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Items for discussion and decision: regional statistical development in Western Asia

Background document

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Member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and variation of the data between national statistical offices and the United Nations agencies

Prepared by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Representatives of national statistical offices of member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) convened a regional preparation for the 42nd session of the United Nations Statistical Commission in Beirut, 3-4 February 2011. They agreed to bring to the attention of the Commission a long-time pending issue of variation of the data between national producers of official statistics and international organizations.

This paper outlines the importance of this issue, possible solutions and expectations of ESCWA member countries. Resolving this issue is a high priority task included in the strategic vision of ESCWA member countries in the field of statistics.

The issue

There is a persistent problem of discrepancies between data presented by international organizations in the databases and publications and those released by national statistical offices. The discrepancies relate to two aspects – availability of data and values.

Major differences exist in the data availability reported by national and international sources. These are likely to be attributed to rather complex reporting mechanisms. This complexity results, on one hand, in a high reporting burden on national statistical offices. On the other hand the international organizations would also benefit from a higher response rate and better access to available information if the data reporting was better coordinated.

Discrepancies in data values are not negligible, because they may undermine confidence of users in official statistics. While some of the variations between nationally and internationally reported data may be attributed to adjustments and harmonization of data, in numerous cases ESCWA countries did not find such a justification.

As an illustration the following examples may be provided (non-exhaustive):

(a) With respect to value variations:

- The UN website on Millennium development Goals (available at: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Home.aspx>) maintained by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD): These data are relayed to the UNSD by various UN agencies. Important variations exist for indicators 1.5 Employment-to-population ratio; 4.3 Infant mortality rate and 7.8 Proportion of population using an improved drinking water source.
- Data on population maintained by the United Nations Population Division (available at: <http://www.un.org/esa/population/unpop.htm>): Many ESCWA countries observed important differences that are yet to be explained. The differences concern total estimated population, annual growth rates and total fertility rates for selected years. There are also differences in infant mortality rates.
- An example outside the UN System: ESCWA countries observed important discrepancies in data used in the Competitiveness Reports prepared by the World Economic Forum.

(b) With respect to discrepancies in data availability:

- World Health Statistics 2010 published by the World Health Organization: Some of the available data are not reporting (e.g. Palestine).
- Energy Balances and Electricity Profiles 2007 (available at: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/energy/balance/>), maintained by the UNSD: The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics report a data annually to the UN, but these data are not reflected in energy balances.

ESCWA countries feel that UN agencies do not pay sufficient respect to statistics released by national statistical offices and to their central role in national statistical systems. There is also a lot desired to achieve optimal coordination and sharing of data among UN agencies. Finally, ESCWA as the regional commission should pay a more assertive role in reconciling discrepancies and gaps and defending national statistics of ESCWA countries. These

observations can be generalized to other international organizations. ESCWA countries expect that other regions may have similar experiences.

Thanks to capacity building activities undertaken over the past ten years, ESCWA countries became better aligned with international statistical standards and more confident in their national statistics.

National statistical coordination

Let's recall Principle 8 of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: "*Coordination among statistical agencies within countries is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.*"

Following this principle, the responsibility of member countries is to ensure national statistical coordination. Practically each ESCWA country has a national statistical office, and efforts are made to coordinate production and dissemination of official statistics through these offices. In some ESCWA countries the legislation explicitly requires that all statistical information about the country is released through the statistical office.

However, it is not purely national responsibility to implement Principle 8. International organizations, and particularly UN agencies, have also their role. While for technical and policy issues various international organizations have their focal points in sectoral ministries and other government agencies, it is highly desirable that all requests for statistical data about a country are made through, or at least with knowledge, of the national statistical office.

One of the causes for minimizing the variation of data between national statistical offices and international organizations can be eliminated by respecting Principle 8 concerning national statistical coordination, in particular by UN Agencies and other international organizations.

International statistical coordination

Let's recall Principle 10 of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics; "*Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries.*"

Applied to the situation of international organizations, this principle requires that these organizations cooperate in collection of statistical data about countries and share such data. This would diminish the responding burden on member countries and improve consistency of official statistics at the international level.

Taking the case of UN agencies, ESCWA member countries would like to recommend a model with one authoritative source of statistical data, to which would all UN agencies refer. Data stored in this authoritative source should be verified and agreed with national statistical offices.

The United Nations Statistics Division might be a custodian of this authoritative source. ESCWA countries expect that the ESCWA Statistics Division assumes a responsibility for the link between national statistical offices and the UN Statistics Division.

Suggested way forward

The issue of variations between national and international data should be addressed at a high level, possibly through a decision by the UN Statistical Commission. Such decision should address issues of coordination among UN agencies, respect to the central role of national statistical offices, verification of data and resolving methodological differences.

The following is suggested for improved coordination of data collection by UN agencies:

- The UNSD is custodian of authoritative and verified data for UN agencies, and UN agencies should use such data;
- UN agencies should coordinate their data requests.
- All requests for data about a country should be notified to the national statistical office, and only national statistical offices should be entitled to release such data to UN agencies;
- ESCWA Statistics Division, the regional structure of the UN statistical system, should act as an intermediary defending national statistics and facilitating dialogue on resolving discrepancies.

A schema of communication with respect to data flows is provided on Fig.1.

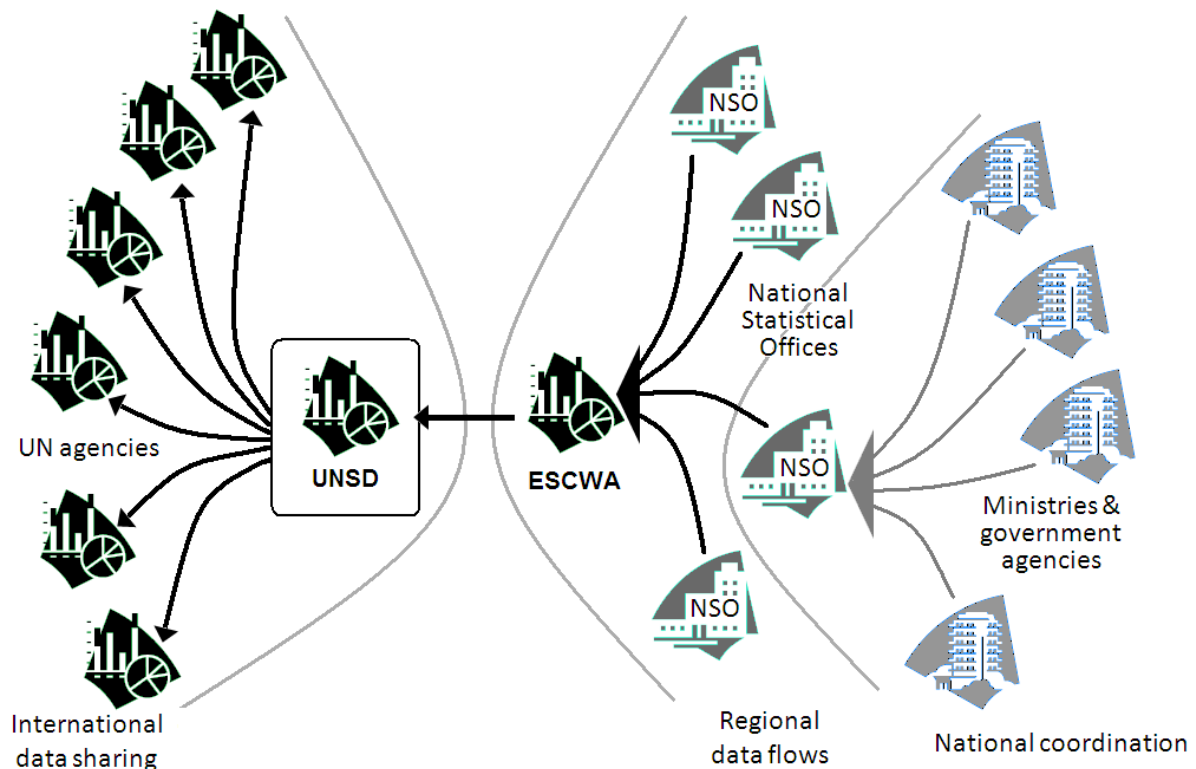


Fig. 1. Simplified schema of coordinated data flows

Variations in data values should be explained on the basis of statistical methodologies and scientific principles. Lessons learned from this exercise should be reflected in capacity building activities undertaken by ESCWA, UNSD and other UN agencies, as well as support provide to member countries.

Targets and deadlines should be defined for improving the consistency of statistics and minimizing variations between national and international data. ESCWA countries see the UN Statistical Commission as the appropriate body to take such decision.

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