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**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE COMMISSION****FOLLOW-UP TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESOLUTIONS
ADOPTED BY THE COMMISSION AT ITS TWENTY-FOURTH SESSION**

*Strengthening the role of national statistical systems in applying the fundamental
principles of official statistics issued by the United Nations*

Summary

This document is presented pursuant to the recommendations made by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Statistics committee at its seventh session in 2006. It contains basic information upon which the Commission relies in its discussions on the activities undertaken by ESCWA for strengthening the statistical capacities of member countries.

The document highlights the importance of applying the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics that were issued by the United Nations in 1994, and of implementing the Declaration on Professional Ethics for Statisticians that was issued by the International Statistical Institute in 1985, as one of the conditions necessary for developing statistical systems that are consistent with international trends and that enjoy the confidence of the public. The report illustrates the link between the ten Fundamental Principles and their interdependency, and specifically explains that the professional independence of statistical offices constitutes the cornerstone of such principles. Despite the significant measures that have been taken by ESCWA member countries regarding the independence of national statistical offices, those offices continue to be in need of further legislative measures and regulations that clearly guarantee their professional independence, particularly with respect to defining scientific methodologies, the content of the outputs of statistical systems and the methods and timeliness of the dissemination of official statistics. The report recommends that measures be taken at the national level to establish appropriate conditions for applying the Fundamental Principles, in order to strengthen the confidence of the public in the official statistical system at the national, regional and international levels.

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I. BACKGROUND

1. This document was prepared as part of the implementation of the recommendations made by the Statistics committee at its seventh session, which was held in Beirut from 7 to 9 November 2006, specifically, the request that ESCWA “conduct a study on supporting the role and status of statistical offices in overall State management and ways of implementing the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, to be presented to the twenty-fifth ESCWA ministerial session [...]”.

2. For more than 30 years, a number of countries, authorities and organizations have worked on the formulation of a framework for statistical work and ensuring the professional independence of statisticians in order to develop the statistical profession and strengthen the capacities of the statistical system in government as a vital tool in identifying, monitoring and assessing social, economic and environmental conditions. Such efforts started from the understanding that the statistical institute should be considered as a State institute that is characterized by credibility, professionalism, neutrality and independence, and whose services should be provided to all individuals and sectors in society without discrimination.

3. In 1975, the International Statistical Institute (ISI) formulated a draft declaration on professional statistical ethics, which comprised a list of principles for statisticians. That draft was then adopted as a declaration by ISI in August 1985. The aim of the document was to document professional values as a means of providing guidance to statisticians in following the best practices in four fields, namely, obligations to society, obligations to funders and employers, obligations to colleagues and obligations to subjects.

4. International efforts to develop a framework for organizing work in official statistics have continued, with a view to defining the professional and organizational relationships between the basic elements of the statistical system and various other State agencies in a way that enables statistical institutes to implement the guidelines contained in the Declaration on Professional Ethics. Such efforts resulted in the formulation of a draft of fundamental principles for official statistics at the Conference of European Statisticians that was held in 1992, which was discussed within the highest international statistical authority, the United Nations Statistical Commission, and subsequently ratified at the 1994 meeting of that Commission (Annex). Those 10 principles are relevance, independence and equal access; professional standards and ethics; accountability and transparency; prevention of misuse; sources of official statistics; confidentiality; legislation; national coordination; use of international standards; and international cooperation. The principles aim to establish internationally-agreed rules in the field of preparing official statistics.

5. With respect to interaction at the regional, Arab and international levels, the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21)¹ has organized three Arab statistical forums², which discussed Arab efforts in designing, implementing and funding national statistical strategies in Arab countries; strengthening dialogue between development partners at the national, regional and international levels as producers and users of statistics, in order to debate various statistical matters; and defining the organizational relationship between the elements of the national statistical system and the professional independence of statistical institutes. The recommendations that resulted from those forums included the following: willingness and strong political commitment should be provided in support of institutes of the statistical consortium; the design and implementation of national strategies should be initiated as part of the endeavour to develop statistics based on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics; laws and

¹ PARIS21 was founded in 1999 in response to recommendations made by the United Nations Economic and Social Council that called upon the international community to strengthen the statistical capacities in developing countries with a view to enabling them by improving their planning capacities, giving them the opportunity to rely on credible indicators in policymaking operations, and encouraging a culture of policy-devising and supervision based on information in all countries, particularly developing countries, which contributes to improving transparency, accountability and governance.

² The first and second forums were organized in collaboration with the League of Arab States in 2003 in Amman and in 2005 in Muscat respectively. The third forum was organized in collaboration with ESCWA and the League of Arab States in 2007 in Sana'a. The fourth Arab statistical forum is scheduled to be held in 2009 in Cairo, in collaboration with ESCWA, the League of Arab States and the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics.

legislation on statistics should be promulgated or updated in order to ensure coordination within the national statistical systems; and the legal frameworks of the statistical system should be completed and activated in order to support the role and independence of Arab statistical offices, with a view to adopting the best practices in statistics work and implementing the statistical standards and methodologies that were issued by the United Nations.

6. In that regard, the ESCWA Statistics committee discussed the issue of enabling statistical offices and supporting their independence at its fifth, sixth and seventh sessions, which were held in 2002, 2004 and 2006 respectively. The first section of the report of the seventh session, which was entitled "Recommendations and draft resolutions", presented a draft resolution aimed at strengthening statistical capacities for evidence-based policy-making, which states that: "The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, *recalling* General Assembly Resolution 60/1 of 16 September 2005 regarding the World Summit Outcome of 2005 [...], *referring* to the significance of the independence of national statistical offices (NSOs) and ensuring effective coordination between those offices and other State organs according to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 1994 [...], *reaffirming* the need to improve institutional statistical frameworks in the member countries [...], *stresses* the need to strengthen the independence of NSOs so as to produce objective data, and to improve coordination mechanisms within the statistical system to improve the production and the use of statistical data for evidence-based policy-making".

7. The first Arab Statistical Conference, which was held in Amman on 12 and 13 November 2007 and was attended by over 300 statisticians, researchers, experts and specialists from 19 Arab countries and a number of Arab and foreign experts and representatives of international organizations, addressed the importance of professional independence in NSOs. The Statistics Declaration of Amman that was issued by the Conference highlighted the significance of independence, commitment to professional ethics and best practices in statistics and the importance of maintaining quality statistics as fundamental standards for the production of official statistics, including the commitment to international classifications and standards. Arab countries were called upon to support statistics and strengthen statistical capacities as a strategic measure for realizing economic and social development goals, to establish professional national statistical organizations geared towards the needs of users and to keep up with new developments in using technology. Countries were also requested to strengthen the interaction between, on the one hand, Arab statistical offices and Arab statisticians and, on the other hand, international forums and organizations, and advised of the importance of influencing the international statistical system, with a view to reflecting the specific conditions of Arab countries.

II. IMPORTANCE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS IN THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM

8. The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS) (see annex), which were adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission at its special session in 1994, were devised in order to establish such firm and unanimous principles for drafting official statistics as disseminating and presenting statistical information according to scientific standards and preserving the confidentiality of data and individuals. Furthermore, it is necessary to prepare a legal framework to govern work in official statistics and inform all users of its content. The FPOS highlight the importance of coordination between regional and international statistical institutes, and also the importance of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between institutes which provide official statistics. The FPOS are largely focused on fostering cooperation between citizens and various institutes in order to ensure the provision of accurate statistical data, and are committed to maintaining continuous dialogue between the users and producers of statistical data. They also emphasize the role of governmental and non-governmental institutions in formulating standards and concepts that allow for regional and international comparisons.

9. The main goals of adopting FPOS at the national level are to strengthen the commitment of national ministries and Government institutions to internationally-agreed principles in producing official statistics, ensure equal access to official statistics for all members of society without discrimination and establish rules for accountability and transparency in statistical work. The FPOS also seek to strengthen and encourage

cooperation at the national, regional and international levels in preparing statistics and ensuring that statistical data is not misused.

10. The countries that adopt FPOS derive many advantages therefrom, the most important of which include stronger membership in international organizations and bodies in view of their commitments to the internationally agreed-upon principles in statistical work; greater reliability of statistical figures both nationally and internationally; greater individual and institutional confidence in official statistics as a source of accurate figures and in the process of collecting data from those parties; and activating the role of governmental and non-governmental institutions in developing standards and concepts that permit regional and international comparison.

11. The FPOS were adopted by such United Nations organizations as ESCWA, and by such regional statistical organizations as Eurostat, Afristat and the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP). Many countries, including some ESCWA member countries, have officially adopted them, while more than 110 countries officially adhere to them.³

12. The implementation of FPOS requires national action to create the appropriate conditions for achieving their goals. The FPOS are interlinked, and their application depends on the extent to which each one of them is effective. Achieving professional independence in NSOs is one of the most important conditions necessary for FPOS implementation. The first principle, equal access to data, which means that all individuals and institutions can access data on an equal basis in terms of degree of detail and timeliness, without prior review of results by any official or minister, can only be applied by ensuring the professional independence of statistical institutes in terms of timeliness and content of statistical publications. Statistical independence and professionalism should reign in statistical institutes in order to ensure the creation of an environment appropriate for the practice of professional ethics and the application of the fifth principle, which concerns the sources of official statistics, while taking into consideration the factors of quality, time, cost and the burden shouldered by respondents.

III. INDEPENDENCE OF STATISTICAL OFFICES: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

13. The independence of statistical offices is necessary in order to ensure their credibility and the fulfillment of their duty, which is to provide useful information to the public and policymakers. A lack of independence and credibility leads to loss of user confidence in the accuracy and objectivity of the data that those offices produce. In the absence of such confidence, the desire of data producers to cooperate with statistical offices and meet their demands dwindles.

14. Statistical offices should be distinct from the governmental agencies with executive and policymaking functions; should have authority to take professional decisions regarding the collection, analysis and dissemination of data; should control the choice and career development of staff; and should adhere to a formerly-defined timetable for disseminating indicators. Statistical offices are service agencies and therefore their independence depends on their methods and outcomes rather than their legally-defined goals.

15. The three organizational levels within the statistical system are the statistical institute (national statistical office), the chief of the statistical institute and the consultative council (national statistical council). The statistical institute is responsible for collecting, compiling, processing and disseminating official statistics from various sources; the chief of the statistical institute is responsible for managing and supervising the institute independently in professional matters; and the consultative council guides the statistical system and defines its strategic direction.

16. Statistical independence is defined by the authority and independence of the chief of the statistical institute in the following matters:

³ In resolution 65/35/09/w.m/q.a of 12 October 2006, the Palestinian Cabinet ratified the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics issued by the United Nations.

- (a) The identification of scientific methodologies and standards for collecting, processing and disseminating statistical data;
- (b) The content of statistical outputs of the statistical institute;
- (c) The methods of timely dissemination of statistics collected by statistical institutes.

17. Therefore, legislation and regulation seek to ensure statistical independence and integrity, confidentiality of data on individuals, objectivity of the methodology and means used, and freedom of statistical institutes to disseminate official statistics that may differ from the position of the Government on certain issues. General reference has clearly been made to that matter in legislation and regulations in many developed countries.

18. The independence of statistical offices is a multi-faceted issue. While statistical institutes are a part of the Government structure and their activities are funded by the Government, they must remain professionally free from Government influence. The professional independence of statistical institutes ensures their credibility in providing indicators to measure Government performance solely on the basis of official statistics.

IV. CURRENT SITUATION IN ESCWA MEMBER COUNTRIES REGARDING STATISTICAL INDEPENDENCE

19. The ESCWA report entitled “Needs assessment for capacity-building of NSOs in the ESCWA region” (E/ESCWA/SCU/2006/IG.1/7), regarding FPOS application in ESCWA member countries, indicated that the oldest national statistical laws in those countries dated back to 1960, while the most recent were issued in 2003, and noted that a small number of those countries had updated their laws.

20. The report added that in most countries, the chief of the statistical office submits his report to the Ministry of Planning or the Ministry of Industry, while in others, that report is submitted directly to the Cabinet. Most countries stated that their statistical offices were free from any political interference regarding the preparation of annual programmes and the dissemination of data in accordance with laws on statistics that provide for the freedom and independence of statistics offices. In some countries, especially those in which the chief of the statistical offices reports to a Government minister, the chief reviews the statistics with the minister before their dissemination. That practice is at odds with the dimension of independence of the statistical system and with the first fundamental principle of official statistics, namely, relevance, independence and equal access.

21. Some ESCWA member countries have legislative provisions or legal machinery that make it mandatory to coordinate work jointly undertaken by Government agencies within the national statistical system. Some ESCWA member countries have issued memorandums of understanding concluded between such offices and data-producing institutions, in order to define roles and responsibilities within joint programmes of work. They have also formed specialized committees, nominated statisticians and statistical units within Government agencies, coordinated overall budgetary estimates for statistical activities, harmonized standards and classifications, and implemented the recommendations of statistical offices regarding institutes that issue administrative data when they conduct research, collect data and plan for modifications, improvement or simplification. Some parties note that the lack of defined statistical roles, responsibilities and legislation significantly hinders the designing of an effective statistical system. That undermines the second standard of independence, which concerns the absolute authority of the chief of the statistical institute in defining scientific methodologies and methods whereby official statistics can be collected, processed, analyzed and disseminated, and limits the fulfillment of the first article of the “Obligations of the Statistician”, which were issued by ISI, regarding ensuring objectivity and fostering good practices.

22. Most countries have an annual or multi-yearly work strategy, plan and programme, while few have national strategies for developing statistics according to the recommendations of the Marrakech Action Plan

for Statistics, or work programmes that comprise all the institutions of the statistical system and include plans which contain standards and requirements for measuring the indicators of the Millennium Development Goals.

23. Most countries have guidelines regarding the professional conduct of staff, laws on statistics and pledges and oaths, but few countries provide staff with those guidelines and facilities that enable them to read and understand them. In fact, half the countries in the ESCWA region are not satisfied with the number, skills and expertise of staff; they consider the budget allocations for training staff of the statistical offices to be inadequate; and most of them lack training programmes for the staff of statistics units in Government agencies that are part of the statistical system.

24. The study recommended that national strategies for developing statistics should contain multi-year programmes for statistical activities, comprise all the data-producing elements of the statistical system and take into consideration the measures and requirements of development indicators. The United Nations, PARIS21 and the World Bank are called upon to support NSOs, provide them with technical and financial resources and enhance the use of international, bilateral and multilateral cooperation between agencies and international organizations aimed at improving the official statistical systems. The study stressed that it is important for NSOs to define the managerial responsibilities of the various data-producing offices of the national statistical systems by formulating legal mechanisms, implementing joint work programmes and establishing national statistical councils, with a view to ensuring better coordination.

25. The aforementioned information shows that statistical independence in the ESCWA region largely depends on the level of statistical system inputs. However, the independence of statistical offices significantly diminishes when it comes to dealing with system outputs, particularly with regard to dissemination, timing and equal access to statistical information for all at the same time and with the same degree of detail. The issue requires that additional measures should be taken in order to achieve statistical independence, with a view to developing official statistics and empowering statistical offices. Such measures should provide a clearer definition of the relationship between the chief of the statistics institute in the Government, particularly regarding statistical professionalism, while his professional responsibilities should be clearly and specifically indicated in organizational measures and arrangements. The United Nations Handbook of Statistical Organization recommends linking statistical institutes with the highest executive authorities in the State, in order to maintain an equal distance from all ministers and officials, avoid any interference from Government ministers in inputs or outputs of official statistics and ensure objectivity and equality as part of FPOS implementation.

V. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN APPLYING THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS IN THE ESCWA REGION

26. The major challenge faced in the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the Declaration of Professional Ethics for Statisticians is to provide a supportive institutional environment for statistics work that is conducive to professional independence in building a credible and fair official statistical system. To that end, the position of statistics institutes in Government structures and the structural factors related to legislative frameworks and regulations must be strengthened, with a view to granting opportunities to NSOs that will enable them to freely choose scientific methodology, engage in professional decision-making and define ways of impartially collecting, processing and disseminating statistical data. That will lead to an improvement in the image and reputation of statistical institutes in the media and among the population in general, while increasing confidence in and respect for statistical outputs and raising their level of credibility.

27. There is a tendency to expand the use of official statistics as an input into policymaking and monitoring in countries in the ESCWA region. The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are witnessing a remarkable revival in statistics, while some countries with more diversified economies are making advances in institution building. Such opportunities constitute a favourable historical moment for establishing a new methodology for setting foundations for evidence-based planning. In that regard, there is a

need to ensure increased transparency in statistical work and information-sharing and devise a clear vision of the role of official statistics as one geared towards overseeing projects, evaluating the distribution of benefits to the various sectors and assessing the impact of policy on those sectors.

28. If official statistics are to keep up with the historical opportunity currently afforded to the ESCWA region, two major challenges must be faced, namely, gaining the trust of the people and exhibiting credibility and objectivity, with a view to creating an appropriate statistical system. In order to gain public trust, the statistical system must be neutral, non-political, independent and objective; it must adhere to high standards of quality; respect the confidentiality of information and privacy of individuals and institutions; and comply with standards of professional transparency in its working methodology. Statistical institutes will only be relevant if the needs of both Government and society are included in inputs and outputs of the statistical programme, which require complete statistical independence.

29. The achievement of statistical independence is an important step that must be taken in order to apply FPOS and the Declaration on Professional Ethics for Statisticians, both of which make it possible to build a statistical system characterized by respect and credibility, and thereby ensure public access to accurate statistical data and offer high-quality outputs to Government and society.

VI. REQUIRED INTERVENTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF MEMBER COUNTRIES IN APPLYING THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

30. In view of the increasing demand for statistics, the developing role of the media and the growing private sector, the integrity and independence of the statistical system have become fundamental to its survival. Such integrity refers to statistical teams, the statistical process and statistical data as an integrated and inseparable whole. The integrity of the statistical system is one of the conditions for excellence in official statistics recognized by users and society alike. Therefore, organizational and statistical measures must take the soundness of the statistical system as the starting point, which requires the adoption of regulations to govern the relationship between statistical institutes and other Government bodies and complement protocols and measures within statistical institutes. Independent bodies should be established in order to evaluate the extent of FPOS application in statistical institutes.

31. Provided that legislative arrangements ensure the professional independence of statistical institutes, the creation of opportunities for NSOs to apply FPOS requires a review of such legislation in order to define the relationship, scope and responsibilities of the three organizational levels, namely, the statistical institute, the chief of the statistical institute and the consultative council of official statistics.

32. Pursuant to the United Nations Handbook of Statistical Organization, which emphasizes the importance of linking statistical institutes with the top executive authorities in the country, a review of organizational arrangements relating to the position of statistical institutes in the Government structure should be undertaken with a view to strengthening the role of statistics therein.

33. NSOs should be instructed to apply FPOS and the Declaration on Professional Ethics for Statisticians once member country Governments have ratified those instruments following study and adjustment thereof, thus adopting them as national standards.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

34. The general situation in ESCWA member countries regarding the application of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, issued by the United Nations in 1994, and the Declaration on Professional Ethics, issued by ISI in 1975, requires additional measures in order to provide a supportive environment for implementing those Principles.

35. The need for statistical independence in the context of the normal development of the national, regional and international statistical systems, which was the subject of extensive debates that led to

unanimous agreement in the Arab region in general and the ESCWA region in particular indicates that practical action must be taken to ensure the integrity and independence of the statistical system. Such action will strengthen the status of official statistics, especially with regard to increasing public confidence in those statistics and NSOs, while creating a reputation in the media and amongst the general public for NSO professionalism and objectivity and fostering confidence in their outputs. Statistical system impartiality and independence will provide Governments in the ESCWA region with an objective tool based on scientific standards and methodology that has credibility in identifying, observing and evaluating demographic, social, economic and environmental situations.

36. At ESCWA, organizational measures should be taken in order to encourage member countries to apply FPOS, which can be achieved by strengthening the status and professional independence of official statistics and providing the advice and technical support needed by member countries that wish to improve and consolidate the official statistical system.

37. Member countries should undertake legislative revisions of the legal provisions that govern the work of statistical institutes and ensure their independence and independence. Similarly, the position of statistical institutes in the Government structure should be revised by member country Governments, and the organizational measures necessary for enhancing the status of statistics should be taken, with a view to gaining the confidence of the public and preserving the credibility, professional independence and impartiality of statistical institutes and the integrity of the statistical system.

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Annex

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS*

Principle 1. Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honor citizens' entitlement to public information.

Principle 2. To retain trust in official statistics, the statistical agencies need to decide according to strictly professional considerations, including scientific principles and professional ethics, on the methods and procedures for the collection, processing, storage and presentation of statistical data.

Principle 3. To facilitate a correct interpretation of the data, the statistical agencies are to present information according to scientific standards on the sources, methods and procedures of the statistics.

Principle 4. The statistical agencies are entitled to comment on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics.

Principle 5. Data for statistical purposes may be drawn from all types of sources, be they statistical surveys or administrative records. Statistical agencies are to choose the source with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents.

Principle 6. Individual data collected by statistical agencies for statistical compilation, whether they refer to natural or legal persons, are to be strictly confidential and used exclusively for statistical purposes.

Principle 7. The laws, regulations and measures under which the statistical systems operate are to be made public.

Principle 8. Coordination among statistical agencies within countries is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.

Principle 9. The use by statistical agencies in each country of international concepts, classifications and methods promotes the consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all official levels.

Principle 10. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries.

* The United Nations Statistical Commission adopted those Principles at its special session, which was held from 11 to 15 April 1994. They are contained in its report on that session (E/1994/29-E/CN.3/1994/18).