

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

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**Regional priorities for the coming years
in the field of statistics****Summary**

The present document highlights the orientation and priorities of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in the field of statistics. Specific sections present inter-agency and intergovernmental statistical coordination and cooperation in the Arab region; data dissemination platforms; governance of data and statistics on the Sustainable Development Goals with a focus on leaving no one behind; integration of geospatial information and technology in official statistics; and increased use of advanced technology for official statistics in the Arab region.

The sectoral subject-matter areas highlighted in the report include population and housing census; civil registration and vital statistics; social indicators; integrated economic statistics; prices and financial statistics; transport statistics; gender statistics; statistics on persons with disabilities; development indicators; environment statistics; and environment economic accounting.

The Statistical Committee is invited to discuss the present document and put forward regional priorities for the coming years in the field of statistics, in order to provide guidance for the work of the ESCWA secretariat in that regard.

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Introduction

1. Statistical activities of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) form a part of its subprogramme on statistics, information society and technology. The subprogramme plan responds to member States' priorities as set by the ESCWA Statistical Committee, Executive Committee and Ministerial Session, and to key United Nations data strategies and programmes, notably the [Data Strategy of the Secretary-General for Action by Everyone, Everywhere](#) and the [System-wide Roadmap for Innovating UN Data and Statistics](#).
2. The present document lays out strategic orientations of ESCWA in the field of statistics and is presented to the Statistical Committee as a basis for a discussion on regional priorities for the coming years in the field of statistics, aimed at deriving priorities and needs of member States and adapting ESCWA work as required.

I. Alignment of ESCWA statistical activities with United Nations data strategies

3. To contribute to the **harmonization and sharing of statistics and data**, ESCWA participates in global working groups on statistical methodologies, such as the inter-agency working groups on national accounts and on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-building (HLG-PCCB) for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (first called HLG-PCCB for post-2015 monitoring) and others. ESCWA endeavours to ensure alignment with global statistical standards, in order to maintain high quality and reliability of data and maintain trust of regional partners and national statistical offices through its professional relevance. This work takes place in a close cooperation with the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), other regional commissions and the statistical units of specialized agencies. The knowledge and experience acquired through global working groups are transferred by ESCWA statisticians to the Arab region.
4. ESCWA works to ensure **integrity and consistency of data across the different knowledge products it produces** through the ESCWA [Data Portal](#) as a key element of data management and dissemination. The content of the Portal is maintained in line with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities, based on national data sources and data obtained through the custodian agencies within the United Nations System. **Data gaps are resolved through reliable sources** and/or appropriate estimation techniques (nowcasting/forecasting). ESCWA formulates, for each data domain published through its Portal, a guide for estimating missing data, especially for the most recent years.
5. **Cooperation in statistics and data within the regional United Nations Development System** has been at the heart of the United Nations reform and is based on two established mechanisms: (a) the Task Force on Data and Statistics of the Regional Collaborative Platform (RCP) that involves regional offices of the United Nations agencies under the leadership of ESCWA and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); and (b) ESCWA participation in the data and statistics working groups of United Nations country teams (UNCTs), in particular for the provision of data for common country assessments, assistance in SDG reporting and a tight coordination in provision of technical advisory services in the field of official statistics.
6. The response of ESCWA to the Data Strategy of the Secretary-General also includes **modernizing data systems and processes for ESCWA management and administration**. ESCWA has developed an internal innovation strategy aimed at the improvement of flow and maintenance of data for management and administration for programme implementation, planning, analysis and improvement of service delivery, budget and finance, as well as human resources and talent management. To do so, ESCWA is exerting efforts to increase the knowledge and skills of its staff in the areas of data science, technology for statistics, geospatial information systems and big data.

II. ESCWA work in the field of official statistics

7. ESCWA work on data and statistics is undertaken in cooperation with national statistical offices, and with other United Nations and regional organizations active in official statistics. There are three priority areas of intervention:

8. **Services to national statistical systems** take place in coordination with national statistical offices and consist of bilateral and multilateral activities. The multilateral activities include work on statistical methodologies, such as methods and data sources for disability statistics, gender statistics and the Sustainable Development Goals, inclusion of Islamic banking in the System of National Accounts, civil registration and vital statistics estimates, use of administrative data sources, pilot projects on big data, use of advance technologies in statistics and linking statistical and geospatial information. In addition, ESCWA, in close collaboration with countries, has developed 20 glossaries of statistical terms and definitions in English and Arabic, and a generic law for the Arab region.

9. Technical cooperation involves both cooperation between countries facing similar challenges and direct assistance based on requests addressed to ESCWA. Activities address skills, knowledge, competencies, legal frameworks, institutional set-ups and organizational platforms. ESCWA with partners have developed a number of tools, such as online training tools, handbooks and guidelines. As for bilateral activities, they build on a specific situation in the country involved and aim to provide a practical solution to improve data quality and produce new data that were not available before through conducting regular assessments of data availability and quality.

10. **Data work** is concentrated on the content of the **ESCWA data management system and the Data Portal** complemented by subject specific tools, such as: the [Arab SDG Monitor](#), national SDG reporting platforms, the [E-handbook on SDG Metadata](#), external trade profiles of Arab countries, an [interactive report of the regional component of the International Comparison Programme](#) and a calculator of purchasing power parities (PPPs), and “[leave no one behind](#)” storytelling dashboards that reveal gaps in gender and disability statistics, and other subject-specific dashboards.

11. The Data Portal currently comprises 52 data cubes with a total of over 800,000 of data points grouped into over 96,000 time series. The development of the Portal in the coming two years will focus on improved users’ comfort, implementing data exchange tools, resolving issues related to display of metadata (footnotes, sources, technical notes, etc.) and a possibility of integrating data from different agencies active in the region. The Portal content will be improved by resolving gaps and increasing timeliness through estimations and nowcasting.

12. ESCWA also aims to rationalize its data collection processes by bringing more automation based on the application programming interfaces (APIs) of partners and on the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange standard (SDMX). The automation of data flows is important for achieving an expansion of the Portal content within the existing resource base, as well as for decreasing the reporting burden put by United Nations agencies on national statistical offices.

13. **The coordination and liaison** activities fulfil the mandate of ESCWA with respect to regional and national coordination, and its commitment to the RCP and UNCTs. In addition, ESCWA has established numerous partnerships in the region, which include, in addition to regional and global offices of United Nations agencies, the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS), the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat), the Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization (AIDMO), the Statistics and Database Department of the League of Arab States, the Gulf Organization for Industrial Consulting (GOIC), Data-Pop Alliance, Qatar Computing Research Institute.

III. Subject matter areas for statistical development in the Arab region

14. ESCWA statistical activities address a wide scope of statistical domains and subject matter areas spanning across topics of economic statistics, population and social statistics, and statistics on natural resources.

15. In the area of **economic statistics**, ESCWA addresses the implementation of the **System of National Accounts (SNA)**. The core requirements of the 2008 SNA were implemented by all ESCWA member States. This work also includes the developments in aligning concepts of Islamic banking with data reporting for SNA. ESCWA also works on social accounting.

16. Work on **financial statistics** includes balance of payments, government finance and **price indices**. ESCWA assists member States in producing consumer price indices (CPI) with a view to achieving a harmonized pan-Arab consumer price index. Moreover, ESCWA is the regional implementing agency of the International Comparison Programme (ICP) resulting in calculation of the annual values of purchasing power parities (PPPs). In the production of price indices, ESCWA also promotes the use of alternative data sources for collecting raw data on consumer baskets, such as web-scraping and use of scanner data.

17. **Economic sectoral statistics** include work on **external trade statistics**, where ESCWA is the main source of data on Arab countries' bilateral trade and commodities at the 6-digit level of the Harmonized System. ESCWA succeeded in improving data quality and resolving gaps by complementing the data collected from Arab countries with data from the rest of the world and mirroring trade flows from data reported by trade partners. ESCWA data on external trade are currently loaded into the United Nations Comtrade database. ESCWA has also a unique role in producing a **regional data set on industrial production and resources** (including employment).

18. Capacity development activities in economic statistics include promotion and assistance in widening the use, in the Arab region, of **statistical business registers** as a sampling frame for economic surveys.

19. ESCWA, following a request by its Statistical Committee, has engaged in the production of **transport statistics** for the Arab region covering the **volume of traffic** and **road traffic accidents**. ESCWA is also exploring ways for using alternative data sources in transport statistics, including big data.

20. In **energy statistics**, ESCWA works on methodological enhancements with national statistical offices and on data collection in collaboration with the International Energy Agency of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Statistics Division.

21. **Demographic and social statistics** activities include work on population estimates and use of civil registration for vital statistics. In its work on statistics on refugees, ESCWA also explores the use of big data, and a pilot project on refugees in Lebanon was recently achieved in cooperation with multiple partners, including the Central Administration for Statistics in Lebanon.

22. In the area of **population and housing censuses**, ESCWA works with national statistical offices on the increased use of advanced technologies in census preparations, management and data collection, as well as on linking census data with geospatial information. In the ongoing 2020 census round, which is slightly delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increased use of administrative registers and records as a source of data – in particular in GCC member states. ESCWA also works with national statistical offices on increasing the use of census results in further statistical production, and in particular in the production of SDG indicators.

23. In the range of **social indicators** addressed by ESCWA, subject matter areas covered include education, labour, health, poverty and cross-cutting social indicators, including the core set of social indicators in the

context of sustainable development. ESCWA also cooperates with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on data and statistics related to **food security**.

24. In the area of **gender statistics**, ESCWA works with national statistical offices through inter-agency and expert group meetings on developing national capacities in collecting and disseminating gender statistics. ESCWA also provides an online gender statistics training through its [e-learning portal](#), to which more than 13,000 trainees have enrolled to date. In addition, ESCWA has created a toolkit for implementing household-based surveys on violence against women and published the Arab Gender Gap Report to provide a basis for a regional list of a minimal number of gender indicators and good examples for conducting an intersectional analysis for effective policymaking, and communicating on it.

25. ESCWA has also achieved significant progress in **disability statistics**. It coordinates and implements its activities in that area through [the CASA Group on Disability Statistics](#), as well as interagency and expert group meetings. Such activities are aimed at improving data collection and production, and developing the capacity of national statistical offices. The ESCWA [Regional Guidebook to Improve Disability Data Collection and Analysis in the Arab Countries](#), based on the concepts and approaches of the Washington Group on Disability Statistics, and the [ESCWA Disability Framework: 115 indicators to bridge the gap between policy and statistics](#), are the first regional handbooks published on disability statistics. Further work is needed to implement the recommendations of those manuals and improve data availability, in particular for data collected through censuses and household surveys.

26. In the area of **environment and natural resources statistics**, ESCWA focuses on water resources and use, and the environment (pollution, land use and related topics). ESCWA assists national statistical offices in implementing the **System of Environment Economic Accounting**. In cooperation with international partners, such as Eye on Earth and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), ESCWA is also engaged in statistics on natural disasters, notably in implementing the Sendai Framework.

IV. Interregional cooperation on statistics and data for the 2030 agenda

27. In the context of SDG progress monitoring, the statistics divisions of the United Nations regional commissions worked in a short time on harmonizing the methods for interpretation and presentation of data. Their common approach, called “**progress traffic lights**”, uses three colours (green, yellow and red) to express progress. Three levels of visualization are used for (a) Goals 1-17 – with bars expressing progress since 2000; (b) targets – expressing, on the basis on predictions of 2030 values, how likely target achievement is; and (c) indicators – showing the gap between the predicted and target values.

28. Regional commissions came up with a joint presentation for several events taking place in 2020. The **selection of indicators was based on common criteria** and ability to set target values and clear metadata explaining the indicator.

29. Two different measures are used to assess progress – on track/not on track. The **Current Status Index** is based on where the region (and subregions) currently stand on the Goals. The **Anticipated Progress Index** estimates whether it is likely that the region (and subregions) achieve individual SDG targets judging by pace of progress thus far.

30. The statistics divisions of the United Nations regional commissions hold weekly coordination virtual meetings, focusing further on coordinating the structure and representation of SDG-related knowledge products. **Approaches to regional reforms** are also discussed at these meetings, and in particular the coordination of statistical activities at the regional level within the Regional Collaborative Platforms, as well as cooperation between the regional statistics divisions and UNCTs.

31. In 2021, interregional coordination on SDG data and statistics will also involve UNSD. This will help in harmonizing the presentation of SDG indicators at the regional and global levels. In recent years, UNSD and the regional statistics divisions have been holding bi-monthly coordination meetings covering the most important topics of statistical programmes and of global and regional events.

V. Action by the Statistical Committee

32. The Statistical Committee is invited:

- (a) To take note of orientations and areas of intervention in ESCWA statistical work;
- (b) To discuss the alignment of those orientations and areas of intervention with Arab countries' priorities in the field of statistics;
- (c) To express Arab countries' priorities in the coming years in the field of statistics.
