

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

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**REGIONAL AND GLOBAL PRIORITIES****IMPROVING STATISTICAL DATA TO MONITOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF  
THE POST 2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES****Summary**

The importance of statistics for the post-2015 agenda has been underscored by a number of stakeholders, with the annual report of the Secretary General to the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) introducing the concept of a 'data revolution'. The development strategies of the future will increasingly rely on statistics for policymaking and the monitoring of implementation. Therefore, statistics will need to be internationally comparable and consistent, and will also have to provide detailed breakdowns for smaller areas and address local specificities. Data will also be needed to support policies in areas that are currently not covered by official statistics, such as governance, political participation and human rights.

This technical paper outlines the role of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in partnering with other regional and international stakeholders to improve official statistics capacities in the Arab region and expand the reach of the Data Revolution for the benefit of Governments, local communities and private citizens.

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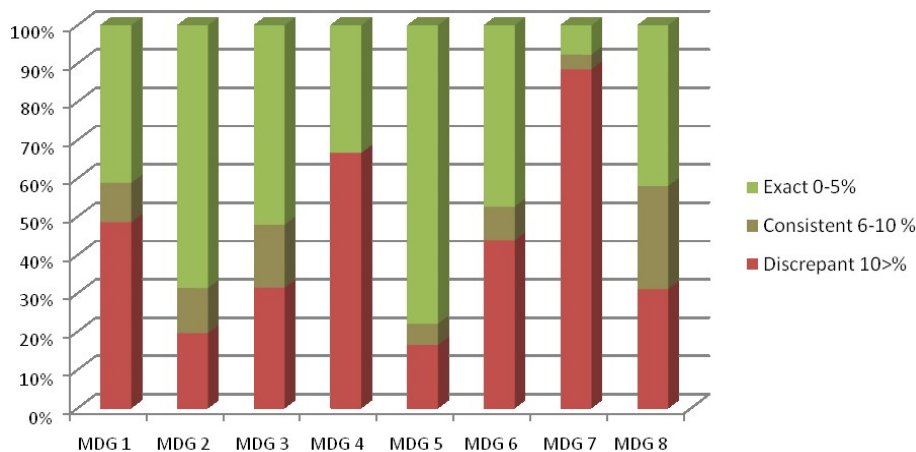
## **Introduction**

1. The post-2015 development agenda still has a way to go before it assumes its final shape. However, it can already be said that it will be much broader and more comprehensive than the Millennium Development agenda. It is clear that there will be a greater focus on impact and efficient use of resources. The development strategies of the future will require more statistical evidence to support decisions by national and local policy-makers on steering the programmes, but also for international donors who insist on more efficient utilisation of resources. Therefore, statistics will need to be internationally comparable and consistent, and will also have to provide detailed breakdowns for smaller areas and address local specificities.
2. The importance of statistics for the post-2015 development agenda was also recognized by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, which extended an invitation to the statistics community to organize a one-day side event on statistical monitoring and measurement, following the regular session of the Open Working Group in December 2013. The annual Report of the Secretary General to the General Assembly on MDGs, while focusing mainly on acceleration towards the MDGs, contained a section on the preparations for the post-2015 development agenda. The Report introduced the idea of a 'data revolution'.
3. Data will also be needed to support policies in areas that are currently not covered by official statistics, such as governance, political participation and human rights. There are various advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations that provide these kinds of data. However, treating these subjects within the framework of official statistics may help to improve impartiality and the soundness of their methodology and collection, as well as provide more comprehensive coverage across countries.
4. In the Arab region, the alignment of national statistical systems is conditioned by advancements in institution-building, modernization and adjustments to legislative frameworks, in line with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

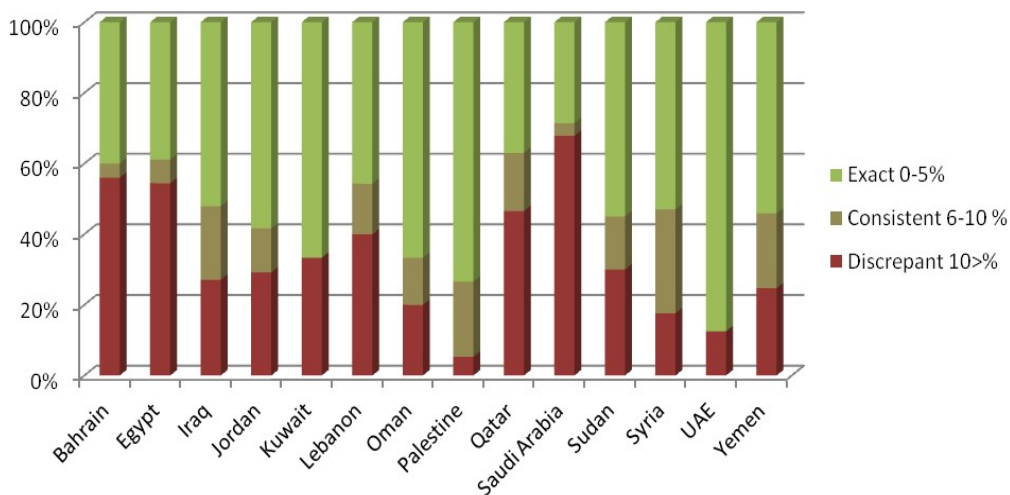
### **I. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS PROCESS**

5. Before proceeding with discussion of future statistical needs, it is helpful to explore the lessons learned from the experience of the Millennium Development Goals. The United Nations Task Force working group on monitoring and indicators launched its report "Statistics and indicators for the post-2015 development agenda" in Geneva on 4 July 2013. This launch was organized as a side event to the annual Economic and Social Council Annual Ministerial Review. The report reflects lessons learned from the MDG-monitoring process.
6. The original monitoring framework of MDG indicators was developed in 2002 for the purposes of reporting at the global level. This process resulted in certain disadvantages of the framework that accompanied the statistical monitoring of progress towards the MDGs.
7. First, there was a lack of national ownership of the data. This was partly due to the fact that data were not recognized by member countries, as they were produced (and often estimated) by international organizations in charge of individual goals. ESCWA undertook an assessment every two years of discrepancies between nationally reported data and international data. This assessment was subsequently used to address the most important discrepancies on a case-by-case basis. While progress was made on improving data and decreasing discrepancies and variations, significant resources were targeted towards the improvement of statistics on MDGs, rather than on monitoring MDGs themselves.
8. The following two graphs show the situation in the ESCWA region in 2012. They indicate that even close to the 2015 target, and despite significant improvements, considerable statistical discrepancies remain.

**Situation of individual goals within the MDG framework**



**Data variations and discrepancies by country**



9. However, data variations and discrepancies were not the main reason behind the lack of national ownership. It should be recalled that the central purpose of these statistics is to provide evidence to policy-makers, whether at the national, sub-national or municipal level. With this in mind, statistics should be designed on the basis of policy issues to be addressed. In other words, while statistical efforts concentrated on top-down approaches to arriving at internationally comparable and consistent data, less effort was placed on a bottom-up policy approach, and these efforts came mainly at the beginning of the process.

10. A considerable effort has been made to develop the statistical literacy of policy-makers and encourage them to use the MDG data. Still, more could be done to help the MDG data respond more closely to policy needs.

## II. DATA REVOLUTION: A PARTNERSHIP FOR STATISTICS IN THE POST 2015 AGENDA

11. The international statistical community holds a collective responsibility to achieve greater consistency of data in support of development agendas. In recognizing this, the multilateral development banks (the World Bank and regional development banks), the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund have concluded a Memorandum of Understanding at the level of their Executives. The Memorandum draws on lessons learned from the MDG process and sets out guiding principles, including:

- Collaboration and coordination in provision of support to member countries;
- Emphasis on national ownership and leadership by supporting prioritized and realistic national statistical strategies and work programmes;
- Coordinated data collection and sharing of data among international organizations;
- Harmonized approach to statistical capacity development;
- Raising awareness and promoting the use of development data;
- Enhancing the quality and usability of statistics.

12. The Global Partnership based on the Memorandum actively embarked on developing an action plan that tackles issues of standardized measures of household well-being; sustainability measures and integrated economic statistics and national accounts. The action plan also recognizes the need to support new ways of collecting data, such as making use of administrative registers and records for statistical purposes. The Global Partnership also recognizes the importance of improved data accessibility to a wide community of users, from policy makers to analysts, academics and researchers, the media and the public at large.

### **III. REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DATA REVOLUTION**

13. Similar to the system of multilateral development banks, the United Nations system has a structure federating its global and regional components. The Regional Commissions of the United Nations all boast full statistics divisions, and their work programmes are steered by the regional Statistical Committees. The Regional Commissions will thus have a two-pronged role in the data revolution.

14. First, the Regional Commissions are in constant contact with the national statistical offices of their respective regions, as well as other official sources of national statistics. In this way they are instrumental to improving the coordination of statistics; reflecting national, sub-national and local policy needs; developing the statistical capacities of national authorities; and improving official statistics at the source. This is an important but difficult role, because the Regional Commissions will serve as the meeting point for top-down and bottom-up approaches to development indicators. In reconciling these two streams, ESCWA is mandated, by its Statistical Committee, to pay due attention to national data, support national statistical systems and respond to their requests for technical assistance, as well as lead regional efforts towards the development of statistical capacities.

15. The other role of the Regional Commissions is to ensure that all players and stakeholders in regional statistics pursue their activities in a coordinated manner. In order to succeed in this task, ESCWA shall maintain partnerships with:

- Statistics and Data Base Department of the League of Arab States (LAS);
- Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS);
- Statistics Centre of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC Stat);
- Statistical, Economic, Social, Training and Research Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC) of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC);
- Statistics Directorate of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB);
- Regional Office of the World Bank;
- International Monetary Fund Middle East Technical Assistance Centre (METAC);
- Regional offices of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes;

- Statistical functions of United Nations departments, agencies, and funds with programmes targeting the ESCWA region;
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), notably its Statistics Directorate and the International Energy Agency (OECD/IEA);
- Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat).

16. Through the further development and strengthening of these partnerships, ESCWA shall contribute to reinforcing the Global Partnership. The organizations involved, primarily LAS, AITRS and ESCWA have already laid the foundations for successful joint undertaking in the field of statistical capacity development. This coordinated approach has enabled more efficient utilisation of resources, and has provided for increased benefits to Arab countries from statistical capacity development activities. Multilateral and bilateral dialogues are underway among all of the organizations listed above.

#### IV. REGIONAL CHALLENGES

17. While the development of national statistical systems in the ESCWA region varies from country to country, common challenges can be identified. These include:

- A limited availability of statistical data due to technical and methodological issues, but often also due to restrictions imposed on the release of information;
- An urgent need for closer collaboration between various producers of official statistics at the national level;
- Linking policy needs and statistical activities, and making statistics an effective tool for evidence-based policymaking;
- Improvements needed to the institutional set-up and legal frameworks of official statistics in ESCWA countries, in line with the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics;
- Achieving greater resource efficiency in data collection, in particular through exploiting administrative registers and records;
- Addressing issues of quality of data, as well as data dissemination and communication.

18. The quality, consistency and comparability of data remain of crucial importance, and the role of the Arab regional statistical system is to ensure the harmonization of statistics, taking into account its cultural and political specificities, but also synergies that are stronger than in other regions. It is important to ensure comparability and alignment with international standards, and at the same time responsiveness to policy needs at the local level. This will only be possible if regional issues are addressed with the participation of national statistical offices and other national partners and stakeholders involved in official statistics.

19. From the thematic areas, the work in coming years should focus on implementation of the System of National Accounts 2008 (2008 SNA). This goes hand-in-hand with the development of an integrated approach to economic statistics, and integrating economic statistics with statistics on population, social issues and the environment. The area of demographic and social statistics faces the important challenge of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS). Future activities on labour statistics should tackle the issues of quality of work. Environmental statistics will require more availability of data, in particular those needed for implementation of the System of Environment Economic Accounts (SEEA). Agricultural statistics are to be addressed in conjunction with statistics on rural development.

20. The region has made progress in reporting sex-disaggregated data and providing gender-sensitive indicators. There is, however, still more to do, in particular in terms of streamlining gender perspectives into

all applicable areas of statistics, and expanding this perspective to other vulnerable groups (e.g. youth, children, disabled, the elderly, etc.)

## **V. ROLE OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEMS**

21. All data intended for use at the international level originates with member countries. It is thus impossible to speak of a data revolution without considering the foundational role of national statistical offices and national statistical systems. It is a challenging task to cater to diverse audiences, including local and national policy-makers, civil society and international organizations. These audiences have diverse needs that may result in some contradictions. ESCWA is committed to work together with member countries whenever these contradictions occur.

22. The basic function of the ESCWA Statistics Division remains helping member countries to further develop their statistical capacities. This includes building skills, facilitating knowledge transfer, sharing experiences, addressing institutional frameworks, improving legal frameworks and providing an organizational platform for regional statistical activities.

23. National coordination of official statistics is an issue of particular importance in this respect. Focus should be placed on integrating national statistical systems, with various ministries and agencies involved in the production of official statistics coordinating their activities with the national statistical office, either under the office's leadership or that of another coordinating mechanism. Coordination must be based on recognition of common standards for the quality of statistics and thus requires the development of national statistical quality frameworks, in line with international standards.

24. National statistics in the Arab countries must also seek new, effective and cost-efficient sources of information in order to produce more and more frequent data. Potential sources include administrative registers and records, but also data from private entities, social networks and the abundance of information available through modern technologies. This requires development of statistical infrastructure such as statistical population registers, statistical business registers and tools for linking and editing of data emanating from non-statistical sources.

## **VI. STATISTICS FOR SMALL AREAS**

25. In addressing issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, access to water and management of natural resources, it is important to recognize that these are not homogeneous throughout a given country. Therefore, data are needed for small areas, in order to identify, for example, pockets of poverty and the socio-economic and environmental reasons behind them. Future statistical databases at the national level will therefore need to combine statistical and geospatial capabilities. Geo-referenced data and the ability to perform spatial analysis of statistical data will provide a crucial tool to policy-makers as they seek to address development issues. Geospatial information can also help to improve quality control in data collection, in particular in cases of population censuses, housing censuses and economic and agricultural censuses.

26. The ESCWA Statistics Division has responded positively to the invitation of the United Nations Headquarters and the United Nations Committee on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) to become the regional focal point for the UN-GGIM. The member countries of ESCWA held a regional consultation on the sidelines of the Third UN-GGIM Forum in February 2013 in Doha, and proposed the creation of a Regional Committee on Geospatial Information Management for Arab Countries. A meeting intended to establish the Regional Committee is planned for early 2014.

27. Linking statistical and geospatial information is today within reach, thanks to advances in modern technology. This capacity will further expand the impact of the Data Revolution on government services, local communities and private citizens.

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