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Report of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia on regional cooperation for development of official statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2020/211 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) on regional cooperation for development of official statistics. The report contains a summary of the priorities, strategic goals, challenges and achievements with regard to cooperation between statistical offices and regional and international organizations in the Arab region. The following topics are discussed in specific sections of the report: inter-agency and intergovernmental statistical coordination and cooperation in the Arab region; data dissemination platforms; data and statistics on the Sustainable Development Goals, with a focus on leaving no one behind; the integration of geospatial information and technology into official statistics; the results of pilot projects on the utilization of non-traditional data sources, including remote sensing, big data and register-based data; and the 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 report also covers the activities of the Statistical Committee of ESCWA as the leading intergovernmental body in the area of statistics and the regional working group on data and statistics as the inter-agency coordination mechanism.

The report also draws the attention of the Commission to coordination and harmonization efforts among the five statistics divisions of the United Nations regional commissions, as well as the achievements of that cooperation, in particular with respect to the harmonized presentation and interpretation of Sustainable Development Goal statistics and indicators. There is also a coordination mechanism among the five statistics divisions and the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat included in the report. The Statistical Commission is invited to take note of the report.

* E/CN.3/2021/1.



Report of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia on regional cooperation for development of official statistics

I. Summary

1. Highlighted in the report are the priorities, strategic goals, challenges and achievements of cooperation between statistical offices and regional and international organizations, as well as inter-agency and intergovernmental statistical coordination and cooperation in the Arab region. The report covers progress in the main areas of work, including data dissemination platforms; data and statistics on the Sustainable Development Goals, with a focus on leaving no one behind; the integration of geospatial information and technology in official statistics; the results of pilot projects on the utilization of non-traditional data sources, including remote sensing, big data and register-based data; and the increased use of advanced technology for official statistics in the Arab region.

2. The report includes highlights of work in sectoral subject areas such as population and housing censuses; 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 environmental-economic accounting. The activities of the Statistical Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), as the leading intergovernmental body in the area of statistics, and of the regional working group on data and statistics, as the inter-agency coordination mechanism, are also covered.

3. The report draws the attention of the Commission to coordination and harmonization efforts among the five statistics divisions of the United Nations regional commissions and the achievements of that cooperation, in particular with respect to the harmonized presentation and interpretation of the statistics and Sustainable Development Goal indicators. There is a coordination mechanism among the five statistics divisions and the Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, included in the report.

II. Alignment of the statistical activities in the Arab Region with the data strategies of the United Nations

4. The statistical activities of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) form a part of the subprogramme on statistics, information society and technology, and are implemented by cluster 4 in close cooperation and coordination with other clusters. ESCWA responds to the two key United Nations data-related strategies – the Data Strategy of the Secretary General for Action by Everyone, Everywhere and the System-wide Road Map for Innovating United Nations Data and Statistics – in an integrated way.¹ This involves three priority use cases, described below.

5. In the case of the harmonization and sharing of the United Nations statistics and data, ESCWA will continue its participation in global working groups on statistical methodologies, such as the Inter-Agency Working Groups on National Accounts on the Sustainable Development Goals, the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for

¹ Prepared by the Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the United Nations System.

Sustainable Development and others. ESCWA will ensure full alignment with global statistical standards in order to maintain high-quality and reliable data and maintain the trust of regional partners and national statistical offices through its professional relevance. The work is performed in close cooperation with the Division, regional commissions and the statistical units of specialized agencies. The knowledge and experience acquired through the global working groups will be transferred by ESCWA statisticians to the ESCWA region.

6. ESCWA will ensure the integrity and consistency of data across various knowledge products produced by ESCWA, with the ESCWA data portal as a key element of data management and dissemination. The data portal will be used, to the extent possible, as a unique data source for other knowledge products containing statistical data, with the content of the data portal maintained in line with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (see General Assembly resolution [68/261](#)) and the principles governing international statistical activities,² based on national data sources and on data obtained through the custodian agencies within the United Nations system. Data gaps will be resolved through reliable sources and/or appropriate estimation techniques, such as nowcasting and forecasting. ESCWA will formulate, for each data domain published through the ESCWA data portal, a guide for estimating missing data, in particular for the most recent years. In this way, ESCWA will ensure that there are no discrepancies and unreliable data sources, while gaps are filled to the maximum, and at the same time ensuring that the ESCWA data portal is consistent with data released by custodian agencies within the United Nations system and United Nations Headquarters.

7. Cooperation in work on statistics and data within the regional United Nations system is at the heart of the regional reform of the United Nations development system, based on two established mechanisms: (a) the task force on data and statistics of the regional cooperation platform, which involves the regional offices of United Nations agencies under the leadership of ESCWA and the United Nations Population Fund; and (b) the Commission's participation in the data and statistics working groups of the United Nations country teams, in particular in the provision of data for common country assessments, assistance in reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals and tight coordination with regard to the provision of technical advisory services in the field of official statistics.

8. The Commission's response to the data strategy of the Secretary-General includes modernizing data systems and processes for the management and administration of ESCWA. In this connection, ESCWA has developed an internal innovation strategy that is aimed at improving the flow and maintenance of data for the management and administration of policies and programmes, planning, the analysis and improvement of service delivery and budget and finance, as well as human resources and talent management.

9. To achieve the aforementioned goals, the Commission's efforts will be concentrated on increasing the knowledge and skills of its staff in the areas of data science, technology for statistics, geospatial information systems and big data.

III. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia areas of action in the field of official statistics

10. The Commission's actions related to data and statistics involves work undertaken in cooperation with national statistical offices and national statistical

² Adopted by the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

systems and with other United Nations and regional organizations active in official statistics, as well as covering internal needs for data and statistics with the ESCWA secretariat. Three priority areas of intervention are discussed below.

11. Services are provided to national statistical systems in coordination with national statistical offices and consist of bilateral and multilateral activities. Multilateral activities include work on statistical methodologies, such as methods and data sources for disability statistics, the inclusion of Islamic banking in the System of National Accounts (SNA), civil registration and vital statistics estimates, the use of administrative data sources, pilot projects on big data, the use of advanced technologies in statistics and the linking of statistical and geospatial information, described in greater detail in section IV below.

12. Technical cooperation involves both multilateral cooperation involving countries facing similar challenges and direct assistance based on requests addressed to ESCWA. Relevant activities address the skills, knowledge, competencies, legal framework, institutional set-up and organizational platform. ESCWA, together with partners, has developed a number of tools, such as the generic law of official statistics, online training tools, handbooks and guidelines. The bilateral activities are built on a specific situation in each of the countries involved and are aimed at uncovering practical solutions and new data that were not available before. A list of subject matter areas in which ESCWA is involved is provided in section IV below.

13. The Commission's work in data is concentrated in the content of its data management system and the data portal, complemented by subject specific tools: the Arab Sustainable Development Goals Monitor, national Sustainable Development Goal reporting platforms, external trade profiles of Arab countries, calculator of the purchasing power parities, an interactive report of the regional component of the International Comparison Program and subject-specific dashboards.

14. The Commission's data portal currently comprises 52 data cubes with a total of over 800,000 data points grouped into over 96,000 time series. The structure of the data portal is presented in section V below. The development of the data portal support system in the next two years will be focused on improving users' comfort, implementing data exchange tools, resolving issues related to the display of metadata (such as footnotes, sources and technical notes) and the possibility of integrating data from various agencies active in the region.

15. The content of the data portal will be improved by resolving gaps and timeliness through estimations and nowcasting.

16. Coordination- and liaison-related activities fulfil the Commission's mandate with respect to regional and national coordination, as well as its commitments with regard to the regional coordination platform and the United Nations country teams, referred to in section II above. ESCWA has established numerous partnerships in the region, in addition to the regional and global offices of the United Nations agencies, including with the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS), the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab States 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), the Data-Pop Alliance, the Qatar Computing Research Institute and others.

IV. Subject matter areas in the focus of regional statistical development in the Arab region

17. The statistical activities of ESCWA comprise a wide range of statistical domains and subject matter areas, spanning the topics of economic statistics, population and social statistics and statistics on natural resources.

18. In the area of economic statistics, ESCWA addresses issues related to the implementation of SNA. The core requirements of the 2008 SNA have been implemented by all ESCWA members. The work includes aligning concepts of Islamic banking with data reporting for SNA. ESCWA works on social accounting, which also contributes to the policy analysis undertaken by its economic cluster.

19. Work on financial statistics includes the balance of payments, government finances and price indices. With regard to prices, ESCWA assists member countries in producing consumer price indices with a view to achieving a harmonized pan-Arab consumer price index. Moreover, ESCWA is the regional implementing agency of the International Comparison Program, which involves the calculation of the annual values of purchasing power parity. In the production of price indices, ESCWA promotes the use of alternative data sources, such as web-scraping and scanner data, for collecting raw data on consumer baskets.

20. Economic sectoral statistics include work on external trade statistics, of which ESCWA is the main source of data on the Arab countries with regard to bilateral trade and commodities at the six-digit level of the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System. ESCWA has succeeded in improving data quality and resolving gaps by complementing the data collected from the Arab countries with data from the rest of the world and mirroring the trade flows from data reported by trade partners. The Commission's data on external trade are currently loaded into the UN Comtrade database. ESCWA plays a unique role in producing a regional data set on industrial production and resources, including employment.

21. Energy statistics, one of the economic statistics sectors at ESCWA, is considered to be closely related to environment and natural resources statistics. ESCWA works on methodological enhancements with national statistical offices, as well as on data collection in collaboration with the International Energy Agency of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Division.

22. ESCWA, following a request by its Statistical Committee, engaged in launching the production of transport statistics for the Arab region, covering the volume of traffic and road traffic accidents. By engaging in that topic, ESCWA explores ways of using alternative data sources, including big data, in transport statistics.

23. 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.

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

25. In the area of population and housing censuses, ESCWA works with national statistical offices on increasing the 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 round of censuses, that work is delayed slightly; owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, administrative

registers and records have been used increasingly as a source of census data, in particular in Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf member States. ESCWA also works with national statistical offices on increasing the use of census results in further statistical production, in particular in that of Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

26. In the range of social indicators addressed by ESCWA, the subject matter areas covered include education, labour, health, poverty and cross-cutting social indicators, including the core set of such indicators in the context of sustainable development. ESCWA cooperates with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations on data and statistics related to food security.

27. The area of gender statistics, notwithstanding its strong social aspect, is considered by ESCWA to be a cross-cutting issue. The Commission has developed a successful curriculum on gender statistics, which includes online training, and in which the enrolment has already exceeded 12,000 trainees.

28. ESCWA has made significant progress in disability statistics, in both data collection and production and building the capacity of national statistical systems. The regional handbook on disability statistics, which is based on the concepts and approaches of the Washington Group on Disability Statistics, is the first regional handbook of its kind. Further work is needed to implement the data in the handbook and to achieve a higher level of data availability, in particular of data collected through censuses and household surveys.

29. In the area of statistics on the environment and natural resources, the Commission's work is focused on water resources and use and the environment (pollution, land use and related topics). ESCWA assists national statistical systems in implementing the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting. In cooperation with the international partners, such as Eye on Earth and the United Nations Environment Programme, ESCWA is engaged in statistics on natural disasters, notably in implementing the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

V. Structure of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia data portal

30. The Commission's data portal comprises 52 data cubes containing over 800,000 data points. They are presented in various dashboards and also as core and downloadable data tables. The data cubes are structured as follows:

Sustainable Development Goals

- Core data for Goals 1 to 7
- Goal metadata
- Country profiles

Demographic and social

- Population
- Education
- Labour
- Health
- Poverty

Economic

National accounts
 Industry
 Finance
 Trade
 Transport
 Consumer Price Index
 International Comparison Program

Environment and energy

Environment
 Energy

Leave no one behind

Gender
 Population
 Marriage and families
 Health
 Maternal health
 Child health
 Education
 Employment
 Public life and decision-making
 Human rights of women and girls
 Environment
 Disability
 Population
 Education
 Employment

31. The structure will be expanded further in the future on the basis of the requirements of other subprogrammes and the recommendations of the Statistical Committee of ESCWA. The Commission's ambition is to make its data portal a reference for statistical data on the Arab region, which is only possible by establishing a partnership with national and regional statistical institutions.

32. ESCWA aims to rationalize its processes for the collection of data. In this respect, it will bring about more automation based on the application programming interfaces 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 content within the existing resource base, as well as for decreasing the reporting burden placed by the United Nations agencies, including ESCWA, on national statistical offices.

VI. Interregional cooperation on statistics and data

33. In the context of progress assessment with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals, the statistics divisions of the United Nations regional commissions worked for a short time on harmonizing methods for the interpretation and presentation of data. Their common approach, called "progress traffic lights", uses three colours (green, yellow and red) to represent progress. Three levels of visualization are used: (a) for Goals 1 to 17, bars represent progress since 2000; (b) for targets, bars represent how likely it is that the target will be achieved on the basis of predictions for 2030 values; and (c) for indicators, bars represent the gap between the predicted and target values.

34. Two different measures are used to assess progress: on track and not on track. The current status index is based on where a region and subregions currently stand with regard to the Goals. The anticipated progress index is based on how likely a region and subregions will be to achieve individual Sustainable Development Goal targets, judging by the pace of progress thus far.

35. The regional commissions jointly presented the results at the 2020 high-level political forum on sustainable development and during the Sustainable Development Goals Moment. Indicators were selected on the basis of common criteria, the ability to set target values and the availability of clear metadata explaining the indicator.

36. The statistics divisions of the United Nations regional commissions hold weekly virtual coordination meetings, focusing further on coordinating the structure and representation of Sustainable Development Goal-related knowledge products. Approaches to the regional reforms are discussed at the meetings, in particular the coordination of statistical activities at the regional level within the regional cooperation platforms, as well as cooperation between the regional statistics divisions and the United Nations country teams.

37. In 2021, interregional coordination on Sustainable Development Goal data and statistics will include the Division with the goal of harmonizing the presentations of Sustainable Development Goal indicators at the regional and global levels. In recent years, the Division and the regional statistics divisions have held bimonthly coordination meetings, covering the most important topics of statistical programmes and of global and regional events.

VII. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

38. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To note the progress made in the Arab region on statistical development;**

(b) **To discuss the alignment of the priorities of regional statistical work with the United Nations data strategies, the regional statistical priorities, the subject matter areas in the focus of regional statistical development in the Arab region and the use of advanced technologies for the automation of data interchange and for linking statistical and geospatial information;**

(c) **To take note of interregional statistical cooperation among the statistics divisions of the United Nations regional commissions.**