



**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL  
COUNCIL**

Distr.  
LIMITED  
E/ESCWA/SD/2012/IG.1/9  
26 November 2012  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

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

Statistical Committee  
Tenth session  
Cairo, 30-31 January 2013

Item 10 of the provisional agenda

**FUTURE PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES IN THE FIELD OF STATISTICS**

**Summary**

This document reports on projects and initiatives that will be undertaken by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in the field of statistics, as follows:

- Regional implementation of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics;
- Working Group on Population and Housing Censuses in Arab Countries;
- Joint International Labour Organization-ESCWA activities for improving labour statistics;
- Data Improvement and Quality in Access in the Middle East and North Africa region;
- Task Force on Statistical Coordination for Arab States.

In addition, this document presents the future direction of the International Comparison Program. Members of the Committee are invited to comment on the proposed projects and initiatives.

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## **Introduction**

1. During the fifth meeting of the Working Group of the Statistical Committee, which was held on 14 and 15 February 2012, participants reviewed the tentative agenda for the tenth session of the Statistical Committee. Based on that review, it was recommended that the secretariat of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) present a report to the tenth session of the Statistical Committee on future projects and initiatives in the field of statistics.

### **I. REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GLOBAL STRATEGY TO IMPROVE AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL STATISTICS**

2. The Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics, led by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and the World Bank, is a ground-breaking effort to strengthen agricultural statistics. The Global Strategy, which was initiated by the United Nations Statistical Commission, is the result of an extensive consultation process with national and international statistical organizations and national statistical offices, agricultural ministries and the other governmental institutions that produce relevant statistics. The Global Strategy is a framework for national and international statistical systems that will enable the production and application of the basic data and information needed in the twenty-first century.

3. Global agencies and national statistical offices requested ESCWA to lead the implementation of the Global Strategy in the Arab region.

#### **Objectives**

4. The objective of the Global Strategy is to establish improved national statistical systems supported by globally and regionally coordinated statistical capacity-building efforts through technical assistance, training and research. The action plan takes into account that other statistical capacity-building and development activities are already under way in many countries, and will coordinate efforts in those cases. Moreover, the action plan anticipates synergies and complementarities with other initiatives, such as the Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS), which was recently adopted by the Group of 20 (G20). The focus of AMIS is on monitoring the global food market mainly in G20 countries and a few developing countries, through data items for selected food crops. By contrast, the Global Strategy is focused on long term statistical capacity-building in developing countries for key basic food and agricultural statistics.

#### **Main tasks**

5. The following are the main tasks defined within the Global Strategy:

- (a) Carry out country assessments and the preparation of national funding proposals for each country;
- (b) Strengthen national governance including statistics legislation;
- (c) Develop a strategic plan for agricultural statistics as a component of the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics;
- (d) Promote data harmonization and dissemination;
- (e) Provide technical advice on new and cost-effective methods.

#### **Proposed activities**

6. The activities of the regional plan to implement the Global Strategy have not been finalized yet. Intensive consultations are currently under way, however, and the activities will include the following:

- (a) Regional and national workshops;
- (b) Technical advisory activities;

- (c) Training, twinning and study tours;
- (d) Pilot studies and tests.

### **Current status**

7. More information on the current status of the Global Strategy will be presented during the tenth session of the Statistical Committee.

## **II. WORKING GROUP ON POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUSES IN ARAB COUNTRIES**

8. The Demographic and Social Statistics Section of the Statistics Division of ESCWA developed a proposal for a Working Group on Population and Housing Censuses in Arab Countries. During the United Nations Population Fund workshop on population censuses conducted in Tunisia in July 2012, participants discussed the draft and recommended presenting it to the Statistical Committee for review and approval.

### **Structure**

9. ESCWA will be the secretariat of the Working Group, which will be chaired by a member country.

### **Objectives**

10. The proposed Working Group aims to do the following:

- (a) Make updated methodological knowledge available for all stages of population and housing censuses in Arab countries;
- (b) Coordinate the work of censuses in Arab countries and enhance their capability in relevant areas;
- (c) Encourage the dissemination of census data using modern methods;
- (d) Enhance the role of population censuses in providing baseline data in national statistical systems.

### **Main tasks**

11. The following are the main tasks to be performed by the Working Group:

- (a) Organize and conduct workshops and draft bulletins and studies;
- (b) Determine training priorities;
- (c) Enrich the exchange of experience, standardize methodologies and activate technical assistance;
- (d) Provide recommendations to heads of national statistical offices to take appropriate decisions.

### **Proposed activities**

12. The following activities are proposed to be included in the workplan of the Working Group:

- (a) Sponsor training courses in census activities for member countries for the next census period;
- (b) Prepare the principles and recommendations for population and housing censuses for the region in Arabic;
- (c) Update the knowledge base on the census with Arabic resources;
- (d) Launch a semi-annual electronic bulletin on census preparation;

- (e) Design and disseminate a template of budgets and plans for conducting censuses, taking into account the specificity of each country;
- (f) Enhance standardization of concepts and definitions of census activities;
- (g) Update ESCWA database information related to census data and maintain the database in the Arabic language;
- (h) Enhance the exchange of experiences on using technological devices in censuses;
- (i) Enhance the implementation of the international recommendations and classifications in population censuses.

### **III. JOINT INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION-ESCWA ACTIVITIES ON LABOUR STATISTICS**

13. The International Labour Organization (ILO), in collaboration with ESCWA, organized a preparatory regional meeting of labour statisticians in support of the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), in Beirut from 18 to 20 June 2012. In that meeting, ILO and ESCWA agreed on future activities on labour statistics, including the following:

- (a) A training workshop will be held on the use of school-to-work transition survey (SWTS), in Abu Dhabi in January 2013. The workshop will focus on the survey design, concepts and definitions, methodology and implementation in the Arab countries. The survey will generate a large pool of data on the characteristics and labour-market attachments of young people and on the enterprises that could absorb them. The unique characteristics of SWTS are the development of indicators that define the stages of transition and the quality of transition and the integration of “decent work” into its analytical framework;
- (b) A second preparatory regional meeting of labour statisticians in support of the 19th ICLS will be held in Abu Dhabi in January 2013 for members of the Gulf Cooperation Council;
- (c) The Statistics Division and ESCWA member countries will participate in revising and updating the international standards of statistics of the economically active population, employment, unemployment and underemployment. The outcome of the review process will be an updated draft statistical standard, which will be presented for discussion and possible adoption at the 19th ICLS in 2013.

### **IV. DATA IMPROVEMENT AND QUALITY IN ACCESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION**

14. Recent calls for greater transparency and accountability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are closely related to the call for more and better data and open data access. According to the World Bank, the statistical capacity index of MENA is second lowest of all world regions, higher only than sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, according to the 2010 index of electronic bibliography of the American Economic Association (Econlit), the number of economic publications on labour markets in MENA is the lowest of all world regions. The lack of data and access to data has been a long-standing complaint by local and international agencies and organizations. If governments and social partners wanted to define evidence-based responses to the challenges facing MENA, they would struggle to find the necessary information to shape and implement those responses. Good policies cannot be designed and governments cannot be held accountable without proper data, data analysis and dissemination. Among all countries in the region, only Palestine and Djibouti are systematically sharing survey data with users and granting full access to anonymized unit record data. Palestine and Tunisia have pioneered the dissemination of data and documentation through their websites, for selected surveys.

## Objectives

15. The development objectives of the Data Improvement and Quality in Access (DIQA) initiative are to strengthen the capacity of national statistical offices and their overseeing ministries in the MENA region to collect, analyse and, most importantly, to appropriately share and disseminate employment and social data. Building on the existing linkages with national authorities and donors involved in statistical work, DIQA, which means “precision” in Arabic, aims to set up a regional network of statistics professionals for one year, on a pilot basis.<sup>1</sup> To achieve this goal, the activity will rely on the convening power and existing e-communities of the Marseille Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI). The network will enable the exchange of experience, good practice and knowledge on the topics of data collection, preparation, analysis and dissemination. Depending on the needs expressed by partner organizations, targeted technical assistance could be included in the package.

16. In parallel, DIQA will favour the emergence of a knowledge exchange platform for data users, namely researchers, social partners, journalists and civil society organizations in general, on the same topics, also using the convening power and existing e-communities of CMI. The generated information will feed into the work of the regional network of statistics practitioners.

17. In the long term, it is expected that DIQA will result in an increase in the availability of useable data, with improved data quality, access and comparability in the region.

## Sponsors and organization of the project

18. The project will be carried out by ESCWA, World Bank and ILO in three pilot countries. Two groups are envisioned:

(a) A regional network of statistics practitioners will include national statistical offices and line ministries involved in their supervision and regulation (ministry of planning or ministry of finance or both) and other ministries related to the data (such as the ministries of labour, social affairs, education, etc.);

(b) A user platform will comprise key researchers, social partners such as business and workers associations, journalists and civil society organizations.

## Current status

19. A concept note has been developed and the partners are currently seeking funds for the project.

## V. TASK FORCE ON STATISTICAL COORDINATION FOR ARAB STATES

20. The role of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) is to provide a forum for regional organizations and regional offices of global agencies to coordinate their efforts on priority issues. ESCWA convenes RCM, and has defined four main priority areas:

- (a) Food security;
- (b) Climate change;
- (c) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs);
- (d) Statistics.

21. ESCWA chairs the Task Force on Statistical Coordination for Arab States, which focuses on five priority areas:

- (a) Population, migration and labour statistics;

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<sup>1</sup> DIQA was largely inspired by the Program for the Improvement of Surveys and the Measurement of Living Conditions in Latin America and the Caribbean (MECOVI) of the World Bank.

- (b) Social statistics, including poverty, social protection, education and health;
- (c) Environment statistics;
- (d) Agriculture statistics;
- (e) National accounts.

### **Objectives**

22. The objective of the Task Force is to achieve greater efficiency and consistency in statistical activities undertaken at the regional level. This includes unifying capacity-development activities, working towards joint approaches in data collection, decreasing the response burden on national statistical offices and increasing the consistency of statistics released by participating agencies.

### **Proposed activities**

23. The Task Force will work on the following:

- (a) A regional database on MGD indicators;
- (b) An inventory of questionnaires/data collection activities by participating agencies;
- (c) Joint activities by two or more participating agencies in the five priority areas listed above.

### **Current status**

24. The Task Force has worked on joint activities in areas such as environment statistics, population and vital statistics, labour statistics, social statistics, improvement of agriculture and rural development statistics and revision of the translation of the System of National Accounts 2008.

## **VI. FUTURE DIRECTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON PROGRAM**

25. While progress has been made in the ESCWA region in the area of price statistics, improvements in data collection and production mechanisms are still needed. The first and second rounds of the International Comparison Program (ICP) in 2005 and 2011 played a key role in enhancing the capacity of national statistical offices in the field of price statistics<sup>2</sup>. As price information becomes more valuable to decision makers in the public and private sectors, producing it in a timely, frequent, reliable and comparable way becomes essential.

26. Price statistics that depict real purchasing ability and inflation rate movements across countries and sectors are crucial as they are fundamental variables for developmental, monetary and fiscal policymakers and individuals and firms looking to manage their businesses and investment portfolios. In addition, price statistics, which allow for analysis across countries (spatial) and across time (temporal), are imperative for benchmarking, negotiating and setting the terms for bilateral and multilateral agreements and pacts.

27. There is growing demand for a more frequently updated series of purchasing power parity (PPP) estimates and a real valuation of gross domestic product (GDP) aggregates, and yet there is a lack of cross-country comparability of inflation and consumer price index (CPI) movements. Thus, there is a need to harmonize CPIs and integrate the production of PPP into it. Several attempts to harmonize CPIs and integrate ICP and CPI have been made in other regions of the world. ESCWA has been working to develop an integration scenario to maximize the benefits of such a step at minimal cost.

28. Although CPI and PPP are temporal and spatial measures of price movement, the conceptual similarities between them allows for their integration. Integrating CPI and ICP will assist in the CPI

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<sup>2</sup> See also E/ESCWA/SD/2012/IG.1/CRP.2 for more information on current and previous ICP activities.

harmonization process by improving the quality and timeliness of CPI estimates and establishing their comparability, while also allowing for the more frequent production of a series of reliable PPP estimates based on the identical overlap of selected goods and services. Moreover, integration will save time, effort and resources in future ICP rounds because price statisticians at national statistical offices will build expertise while working on the harmonized CPI, which collects monthly price data that matches the classifications and mechanisms of the ICP round.

29. ESCWA is studying the feasibility of integrating CPI and ICP in the region or in subregions and has outlined some key requirements for its success. The full commitment of participating countries is fundamental and requires the following: dedication of national statistical offices to completing technical surveys concerning price collection practices; willingness to improve CPI data production methods; attendance at regular meetings to agree on strategies and common product lists; and the allocation of appropriate resources for this practice. Outlines of appropriate courses of action are being prepared and will be discussed with member countries to obtain their feedback and comments and customize the integration process according to their needs and priorities.

## **VII. ACTION REQUIRED OF THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE**

30. Members of the Statistical Committee are invited to review the proposals and provide comments, suggestions and guidance to the secretariat on future projects and initiatives in the field of statistics. In particular, members of the Committee are invited to consider the following issues:

- (a) The process of constituting the Working Group on Population and Housing Censuses in the Arab Region, including membership, financing, modes of operation and substantive issues of its work programme;
- (b) The activities undertaken in partnership with ILO in the area of labour statistics;
- (c) The access to survey data for research purposes, while protecting confidentiality of data (DIQA project);
- (d) The expectations of member countries of the Task Force on Statistical Coordination for Arab States, and ways to link representatives of national statistical offices with the Task Force;
- (e) The opportunities and challenges of “rolling” price data collection and the calculation of PPPs through the integration of CPI and ICP.

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