

# STATISTICS SUBPROGRAMME EVALUATION REPORT

2006-2009

## Executive Summary

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*Note: This document is a summary for ESCWA's senior management to consider the major findings and recommendations of the full evaluation report. In order to fully reflect the findings and key recommendations for enhancing the performance of the Statistics Subprogramme, measures and actions must take into account the fully analysis, methodology and context of the full report. Thus this document should be viewed as a precis for senior management to capture the essence of the findings. As such it is strongly recommended that this document be limited in distribution to ensure that the context of the evaluation retains its full integrity.*

# ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WEST ASIA (ESCWA)

## 1. BACKGROUND

ESCWA invited a consultancy to focus on undertaking discretionary self-assessments of ESCWA's substantive sub-programmes, as an extra tier to the established and mandated assessment tools and provide an opportunity for review between the biennium periods.<sup>1</sup> The Statistics Sub-programme was selected as the first ESCWA entity to be evaluated. The period evaluated was 2006-2009 (two biennium programmes).

The evaluation of the Statistics Subprogramme was commissioned to develop a robust process of review of ESCWA's programme performance by increasing the objectivity of ESCWA's discretionary self evaluations, and through the standardization of evaluation tools and expertise to develop baselines for recommendations for calibrating programme activities and relevant processes to increase ESCWA's programmatic delivery to its member states. The evaluations would also review the extent to which ESCWA programmes are in line with latest global trends on thematic areas, through review of the work of ESCWA and the ECOSOC committees, and other regional commissions. It assessed the Statistics Subprogramme's performance to determine its effectiveness, efficiency, client satisfaction, good practices and lessons learned, partnership, unexplored areas and new opportunities.

## 2. OBJECTIVES & SCOPE

To conduct evaluation of the ESCWA Statistics Subprogrammes to:

- i. Assess the effectiveness of the statistics subprogramme in achieving its objectives and expected accomplishments outlined in ESCWA's Strategic Frameworks for 2006-09.
- ii. Assess the planning undertaken to develop the work plans & budgets for 2010-13.
- iii. Assess the efficiency with which the subprogramme utilized the financial and human resources available in achieving these results
- iv. Gauge the satisfaction of ESCWA's member states on the prioritization of these expected accomplishments as serving their interests and needs;
- v. Identify areas of good practice and lessons learned to feed into the broader work of ESCWA and future programme planning processes;
- vi. Review and assess effectiveness in coordinating, building and managing external partnership with National, LAS, UN and International Development partners and determine to what extent the Statistics Subprogramme is open and accommodating to such collaborations;
- vii. Identify policies, practices and strategies that ESCWA's statistics subprogramme should be implementing that it is currently not undertaking and recommend actions for expanding and improving the effectiveness of the subprogramme to take it to the level of global practice, standard and relevance.

The evaluation focused on 14 areas of in-depth inquiry and analysis including:

- i. capacity of the Statistics Division;
- ii. meeting emerging demands for technical excellence at regional and national levels;
- iii. continuous engagement of all ESCWA members;
- iv. an evaluation that helps design the Statistical Subprogramme better;
- v. a forward looking evaluation;
- vi. avoiding duplication;
- vii. result orientation;
- viii. capacity to deliver on critical needs in the area of statistics;
- ix. assessment of the quality and modalities of technical assistance delivery;
- x. ESCWA's niche;
- xi. client and partnership orientation;
- xii. gender; and
- xiii. human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> As per ESCWA's revised evaluation policy issued in September 2010

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## 3. KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The thirteen areas identified for focused inquiry include:

**3.1 The capacity of the Statistics Division** to undertake and lead ESCWA's outreach programme and service in supporting the member states to strengthen their institutional statistics capability to generate, monitor, manage and disseminate vital reliable data and information as well as serve as the hub for coordinating and managing data and information within the Commission

**3.2 Meeting emerging demands** for technical excellence at regional and national level. How to meet emerging demands in statistical systems that bring the best practices from across the world to the West Asia region and to the countries? How will the demand be resourced in technical capacity and financial availability?

**3.3 Continuous engagement of all members. How to ensure ownership and active engagement of all members of the Commission?** In between the Commissions' Technical Committee and Thematic Technical Committees of the respective Subprogrammes guide the technical and operational work of ESCWA.<sup>ii</sup> How to cultivate and secure greater interest, support, engagement from the Commissions member states especially the GCC and ensure flow of resources?

**3.4 An evaluation that helps design the statistical subprogramme better.** The Statistics Subprogramme has undergone leadership change in the last year or so and the new head welcomes the evaluation as a means for introducing change and adjustment to the work of the Section. The obvious starting point for this change is the ESCWA database.

**3.5 A regional center for excellence and resource bank on statistical data.** How to build a programme that becomes a depository of good practice and data?

**3.6 A forward looking evaluation-** ESCWA's Executive Secretary wants the evaluation to identify practices, policies and strategies that ESCWA should be initiating and implementing that it is not currently undertaking in the statistics subprogramme.

**3.7 Avoiding duplication.** How every subprogramme can feed into and benefit from a common regional database for core indicators?

**3.8 Result orientation, and ultimately measuring the impact of ESCWA's work.**<sup>iii</sup> How can the programme be monitored periodically for results? Including a system that links budgets to activities and outputs to provide one single overview facilitating the gauging of implementation rates to available resources and expected outputs and results.

**3.9 Capacity to deliver on critical needs in the area of statistics.** Does the Statistical Subprogramme have the capacity to fulfill their work plan and deliver on the critical needs of the national statistical office in areas such as administrative data, surveys and gathering internationally comparable information on commitments such as MDGs?

**3.10 Assessment of the quality and modalities of technical assistance delivery.** Are the approaches appropriate and does the programme of high quality?

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<sup>ii</sup> The frequency of the meetings of the intergovernmental bodies of ESCWA was the subject of a Commission requested evaluation from 2010, which concluded that member countries did not believe that the frequency of the convening of the specialized committees, including the Statistical Committee, was required.

<sup>iii</sup> While not the subject of this evaluation, ESCWA must consider this evaluation approach as an interim measure to the direction issued by the Executive Secretary during the Evaluation Teams' meeting with her in February 2011, for ESCWA to consider how to best evaluate the impact of ESCWA's work.

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**3.11 ESCWA's Niche** is a central question pursued in the interviews. A strong view is expressed that the Commission's future relevance and demand for its services will depend in its ability to strengthen its expertise in the economic pillars over and above the social focus.

**3.13 Client Orientation.** The Statistics Subprogramme has a dual function towards two distinct groups of clients, that have practically non overlapping demands. The **first is the inter-governmental constituency** represented by the NSOs and other producers of statistics, as well as users of statistics among national and regional policy and decision-makers. **The second group of clients** is the users of data for analysis, policy development and technical cooperation within ESCWA itself and partly within the UN System.

**3.14 Partnership Orientation.** Because of its convening power and level of trust it enjoys amongst its membership, ESCWA is in the position to lead the statistical work in the region by optimizing capacity development through partnership. This falls in line with the important mandate of Regional Commissions as the regional arm of UNSD. How could partnership orientation be used to further the improvement of the Statistics Subprogramme?

**3.15 Gender** statistics addresses issues of groups of special interest that also includes youth and elderly population, etc. The interest in gender statistics in the ESCWA and Arab region is very high, and the dedication of experts working in this area may exceed their peers in other regions, however the availability of gender data varies across the region. How can the Statistics Subprogram improve the quality of gender statistics throughout the region?

**3.16 Human Rights** are not directly addressed by activities undertaken under the Statistics Subprogramme. However, ESCWA follows the change of paradigm in official statistics that moves from a purely technical view towards following the social and economic development in its complexity. Human rights are an important component of well being and how it could receive greater priority in ESCWA's statistics work.

### 4. EVALUATION GUIDELINES AND CRITERIA

At the core of the methodology are the evaluation criteria and associated questions. These define the scope of what ESCWA want to know and by what factors ESCWA will be judged against. The evaluation is informed and guided by the UNEG, ESCWA Evaluation policy and the newly developed methodology for the evaluation of ESCWA Subprogrammes and the OECD/DAC Evaluation Criteria. Applying the OECD/DAC criteria across the board to the ESCWA Evaluation, the Statistics Subprogramme fared generally well:

- **Relevance** –The planned interventions have been relevant to achieving the regional and national statistical programme objectives and ESCWA has to a certain extent applied the right strategy and a mix of appropriate modalities within the specific political, economic and social context of the region. The design of the interventions and resources allocations has been generally realistic. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement and introduction of new innovative strategies adapted to the special needs of the region.
- **Effectiveness** – To what extent has the statistical subprogramme accomplished its intended objectives and planned results. The strength of the programme lies in its outreach programme to member states and technical expertise contributing to the capacity development of the former. Its weaknesses are the mismatch between staff time use for building member state statistics capacity and producing publications. The unexpected result may be a weaker ESCWA technical support to the member states. The Statistics Subprogramme needs to pose and consider if it wishes to continue in the same direction or adjust its main tenets during the preparations of the 2014-15 Strategic Framework (September-December 2011) to be reviewed by ESCWA's Commission in May 2012.
- **Efficiency** – The Statistics Division maximized the use of its staff time well by assigning a larger ratio of about 5:1 of its work load to its staff compared to the use of the services of consultants. However, by dedicating its staff time more to participating in regular meetings and seminars and producing recurrent publications; ESCWA deprived the NSOs of much needed direct technical assistance to strengthen their

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statistics capacity. It is too early to determine the change the new leadership has brought to bear on the efficiency of the division although initial indications point towards improvement.

- **Sustainability** – Many of the NSOs have been established over a long period of time operating at their own various levels of efficiency. It is too early to determine if the technical expertise and benefits transferred to them by the Statistics Subprogramme interventions have been owned by these national stakeholders and embedded fully in their systems for sustainability by the time the programmes reach the exit stage. Although sustainability is the outcome of committed proactive partnership by all sides in the equation, ESCWA has the added responsibility of leading, monitoring and translating joint commitments into sustained implementation and management of established capacities and programmes.

### 5. MAJOR FINDINGS

**5.1** The existing Statistics Division staff complemented by consultants managed to undertake the major tasks planned with mixed results. Maintaining a staff time use ratio of 5:1 to the use of consultants indicates consistently a maximization of the use of staff time. However, more staff time was dedicated to participating in routine meetings and seminars and in producing recurrent publications than providing direct technical support to the NSOs. The evaluation could not assess the performance of the NSOs against meeting the goals ESCWA set for them as the records of implementing these goals were not available to the consultants. A better distribution and balance of work to staff and a greater investment of their time and energy to direct support to NSOs would have contributed towards greater national capacity development for statistics at the country levels.

**5.2** Interviews of the National Statistics Offices indicate that ESCWA's technical assistance to the member states is appreciated but there is a growing demand for more specialized training and technology transfer. Members States want a stronger capacity at the regional level to support their own efforts at achieving technical excellence nationally.

**5.3** Overall there persists a strong need to improve the Statistics division's technical institutional capacity to produce timely, reliable and comparable statistics for policy and programme formulation and for monitoring the progress made towards the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals. This and a robust outreach programme would have substantively supported and enabled member states to strengthen the NSOs to achieve national excellence.

**5.4** The Commission meets once every two years. In between the Commissions' Technical Committee and the Thematic Technical Committees of the respective Subprogrammes guide the technical and operational work of ESCWA. This arrangement and the lack of engagement of especially the richly endowed GCC member countries deprive the Commission of much needed guidance from the regional leadership levels. This poses the critical question of how to cultivate and secure greater interest, support, and engagement from the Commission's member states especially the GCC and translate into a flow of resources. Ensuring ownership and active engagement of all members of the Commission through stronger proactive advocacy at the leadership level and creative initiatives geared at providing greater lead roles for individual member states in various commission activities, is crucial to the success of ESCWA in fulfilling its mandate towards its members.

**5.5** The ESCWA Database is intended to serve as a regional reference hub for member states and clients interested in information on the region. However it is widely recognized that the database poses a challenge to the improvement of ESCWA's statistics capacity. One of the biggest debates concerning the database is where it is located. Currently the database is housed and managed by ICTD with unclear guidelines dividing the responsibility between ICTD and the Statistics Division. Opposing views in-house prefer to see the database not be housed by ICTD but by CITS/ASD with management from the Statistics Division.

**5.6** There is a strong view amongst the NSOs for the creation of a center of excellence as a regional resource bank of statistical data designed and built around the strengthened ESCWA database incorporating more expertise and diversified contents or based in one of the leading NSOs with cutting edge advantage in special technology, expertise and knowledge. The Statistics Division should be developing a database of Statistical experts within the region to exchange experiences and best practices so they can be incorporated throughout the region.

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**5.7** Current methods in which statistics services are delivered leaves room for improvement. As each Subprogramme has retained its own specialized database it is not clear how much it relies on the ESIS for its day to day needs. It is not also clear who within the Statistics Division is responsible for coordinating, directing and responding to requests from the other subprogrammes. The evaluation understood the focal point network to be an ad hoc consultative and not a functional body to assume this task. The Statistics Division receives requests from NSOs for technical assistance but in interviews with these offices several pointed out that they prefer the demand based modality for technical assistance and not a supply driven collaboration. The division needs to adopt a functionally effective modality for extending service within the commission and externally to its partners.

**5.8** A forward looking evaluation that identifies current practices that are not being implemented must include the lack of adequacy in the database and shortfall in adapting the database to provide a reliable reference depository for specialized data and information for the region. ESCWA must determine the most effective location for the database between the ICTD or within the Statistics Division. The contents of the database must be addressed as well; currently it is not fully populated or customized to meet the needs of member states. Linking the Beirut database to New York would strengthen it to serve as a specialized information hub for the region.

The role of the Statistics Division in relation to the database remains unclear as long as the database lies in a separate division. As discussed earlier, the central location of the database and its efficient management by the Statistics Division will provide a space in which other Subprogrammes can merge their respective individual databases to create one common regional database. ESCWA has already come to grip with this problem and former Executive Secretary Bader Omar Al-Dafa issued a circular (see Annex I) dated April 2010 addressing the issue. The memo calls for multiple adjustments to be made within ESCWA in order to ensure that the processes of the statistical information system are streamlined to ensure that the collection, processing, and dissemination of information are coherent and easily accessible to internal and external users. The challenge lies in implementing the circular fully in its content and spirit through multiple steps to “promote cross-fertilization amongst divisions, fostering better coordination and a horizontal work approach.”

**5.9** The current staffing of the ESCWA’s Statistics Division needs to be reviewed to ensure that staffing is adequate and efficient. The interviews with key senior ESCWA staff revealed some staffing challenges ESCWA faces. The current leadership is now aware that they are methods to work around the UN budgets policy of zero growth. With efficient planning staffing can be shifted between divisions and sectors to not cause a disturbance and imbalance in the efficiency of the division. Currently the Statistics Division is adequately staffed but it is possible that some of the staff do not have the required qualities and capacity for fulfilling the tasks assigned to them. To determine if these discrepancies exist the division may have to undertake a desk audit to analyze the qualifications, skills and aptitudes of its staff. The division may also want to use these results to compare manpower sizes to other commissions with similar objectives.

**5.10** Currently ESCWA programmes do not have a system that links budgets to activities and outputs to provide one single overview facilitating the gauging of implementation rates to available resources and expected outputs and results (objective i). The evaluation methodology developed by the evaluation team includes an important system to meet this need for continuous monitoring.

**5.11** Under the 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 expected outputs a set of 8 goals with baselines for 2003-2004 and targets for 2006-2007 and 2009 were established for the NSOs to meet as carried in Annex VII It was not possible to assess how the NSOs performed against the goals as no record of implementation was available to the evaluators.

**5.12** Gross meeting of goals alone without quality assurances is incomplete achievement. The Technical Cooperation Section appears to be conducting good coordination in liaising between the technical divisions and the national statistics offices but a more in-depth look at the quality and modality of delivering technical assistance is necessary. The feed-back received from interviewing NSOs indicate on the one hand a general appreciation for the quality of services received from the Statistics Subprogramme and on the other an urge to diversify, specialize and make these services more participatory, relevant and useful.

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**5.13** The Commission's niche as seen by several interviewees lay in extending technical assistance and knowledge to its member states. In their view it is what has won it a good name and image. However, a strong view is also expressed that within this technical assistance context the Commission's future relevance and demand for its services will depend in its ability to strengthen its expertise in the Economic Pillars rather than its Social Sector Pillars where many institutions in the region have a comparative advantage.. Representatives of other Commission consider the ESCWA's smaller manageable operational size (14 members) as a comparative advantage in getting decisions made more speedily by its members and in reaching consensus on urgent issues. Several partners observed positively the versatility and the ability of ESCWA to speak with ease and unified voice on behalf of its members at inter-commission meetings. There is potential for the Statistics Division to offer a unique demand for specialized region-specific data and information if it can establish a strong and reliable regional database.

**5.14** Amongst handful of respondents to questions relating to ESCWA's niche and comparative advantages senior and experienced Regional Commission staff spoke passionately and profoundly of multiple ways in which ESCWA could improve upon its position within the region. He argued that with discipline and focus ESCWA could "strengthen and leverage its capacity to benefit the region through work in the transportation, water and trade sectors." He went on to state that ESCWA's broad reach also allows it to be an initiator of ideas and development paradigms in the regions socio-economic sector and recommended that the Commission's wide scope outreach should be leveraged to create centers of excellence for specialized statistics in the region. ESCWA's strong ICT is currently not addressing trans-boundary issues that similar commissions are addressing. This is a lost opportunity in which ESCWA could tap into the region's development potential and paradigms for regional integration. The evaluation considered this unique perspective and vision worth bringing to the attention of the ESCWA management to reflect upon as it considers the commissions future options and engagements.

**5.15** It is the clear expectations of the clients to see ESCWA (Statistics Division) as a house of expertise that provides expertise in selected areas, facilitates exchange of expertise and experience between member countries, and helps official statistics services in member countries to get their leading position within the institutional setup, legislative framework. They also expect ESCWA to defend their interests in the international statistical scene (within the region and globally). To satisfy this demand, the Division has tried to provide technical assistance to member countries, organizing workshops and expert group meeting in areas of their interest, and representing the regional view in the international fora. In addition it facilitates regional preparations for the annual sessions of the UN Statistical Commission, where the ESCWA countries got a much stronger voice and their views reflected in final conclusions.

**5.16** Because of its convening power and level of trust it enjoys amongst its membership, ESCWA is in the position to lead the statistical work in the region by optimizing capacity development through partnership. This could be achieved by mobilizing the necessary expertise from a pool of experts and logistics resources coming from various organizations. A common language, culture and traditions should enhance cooperation between ESCWA and partners within the region.

**5.17** Gender statistics addresses issues of groups of special interest that also includes youth and elderly population, etc. The interest in gender statistics in the ESCWA and Arab region is very high, and the dedication of experts working in this area may exceed their peers in other regions. They consider statistical issues, as well as cultural aspects having a relationship to gender statistics and gender policies. Therefore, it occupies a high priority within ESCWA's Statistics Subprogramme.

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**5.18** Human rights are not directly addressed by activities undertaken under the Statistics Subprogramme. However, ESCWA follows the change of paradigm in official statistics that moves from a purely technical view towards following the social and economic development in its complexity. The well being of population is part of this paradigm, and the human rights are an important component of well being. Outside ESCWA's participation in international events addressing human rights issues the organization's work in statistics on Human Rights is still in its infancy with a potential for future growth.

### 6. MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Strategic Vision

**6.1** Review ESCWA's niche and comparative advantages taking into account its perceived manageable small size that facilitates easy management and faster decision-making; a proposed shift of emphasis from the social pillar to the economic pillar; exploring the transportation, water and trade sectors as potential areas for future involvement; viewing trans-boundary issues and regional integration as unexplored frontiers to look at--all as part of an exercise in exploring what the Commission and the Statistics Sub-programme are not currently doing that they should do to remain current and relevant to the region's changing

**6.2** ESCWA to give greater importance to statistic work on Human Rights in its programme by adapting and populating the database with region-specific human rights data accessible, relevant and current to the growing importance of human rights in the region.

**6.3** While taking the above suggestions on board and moving forward, this evaluation recommends a shift of the Statistics Division to four key pillars:

- a. **A center for technical excellence in statistics:** a center that is a repository of latest statistical knowledge and practice and use of information and technology. The members are hoping that ESCWA would raise up to the role of bringing the latest technology, methods and knowledge to the region and help build their capacity to advance.
- b. **A center for coordination and partnership.** A center that helps coordinate between the National Statistical Office to share and build each other's capacity but also link them to the external world.
- c. **A focus on gender and youth.** With the rising youth unemployment in the wake of the Arab Spring Revolution and greater participation of women in workforce the region feels it is ready to advance on these issues especially given the recent events in the region. There are good examples such as gender statistics in Saudi Arabia to build on.
- d. **A continued focus on MDGs and international comparability of data.** All NSOs feel the ESCWA coordinated MDG report for the region is an excellent initiative and ESCWA should build on this and ensure international comparability of data and support NSO in improving data quality.

#### Management Issues

**6.4** Strengthen and adapt the ESCWA Statistics Information System (ESIS) to the special needs of the region and implement the ES Memorandum on streamlining the information system in the Commission that places the administration and management of the Database under the Statistics Division.

**6.5** Review and reorganize the functions and work practices of the Statistics Division especially the utilization of its human resources to shift greater priority to adjusting and strengthening its internal capacity and providing more effective technical assistance to the capacity development of the NSOs.



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**6.6** Ensure adequate resources in support of the Statistics Division's technical institutional capacity to produce timely, reliable and comparable statistics for policy and programme formulation and for monitoring the progress made towards the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals and to meet the growing demands of NSOs for specialized training and technology transfer.

**6.7** Re-align the ESCWA Budget system to the new Evaluation Methodology for ESCWA Sub-programmes to link budgets to activities and outputs to provide one single overview facilitating the gauging of implementation rates to available resources and expected outputs and results.

### **Institutional Issues**

**6.8** Encourage the Statistics Division to adopt a practice of determining and regularly re-checking the specific needs of member states to ensure that ESCWA delivers its services based on demand and not supply driven through consistent engagement and coordination mechanisms by increasing the frequency of Informal virtual meetings between statistical committees.

**6.10** The Statistics Division must collaborate with other divisions in order to address the multiple calls for services. To accomplish this ESCWA must determine the needs of its members before attempting to meet their demand for services.

### **Priority Programmatic Areas**

**6.11** Support the Technical Cooperation Section and Statistics Subprogrammes to strengthen quality assurances in the delivery of ESCWA's service to member states through designing and establishing a screening system for monitoring and gauging the technical assistance that the Subprogramme provides to the NSOs.

**6.12** Utilize the high priority assigned to gender in the Subprogramme's work to bring to full development a number of gender-specific projects underway in collaboration with the Gender Statistics.

### **Coordination and Partnership**

**6.13** The Statistics Subprogramme needs to strengthen further its working and professional relationship with its national clients and regional and international partners by undertaking joint. Initiatives.