

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Statistical Committee
Fifth session
Beirut, 1-3 October 2002

**REPORT ON THE
FIFTH SESSION OF THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE
BEIRUT, 1-3 OCTOBER 2002**

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Introduction

1. The fifth session of the Statistical Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) was held pursuant to resolution 179 (XVI) of 2 September 1992, which was adopted by United Nations Economic and Social Council resolution 1993/2 dated 2 February 1993, and in implementation of the recommendations made by the Statistical Committee at its fourth session, held in Beirut from 3 to 5 April 2001, which were approved by the twenty-first ESCWA session, held in Beirut on 10 and 11 May 2001.
2. This report, which was adopted at the closing ceremony of the session on 3 October 2002, gives the highlights of the discussions on each agenda item.

I. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE OF THE SESSION

3. The fifth session of the Statistical Committee was held at United Nations House in Beirut from 1 to 3 October 2002.

B. PARTICIPANTS

4. The session was attended by the representatives of 11 ESCWA member countries, namely, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

5. Also in attendance were representatives from a number of United Nations organizations and specialized agencies, including the United Nations Statistics Division, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

6. Representatives from Arab, regional and international organizations attended as observers.

C. OPENING OF THE SESSION

7. Ms Mervat Tallawy, Executive Secretary of ESCWA, opened the session with a statement in which she welcomed the participants and noted the importance with respect to State administration, sound planning and decision-making of collecting, producing and analysing statistical indicators. She also noted the need for a new strategy in the field of statistics, based on the production and dissemination of high-quality, precise, detailed, comprehensive and timely data and statistics. Ms Tallawy outlined the methodology of statistical work at ESCWA, which is based on three interconnected axes, namely, interaction between the various divisions of ESCWA in implementing the statistical programmes for which they are responsible; coordination between the statistical programmes of the various divisions by means of the Coordination Unit, which is also responsible for making the preparations for the sessions of the Statistical Committee, the establishment of external contacts with Governments, international organizations and the United Nations Statistics Division; and the establishment of a committee to include representatives from the various divisions of ESCWA, the purpose of which would be to harmonize the statistical concepts and methods employed.

8. The Executive Secretary also mentioned the most important of the projects being implemented by ESCWA in cooperation with a number of international organizations, including the project to enhance statistical capacities in ESCWA member countries, which is being undertaken in cooperation with the United Nations Statistics Division; the International Comparison Programme (ICP), which is being carried out in cooperation with, *inter alia*, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, UNDP and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Ms Tallawy thanked the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development for the statistical support with which it had provided ESCWA, and concluded her statement by wishing the participants every success in their work.

9. On behalf of Mr Rafic Hariri, Prime Minister of Lebanon and sponsor of the session, His Excellency Mr Assaad Diab, the Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs, made a statement in which he welcomed the participants and affirmed the need of member countries for a greater number of more accurate statistics. Mr Diab focused on the importance of joint regional action with respect to current challenges, and on the need to use sophisticated means of collecting data and to apply international methods in comparing outputs and estimating needs. He noted the efforts exerted by Lebanon with a view to providing accurate and up-to-date economic statistics.

10. The opening ceremony was concluded by Mr Abdullah Al-Othaim, General Manager of the Central Department of Statistics, Saudi Arabia, in his capacity as Chairman of the bureau of the previous session. He commended the efforts expended by ESCWA and wished the session every success.

D. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

11. Pursuant to ESCWA resolution 226 (XXI) dated 11 May 2001, which provided that members should assume the chairmanship of the sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies on a rotating basis, in Arabic alphabetical order,¹ Ms Bushra Aly Muhammad, representative of the United Arab Emirates, assumed chairmanship of the session. Participants unanimously elected the following officers: Mr Muwaffaq Mirza, representative of the Syrian Arab Republic and Mr Sabir Al-Harby, representative of Oman, Vice-Chairmen; and Mr Abdul-Rahman Al-Mansury, representative of Kuwait, Rapporteur.

E. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

12. In the course of its first meeting, the Committee adopted the agenda and organization of work in the amended form in which they appear in documents E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/1 and E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/2. The representative of Palestine registered a reservation thereto. Set forth below is the form of the agenda that was adopted:

- “1. Opening of the fifth session of the Statistical Committee.
2. Election of officers.
3. Adoption of the agenda.
4. Organization of work.
5. General discussion.
6. Review of statistical work carried out since the fourth session of the Statistical Committee:
 - (a) Follow-up of the recommendations of the fourth session of the ESCWA Statistical Committee;
 - (b) Activities covered by the regular programme budget;
 - (c) Consultancy services and technical cooperation;
 - (d) Activities funded by extra-budgetary resources:
 - (i) The development of national gender statistics programmes in the Arab countries;
 - (ii) The International Comparison Programme developed for the forthcoming session in 2003;
 - (iii) The Pan Arabic Project for Family Health;
 - (iv) The development of statistical work in the ESCWA region.
7. Proposals concerning the programme of work and priorities for the biennium 2004-2005 in the field of statistics.
8. The decentralization of statistical duties in ESCWA.
9. Adoption of the report of the Statistical Committee on its fifth session”.

II. DISCUSSION

A. GENERAL DISCUSSION (Agenda item 5)

13. The aim of the Committee in devoting one agenda item to general discussion was to give participants the opportunity to express their views on a variety of subjects and to refer to developments of particular concern.

¹ The Arabic alphabetized list of ESCWA member countries is as follows: Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

14. The representative of UNEP made a statement in which he noted the importance which his organization attaches to the meetings of the Commission, because it is persuaded that information plays a significant role in sound decision-making. He said that environmental data did not yet enjoy the attention accorded to economic and social data, despite the fact that the environment is one of the three basic components of sustainable development, on a level with the social and economic components. He therefore urged statistical institutions to give environmental statistics a degree of attention similar to that accorded to social and economic statistics. He pointed out that UNEP and its Regional Office for West Asia are undertaking a number of activities with a view to supporting the availability of and ease of access to data. Those activities include the establishment of a regional centre for information, environmental assessment and early warning; support for capacity-building in respect of decision-making and environmental planning and management; support for national institutional structures for comprehensive environmental evaluation; and the dissemination of assorted information on the environment.

15. The representative of FAO reviewed the activities of his organization in three fields, namely, economic accounts, environmental agricultural indicators and gender-disaggregated data. A manual had been prepared and translated into Arabic on economic accounts in respect of nutrition and agriculture that were consistent with the demands of the 1993 System of National Accounts (1993 SNA). Guidelines had been prepared and would shortly be made available on the collection of environmental agricultural indicators. Guidelines that took into account the limited resources available to member countries were currently being drawn up on the collection of data on the role of women in the development of agriculture and rural areas. The representative stated the willingness of his organization to cooperate with ESCWA and member countries in any of the above-mentioned fields.

16. The UNICEF representative spoke of two new initiatives being taken by his organization in the field of statistics, namely, the development of a database on children in the region that would include some 200 social development-related indicators, and the collection of data in advance of the preparation of a report on the situation of Arab children. He urged ESCWA to participate in those two initiatives.

17. The representative of the Arab Towns Organization also made an intervention, in which he stressed that sustainable development involved every human being, whether they lived in a city or in the country. He noted that his organization had adopted a programme of urban observatories and concluded that certain cities lacked statistical data. He urged that local authorities should be given a role in the collection of data, in view of their importance in contributing to sound decision-making.

18. Finally, the Executive Secretary welcomed the useful proposals that had been made in the course of the general debate, which would serve the cause of regional integration, and urged the representatives of the above-mentioned organizations to arrange meetings with the ESCWA secretariat, with a view to formulating measures for joint action.

B. REVIEW OF STATISTICAL WORK CARRIED OUT SINCE THE FOURTH SESSION
OF THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE
(Agenda item 6)

1. *Follow-up of the recommendations of the fourth session
of the ESCWA Statistical Committee*

19. The secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/3, reviewing the following points:

(a) *Action taken*

- (i) The use by ESCWA of the Internet to exchange information and data with a group of regional countries and certain regional and international organizations;
- (ii) The holding from 22 to 26 October 2001 of a workshop on implementation of the 1993 SNA;

- (iii) The preparation of sample questionnaires for surveys of enterprises of all sizes, which were submitted to the Workshop on Industrial Statistics held in Cairo from 4 to 8 November 2001;
- (iv) The preparation of a database on social indicators;
- (v) The revision, in cooperation with the United Nations Statistics Division, of the Arabic translation of the document entitled Links between Commercial Accounting and National Accounts;
- (vi) The preparation of a guide to social development indicators;
- (vii) The design of a number of related databases.

(b) *Action currently being taken*

- (i) Contacts are being established with the countries of the region with a view to forming a regional committee for civil registration and vital statistics;
- (ii) A gender statistics Web site is being developed as part of the ESCWA Internet Web site;
- (iii) Contacts are being established with the Beirut International Regional Office for Arab States of the International Labour Organization, with a view to cooperation in the holding of workshops on the economically active population.

20. A representative of the secretariat explained that the role of the members of the bureau of the Statistical Committee and the duties of the Committee were specified in the Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure that govern ESCWA and its subsidiary bodies. There was therefore no need for those duties to be redefined, particularly in view of the fact that the United Nations had prepared those Rules with a view to standardizing management procedures in its own subsidiary bodies.

21. The secretariat is committed to consult and coordinate with bureau members, in order to best serve member countries. It is therefore eager to seek the views of those members, bearing in mind that the aforementioned Rules must be observed. The delegation of Palestine requested that the bureau should employ the same procedures as those adopted by the United Nations Statistics Division.

22. The secretariat requested that the recommendations put forward should take into consideration the financial capacities of and time constraints on ESCWA, which receives very few extrabudgetary resources and has, as a result, experienced difficulties in implementing the recommendations relating to the standardization of the questionnaires used by statistical bodies.

23. The Executive Secretary of ESCWA said that the recommendations that would be made by the session should be of particular relevance to ESCWA member countries and should keep within budgetary constraints. They should, furthermore, take into account the new instructions issued by the Secretary-General of the United Nations concerning optimum organization activity, limitations on documentation, the reduction in the number of activities and the linking of all activities to the United Nations Millennium Goals. Activities should also be carried out within an appropriate time-frame.

2. Activities covered by the regular programme budget

24. The secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/4, referring to the following points:

- (a) The preparation of databases on trade, industry and manpower;
- (b) The holding of workshops on gender statistics; development indicators; 1993 SNA; international trade statistics; industrial statistics; and of an expert group meeting on poverty statistics;

(c) The issuing of a number of publications, including the annual Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region, the Bulletin of Industrial Statistics for the Arab Countries, the External Trade Bulletin of the ESCWA Region, the Compendium of Social Statistics and Indicators, the Bulletin of Vital Statistics in the ESCWA Region, National Accounts Studies of the ESCWA Region, and several pamphlets and wall charts on the situation of women and men;

(d) The participation by ESCWA in a number of expert group meetings and seminars;

(e) Cooperation by ESCWA with many international and regional organizations.

25. During the discussions on this agenda item, the following points were raised:

(a) There is a need to develop the infrastructure of statistical bodies;

(b) In cooperation with the League of Arab States, an attempt must be made to harmonize statistical questionnaires, and to find funding for this project;

(c) The Commission was commended for its support for the experimental application of gender statistics and for statistics programmes in member countries.

3. Consultancy services and technical cooperation

26. The secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/5, in which were reviewed the consultancy services and technical cooperation provided to member countries in the following fields:

(a) The implementation of SNA;

(b) The design of surveys and preparation of statistical questionnaires;

(c) The development of parallel statistical systems;

(d) The preparation of statistical frameworks and requirements for sampling design;

(e) The analysis and processing of statistical data;

(f) The establishment of statistical databases;

(g) The construction of input/output matrices;

(h) The organizational structure of statistical bodies;

(i) Introduction of ICP.

4. Activities funded by extra-budgetary resources

(a) *The development of national gender statistics programmes in the Arab countries*

27. The secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/6, which promoted discussion on the following points:

(a) A request for coordination with the Department of Statistics of the League of Arab States, with a view to extending the gender statistics experiment to all Arab countries;

(b) Confirmation of the important role played by national statistical bodies as centres for coordination and contact in member countries and, consequently, their ability to strengthen national capacities in the field of statistics;

(c) The importance of training national statistical bodies to collect, disseminate and use gender statistics;

(d) The need for ESCWA to continue to make efforts to promote the building of national capacities with respect to the collection of gender statistics and to cooperate with member countries in establishing special units for that purpose;

(e) Appreciation of the work done by ESCWA in the field of gender statistics.

(b) *The International Comparison Programme*

28. The secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/7, which promoted discussion on the following points:

(a) The need to clarify the uses of ICP and the feasibility of providing manuals or other tools to explain how to use the Programme with statistical accounts and data, and with the mathematical formulae used for that purpose. The nature and scope of ICP must also be clarified, together with the types of software used in applying it;

(b) The need to explain the impact on national economies of implementing ICP, and affirm the importance of providing member countries with responses to their enquiries relating to the Programme;

(c) The affirmation of the importance of making widely available information on successful national experiences in implementing ICP, in order to allow other countries to benefit therefrom;

(d) The use of purchasing power parities to adjust certain items of SNA integrated economic accounts in order to obtain comparable data from any country in the world.

29. The secretariat outlined the problems that would result from the implementation of ICP when using models that do not accurately embody the situation of a given society, thereby making the resultant statistics defective. Statistical work operates with a margin of error that increases at the implementation stage whenever the applied methodology has any weakness. The secretariat stressed that the situations and particularities of the countries of the region would be taken into account when applying ICP. Special computer software for the implementation of ICP were currently being prepared, and courses would be held in order to train those who would transfer to countries the expertise necessary to apply the Programme. Furthermore, the secretariat was in the course of preparing documents and information on the implementation of ICP, with a view to distributing them to member countries, and of establishing a web site on the Internet devoted to ICP, which would include all the necessary information.

(c) *The Pan Arab Project for Family Health*

30. The representative of the Pan Arab Project for Family Health presented this item, that is covered in document E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/9, saying that the Project is an extension of the Pan/Arab Project for Child Development. It was prepared by the League of Arab States, which is implementing it in cooperation with a number of international and regional organizations, including ESCWA, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund, the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations. The main long-term objective of the Project is to enable ministries of public health and national health institutions in participating countries to obtain the information necessary to be effective in formulating, implementing, following up and evaluating policies and programmes related to family and reproductive health.

(d) *The development of statistical work in the ESCWA region*

31. This item was presented by the Director of the United Nations Statistics Division, who referred to the meeting that is to be held by the Steering Committee of the United Nations Development Account project in order to review the activities undertaken as part of the project during the past two years and discuss those that will be undertaken in the forthcoming biennium. This project, which was adopted by the General Assembly, will include activities of a regional nature in the field of the management and organization of statistical mechanisms and deal with census reports and issues related to censuses and disability. It will also cover census administration and successful experiences of disseminating official reports and environmental statistics, national capacity-building in the field of environmental statistics, and certain applications of information technology.

C. PROPOSALS CONCERNING THE PROGRAMME OF WORK AND PRIORITIES
FOR THE BIENNIUM 2004-2005 IN THE FIELD OF STATISTICS
(Agenda item 7)

32. The secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/8, *Proposals Concerning the Programme of Work and Priorities for the Biennium 2004-2005 in the Field of Statistics*. During discussion of this item, the following points were raised:

(a) Attention must be paid to satellite accounts, including environmental, tourism, household and agricultural accounts, within the framework of national accounts;

(b) There is a need to establish a statistical forum where Arab experiences may be exchanged, scientific research encouraged and links made between the academic and the practical issues;

(c) A mechanism must be established for following up the outcome of workshops and training programmes;

(d) While ESCWA produces excellent, useful statistics, action must be taken to gradually reduce the number of descriptive statistical publications it issues;

(e) Responsibility must be given to ESCWA for preparing a paper on methods of coordinating statistical work in the region;

(f) Censuses should be conducted in coordination between the countries of the region, and agreement should be reached on the minimum number of questions to be contained in census questionnaires.

33. The Executive Secretary explained that what ESCWA had presented was a framework for the programme of work and priorities for the biennium 2004-2005 in the field of statistics. She added that ESCWA intended to direct resources towards the implementation of projects that would play an important part in building the capacities of member countries, and to reduce the number of publications. She also emphasized the importance of cooperation, and commended the experiment conducted by the States of the Gulf Cooperation Council with respect to harmonizing census dates.

D. OTHER BUSINESS
(Agenda item 8)

34. Under this item, the delegation of Palestine requested that the issue of the structural changes in ESCWA affecting the Statistics Division should be explored. The Executive Secretary clarified the reasons for those changes and referred to the United Nations by-laws which grant the Secretary-General of the United Nations the power to make necessary structural changes and give Governments the power to consider objective matters.

35. The representative of Saudi Arabia requested ESCWA to prepare a paper clarifying the manner in which the statistical programme was managed within ESCWA, in light of the recent changes. In response, the secretariat produced document E/ESCWA/STAT/2002/IG.1/10, in which the reasons for those changes were reviewed, together with the steps that would be taken, either by the Commission or by the Committee for Programme and Coordination in New York, with a view to adopting those changes. The document also described the mechanism for implementation of the statistical programme.

36. Some delegations made enquiries as to methods of communication between central statistical bodies in member countries and the secretariat with respect to the new organizational structure of ESCWA, and wondered why those bodies had not been consulted about measures relating to the management of statistics.

37. The Executive Secretary responded to those queries, referring to the fact that the internal organization of the United Nations was part of the Secretary-General's mandate, while the programme of work and

activities was the concern of member countries. She assured the Committee that statistical work would enjoy greater importance after the structural changes at ESCWA.

E. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE ON ITS FIFTH SESSION
(Agenda item 9)

38. At its fifth session, which was held from 1 to 3 October 2001, the Statistical Committee adopted the report on its work and its recommendations.*

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

39. The Committee concluded its discussions by making the following recommendations:

- (a) The databases developed by ESCWA should be made available on the Internet;
- (b) The role of ESCWA in facilitating cooperation between member countries in respect of the exchange of expertise, statistical publications and information systems should be strengthened;
- (c) Cooperation should be increased between ESCWA and regional and international organizations and United Nations organizations;
- (d) The Commission should continue to assist member countries in developing statistical infrastructure and concentrate on building national capacities;
- (e) Member countries that were not as yet participating in ICP were urged to do so, given the importance of its indicators to issues relating to regional and Arab integration. They were also urged to take part in the training courses that would be held by the ICP regional coordination office for the ESCWA region;
- (f) With a view to facilitating regional comparisons, member countries were urged when conducting censuses to consider the issues specified and agreed upon at the workshop on census questionnaire development including disability questions that was held in Cairo in June 2002. Those issues include demographic particularities, migration, education, economic activity, fertility and disability and aim to facilitate regional comparisons;
- (g) The Commission was urged to coordinate with the members of the Statistical Committee bureau with respect to the issues and recommendations relating to the mandate of that Committee to be submitted to the twenty-second ESCWA session;
- (h) The bureau was urged to hold a meeting in coordination with ESCWA in order to consider the duties it should undertake in accordance with normal United Nations practice;
- (i) The Commission was urged to furnish the statistical bodies with copies of correspondence in addition to that sent through the official channel;
- (j) Countries were urged to send the heads or high-ranking officials of statistical bodies to the sessions of the Statistical Committee.

* Palestine registered a reservation to the adoption of the report.

Annex

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