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PROPOSALS CONCERNING THE PROGRAMME OF WORK AND PRIORITIES FOR THE BIENNIUM 2004-2005 IN THE FIELD OF STATISTICS

I. BACKGROUND TO THE MEDIUM-TERM PLAN FOR THE PERIOD 2002-2005

1. At its fourth special session, held on 11 March 2002, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) adopted the revised medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005 and the revised programme of work and priorities for the biennium 2002-2003. Both documents were adopted by the United Nations Committee for Programme and Coordination in May 2002.

2. The plan refers to the fact that the direction of the programme is provided in resolutions of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and ESCWA. Further direction is provided by the recommendation made at the twenty-first session of ESCWA, which was held on 10 and 11 May 2001, to the effect that ESCWA secretariat activities should focus on a limited number of priorities and be correspondingly restricted; and that attention should be focused on Arab regional integration and the study of mechanisms that would activate such integration, and on reviewing the existing organizational structure of the secretariat in order to best serve Arab integration.

3. The main features of the overall orientation of the medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005 may be summarized as follows:

(a) To strengthen comprehensive, integrated, equitable and sustainable economic and social development at national and regional level;

(b) To stimulate regional cooperation and integration by providing support to member countries in formulating regional programmes, mechanisms and solutions, and assisting them to achieve the synergies and common positions that will facilitate regional integration and a balanced integration into the world economy;

(c) To assist member countries in creating an environment conducive to the three interdependent and mutually reinforcing components, namely, the economic, the social and the environmental.

II. STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MEDIUM-TERM PLAN FOR THE PERIOD 2002-2005

4. The overall strategy for implementing the plan is designed around six interdependent and complementary subprogrammes, which are described in the plan as set forth below:

(a) Integrated policies for the management of regional resources for sustainable development. The objective of this subprogramme is to have a positive impact on regional integration and cooperation between ESCWA member countries, using a concerted approach to the integrated sustainable management of water, energy and production sectors;

(b) Integrated social policies. The objective of this subprogramme is to achieve regional cooperation in the advocacy and promotion of comprehensive and integrated social policies that are region-specific and culturally sensitive and have a practical orientation;

(c) Economic analysis and forecasting for regional development. The objective of this subprogramme is to increase the capacity of member countries to coordinate their economic policies and achieve economic development by providing quantitative assessment of economic and financial data and trends;

(d) Regional integration and responding to globalization. The objective of this subprogramme is to facilitate transboundary flows of goods, persons, capital and services in order to meet the challenges posed by the trend towards globalization;

(e) Information and communication technology for regional integration. The objective of this subprogramme is to increase the capabilities of member countries to harness information and communication technologies for their development;

(f) Comparable statistics for improved planning and decision-making. The objective of this subprogramme is to improve the statistical capabilities of countries in the region for informed decision-making and improve the availability and timeliness of comparable statistical information.

III. THE GENERAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STATISTICS PROGRAMME OF WORK FOR THE BIENNIUM 2004-2005

5. An idea of the general framework for the programme of work for the biennium 2004-2005 in the field of statistics may be gained by referring to the above-mentioned general objective of the relevant subprogramme, which may be considered by its very nature to be the common denominator of the other five subprogrammes; the objectives of those five subprogrammes and the region-specific priorities inherent therein; the Millennium Development Goals formulated by the United Nations in cooperation with other international bodies; and the outcomes and recommendations of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, that was held in Johannesburg from 26 August to 4 September 2002. Some of the most important features of the subprogramme are set forth below:

- (a) Assistance will be provided to member countries in the following areas:
 - (i) The development of sustainable development indicators, with the emphasis on those relating to water and power;
 - (ii) The development of social and economic development indicators that are consistent with the Millennium Development Goals;
 - (iii) The application of the 1993 System of National Accounts and use of purchasing power parities as the true standard for international comparisons;
 - (iv) The development of certain standard figures that are important for comparisons of productivity and efficiency;
 - (v) The production of gender-disaggregated social statistics;
 - (vi) The electronic dissemination of statistics and development of qualitative databases equipped with links for the interchange of information via the Internet;

(b) The descriptive statistical publications compiled from official documents, the questionnaires sent to member countries and secondary sources will be reduced in size and replaced by the following:

- (i) A local database linked to information networks and national, regional and international databases;
- (ii) Analytical comparative statistical studies which gauge trends and make forecasts for the future;

(c) Cooperation and coordination will be undertaken with United Nations organizations and, in particular, the United Nations Statistics Division, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and with Arab and regional institutions, foremost among which being the League of Arab States, in the following fields:

- (i) The standardization of the questionnaires that are sent to various countries throughout the world in order to ensure that data is similarly standardized, reduce costs and lighten the burden imposed by responding to repeated requests;
- (ii) Academic and financial involvement in the holding of conferences, expert group meetings and training workshops in areas of shared interest;
- (iii) The formation of specialized working groups and teams to study and follow up regional needs in various fields of statistical work and incorporate those needs as necessary in the programme of work of ESCWA and the institutions that are cooperating;

(d) The effective participation of member countries will be sought in the following fields:

- (i) Commitment to the application of international concepts with respect to, *inter alia*, classifications, terminology and methodology;
- (ii) The adoption of new statistical systems and use thereof at the appropriate time;
- (iii) Raising the standard of statistics personnel by sound selection processes and ongoing training in statistical fields;
- (iv) Ensuring that requested information and data is supplied with the necessary precision and speed;
- (v) Assisting with the implementation of the recommendations made by the Statistical Committee;
- (vi) Participation in the funding or hosting of some training workshops in order to increase the number and improve the quality thereof.