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CAPACITY-BUILDING IN STATISTICS FOR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

Summary

This document outlines the strategic issues of statistical capacity-building. It presents two initiatives in the field of national statistics, namely measuring the impact of statistical capacity-building activities and assessing national statistical systems. The document also reviews two studies concerning the assessment of capacity-building needs of national statistical offices and the improvement of statistical capacity to monitor the progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Further details on those issues will be provided in the form of background documents, as appropriate.

The representatives of the member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia are invited to review those strategic issues and make recommendations, with a view to improving the work of the Commission (ESCWA) in the field of statistical capacity-building.

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Introduction

1. Developing statistical capacity is the main priority of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in the area of statistics. Considerable resources are made available to address the most important needs in the field of official statistics, in the region and in individual member countries.

2. Critical review and recommendations of the members of the Statistical Committee will help the ESCWA secretariat in determining the priority areas of statistical capacity development. That periodic review, complemented by a continuous dialogue between the secretariat and the heads and senior officials of national statistical offices, has already resulted in suggesting the following initiatives:

(a) To develop a systematic approach to evaluating and monitoring the impact of statistical capacity-building. Such an approach would include an established methodology, indicators and systematic methods of impact monitoring. A group of representatives of national statistical offices should be formed to lead this initiative. Outcomes will help both ESCWA and member countries in identifying strengths and successes, but also gaps, shortcomings and needs for improvement in the area of statistical capacity development. If this initiative is successful, it could also be considered in other fields of the work of the Commission;

(b) To establish a programme of voluntary assessments of national statistical systems that would be coordinated by ESCWA. Such assessments would examine legal, organizational and technical aspects of national statistical systems, and would follow successful examples from countries of Europe and Central Asia.

3. Two studies are also brought to the attention of the Committee under this agenda item:

(a) The assessment of the needs of national statistical offices for capacity development;

(b) The improvement of statistical capacity to monitor the progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and address the variations between national and international sources of statistical data.

I. INITIATIVES

A. MEASURING THE IMPACT OF STATISTICAL CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

4. At its meeting in December 2011, the bureau of the Statistical Committee recommended that more attention be devoted to evaluating and monitoring the impact of capacity-building activities. The bureau also suggested the creation of a small working group for that purpose.

5. Capacity-building activities of ESCWA in the field of statistics differ with respect to scope, number of countries involved and goals. Three main types of capacity-building activities are considered, namely:

(a) Advisory missions at the request of member countries, addressing their specific issues and needs. During such missions, an ESCWA expert and the staff of the national statistical office concerned analyse problematic issues and suggest solutions. The outcome and impact of an advisory mission are expected to materialize in the short term and should be measurable soon after the mission;

(b) Training programmes addressing specific regional issues common to a group or all of the ESCWA member countries. The training courses are undertaken by resource persons from the ESCWA staff, consultants or partner agencies. The impact of a training course depends on the ability of participants to apply the skills acquired through the training soon after it is completed. The feedback required from individual participants and their offices should include the relevance of the course content and how the skills acquired helped the trainees to improve their work outputs, in both the short term and the long term;

(c) Workshops addressing a specific subject matter related to statistical methodologies. Workshops are collaborative undertakings, where participants from member countries share experiences, good practice and research. Outputs of such workshops could be guidelines, recommendations or regional standards. The impact of a workshop depends on the applicability of such guidelines, recommendations or standards in the work of the participating statistical offices.

6. The assessment proposed by ESCWA suggests a methodology for evaluating the three different types of capacity-building activities and gives specific examples from the recent experience of the work of the Commission. The Committee may wish to provide further guidance on how to evaluate the impact of statistical capacity-building activities and possibly establish a working group that would develop that systematic monitoring and evaluation, in cooperation with the ESCWA secretariat.

B. GLOBAL ASSESSMENTS OF NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEMS

7. Global assessments of national statistical systems are voluntary actions undertaken, pursuant to an agreement between a country and international experts, to evaluate the legal, organizational and technical aspects of its statistical system. Each global assessment aims to make a set of mutually agreed recommendations, with a view to improving and strengthening the national statistical system. Global assessments are not intended to evaluate nor rank statistical systems in member countries.

8. Some ESCWA member countries expressed their interest in the experience of the global assessments of national statistical systems in the European region. They asked ESCWA to organize similar global assessments.

9. ESCWA and its member countries do not have sufficient experience and expertise. The assistance of European experts is therefore needed. However, it is important to calibrate the criteria to the needs of the countries of the region. In particular the legal and organizational frameworks have to be assessed on the basis of prevailing practices in the Arab region and are not to be compared to European frameworks.

10. The global assessments of national statistical systems focus on three main areas:

(a) The legal basis, such as the general statistical legislation, the census legislation and the legislation in other statistical areas, and the data protection and confidentiality laws;

(b) The organizational setup of the national statistical system, including its programming, monitoring and resource planning;

(c) Statistical activities in individual areas of statistics, including issues of statistical methodologies such as standards, classifications and quality frameworks.

11. ESCWA has prepared a proposal further described in the paper E/ESCWA/SD/2012/IG.1/CRP.7. The Secretariat seeks the views of the Committee and the expressions of interest of countries that would like to participate in the exercise.

II. STUDIES

A. THE ASSESSMENT OF THE NEEDS OF NATIONAL STATISTICAL OFFICES FOR CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

12. The Statistics Division of ESCWA, mandated by the Statistical Committee, prepared an assessment of the needs of national statistical offices for capacity development (see E/ESCWA/SD/2012/IG.1/CRP.4 for further details). It is the third assessment, following those undertaken in 2008 and 2010, and is based on a questionnaire completed by national statistical offices during the second quarter of 2012.

13. The assessment analyses areas of statistical work that may be in need of further capacity development, in particular:

- (a) The potential of the national statistical offices in their application of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 1994;
- (b) The application of other international statistical standards and technical recommendations;
- (c) The compliance with the most important international statistical classifications;
- (d) The implementation of surveys and censuses and the use of administrative registers and records as a source of statistical data;
- (e) The cooperation and coordination in the area of statistics at the national and international levels.

14. The assessment aims to provide the members of the Statistical Committee with the needed background information enabling them to identify priorities in statistical capacity development and to define short-term and long-term action plans for capacity-building at the regional level.

B. IMPROVING STATISTICAL CAPACITY TO MONITOR THE PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

15. It is essential that national statistical offices be the official source of national data on development indicators in their respective countries. They should be the national custodians for official statistics that lead the management of national databases. In order to play that role effectively, statistical offices have to support data flows at the subnational and national levels to the repository of databases under their custody. They should also enhance efficient transmission of data to a variety of national and global users through a well-established communication strategy. Common issues to be addressed by the ESCWA secretariat and member countries are:

- (a) To reconcile national and international data;
- (b) To increase data production;
- (c) To enhance coordination mechanisms;
- (d) To improve reporting mechanisms.

16. Further details are provided in the paper on the assessment of capacity-building activities in the statistical field (E/ESCWA/SD/2012/IG.1/CRP.4). The Committee may wish to comment on the analysis of the variations between national and international data and provide guidance to the secretariat on future capacity-building activities, related to development indicators.

III. ACTION REQUIRED OF THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE

17. Members of the Statistical Committee are invited to review the analysis and proposals presented at the meeting, with a view to providing guidance to the secretariat on the following issues:

- (a) Defining short-term and long-term action plans for capacity development at the regional level, including future assessments of needs;
- (b) Evaluating the impact of statistical capacity development activities and possibly establishing a working group that would further develop, in cooperation with ESCWA, the systematic monitoring and evaluation of those activities;
- (c) Establishing a programme of voluntary global assessments of national statistical systems.
