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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia**

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**MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

**STREAMLINING THE WORK OF THE COMMISSION**

*Consideration of the Statistics Programme*

**Summary**

This report provides an overview of the changes that have taken place in the statistics programme at Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in light of the restructuring of the Commission in 2003, the audits and reviews by the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), and the ESCWA internal evaluation.

While the ultimate decision as to the administrative and organizational structure of the secretariat remains with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the secretariat has opted to submit this document to the Commission because of the differing interpretations of the current status of the statistics subprogramme.

The Commission is invited to provide comments on the document before it.

1. Pursuant to the policy recommendations of the twenty-first ESCWA session, 2001, the Commission undertook the restructuring of its programmes and activities. As a result of that restructuring, the Statistics Division was disbanded in 2003, ESCWA statistical activities were decentralized, and staff and non-staff resources were redeployed to the substantive divisions in order to integrate their technical and statistical expertise into the work of those divisions and eliminate duplication. Four specialized teams of statisticians were assigned to four substantive divisions. The rationale behind the decentralization process was to overcome statistical discrepancies between the Statistics Division and the substantive divisions, forge synergies and improve coordination between experts in substantive areas and statisticians in ESCWA in order to produce the accurate, consistent and harmonized data and statistics that are fundamental to in-depth analysis and to assisting member countries in the formulation of evidence-based national policies and strategies.

2. The Statistics Division was replaced by the Statistics Coordination Unit (SCU), headed by the Deputy Executive Secretary. Its core functions are to act as a regional focal point for member countries, the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and other United Nations international and regional agencies, and to organize and coordinate the meetings of the ESCWA intergovernmental Statistical Committee and the interdivisional statistics steering committee. The steering committee, which is serviced by SCU, functions as the coordinator of statistics-related activities in ESCWA and ensures their cohesion.

3. Less than one year after the decentralization of the Statistics division had been carried out, OIOS, in its final audit report on ESCWA,<sup>1</sup> recommended that ESCWA should re-evaluate the effects of that decentralization, which has resulted in a decline in statistical investment and/or resources and outputs, a dearth of statistical projects implemented in member countries and the lack of a statistical strategy. That recommendation was further reiterated in the final OIOS report<sup>2</sup> on its audit of the regional commissions, where OIOS found that the lack of a separate statistics division was a drawback and recommended that the decentralization of the statistics division should be re-evaluated in consultation with member countries, UNSD and DESA, and that ESCWA should review whether the re-establishment of a separate statistics division would strengthen statistics strategy and outputs and better guarantee methodological standards in the region.

4. The ESCWA position was that an evaluation of the decentralization of the statistics programme and a reversal of the recent arrangement, which was approved by member countries, was premature. ESCWA emphasized that neither the resources available for the statistics subprogramme nor the quality of its outputs had been jeopardized by the decentralization exercise. On the contrary, within the existing decentralized statistics programme, ESCWA developed and deployed the ESCWA Statistical Information System (ESIS), which is a highly valuable database, and made it accessible to member countries on the Internet. It is also worth noting that a larger number of quality outputs were produced by the statistics subprogramme than in the biennium before the statistics division was dismantled.

5. ESCWA therefore suggested that continuous monitoring and evaluation of the functions and performance of the statistics programme would determine the most appropriate subsequent course of action. In November 2004 it therefore undertook an assessment of the decentralization of statistics. The majority of programme managers and team leaders responded positively, and were in favour of maintaining the current decentralized structure. The ESCWA review of the decentralization exercise also revealed that one advantage of the current structure is that statistics are more fully integrated into the work of substantive divisions, and, as a result, response to the requests of member countries is more integrated and demand-driven. While the management of statistical activities could benefit from improved management measures, reverting to the previous structure would not help to address the

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<sup>1</sup> OIOS Final audit report AN/2003/46/1.

<sup>2</sup> Report of OIOS on its audit of the regional commissions (A/58/785).

challenges posed by decentralization, and ESCWA believes that strengthening SCU and enhancing cooperation with UNSD will contribute to the achievement of its objectives.

6. ESCWA has also been closely and regularly monitoring the performance of its statistics operation and has taken steps in consultation with the United Nations Programme Planning and Budget Division, which approved ESCWA's request to consolidate staff and non-staff resources under the statistical subprogramme. To that end, and in order to optimize the use of resources earmarked for statistical activities, while ensuring the proper management and monitoring of such activities and maintaining statistical expertise within the substantive divisions resources for statistical activities were realigned and pooled under one subprogramme.

7. In its 2005 draft report on the inspection of the programme and administrative management of ESCWA, OIOS recommended that a revitalized Statistics Division responsible for all outputs and resources of the statistics subprogramme should be re-established and linked, through effective consultative mechanisms and collaborative arrangements, with other ESCWA divisions, UNSD and regional and national counterparts. The main priorities of the new Division should be to establish an integrated statistical information system and formulate a holistic regional strategy for statistics capacity development.

8. ESCWA considers that a central unit, within an overall decentralized system, is best suited to compile descriptive statistics in convenient, usable, and understandable form, and devise standards against which such statistics may be monitored. Additionally, a central unit could, in cooperation with substantive divisions and teams within ESCWA, help member countries to formulate and implement their capacity-building plans, making full use of the multi-dimensional resources available. As for interpretive statistics, the substantive divisions have a clear edge, given that they are generally more familiar with, inter alia, the status of indicators, and methods of collection and collation. ESCWA statisticians from different disciplines could work together in order to assist countries in developing their national statistical strategies, leading to a regional strategy that could meet member country data requirements for regional integration and development priorities, taking into account the outcome of the 2005 World Summit. That would prepare the way for countries to produce reliable, timely and comparable data that meet the requirements of policy-makers, national goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

9. The OIOS recommendation that the Statistics Division should be re-established remains under consideration and a more thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the current arrangement is being undertaken by ESCWA. Upon the completion of that exercise, and on the basis of its results, the secretariat will make the appropriate administrative and organizational changes within overall policy orientation, as determined by member countries.

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