High Level Seminar on the Future of Economic Statistics for the Arab region

InterContinental Hotel

King Saud Rd, Riyadh Almaazr Saudi Arabia

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Concept Note

The High-Level Seminar on the Future of Economic Statistics offers a unique opportunity to interact, exchange and learn from leading economists, statisticians and academics in the fields of economic policy, data, and statistics. The Seminar brings together statisticians, economists, and policy-makers in the debate and discussion, and thus provides the platform for robust dialogue on the future requirements of economic statistics. The user increasingly demands economic statistics that are responsive, effective and relevant, particularly in a rapidly changing world. This Seminar is also a response to the renewed interest in economic policy and statistics initiated by the UN Secretary-General, who has recently requested the formation a UN network of economists, led by the UN Chief Economist, to better address the issue of sustainable development.

The High-Level Seminar is co-organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and hosted by the General Authority of Statistics in Saudi Arabia. It will seek a collaborative regional response to the need for economic statistics that support evidence-based policymaking within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This response may call for a step-change in the update of the conceptual framework of the system of economic statistics combining measures of economic activity on trends in technological breakthroughs, demographic, environmental and social change, urbanization, globalization and digitalization dynamics with broader measures on equitable and sustainable economic performance.

It is expected that the update of the system of economic statistics informs policy actions that foster economic growth, well-being, inclusive societies, and sustainable use of the environment as set out by the sustainable development agenda. To debate the broader purpose of economic statistics in the future, we need to assess the main users' demands, as well as the capacity of our statistical systems to provide the required data and statistics services.

To achieve this response, national statistics agencies will need an institutional transformation of the system of economic statistics from producers of statistics to stewards of data standards and recommendations. Elements of this transformation include the use of new data sources and methods (such as big data, administrative data. and micro-data linking); secure data sharing arrangement between statistical agencies and with data owners in the public and private sector; and the broadening of services to provide access to micro-data, including longitudinal data.

Recognizing these challenges facing national statistics agencies, the 50th Session of UN Statistical Commission (held in March 2019) established a Friends of the Chair Group on Economic Statistics, consisting of both economists and statisticians, to consider the effectiveness and responsiveness of system of economic statistics. The Friends of the Chair Group has a 2-year mandate and will report to the Statistical Commission in 2020 and 2021.

This Seminar will be part of a series of regional consultation organized by the Friends of the Chair Group. As such, it provides an opportunity for the region to share regional concerns and priorities and to influence, and inform, the global design of the system of economic statistics.

The Seminar will be organized around the following sessions:

1. **A relevant system of economic statistics:** is the conceptual framework of the system of economic statistics meeting the regional and national demands from policymakers and economists? What are regional and national policy and statistics priorities? Are the regional and national priorities the same as the global policy statistical priorities for the conceptual update of the system of economic statistics identified around the thematic areas such as digitalization, globalization, economic well-being, economic inequalities, sustainability, climate change, household production, human capital, the informal sector?

2. **A responsive system of economic statistics**: are the statistical operations and infrastructure responsive to new data solutions, applying new technologies for collection, processing and dissemination. Are administrative and big data used in statistical production? Are statistical registers put in place for micro data linking to provide more granular analysis? Are efforts made to improve the timeliness and accuracy of the time series? Are NSOs prepared to take on new roles as data custodians for the use of administrative and big data? How are the NSOs in the Arab Region responding in updating their statistical operations and infrastructure?

3. **Opportunities and challenges for institutional transformation to support the update of the system of economic statistics:** what are the present barriers and challenges in updating the statistical operations and infrastructure of the national and regional statistical system and the actions needed to overcome these impediments in making the system more relevant and responsive to the new user demands? How can new institutional arrangements overcome these challenges and allow the NSOs to be more responsive to the changing needs of policymakers and economists? Can Arab NSOs move from being reactive and slow in adjusting to being more responsive? How to rebuild the system of economic statistics in fragile and post-conflict countries?

4. **A governance structure for a responsive and relevant system of economic statistics:** what is the current governance framework of statistical groups related to the update of the system of economic statistics? What are the proposed actions to avoid duplication and overlap and to make the governance arrangements for the update of the system of economic statistics more responsive to the new policy and statistical demand? How can the present coordination and governance arrangements for the statistical groups working on the update of the the system of economic statistics be improved? What is the role of Arab countries, ESCWA, and regional organizations within these governance arrangements? What improvements can be made to increase their contributions to the update of the system of economic statistics?