per the WASH indicator definitions)
8 Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	8.5 By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value	8.5.1 Average hourly earnings of female and male employees, by occupation, age and persons with disabilities 8.5.2 Unemployment rate, by sex, age and persons with disabilities
10 Reduce inequality within and among countries	10.2 By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status	10.2.1 Proportion of people living below 50 per cent of median income, by sex, age and persons with disabilities
11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons	11.2.1 Proportion of population that has convenient access to public transport, by sex, age and persons with disabilities
	11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities	11.7.1 Average share of the built-up area of cities that is open space for public use for all, by sex, age and persons with disabilities 11.7.2 Proportion of persons victim of physical or sexual harassment, by sex, age, disability status and place of occurrence, in the previous 12 months
16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels	16.7.1 Proportions of positions (by sex, age, persons with disabilities and population groups) in public institutions (national and local legislatures, public service, and judiciary) compared to national distributions 16.7.2 Proportion of population who believe decision making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group
17 Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	17.18 By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts	17.18.1 Proportion of sustainable development indicators produced at the national level with full disaggregation when relevant to the target, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics 17.18.2 Number of countries that have national statistical legislation that complies with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics 17.18.3 Number of countries with a national statistical plan that is fully funded and under implementation, by source of funding

Figure 1. Some highlights: access to employment and causes of disability



Source: www.unescwa.org/sub-site/arab-disability-statistics-2017.

SDG target 17.18 calls for the increased availability of reliable data disaggregated by disability. Current data on persons with disabilities are mainly concentrated in general population statistics, presenting the prevalence of disability disaggregated by sex, age, marital status, and urban/rural location. Data on education and employment are more limited, and information on poverty is currently not available in macro-level statistics in Arab countries.

Over the past years, Arab countries have made progress in harmonizing their methodological approaches to disability statistics. Currently, 12 Arab countries apply the Washington Group’s short set of questions in their censuses and household

surveys, and five countries are in the process of transition. However, despite increasing harmony in the population data currently available, those statistics still raise questions. Disability prevalence rates in Arab countries range between 0.2 per cent and 5.1 per cent, and are thus far from what is thought to be a realistic reflection of the situation on the ground. Factors contributing to this phenomenon include widespread stigma and discrimination, and different statistical approaches such as some countries including non-national resident populations in their statistics.

The limited data available on the status of persons with disabilities in the major development fields points to significant structural disadvantage and

exclusion. Educational attainment among persons with disabilities is considerably lower than among persons without disabilities, particularly in rural areas. In addition, the overwhelming majority of persons with disabilities do not participate in the labour force, although most Governments have introduced an employment quota system for persons with disabilities, at least in the public sector.

ESCWA is currently working on the inclusion of persons with disabilities through several channels. The ESCWA Social Development and Statistics Divisions has launched an initiative to increase the quantity and quality of disability-related statistics. This includes broad and ongoing data collection, currently available in the e-publication entitled “Arab disability statistics in numbers 2017”,¹ which focuses on macro-level data from censuses and surveys. Data collection is accompanied by an extensive statistical capacity-building programme. To gather information on relevant disability-related SDG indicators in the region, ESCWA performs micro-data calculations of data obtained through household surveys, which can shed light on the situation of persons with disabilities in areas such as poverty, social protection and access to transport and buildings.

In view of the widespread conflicts in Arab countries, ESCWA is preparing a study on the impact of conflict on disability through micro-data calculation and quantitative and qualitative studies, in collaboration with other international organizations such as the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) and Handicap International. In addition, a forthcoming report entitled “Social protection of persons with disabilities in Arab countries” provides a comprehensive review of current legislation and specific programmes, and summarizes the coverage of persons with disabilities in social insurance, social assistance and basic health care. The report sets out the related challenges and achievements, especially the focused coverage of persons with disabilities in some of the larger cash transfer programmes.

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market, and their access to media and the virtual world are also prominent concerns (figure

1). ESCWA, in collaboration with the International Labour Organization, the private sector and the International Telecommunication Union, is currently supporting member States in making their labour markets more accessible through improved employment services and support to accommodate persons with disabilities in the workplace using information technology tools. Modern technology is also a tool for promoting broader advocacy campaigns to confront widespread stigma and public misperception of disability, and to enhance inclusion.

All ESCWA work on disability is closely coordinated and guided by an inter-governmental working group on disability formed in 2016. The group comprises government experts from 17 Arab countries, who are either heads of national disability councils or high-ranking government officials from ministries of social affairs. The group meets at least once a year to discuss issues of common interest, and steers the ESCWA work programme on disability.

Disability is prominent on the social policy agenda of Arab Governments. Progress is still needed towards better inclusion, social justice and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities, but a range of stakeholders, such as Governments, civil society organizations, the private sector and international organizations, are working towards the common goal of no longer leaving them behind.

IV. Emerging Issues: Social Justice

The Arab region faces significant social justice challenges, including low labour force participation, notably among women, young people and persons with disabilities; high levels of informality and social exclusion; varying levels of poverty and inequality; and poor governance and human rights deficits. For ESCWA, social justice means “equal rights and access to resources and opportunities for all, men and women, paying particular attention to the removal of barriers that hinder the empowerment of disadvantaged groups to fulfil their potential to participate in decisions that govern their lives”² It is a concept that focuses on the principles of equality, equity, participation and human rights, and is thus critical to the achievement of the SDGs.

The SDGs provide invaluable opportunities for national development policies to adapt and devise plans to meet the Goals, which also require synergy and coordination between various sectors. The interconnected nature of the SDGs shows that it would be ineffective to address them on an individual basis - the most effective way to achieve the 2030 Agenda is to develop national plans based on the interrelatedness of the SDGs.

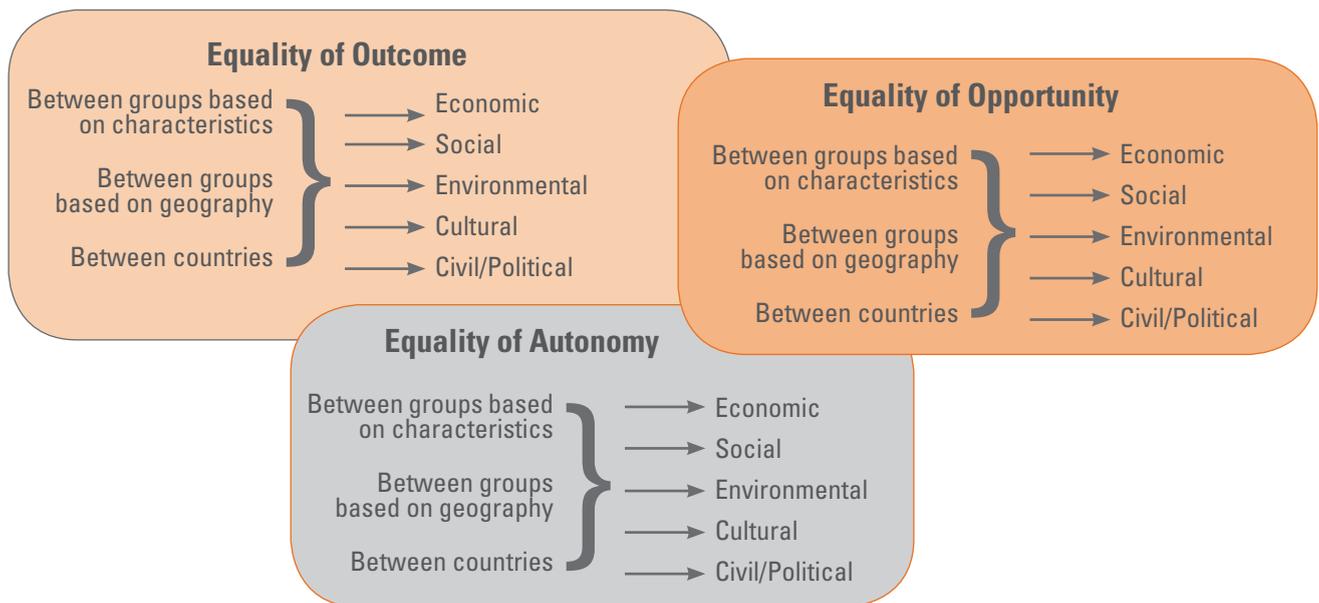
In accordance with its mandate emanating from the twenty-ninth ESCWA ministerial session, held in Doha in December 2016,³ ESCWA is preparing a major study identifying policy options to transform unequal societies in the region into more equal ones by addressing interrelated SDG goals and targets through a nexus approach. The study focuses on Goals addressing poverty eradication (SDG 1); gender equality (SDG 5); inclusive growth and productive employment (SDG 8); the reduction of inequality (SDG 10); peaceful and

inclusive societies (SDG 16); and the means of implementation (SDG 17).

This nexus study will examine the intrinsic relationships among equality, inclusion and justice. Sustainable human development cannot be achieved without equality, as all peoples, without discrimination, need to benefit from the fruits of development. In addition, without inclusion and justice, societies cannot prosper or flourish, as injustice and exclusion are often linked to instability, wars and conflicts.

ESCWA is also taking a closer look at the equality pillar of the social justice agenda in a forthcoming flagship report focusing on equality of outcome, equality of opportunity and equality of autonomy or voice in selected Arab countries. It will also examine the different dimensions and complexity of stakeholders involved in efforts to reduce inequality (figure 2). The report will be launched during the first half of 2018.

Figure 2. Different dimensions of equality



Source: ESCWA, *Social Development Report 2: Equality of Outcome, Process and Autonomy in Selected States in the Arab Region* forthcoming.

Endnotes

1. www.unescwa.org/sub-site/arab-disability-statistics-2017.
2. E/ESCWA/28/8.
3. E/ESCWA/29/12/Report.