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ESCWA STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES**STRATEGIC DIRECTION FOR THE STATISTICAL WORK OF ESCWA IN 2016-2020
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA****Summary**

The present document provides background for discussions on the strategic priorities of the statistical work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) for the period 2016-2020. In addition to traditional social, economic and environment statistics and development indicators, there are a number of new challenges emerging, which are commonly described as the data revolution. In practical terms, these challenges include new areas of statistics not covered by official statistics; and a need for more timely, frequent and detailed data with more thematic and geospatial granularity. This entails looking for new sources of data that should be combined with data from traditional statistical surveys; benefiting from modern technologies; and flexibly adapting statistical programmes to changing policy needs.

The Statistical Committee is invited to review this outline of the strategic direction of the statistical work of ESCWA for the period 2016-2020, provide guidance and make recommendations as appropriate.

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Introduction

1. The Statistical Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) discussed at its tenth session, held in October 2010, its strategic vision for the period 2011-2015. The Committee set out the following three priorities for ESCWA work in the area of official statistics: statistical capacity development that responds to the needs of the national statistical systems of member States; collection and dissemination of statistical data that are preferably based on national official statistics; and coordination and building of partnerships in regional statistical work.

2. The eleventh session of the Statistical Committee offers an opportunity to discuss its vision for the period 2016-2020. This is particularly important in view of the negotiations on a post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development goals, and the call by policymakers at all levels for more detailed and timely data related to all aspects of sustainable development, including areas presently not covered by official statistics.

I. OUTLINE OF THE STRATEGIC VISION

A. OBJECTIVES

3. ESCWA statistical work, implemented by the Statistics Division under the guidance of the Statistical Committee and in collaboration with regional and international partners, includes the following:

(a) Assisting member States in further developing their national statistical capacity and adapting to the emerging policy-related demands on statistics and data;

(b) Identifying and promoting best practices in implementing leading methods and techniques in official statistics, including formulating technical recommendations and guidelines for the Arab region;

(c) Providing comprehensive and coherent data on Arab States, establishing central data reference points at the national level (national statistical offices) and at the regional level (a regional statistical portal);

(d) Coordinating statistical work among Arab States, regional statistical institutions and international organizations active in the region, and building partnerships that ensure complementarity and avoid duplication.

4. In implementing these objectives, and while supporting the integration efforts of the Arab region, it is important to recognize that there are significant disparities in countries' statistical capacity. Therefore, programmes on technical cooperation in statistics should differentiate among three or four groups of member States. Focus points and priorities have to be adjusted to each of these groups. An improved information infrastructure will be used in statistical capacity development, such as e-learning and other online information resources. The ultimate goal is to raise the statistical capacities of all member States and, in particular, ensure that they can benefit from international experiences.

5. The regional programmes should be formulated in a way that is consistent with United Nations programmes on statistics and data, in support of the data revolution and a post-2015 development agenda. The regional programmes should also be in line with the development of high-tech statistical information systems covering all phases of the statistical work, including statistical data concepts, collection, quality assurance, processing, analysis, dissemination and archiving.

B. PRIORITY AREAS

6. The main thematic areas of regional statistical work will continue to include relevant aspects of the following:

- (a) Managerial and strategic issues related to official statistics;
- (b) Demographic and social statistics;
- (c) Economic statistics;
- (d) Environment statistics;
- (e) Development indicators and cross-cutting areas of statistics.

7. While covering these areas of statistics, special attention should be given to statistical capacity-building, which may be broken down as follows:

(a) Enabling national statistical systems to benefit from the use of technology in terms of collecting data from data sources, such as administrative registers and records, with a primary focus on statistical business registers, and civil registration and vital 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 needs of the post-2015 development agenda and ensure policy relevance of statistical strategies;

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

8. Furthermore, ESCWA work on statistical indicators for the post-2015 development agenda shall cover national policy formulation and monitoring processes for each State; the provision of indicators at the subnational level; and the use of indicators for international purposes, such as directing financial and technical support to countries. Preliminary studies should be undertaken on the potential for developing primary indicators before taking a final decision in that regard. Indirect indicators (proxies) may be needed in cases where direct indicators are not available.

9. Thematically, indicators should expand to areas of social progress and welfare, income inequality, multidimensional poverty, social justice, reproductive health and vulnerable social groups, such as women, young people and the elderly. Indicators should also cover areas of governance and national security.

C. PARTNERSHIPS

10. At the national level, it is important to maintain an ongoing dialogue between statisticians and policymakers. Furthermore, new partnerships should be developed with civil society, given that the post-2015 development agenda will require wide participation from all segments of society.

11. At the same time, the role of national statistical offices as the central focal points for official statistics must be strengthened in each member State. ESCWA and its partners will provide systematic support in this respect. Various means should be used to achieve this goal, including a promotion of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics adopted by the General Assembly in 2014.

12. At the regional level, statistical work takes place in close partnership with players on the Arab statistical scene, notably ESCWA, the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS), the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries 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 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and United Nations agencies working in the Arab region.

D. PROPOSAL FOR THE FUNCTIONING OF ADVISORY GROUPS

13. To ensure the effectiveness of this statistical work and, in particular, to make it more systematic, the ESCWA work programme should not be considered as a set of isolated outputs and activities, but as a coherent programme that aims to address key areas of official statistics.

14. In the most important of these areas, ESCWA, with its partners and national statistical systems, should continuously develop and recommend methods, techniques and good practices, and assist member States in implementing them; in addition to collecting and disseminating reliable statistics from national sources. To ensure work continuity and sustainability and a permanent engagement of partners and national statistical systems, it is recommended that advisory groups convened by ESCWA and composed of experts from national statistical offices and partner organizations lead the work.

15. It should also be emphasized that the goal is not to form a large number of advisory groups, but to focus on sustainability. Therefore, it is important to start with a few statistical areas and expand gradually, according to the existing capacity of the ESCWA Statistics Division and other participating organizations.

16. The annex to the present document provides a template for the terms of reference of advisory groups and the mode of operation.

II. ACTION REQUIRED OF THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE

17. The Statistical Committee is invited:

(a) To provide comments and agree on the objectives of the statistical work in the Arab region for the period 2016-2020;

(b) To discuss and confirm the priority areas of the ESCWA statistical work for the period 2016-2020;

(c) To consider the proposal on advisory groups, including details contained in the annex to the present document.

Annex

TERMS OF REFERENCE OF ADVISORY GROUPS

1. The objectives and deliverables, methods of work and composition of each advisory group should be specified in its mandate – terms of reference. The aim is to ensure that each group pursues its work with a view to making tangible progress in its respective statistical area. To this end, the group should be accountable to the Statistical Committee, regularly report on progress achieved, seek extension or end its mandate(s) and present recommendations and guidelines.

2. The terms of reference should include the following sections:

(a) *Objective*: the objective should specify the issue to be addressed, for example “To assist member countries in resolving gaps in population estimates through identifying appropriate data sources and data collection methods, including utilization of administrative registers and records, increasing the knowledge of the staff of national statistical offices in the field of population estimates, implementing methods and techniques adapted to Arab countries and collecting and publishing reliable population data through a regional database”;

(b) *Target audience*: this section should specify counterparts in member States that could be partners in a group’s specific work area, for example: “Directors of population statistics departments, senior demographers, lead experts in population estimates at national statistical offices of Arab States”;

(c) *Partnership*: partner organizations that have similar goals to ESCWA in a particular work area should be invited to join the group;

(d) *Membership*: the group should be composed of experts from national statistical offices. Group members will serve with respect to their technical expertise in a particular statistical area;

(e) *Expected achievements*: each group must have a specific target.* The expected achievements should also include a clause that group output(s) will be presented to the Statistical Committee for adoption or approval. Adoption by the Statistical Committee will provide a space for (i) a high level discussion on whether this is the right direction (a link between the Statistical Committee and the advisory groups); (ii) recognition of the guidelines, recommendations, practices, methods or techniques; and (iii) a facility for mandating national experts to proceed with implementation.

(f) *Sunset clause*: the Advisory Groups are expected to be durable, but this is conditioned by their sustained and fruitful activity. Therefore, the Statistical Committee should regularly review whether the groups are still needed, and refocus their mandate if necessary. Moreover, if a deliverable was completed, a new set of outputs should be defined. The sunset clause is, therefore, a motivating factor for groups to report on achievements and to seek mandate extensions (with new/updated terms of reference) from the Statistical Committee.

* For example, “To develop and publish guidelines for population estimates in the Arab States”, “Develop methods, techniques and a work plan for integrating the Consumer Price Index and the International Comparison Programme”, “Publish guidelines for calculating subnational purchasing power parities”, “Implement on-line learning programme on gender statistics”. Training workshops, reviewed data sets (e.g. reconciled variations between national and international data) and implemented surveys are also potential deliverables and expected achievements of the advisory groups.

MANDATE-GIVING BODIES

3. The statistical work of ESCWA is steered by its Statistical Committee. Terms of reference shall be provided to the Statistical Committee for approval. Given the biannual frequency of the Committee sessions, terms of reference may be submitted to members of the Committee in a written consultation.

WORK METHODS

4. Each advisory group should ensure permanent contact between its members, observers and the ESCWA secretariat. To this end, the groups should hold face-to-face meetings, subject to time and resource constraints. The groups should benefit from face-to-face meetings by concentrating the substantive discussion on the subject matter of those meetings. ESCWA can sponsor a limited number of participants. It would be highly appreciated if participating offices can cover the costs of their experts.

5. Groups should have regular (e.g. bimonthly or quarterly) audio/video conferences, for example using Webex, Skype or a similar communication tool. At these virtual meetings, groups should review their lists of tasks, update them, review completed deliverables and discuss substantive issues.

6. Groups should also benefit from electronic communications, such as wikis, discussion boards, blogs, etc. It should be noted that these need to be moderated and password protected.
