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**Critical Issues Relevant to
Population and Housing Censuses in the ESCWA Region***

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SUMMARY

The history of census-taking differs significantly between ESCWA countries. Egypt has been conducting censuses periodically for over a century, Lebanon has not undertaken a census since 1932, and some countries like Oman and Palestine have only recently undertaken their first censuses. It is also important to note that many ESCWA countries (like Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Iraq) are currently planning for their next population and housing censuses to be undertaken in 2004.

The aim of this paper is to identify emerging critical issues for census-taking in the ESCWA Region, explore the use of alternative approaches to traditional census-taking, propose measures for strengthening the capacities of ESCWA countries to promote and disseminate census results, and finally assess the use of Information Technology (IT) in censuses in the region.

The emerging critical issues to be considered in census-taking in the ESCWA Region are economic characteristics, disability, education and ICT indicators. In this regard, ESCWA countries ought to abide by the revised international definitions, concepts, standards and classifications (ILO definitions of the economically active population, ISCED, ISCO, ICF etc.) in formulating census questions and in tabulating census data.

Alternative approaches to census-taking are not an emerging issue in the ESCWA region where traditional census-taking remains a necessity to generate required data. A successful population and housing census is considered the most comprehensive, accurate and reliable source of information. It provides benchmark data that can also be integrated with other components of the national statistical system (administrative registers and sample surveys) to provide a full assessment of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of a country.

The technical capacities of ESCWA countries to undertake population and housing censuses and to promote and disseminate census results have considerably improved during the past census decade (1995-2004) because of countries' recurrent undertaking of such censuses (making them acquire the necessary practical skills by experience) and mainly because of statistical capacity building workshops conducted by ESCWA in addition to other UN agencies such as UNSD and UNFPA. However, the capacities of ESCWA countries are often constrained because of the lack of financial resources and an inappropriate institutional structure.

The use of information technology can help expedite census activities, minimize error, improve the quality of census results and improve the efficiency in disseminating these results in a timely manner. Some ESCWA countries have recently incorporated IT into their various census activities, whether in the planning process, data collection, processing, tabulation and the dissemination of census results. In its 2004 national census, Oman has developed a Palm Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) based solution. Egypt is also planning to use Optical Character Recognition System (OCRS) in conducting its population and housing census for 2006. However, it is important to note that a good grasp of IT is necessary to guarantee the efficiency of census-taking and the accuracy of census results. A poor grasp of IT can be a constraint to efficient census-taking.

INTRODUCTION

1. The history of census-taking differs significantly between ESCWA countries. More specifically, Egypt has been conducting censuses periodically for over a century (since 1882), Lebanon has not undertaken a census since 1932, and some countries like Oman and Palestine have only recently undertaken their first censuses (in 1993 and 1997 respectively). It is also important to note that many ESCWA countries (like Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Iraq) are currently planning for their next population and housing censuses to be undertaken in 2004.

2. The aim of this paper is to identify emerging critical issues for census-taking in the ESCWA Region, explore the use of alternative approaches to traditional census-taking, propose measures for strengthening the capacities of ESCWA countries to promote and disseminate census results, and finally assess the use of Information Technology (IT) in censuses in the region.

I. EMERGING CRITICAL CENSUS ISSUES IN THE ESCWA REGION

3. During the past census decade (1995-2004), ESCWA countries have gradually realized the emergence of many critical issues that need to be considered while undertaking population and housing censuses. These issues have emerged because of the awareness of the growing importance of certain social phenomena (such as disability), or because of the need to abide by international standards and classifications (such as ISCO 1988 and ISCED 1997) and the ILO definitions of economic characteristics of the population, or even because of the need to provide the data necessary to monitor the progress made towards international goals (such as the Millennium Development Goals MDGs).

4. The emerging critical issues to be considered in census-taking in the ESCWA Region are highlighted in details as follows:

A. Economic characteristics

5. Census questions on economic characteristics (economic activity, employment, unemployment and the place of work) sometimes differ considerably between countries of the region, making it difficult to conduct comparative analysis between ESCWA countries. On the other hand, a country might use different census questions in their consecutive censuses, thereby making it difficult to analyze trends within a same country.

6. In this regard, ESCWA countries ought to abide by the ILO definition of the economically active population and by the recommendations of the International Conferences of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) related to the economic characteristics of the population.

7. The annex to this paper provides a proposed model set of questions on economic characteristics in population censuses.

B. Disability

8. Some countries in the ESCWA Region (Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine) have experienced long periods of war, resulting in an increased proportion of people with disabilities, particularly among young men who incur serious physical disabilities as a result of armed conflict. In this context, accurate and reliable statistics on people with disabilities are necessary to identify their needs and to formulate policies aimed at their integration into society.

9. In light of the work undertaken by the Washington City Group on Disability Statistics, ESCWA countries ought to reformulate the census questions related to disability based on the concepts and definitions specified by the 'International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health' (ICF). A specific module should be adopted that provides information on the area of limitations, their recurrence, the duration since these limitations began, as well as their reason, and whether the individual needs the help of a person or an instrument to face them.

10. It is important to mention here that ESCWA has recently formulated a 3-year regional project on the "Measurement of Disability in the ESCWA Region" to be funded by interested donors. This project aims at enhancing the statistical capacities of ESCWA countries in the compilation, production and dissemination of disability data. Statisticians and health professionals concerned with disability issues will be trained to use the United Nations guidelines and principles for collecting disability data and the WHO International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).

C. Education

11. During the past census decade (1995-2004), ESCWA countries have made a considerable effort to abide by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) as designed by UNESCO.

12. Questions related to the status of enrollment in education (specifying the class and level of education) and questions on the completed educational level and the field of specialization, should be reformulated to generate data in compliance with ISCED 1997 in order to facilitate regional and international comparisons.

13. On the other hand, countries should abide by ISCED in their *tabulations* of educational characteristics.

D. ICT indicators

14. Only a few ESCWA countries generate ICT indicators such as the number of telephone lines and cellular lines, as well as the number of personal computers and internet users, per 100 population. These indicators are necessary to formulate adequate Information Technology (IT) strategies and to monitor the progress towards the implementation of the Millennium Development Goal 8 (Develop a Global Partnership for Development).

II. ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO TRADITIONAL CENSUS-TAKING IN THE ESCWA REGION

15. Censuses conducted by ESCWA countries have been characterized by individual enumeration, universality within a defined territory, as well as simultaneity. All ESCWA countries have opted for a *de facto* census. This approach was adopted for practical reasons and to avoid the possibility of double counting. In the case of Bahrain, selected factual information, extracted from the civil registers, was incorporated into the census questionnaire for validation / updating by the interviewer.

16. Some countries in Europe have been using administrative registers/information systems as an alternative source to traditional census-taking. However, a number of prerequisites must be met if such attempts are to be successful such as, for example, a set of unique identification numbers for individuals and dwellings.

17. Alternative approaches to censuses are not an emerging issue in the ESCWA region where traditional census-taking remains a necessity to generate required data. A successful population and housing census is considered the most comprehensive, accurate and reliable source of information. It provides benchmark data that can also be integrated with other components of the national statistical system (administrative registers and sample surveys) to provide a full assessment of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of a country.

III. STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITIES OF ESCWA COUNTRIES TO PROMOTE AND DISSEMINATE CENSUS RESULTS.

18. Undertaking a population and housing census is an integrated process that requires careful planning and specialized staff who possess the professional technical skills necessary to implement census activities.

19. The technical capacities of ESCWA countries to undertake population and housing censuses and to disseminate census results have considerably improved during the past census decade (1995-2004) because of countries' recurrent undertaking of such censuses (making them acquire the necessary practical skills by experience) and mainly because of statistical capacity building workshops conducted by ESCWA in addition to other UN agencies such as UNSD and UNFPA.

20. In fact, ESCWA has collaborated with UNSD within the Development Account Project entitled "Strengthening Statistical Capacity in the ESCWA Region" in order to conduct capacity building workshops for the national statistical offices of its Member Countries. These workshops included the following:

- "Workshop on Census Data Processing for ESCWA Countries", held in Amman, 18-22 May 2002. This workshop reviewed country census plans (through country paper presentations) and tackled the issues of managing IT in census operations as well as technology and methods for census data capture.

- “Meeting on a Core Set of Census Topics for ESCWA Countries”, held in Cairo, 8-12 June 2002. This meeting emphasized the need for comparable data based on common census topics, concepts and definitions. It was concluded with the agreement on a list of common core census topics for the region, including demographic and social topics, internal and international migration, educational characteristics, economic characteristics, fertility, disability and housing. Participants expressed a need for networking and exchanging of experiences in census data collection among countries in the region. There was a general agreement on the need to use existing UN methodological guidelines for collecting and classifying data from censuses, and on the need to harmonize concepts and definitions between different data sources – censuses, surveys and vital registration.
- “Workshop on Census Management for ESCWA Countries”, held in Sana’a, Yemen, 12 – 23 July 2003. This workshop addressed a set of topics, including the overview of census management, census planning, management structure, quality assurance, the use of sampling, data processing, instruction manuals, field staff recruitment and training, monitoring field operations, census products...etc

21. However, the capacities of ESCWA countries to promote and disseminate census results are often constrained because of the lack of financial resources and an inappropriate institutional structure. Thus, strengthening the capacities of these countries requires the following strategies:

A. Ensuring the necessary financial resources

22. Undertaking a population and housing census is a very costly activity. Therefore, some ESCWA countries have to seek funding from international organizations, UN agencies and donors, and in some cases, the civil society and non-governmental organizations.

B. Establishing an appropriate institutional structure

23. A comprehensive statistical master plan that covers several areas of statistics (social, economic and sectoral domains) is needed to establish a solid statistical system that is characterized by a high efficiency and a capability to meet user needs.

IV. THE USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) IN CENSUSES IN THE ESCWA REGION.

24. The use of information technology can help expedite census activities, minimize error, improve the quality of census results and improve the efficiency in disseminating these results in a timely manner. Some ESCWA countries have recently incorporated IT into their various census activities, whether in the planning process, data collection, processing, tabulation and the dissemination of census results.

25. In its 2004 national census, Oman has developed a Palm Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) based solution. Egypt is also planning to use Optical Character Recognition System (OCRS) in conducting its population and housing census for 2006.

26. It is important to note that a good grasp of IT is necessary to guarantee the efficiency of census-taking and the accuracy of census results. A poor grasp of IT can be a constraint to efficient census-taking.

V. CONCLUSION

27. With the exception of Lebanon, all ESCWA countries have undertaken, or are planning to undertake, a population and housing census in the census decade 1995-2004.

28. ESCWA countries are gradually adopting appropriate census questions related to emerging critical issues such as disability, economic characteristics and ICT indicators. The capacities to promote and disseminate census results need to be strengthened in the ESCWA Region, particularly through ensuring the necessary financial resources and an appropriate institutional structure. Finally, the use of information technology needs to be reinforced.

Annex: Proposed model set of questions on economic characteristics in population censuses

