



Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Working Group of the Statistical Committee
Fourteenth session
Online, 18 February 2021

Regional position on items for discussion and decision on the agenda of the 52nd session of the United Nations Statistical Commission

General recommendation applicable across all items on the agenda of the UN Statistical Commission

ESCWA countries emphasise the importance of publishing the statistical manuals, recommendations and guidelines in the Arabic language, simultaneously in all six official languages, and guided by the Arabic Glossaries of Statistical Terms published by ESCWA.

COVID-19 has halted the field work of planned surveys in almost all the countries in the region. ESCWA countries call upon the UN Secretariat, UN Agencies, funds and programmes to provide guidance on data collection tools and technical assistance to develop relevant indicators that would address situation in crisis to guide policy decisions..

Agenda item 3 (a) Data and indicators for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Availability of data at the country level exceeds that in the in the Global UN SDG Database. It is, therefore, necessary to establish an effective dataflow processes from countries to Custodian Agencies to address data gaps and discrepancies, and that would allow a better representation of country data in the Global UN SDG Database. ESCWA countries strongly believe that the Regional Commission has an important role to play and recommends to centralize the process and mainstream data flow through the ESCWA National Data Reporting Platforms of the Arab SDG Monitor .

There remain a number of SDG indicators that are ambiguous to many producers, especially those from administrative records that constitute 80% of SDGs. NSOs are not able to collect, verify nor explain those indicators to relevant ministries, hence affecting not only availability of data but also effective coordination within NSSs. There is a general lack of technical resources in many of the SDG indicators. NSOs need user-friendly access to learning materials such as YouTubes and organized recorded Webinars in addition to workshops to quickly understand better the concepts and policy relevance of those indicators, the potential sources of data and methods of computation. National Statistical Offices (NSOs) request that UN Agencies and UN Statistics Division (UNSD) to play an active role to support the regional commission's role in building and developing the capacities of member States.

NSOs still suffer from lack of coordination within the National Statistical Systems (NSS) exacerbated by the UN Agencies' direct communication with ministries in the countries. As a result, many of the country data in the UNSD database are not available with the NSOs' own national databases. Many of those indicators

are also calculated by the UN Agency without NSO full understanding of methodology applied. NSOs request UNSD to play an active role to ensure NSOs agreement before disseminating data in the Global SDG database as per SG recommendations. Having the approval of NSOs before collecting and disseminating, would enhance coordination at all levels and would allow national, regional and global statistical systems deliver official data in one voice.

Disaggregated data and producing meaningful analysis remain a major issue in the region. While most countries have no legislation against production of detailed data, many have limited datasets published. NSOs request further collaboration among UN offices to enhance the region's capacity to produce disaggregated data from surveys and provide guidelines to modernize administrative records including use of GIS to enable meaningful analysis at the community level.

Agenda item 3 (b) Coordination of statistical programme

ESCWA countries welcome the System-wide Road Map for Innovating United Nations Data and Statistics, presented by the Committee for Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA), including the priorities and work programme of the CCSA, and call for the implementation of the Roadmap.

ESCWA countries (1) emphasise the importance of national sources of data and the national statistical offices; (2) point out that the coordination between the UN entities with respect to statistic and data is progressing, but should be further strengthened, and data flow need to be streamlined from member states to the UN databases; and (3) there is a need for an easy-to-use mechanism for national statistical offices to point to any gaps, discrepancies and variations in data, as compared to the national sources.

Agenda item 3 (c) Economic Statistics

ESCWA countries agree with the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair group on economic statistics (E/CN.3/2021/7).

The future work on economic statistics should consider the need for a responsive, comprehensive and coordinated system of economic statistics that includes macroeconomic accounts, statistical business records, international rankings and accurate data from household and business and business statistics. Such system of economic statistics should also address global development priorities, such as those related to globalization, digitization, welfare and sustainability, the informal economy and human capital;

ESCWA countries also agreed to dissolve statistical groups that are no longer active in the field of economic statistics, as contained in paragraph 30 of the report of the Friends of the Chair Group on Economic Statistics: the Inter-Agency Task Force on Financial Statistics, the Expert Group on International Trade Statistics and Economic Globalization, and the Joint Working Group Between the Secretariats on International Trade and Statistics of Economic Globalization, the Delhi Group on Informal Sector Statistics, and the Inter-Agency Working Group on Debt Statistics;

ESCWA countries also support (i) short-term projects, based on the needs of developed and developing countries, to experiment with new working methods and to connect networks of statistical groups to support the modernization of the economic statistics system; (ii) development of detailed guidance notes addressing implementation of emerging conceptual approaches in national statistical systems.

Agenda item 3 (d) National Accounts

ESCWA member states agree to what was stated in the report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts (E/CN.3/2021/8), taking into consideration the following points:

- Welcoming the initiatives related to providing in-kind and financial support for the process of modernizing the system of national accounts and noting the need for countries to be informed of the issues targeted for modernization and that are of interest to the region in order for them to have the opportunity to choose the issues they wish to test in their countries.
- Requesting the Group to conduct an evaluation when updating the system for reasons of deficiency and the inability of states to implement it
- Requesting the Group to involve a larger segment of users by holding a global conference that includes statisticians, users, academics, decision-makers and the private sector to exchange experiences in the field of transition to the new system

Agenda item 3 (e) Business and trade statistics

ESCWA countries agree to the recommendations proposed in E/CN.3/2021/9.

ESCWA member countries acknowledge the new model for supply of external trade data for the global COMTRADE database. This brings more complete set for the Arab region's data and respects the national sources. This model is viable and should be further expanded.

The Arab region seeks cooperation with national statistical systems that have advanced statistical business registers, and therefore, we count on the UNSD to facilitate this transfer of knowledge. This should include the concepts, methods and also the tools (IT).

When looking into the challenges of collection and publishing commodity trade data according to the International Merchandise Trade Statistics Manual 2010, ESCWA countries noted that there are still discrepancies between international standards and national reporting, for example:

1. Unavailability of trade data for some countries according to the Harmonized System HS Code,
2. Lack of separation between export and re-export data, which constitutes an obstacle in calculating international indicators).

Agenda item 3 (f) Environmental economic accounting

ESCWA countries agree to the recommendations proposed in the Report of the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (E/CN.3.2021.10), and they request a technical support and exchange of experiences in this regard.

ESCWA countries support the expansion of the mandate of the expert group on environmental statistics to cover more aspects of statistics and indicators and contribute to the development of the action plan. They support the proposal to adopt the model of the system of economic environmental accounting as a statistical standard and to encourage implementation in countries. Countries also support activities to develop and implement the monitoring framework for the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and mainstream the use of the environmental-economic accounting system in policies including climate change, circular economy and sustainable financing. They agree with the proposal for the continued development of the ocean accounting methodology

item 3 (g) Migration statistics

ESCWA countries support the development of core and additional indicators that was initiated by the Expert Group on migration statistics. They also agree to the approval of the revised conceptual framework on international migration.

Previous revisions of the Recommendations on Statistics on International Migration could never be fully implemented even in the most advanced national and regional statistical systems. Therefore, in the upcoming revision of the Recommendations, it is important to have a continued validation of whether these can be practically implemented in most of the national statistical systems.

ESCWA countries emphasize the importance of harmonisation of concepts, while allowing for reflecting the local situations. Migration data are important for national policy making. Regions and subregions need to set the duration limits for short and long term migration according to their local context.

The capacity development in migration statistics should focus practical issues of the use of registers and alternative sources (big data) for migration statistics

Agenda item 3 (h) Regional statistical development

ESCWA countries discussed the document E/CN.3/2021/12 at the 14th session of the Statistical Committee of ESCWA, and made qualifying comments that will be included in the presentation by the ESCWA Secretariat at the 52nd session of the UN Statistical Commission.

Agenda item 3 (i) Management and modernization of statistical systems

ESCWA countries welcome the work on the Arabic translation of the Handbook of Statistical Organization that is undertaken in cooperation of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, ESCWA and the Arab Institute for Research and Training in Statistics. They recommend the endorsement of the Handbook by the UN Statistical Commission, and making it openly available on the internet. ESCWA countries agree to the recommendations of the report E/CN.3/2021/13

Agenda item 3 (j) Big data

ESCWA countries would like to thank the UN GWG for creating a space where countries can come together, innovate in the big data, and utilize tools and technologies to uplift our statistical work and build transformative products that is aligned with the needs of our policy makers.

The UN Global Working Group (UN GWG) gave participating national experts and opportunity to connect with friends and colleagues from different countries, to learn from each other and to come together to solve challenges to be able to ultimately achieve the SDG's 2030. The wealth of knowledge in the different task teams that are a part of the global platform is substantial and we have engaged in different levels with the UNGWG community.

The Arab countries welcome the establishment of the regional center of excellence for Big Data applications and capacity building in the United Arab Emirates as one of the UN affiliated centers in the world. The potential benefits of the center are critical for the official national statistics in Arab countries and to localize best practices and experiences from different regions as part of the global UN Big Data platform. The realistic launching of activities in 2021 is an opportunity to harness practical applications of Big Data for assisting with evidence the Arab countries to rebuild better and more sustainably while recovering from Covid-19 pandemic with the urgent need for more timely data to complement and sometimes substitute traditional data collection schemes due to health risks lockdown, security constraints, or high cost burdens. In addition to tracking impact of Covid-19 and effectiveness of related governmental responses, the Arab countries can benefit from possible applications of Big Data in tracking progress on the SDGs indicators and statistical

In terms of funding, there should be an collaborative effort from the countries to bring new projects and initiatives to the platform. Also to engage with the research institutes community as the backbone and technical arm for the countries thinking about developing their own platforms, this shouldn't be the case as the UNGP has all the capability to host, develop and implement big data project using trusted partners and advisors.

Since the UNGWG was established and the times and work done today has changed to include Data science at the heart of how the group operates. Thus, ESCWA countries would like to endorse the change of the name of the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics to the United Nations Committee of Experts on Big Data and Data Science for Official Statistics.

Agenda item 3 (k) International statistical classifications

ESCWA countries agree to the adoption of revisions to the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC) Rev.4 and the Central Product Classification Rev. 2.1

Agenda item 3 (l) Household surveys

ESCWA countries welcome the approval of the recommended tasks of the working group, as well as the ongoing work on “the collective vision of the new normal for household surveys” - in particular the approach to conducting household surveys in crisis situations.

Agenda item 3 (m) Data and metadata presentation and dissemination

ESCWA countries welcome the proposal for establishment of a new UN data hub. In this respect, ESCWA countries emphasise:

- (1) The importance of a greater integration of data across the UN Secretariat entities, UN specialised agencies, funds and programmes. Data presented in the new UN data hub and in data hubs of the UN entities should be consistent.
- (2) Data in the new UN data hub should be primarily drawn from the national data sources.
- (3) The development and implementation of the new UN data hub should be accompanied by a mechanism for easy and transparent data flows from the national statistical offices to the UN data hub.
