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**Improving monitoring of the 2030 Agenda
for Sustainable Development: institutional environment,
and production and dissemination of data****Summary**

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is mandated to support economic and social development in its member States, and assist them in monitoring and reporting on progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ESCWA devotes a large number of its activities to fulfilling this mandate, including publishing SDG-related statistical data and information on the [Arab SDG Gateway](#). In that context, ESCWA provides technical support and builds capacity to enhance data quality and availability at the national and regional levels. ESCWA has also developed various tools and applications to improve institutional statistical environments, coordination and management of data flows, production of comparable data from different sources, and data sharing. It continues to strive to increase the availability and timely flow of data, and to reduce duplication of efforts and inconsistencies in reporting.

The present document provides an overview of progress made in improving monitoring of the 2030 Agenda in the Arab region, and of the outcome and impact of ESCWA activities and tools on the production and dissemination of quality and timely national SDG data. The document also offers recommendations on the way forward in that regard. The Statistical Committee is invited to take note of the contents of the present document, and make recommendations on means to improve national SDG monitoring and reporting.

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Introduction

1. The Statistical Committee of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has repeatedly recommended that the ESCWA secretariat continue supporting member States in producing and disseminating quality and timely data on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular “continue providing technical coordination and cooperation in the field of data collection and publication for SDG indicators” ([E/ESCWA/SD/2017/IG.1/7/Report](#)); “develop tools that assist member States to monitor SDG implementation at the national level” ([E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/8/Report](#)); and “continue supporting Arab countries in developing national reporting platforms for the SDGs and related indicators, and follow up on capacity-building efforts to increase the availability and quality of disaggregated data and their dissemination at the national, regional and global levels” ([E/ESCWA/C.1/2021/7/Report](#)).
2. The present document provides an overview of the activities and tools that ESCWA has implemented in response to those recommendations. It also reviews the outcome of ESCWA efforts and the impact achieved since the fourteenth session of the Committee, held online on 10 and 11 February 2021. Moreover, the document highlights national good practices for improving production and dissemination of quality and timely data, and sets out recommendations on the way forward in that regard.

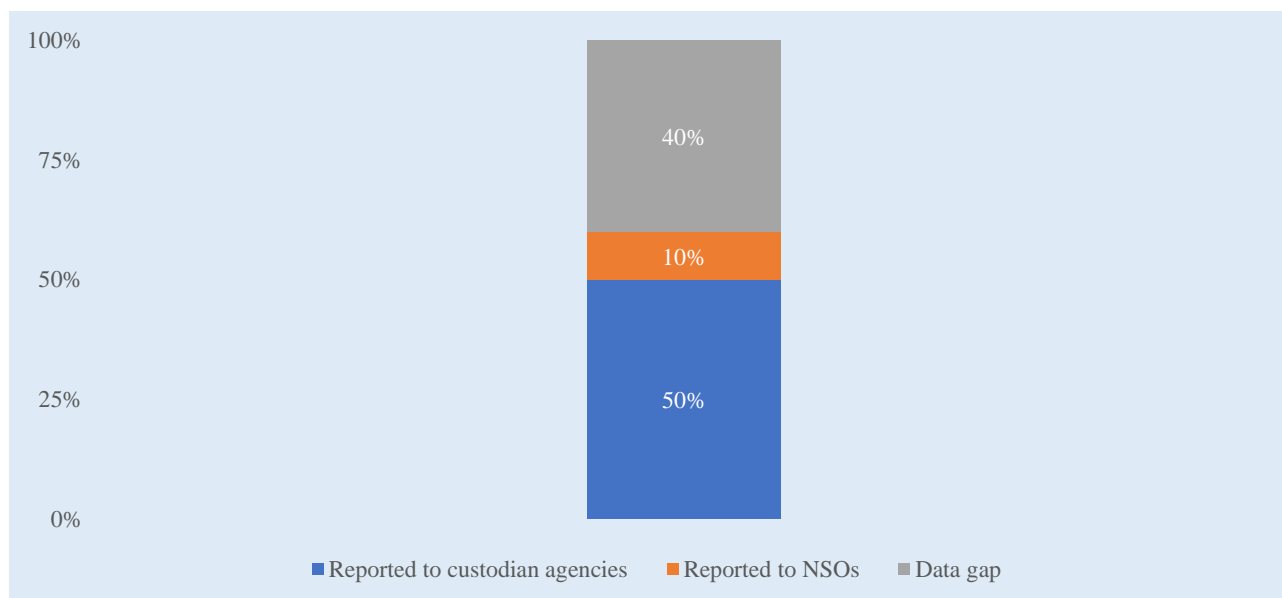
I. Problem-driven approach

3. ESCWA work on SDG data tackles challenges in the following four areas: institutional environment; dissemination and communication of available data; data quality; and data flow. ESCWA aims to support Arab countries in making a qualitative shift in all four areas through the modernization of their statistical activities, tools and methods.
4. National statistical offices (NSOs) face many institutional challenges in the management and coordination of their national statistical systems, which have affected the quality, availability and flow of official SDG data. Those challenges also hamper the ability of NSOs to be the official national source of data, improve data quality, and reduce data discrepancies. Essential elements are required for an effective functioning of national statistical systems, based primarily on collaboration between all data producers and with NSOs. Most Arab countries do not have updated laws that adhere to the fundamental principles of official statistics; they lack steering councils for statistics users, technical committees of active data producers, and national strategies for the development of statistics generated in participation with all data producers.¹
5. There remains a large gap in SDG data that needs to be addressed to disseminate and communicate data effectively. Data are available or could be made available through data collection; however, not all collected data are compiled, and some are compiled but not calculated. In many instances, data may also be calculated but not disseminated. Although countries have committed to producing comparable SDG indicators from their official sources as per international standards, a large number of indicators have not yet been captured by NSOs: the majority of SDG indicators come from administrative sources. In addition, many indicators from survey/census data are made available, but their disaggregated data are not disseminated. The granularity of data is important for effective policymaking. The Arab region produces a limited number of gender indicators, without making sex-disaggregated data available.
6. Data quality is another challenge. ESCWA assessments show data discrepancies exist not only between national and international sources, but also between officially reported national data and those disseminated in national SDG reports. Some quality issues could be the result of not producing SDG indicators as per official SDG metadata. Deviation from standard definitions, varied methods of calculation, and different units used

¹ Efforts to modernize national statistical legislation have been weak. Only 11 Arab countries have statistical advisory boards/councils. Five Arab countries have technical committees, and some have adopted a mixed setup of data producers and users with unclear delineation of roles. For further reading on the institutional environment, please refer to ESCWA, [Guide on the Generic Law for Official Statistics in the Arab Countries](#), 2021.

affect data quality. Moreover, management of data production, data sharing and data dissemination, including the use of outdated methods, have also contributed to data quality issues.

Figure 1. SDG data flow from administrative sources



Source: ESCWA calculations, based on data from the [Arab SDG Monitor](#).

7. Data flow of SDG indicators is one of the main challenges in the region. NSOs are only one of the many data producers at the country level. In all Arab countries, data are produced from at least three main sources, and are mostly not reported to or through NSOs. The matter of data flow is made more complicated given that around 80 per cent of all SDG indicators are from administrative records and other sources. ESCWA assessment shows that half of SDG indicators are directly reported to custodian agencies by nationally nominated trained data providers, but those data are not available with NSOs. The few administrative indicators (10 per cent) received by NSOs from ministries sometimes suffer from discrepancies compared with data reported to custodian agencies. The remaining 40 per cent represents a data gap mainly from administrative records.

8. There is no coherent, integrated or controlled effective setup at the country level to provide all SDG data. This is especially true when data are beyond those generated from surveys or censuses under the direct responsibility of NSOs. Consequently, large data gaps exist and duplication in data reporting and efforts have led to the dissemination of inconsistent data at a national level.

9. The ESCWA SDG data project addresses these challenges by developing appropriate tools, and making targeted interventions through a “building block approach” that aims to unlock each challenge and produce the desired outcome. At each level of transformation, ESCWA makes a sustainable impact by developing and building the necessary tools, skills and changes in mindsets.

II. ESCWA activities and tools

10. ESCWA established a regional hub for data and statistics relating to the 2030 Agenda to ensure that the regional level is not a “forgotten level”. The [Arab SDG Monitor](#) hosts 22 national reporting platforms (NRPs) based on official national data: 16 NRPs have been finalized as a result of 140 consultations and bilateral data reviews with member States. Further consultations with countries are ongoing to improve data quality, provide timely data, and close data gaps.

11. During the period 2021–2022, ESCWA organized 48 [SDG webinars](#). A total of 20 United Nations agencies² collaborated to deliver trainings on the production of 115 SDG indicators, pursuant to a recommendation made by the Statistical Committee to “strengthen communication between relevant United Nations organizations and countries to support the use of national data in general, and especially in calculating SDG indicators and updating them from national sources” ([E/ESCWA/C.1/2021/7/Report](#)). The webinars were attended by over 1,500 participants, and all training materials are available on the [Arab SDG Gateway](#) for future reference and use.

12. In 2021, the implementation of the first phase of the ESCWA regional SDG data project and strategy entailed a revision of available national data mapped to existing data sources. The objective was to take stock of all available national time series and disseminate quality data on the SDG regional hub through NRPs powered by ESCWA. NRPs enhance country reporting by providing high-performing functionalities, including country tracking of SDG performance towards 2030. They also provide information on the institutional statistical environment, and monitor data availability, data flow and data disaggregation.

13. To improve NSO skills in mapping and converting SDG data as per international standards using conversion tools, ESCWA held four workshops on the use of statistical data and metadata exchange (SDMX) for SDG monitoring and reporting (in June 2022; October 2020; November 2021; and June–July 2022). It is expected that all countries will maintain and sustain their NRPs through SDMX by 2023.

14. ESCWA has developed several data tools to support the production and dissemination of quality and comparable data, and made them available on the Arab SDG Gateway to all users and producers of statistics. The following four new tools provide solutions to historical data challenges, and are expected to have a profound impact on statistical work processes and data quality:

(a) The [SDG Data Collection Tool](#) is a technical dynamic resource developed for the first time at the global level, in collaboration with 35 custodian agencies. The Tool provides countries with a practical and user-friendly searchable guide to producing comparable and standardized indicators by implementing harmonized methods and instruments for 188 SDG indicators. It also aims to increase data flow between countries and custodian agencies by providing NSOs with the inquiries used by agencies to collect data from surveys and administrative records. Countries can easily identify indicators by type of data source, how and when each indicator should be collected, and standard questions to be used in surveys; and can access the United Nations agency inquiry for all indicators from administrative sources. The Tool also features methodological guidance on recommended sources for each indicator, periodicity of data collection, and related metadata. The Tool is expected to make an impact on data quality and availability of SDG indicators in the Arab region and in other regions worldwide;

(b) The [Regional Network of SDG Data Providers](#) is a dynamic tool that aims to improve transparency and accountability of SDG monitoring and reporting of Arab national statistical systems, so as to streamline the timely flow of data at both the national and global levels. The Network was developed in collaboration with 40 United Nations agencies to cover 80 per cent of SDG indicators that are mainly from administrative sources. It includes, for each indicator, the contact information of national technical experts who were officially

² ESCWA, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Bank, the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (UNESCO-IOC), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

nominated by a relevant entity in the national statistical system to report on data, and have been active since then. It also contains the contact information of NSO SDG teams and custodian agency focal points;

(c) To support member States and enhance the leadership of NSOs as the official source of all national data, ESCWA has developed an electronic [Monitoring Application for the Reporting on SDGs \(MARS\)](#), to be launched on the Arab SDG Gateway (forthcoming). The task of managing and coordinating data compilation, capacity development and data verification is enormous. MARS is a web solution that aims to enable NSO leaderships to manage dataflow and facilitate the process of data reporting on SDGs from each national entity at the data provider level, and in line with the United Nations custodian agency calendar. It includes access control and authorization management as per the role of each partner, and is based on two main components: the national network for SDG data providers in a country; and the e-calendar for United Nations agencies' data inquiries, developed globally for the first time by ESCWA in collaboration with United Nations custodian agencies;

(d) The [ESCWA SDMX Converter for SDGs](#) will facilitate timely data exchange from NRPs of NSOs to ESCWA. The Converter will improve data dissemination at the regional and global levels. It includes a validation functionality to ensure that data adhere to a data structure definition that follows international SDG standards. The process will assist countries in enhancing data quality through real-time feedback. The tool is part of the ESCWA new data ecosystem, which aims to provide member States with intelligent data and policy analytical tools that they can rely on for evidence-based policy decision-making.

15. Improved data production and streamlined well-coordinated data exchange mechanisms will yield timely, accessible and quality information for national policymakers, and will benefit other users and producers of official statistics at all levels. Through improved collaborative partnerships, there will be a transformation in data governance and data modernization, including greater transparency and accountability through a well-functioning statistical system that can provide relevant, reliable and timely statistical information.

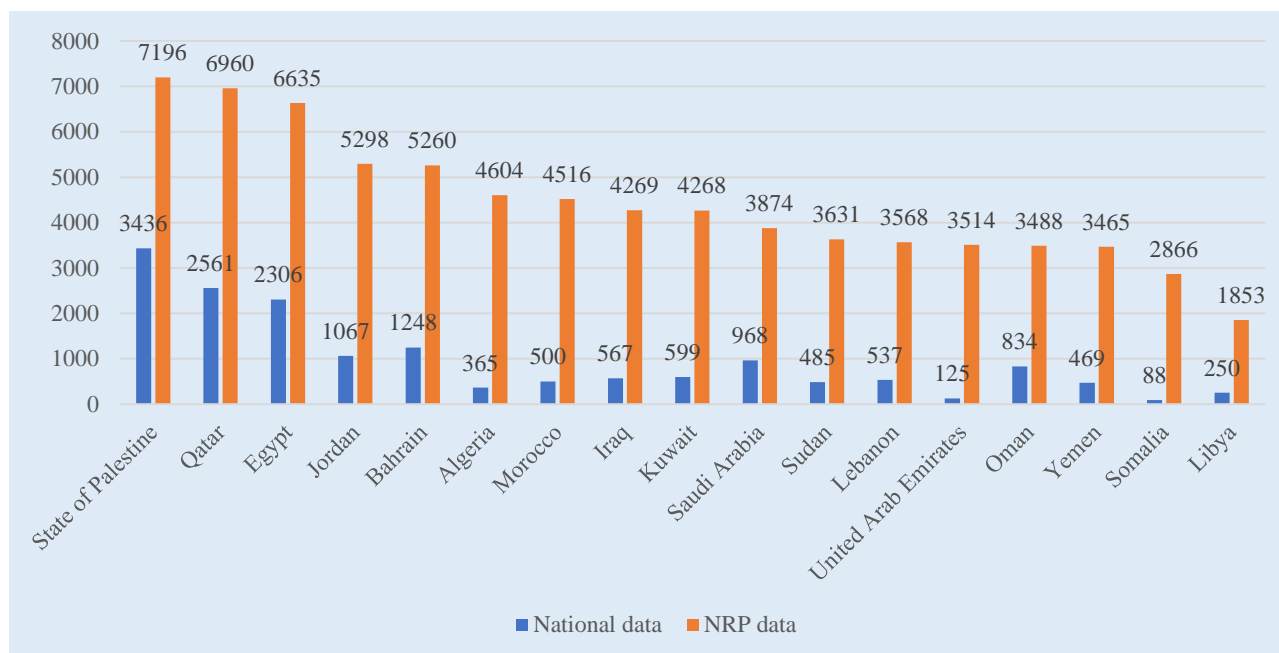
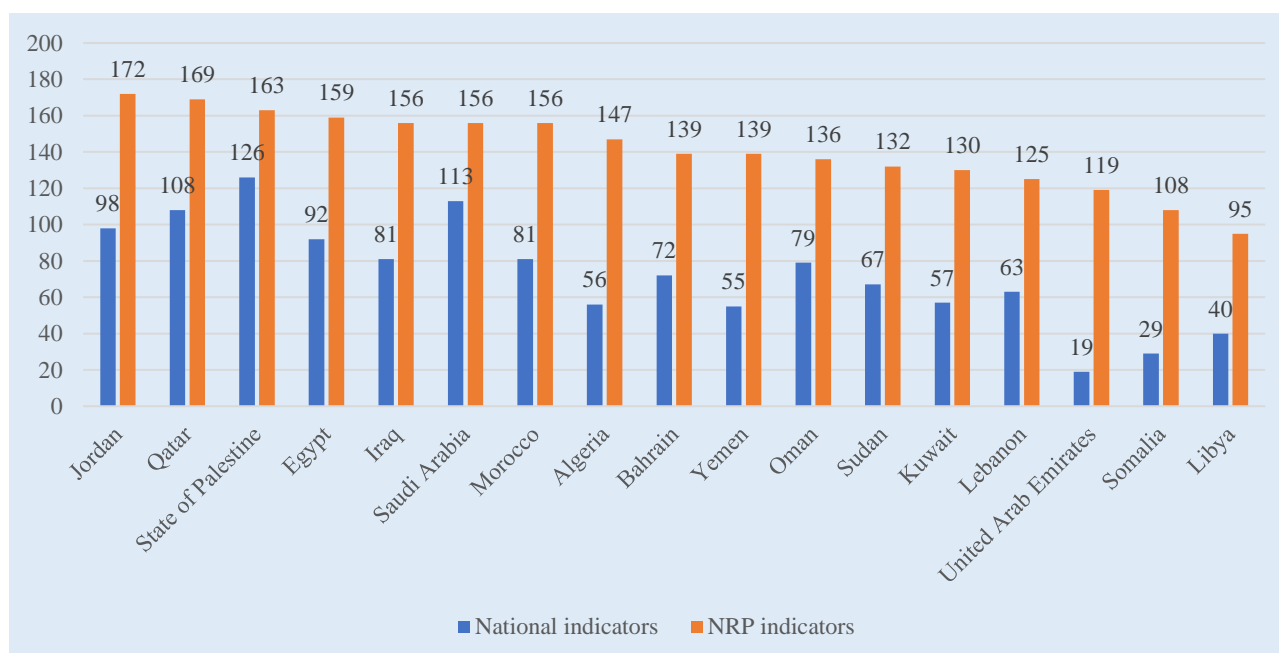
III. Outcome and impact

A. Dissemination and communication of quality data

16. Arab NSOs have increased access to quality data and analytics, which are useful and timely for national planning, through improved dissemination and communication systems. As mentioned above, ESCWA has compiled national data and implemented over 140 bilateral consultation meetings with countries to complete 16 NRPs³ with up-to-date data. As a result, there has been an average increase of national indicators by some 130 per cent and a significant impact on data quality, thus doubling the availability of indicators and tripling data points for SDG indicators.⁴ Figure 2 illustrates the impact made on SDG indicators and observations.

³ Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

⁴ National data reported by countries initially ranged between 4 and 45 per cent, increasing to a range of 33–67 per cent after SDG data revisions by ESCWA in collaboration with countries.

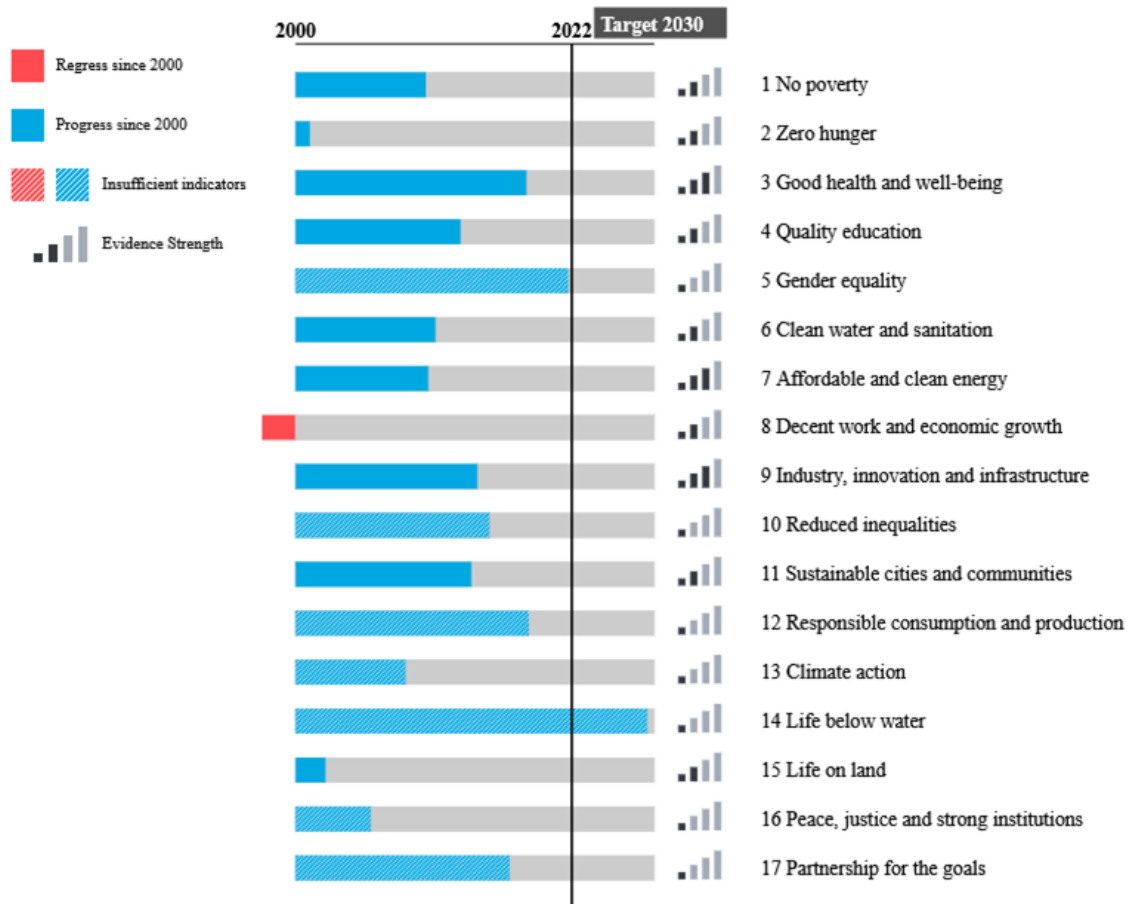
Figure 2. Impact on SDG indicators and observations, 2020 to 2022**A. Increase in observations****B. Increase in indicators**

Source: ESCWA calculations, based on data reviews implemented bilaterally with each country and disseminated on national reporting platforms from 2020 to 2022.

17. Four Arab countries have successfully published their NRPs on their websites, namely Lebanon, the State of Palestine, Qatar and Somalia. In addition to countries' own SDG dashboards, countries included the ESCWA NRP to expand SDG platform knowledge and provide national, regional and international users with further functionalities to monitor goal performance, and track indicators and time series using interactive and user-friendly visualizations. Nonetheless, large data gaps remain, which affect monitoring capacity.

18. ESCWA has developed SDG trackers for the region and for each Arab country. The trackers reveal insufficient data for several SDGs: many indicators have less than two data points, which renders monitoring impossible. Projections for those Goals should therefore be interpreted with caution. Figure 3 provides an example of the regional tracker that is able to monitor 10 Goals, while 7 Goals have insufficient data (lightly shaded blue/red) to monitor and track progress.

Figure 3. SDG tracker for the Arab region



Source: Arab SDG Monitor – Monitoring SDG Progress and Data availability: Where is the Arab Region Now?

19. NSOs could also easily identify data inconsistencies through NRPs, including discrepancies with international sources. ESCWA has been supporting member States to reconcile data discrepancies using regional tools such as the [E-Handbook on SDG Framework and Metadata](#) and the [SDG Data Collection Tool](#). Figure 4 gives an example of country x where NRP detects discrepancies between national and international data, citing different values from the country’s labour force survey (LFS). Countries are currently reviewing data and will provide transparent justification in an effort to reconcile discrepancies. Countries will also implement corrections to erroneous data or metadata, where needed, to improve the dissemination of quality data.

Figure 4. Comparison between national and international data

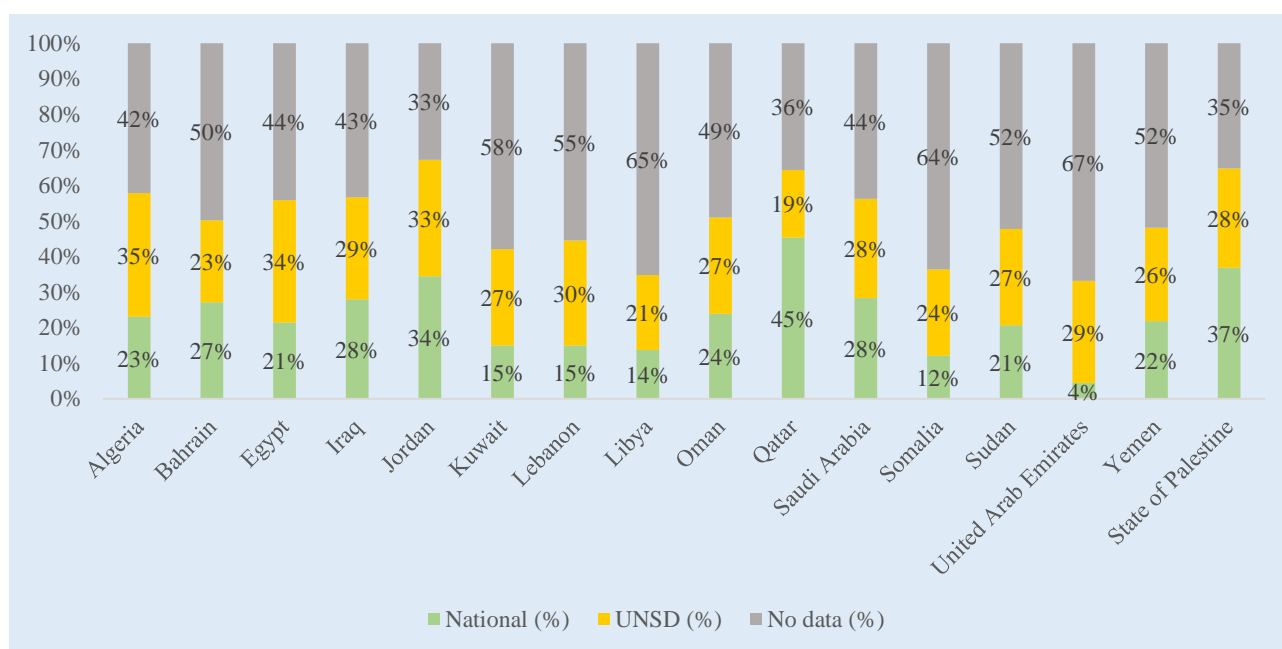
Source: National reporting platform of a country on the Arab SDG Monitor.

Note: C: country; Nat: national; I: international; N: national.

20. To close data gaps from surveys or administrative sources, NSOs need to play a leading role in addressing both sources. While survey-sourced indicators are directly administered and managed by NSOs and represent only 20 per cent of SDG data, NSOs still need to devise strategies to mainstream indicators into existing surveys or implement new ones and identify partners and stakeholders, where needed. For example, upon the request of Qatar in 2021, ESCWA undertook a mission to assist in an assessment of data availability and quality, and formulate a plan to close data gaps in surveys.

21. The remaining 80 per cent of SDG indicators are from administrative sources. NSOs, in the majority of cases, have no direct control over those sources nor direct access to them. As a result, in the majority of cases, data flow and reporting have been done directly to international agencies by officially nominated national data providers. ESCWA assessment shows that there are available country sourced indicators on the UNSD SDG Global Database, sometimes reaching over six times (yellow shaded bars in figure 5) those disseminated by the country's NSO (green shaded bars in figure 5).

22. Moreover, no reporting has yet been done on a larger number of indicators. The grey shaded areas in figure 5 represent data gaps: either indicators have no assigned data providers and therefore have not been collected, have been collected but not computed, have been computed but not disseminated, or have been disseminated but not communicated effectively in line with transparent international standards/metadata.

Figure 5. Proportion of indicator availability by country

Source: ESCWA calculations, based on data from the [Arab SDG Monitor](#).

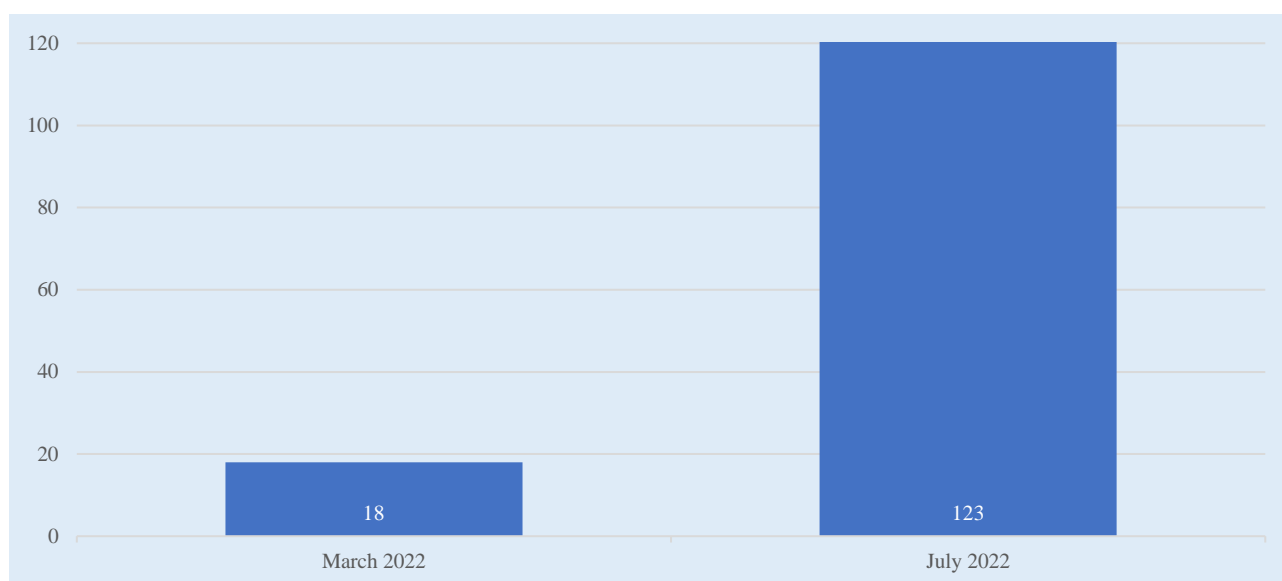
23. To maintain and sustain NRPs on the Arab SDG Monitor until 2030, ESCWA and Arab countries need to use the latest technology in data exchange and sharing. As a follow up to the capacity-building workshops on SDMX, 10 countries received credentials (username and password) to upload SDG data on their NRPs through the ESCWA SDMX Converter for SDGs, namely Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

24. Looking forward, ESCWA will continue to provide member States with the needed support to improve data availability and quality, including disaggregated data. Efforts to reconcile data discrepancies and inconsistencies at the national and international levels will also continue. In addition, ESCWA will assist Arab countries in developing strategies for closing data gaps as per international standards, and play an effective role in facilitating consultations with custodian agencies to disseminate quality national data. ESCWA will also continue providing further support to countries to initiate the first data exchange to NRPs through SDMX by the end of 2023.

B. Improved coordination of national statistical systems for effective data flow

25. Arab countries, through their participation in the development of the [Guide on the Generic Law of Official Statistics in the Arab Countries](#), confirmed the importance of modernizing national laws on official statistics. However, the process of approving a national statistical law is complicated and lengthy. ESCWA has been providing support to countries to enhance governance of their national statistical systems, guided by the [Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems](#).

26. A number of NSOs have taken concrete steps to strengthen coordination mechanisms to produce official statistics from their respective national statistical system. Those steps aim to improve data flow and modernize administrative sources. Qatar, for example, had only 18 active data providers reporting on SDG indicators from administrative sources. Recently, it has completed the establishment of a national SDG network of 123 expert data providers to report on all SDG indicators from its national statistical system, with ESCWA support. Qatar accomplished this in a record time of four months (March to July 2022). Other countries, including Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, are also in the process of establishing their national networks of SDG data providers.

Figure 6. Progress of data providers in Qatar, March–July 2022

Source: ESCWA calculations, based on the Network of Data Provider Tool.

27. National SDG networks will contribute to the formulation of national strategies for the development of statistics, with the involvement and participation of all data producers. ESCWA, in collaboration with NSOs and relevant custodian agencies, will organize capacity-building sessions for technical experts of data providers, as needed.

28. ESCWA will also pilot the implementation of MARS in Qatar. Other countries may also participate in the testing once they complete their national network of data providers before the end of 2022. Countries using MARS are expected to effectively strengthen the coordination mechanism of their national statistical systems and improve the flow and sharing of official data, making national data more visible at both the national and global levels.

29. Looking forward, ESCWA will continue to support member States in improving governance of official statistics and formulating or updating national statistical laws by providing an analytical tool to measure compliance with the Generic Law on Official Statistics, which will support countries in advocating for required changes to their statistical laws. To increase transparency, accountability and timeliness of data flow, and reduce data gaps, errors and duplication of efforts, ESCWA will continue providing support to member States in establishing national networks of SDG data providers. Countries that have completed their national network will benefit from the regional capacity development of expert data providers and MARS to strengthen the coordination mechanism of their national statistical system, and improve the flow and sharing of official data.

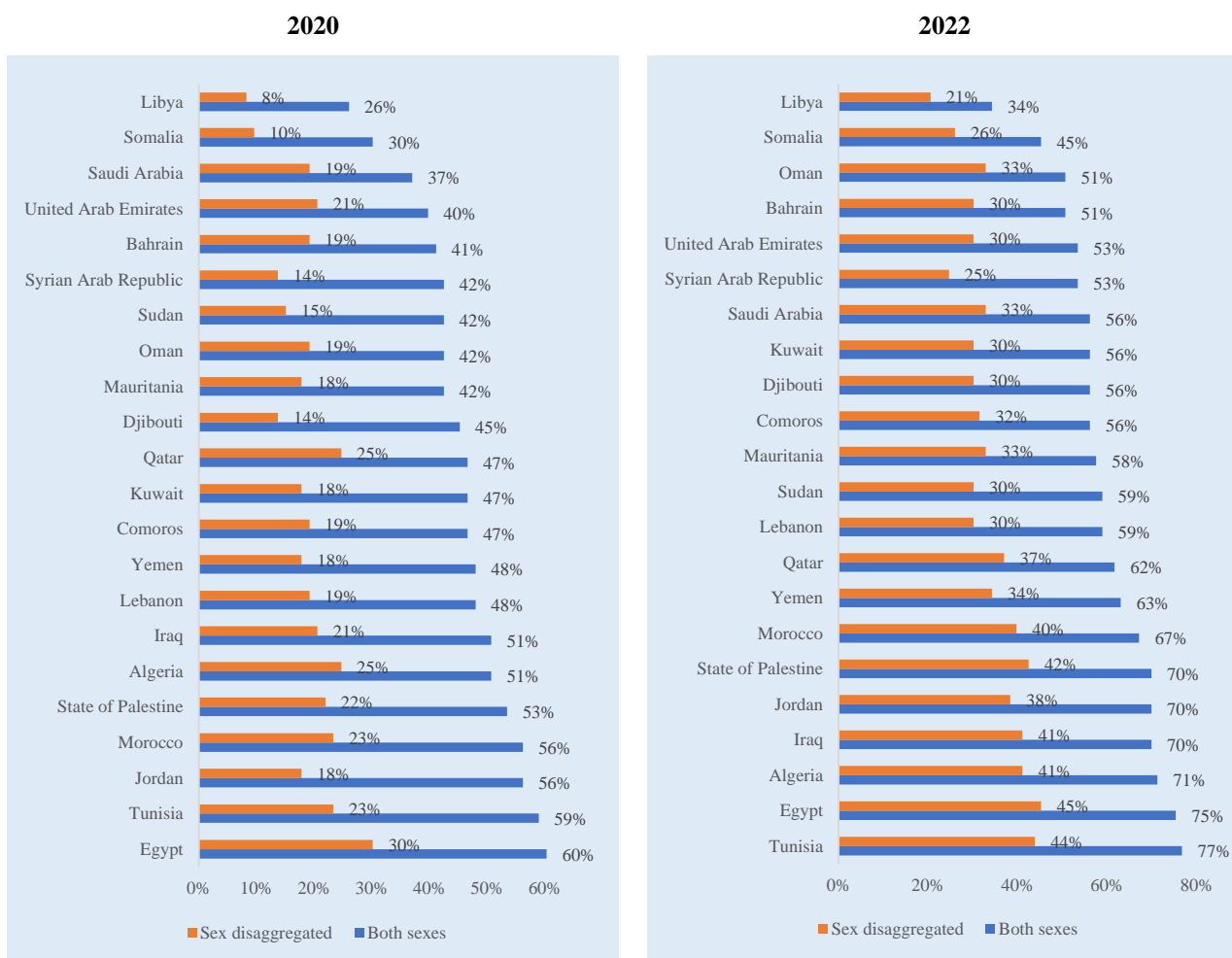
C. Capacity development to leave no one behind

30. Disaggregated data are vital for the effective monitoring of evidence-based policies and inclusiveness of vulnerable groups. Countries should be able to know the location and socioeconomic characteristics of such groups to improve their well-being. SDG target 17.18 aims to increase the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity and migratory status. ESCWA has been working with Arab countries to improve the production and dissemination of disaggregated data, especially those related to persons with disabilities and women and girls.

31. The dissemination of gender indicators and sex-disaggregated data has been improving in the Arab region. ESCWA has been monitoring 73 gender indicators on the Arab SDG Monitor. The latest ESCWA assessment shows that all Arab countries publish less than 80 per cent of gender related indicators in total,

while less than 50 per cent are being published disaggregated by sex. Figure 7 shows the ranking of countries disseminating disaggregated data by sex, and improvements made between 2020 and 2022.

Figure 7. Availability of gender indicators disseminated in totals and disaggregated by sex



Source: ESCWA calculations, based on data from the [Arab SDG Monitor](#).

32. ESCWA efforts to improve the collection and dissemination of disability statistics have been yielding good results. More Arab countries are correctly implementing the standard questions of the Washington Group, and capturing more comprehensive data on the population. Moreover, ESCWA and member States are conducting detailed analysis and disseminating data for regional and global reports since 2018.

33. Looking forward, ESCWA will continue its technical support and capacity-building activities, in collaboration with NSOs and other United Nations agencies, to leave no one behind. Through its Gender Statistics Toolkit and E-learning Portal, ESCWA will expand knowledge of gender statistics among all users. ESCWA will also produce a guidebook on implementing and analysing disability statistics.

IV. Recommendations and the way forward

34. Great challenges remain in monitoring the SDGs and meeting the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind. Limited data availability, untimely dissemination of data, and a lack of data disaggregation are all bottlenecks to informed decision-making, and emanate mainly from issues related to statistical data governance.

35. Data can be disseminated in a timely manner if national statistical systems work together with NSOs to streamline data flow from main data providers. It is vital to strengthen the coordination mechanism of national statistical systems, modernize administrative records, and tap into big data as a statistical resource.

36. It is also vital to upgrade the design of surveys and develop innovative mechanisms to disseminate information about the most vulnerable so as to leave no one behind. Many Arab countries still face difficulties in providing access to comprehensive information and data disaggregation by age, sex, location, wealth and socioeconomic status, which provide policymakers with the tools to design targeted policies.

37. Promoting the use of timely data for policymaking is vital to achieving the SDGs. Outdated data can be dangerous if used.

38. The Statistical Committee is invited to undertake the following:

(a) Note progress made by ESCWA in developing national SDG reporting platforms, including capacity-building activities, to increase data availability and improve data quality;

(b) Note progress made by ESCWA in developing and making available tools and applications on the Arab SDG Gateway to improve the production of standardized and comparable data;

(c) Make recommendations on future work by ESCWA and NSOs on national reporting platforms, and on ESCWA SDG-related statistical management and knowledge products, to support the production and dissemination of timely data and improve data flow at the national, regional and global levels for effective policymaking.
