

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Statistical Committee
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Item 10 of the provisional agenda

Round-table discussion**Vision and strategic directions for ESCWA work
in the field of statistics for the period 2020-2025**

1. The present document provides ideas for a round-table discussion on the visions and strategic directions of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in the field of statistics for the period 2020-2025. It is based on the perception of the ESCWA secretariat of the needs and challenges of official statistics in the Arab region in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

I. SITUATION ANALYSIS**A. DATA REVOLUTION**

2. The past two decades saw a digital revolution driven by the ubiquitous availability of smartphones and Internet connected devices. Big data can offer huge volumes of pertinent information if they are stored, tagged and analysed properly. In addition, the rise and adoption of open data initiatives provides alternative sets of data sources, which could address the growing need for information by decision makers and the general public. Such new data sources offer opportunities for official statistical agencies to improve the relevance and efficiency of data production and reduce response burdens. The private sector is the main generator of those data. National statistical offices are increasingly under pressure to defend and rethink their role as the main providers of high-quality national statistics.

B. LIMITED STATISTICAL CAPACITY

3. The Arab region has diverse statistical capacity to produce timely and high-quality statistics. Some countries have fully functioning statistical systems, providing up-to-date statistical series in most areas, while others suffer from large data gaps in their series. Existing data gaps are partly due to a lack of adequate financing for official statistics in some countries; however, some of the Arab countries that do have financial resources suffer from limited statistical capacity as well. In general, the region requires significant technical capacity-building in statistics.

C. INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESSES AND PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES

4. Statistics is not considered a priority area for policymakers in some countries, and national statistical offices often find themselves in a weak position to negotiate much needed budgets to function properly. Moreover, international and regional organizations often have conflicting agendas and priorities, with little coordination among them in the areas of capacity-building and demand for statistics.

D. WAR AND CONFLICT

5. Political instability has adverse effects on the production of quality statistics. Recent wars and conflicts in several Arab countries have destroyed their statistical infrastructure and drained their statistical capacity. Some countries were unable to undertake a population census in the last round of censuses, and existing sampling frames are no longer usable in conflict-ridden countries. Armed conflict has also generated new realities such as human casualties, massive population displacement and destruction that need to be reflected in official statistics.

II. VISION FOR THE PERIOD 2020-2025

6. Work by the ESCWA secretariat will focus on building strong national statistical systems in the Arab region, which produce and disseminate quality statistics in an efficient and timely manner, making use of new data sources and innovative statistical methods in statistics production, especially in conflict-ridden countries. The ESCWA secretariat will also devise new ways to engage partners and stakeholders to improve statistical capacity in the region. It will focus on the following areas:

(a) Using new data sources, including public and commercial administrative registers, remote sensing and big data;

(b) Improving statistical information systems, including increased use of technology in data collection and linking statistical and geospatial information;

(c) Formulating national strategies to develop statistics for monitoring and following up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

7. The thematic areas of intervention will cover key official statistics issues that are not addressed in detail by the statistical units of international and regional organizations, including the following:

(a) *Managerial and strategic issues relating to official statistics*

8. The ESCWA secretariat will assist member States in establishing national strategies for statistics development with a focus on the 2030 Agenda. This work area will cover new data sources, including remote sensing, administrative registers and records and big data. National statistical offices and the ESCWA secretariat, as custodians of ethical and professional standards in the area of statistics, will ensure that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics are observed. The secretariat will also facilitate integration and better coordination of the regional statistical system through existing inter-agency and regional mechanisms.

(b) *Demographic and social statistics*

9. This work area will be steered by the Technical Advisory Group on Demographic and Social Statistics. ESCWA work will cover the 2020 round of population and housing censuses, including the introduction of new technologies and the geospatial dimension. Work will also focus on civil registration and vital statistics, and on technical cooperation and data collection in the area of core social indicators, such as culture, education and health. Informal employment will also be addressed, in cooperation with the International Labour Organization and other partners.

(c) *Economic statistics*

10. This work area will be steered by the Technical Advisory Group on Economic Statistics. In addition to capacity-building and data collection on national accounts, industry, trade, price, finance and energy statistics, the new areas of transport statistics and digital economy statistics will be addressed. In the area of price statistics, efforts will aim to produce harmonized Arab consumer price indices and annual purchasing power parities based on real data collection.

(d) *Environment statistics*

11. Climate change is a key priority for environment statistics, which cover data on its impact and on its prevention and mitigation. The ESCWA secretariat will work with regional partners to ensure technical cooperation and data collection on key environmental indicators. It will lead efforts to implement the System of Environmental Economic Accounting.

(e) *Development indicators and cross-cutting areas of statistics*

12. Work on development indicators is guided primarily by the Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, which is presented to the current session of the Statistical Committee under agenda item 7. In that regard, the ESCWA secretariat will ensure availability of Arabic metadata for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators, including translating the global framework of indicators and a localised regional framework. Technical cooperation and data collection on development indicators will also include data and statistics on persons with disabilities, gender-sensitive indicators and sex-disaggregated data. The availability of SDG data will be assessed continually, and the ESCWA secretariat will assist member States in identifying the right data sources.

13. While covering the above-mentioned areas of statistics, the ESCWA secretariat will place special attention on the following:

(a) Enabling national statistical systems to benefit from the use of technology in terms of collecting data from new data sources across all thematic areas of official statistics;

(b) Assisting member States in developing and improving statistical information systems, including links between statistical and geospatial information;

(c) Assisting member States in formulating national statistical strategies that correspond to the 2030 Agenda, and ensure the policy relevance of statistical strategies;

(d) Supporting the implementation of data quality frameworks, and improving the quality of data at the national and regional levels.

14. At the national level, it is important to maintain an ongoing dialogue between statisticians and policymakers. A cultural shift is also needed to deal with other potential data providers outside the present scope of official statistics, such as custodians of data sets belonging to big data. At the same time, the role of national statistical offices as the central focal points for official statistics should be strengthened in each member State, and the ESCWA secretariat with its partners will provide systematic support to that end. Various means should be used to achieve that goal, including promoting the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

15. At the regional level, statistical work takes place in close partnership among statistical actors, notably the ESCWA secretariat, the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics, the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC-Stat), the League of Arab States, the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), the European Union, the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and United Nations agencies working in the Arab region.

III. ACTION BY THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE

16. The ESCWA Statistical Committee is invited to undertake the following:

(a) Debate official statistics needs in the region for the period 2020-2025 in the round-table discussion that includes all delegations;

(b) Consider interlinkages between the strategic vision set out in the present document, the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data and the Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data;

(c) Provide the ESCWA secretariat with recommendations and mandates on statistical work for the period 2020-2025 that cover the overall focus of statistical work in the region and its thematic areas, while highlighting priority and new areas, the modalities of work and official statistics challenges in the context of the 2030 Agenda.
