



Shared Prosperity **Dignified Life**



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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Effect of COVID-19 on price and expenditure statistics

**COVID-19 could affect
the real size of Arab economies**



United Nations
Beirut, 2020

Preface

In the light of the COVID-19 global pandemic, many containment measures have been put in place by Governments worldwide, such as lockdowns, changes to work modalities, travel restrictions and outlet closures. Such policies hinder statistical work, especially in areas requiring data collection through field visits, such as price statistics, which are no longer possible in many parts of the world. To assess the effect of COVID-19 and its consequent measures on the work of national statistical offices in Arab countries, and to find the best solutions to ensure the continuity of data collection and production of needed indices for socioeconomic analysis and policymaking, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to national statistical offices of ESCWA member States. Responses were received from the statistical offices of the following countries: Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. An analysis was conducted based on the those responses. In general, the pandemic has put a complete stop to statistical work in some countries, and affected data collection in others. Very few countries have experienced no impact at all. This highlights the need to introduce big data into statistical data collection after analysing its feasibility in each country, an initiative which ESCWA had already begun prior to the pandemic by conducting training for a pilot project on collection of price data through web scraping. Not only prices are affected: the GDP expenditure structure in most countries is expected to shift, depending on the duration of the pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 is having a stronger impact on prices in some countries compared with the others, especially in categories of household consumption which are mostly necessities. The pandemic will therefore strongly affect the purchasing power of currencies, and consequently the real sizes of economies and ranking of nations' wealth.

The present report was prepared by the Regional Team of the International Comparison Programme (ICP). Further information and updates may be obtained by e-mail: skaini@un.org and sbeiti@un.org.

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Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 worldwide has impacted the global economy, reducing output in all affected countries, affecting the hospitality and services sectors, and raising unemployment following business closures and movement restrictions. Consequently, the pandemic is expected to cause a global economic recession.

Official statistics have also been affected by the pandemic, especially operations requiring field data collection, such as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and other areas of price statistics. ESCWA developed a questionnaire to assess the effect of COVID-19 on statistics, in general, and on price and expenditure statistics, in particular, which was sent to national statistics offices in ESCWA member States.

The present report focuses on the effect of COVID-19 on two statistical programmes: national accounts statistics and price statistics. It sets out the ESCWA response and measures developed to assist member States' statistical offices in ensuring the sustainability of their operations during this pandemic, and highlights the potential effects of the pandemic on the real size of Arab economies.

I. Assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on statistics

A. General effect

1. Price statistics

From the perspective of price statistics, the lockdown measures have put a stop to field data collection in most Arab countries, forcing a shift to other non-traditional sources of data collection. However, the impact of COVID-19 on prices can still be observed.

For instance, increased demand for necessary goods as a result of panic buying has caused an increase in prices of food items, such as rice, bread, meat, fruits and vegetables. The most noticeable price increase is in therapeutic appliances and protective equipment, especially medical masks, gloves and thermometers, as well as other personal care products such as toothpaste, shampoo, soap, toilet paper and, above all, hand sanitizer.

Conversely, some industries have witnessed a decrease in demand and prices, chiefly the oil industry. The suspension of both air and road transport has significantly reduced demand on oil, causing its prices to plummet, which coincided with an initial decrease in oil prices before the pandemic. This decrease in oil prices has affected prices in other oil-reliant industries.

2. National accounts

The pandemic has also impeded or delayed household budget surveys, implying that countries will rely on different imputations of price and volume data. The entire national accounts structure is shifting at the global level, affecting some countries and industries more than others. Therefore, the GDP expenditure structure in 2020 is expected to be significantly different from 2019.

For instance, households have increased their spending on necessities, such as food. Given that expenditures are the product of prices and quantities, increased demand and higher prices of necessity

items will award the latter a higher share of GDP expenditures through a double effect of price and quantity.

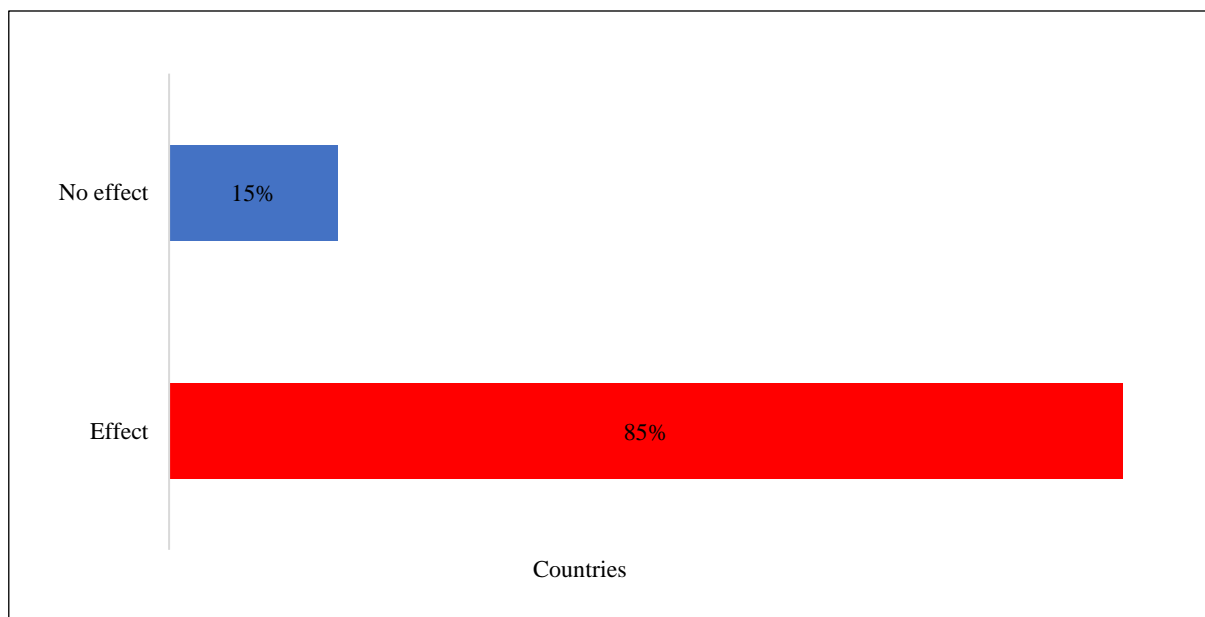
Conversely, given the closure of restaurants, hotels and businesses, and the imposition of transport restrictions, including air travel, the quantities of goods and services consumed in these categories will be low or non-existent for March and April 2020. This trend may be carried forward for a longer period, which, coupled with decreases in prices of items within these categories caused by reduced demand, will decrease their expenditure shares through a double effect.

Furthermore, the communication sector may receive a higher share of spending, given the application of work from home modalities across different industries. The oil sector and balance of payments will also be affected.

B. Survey results

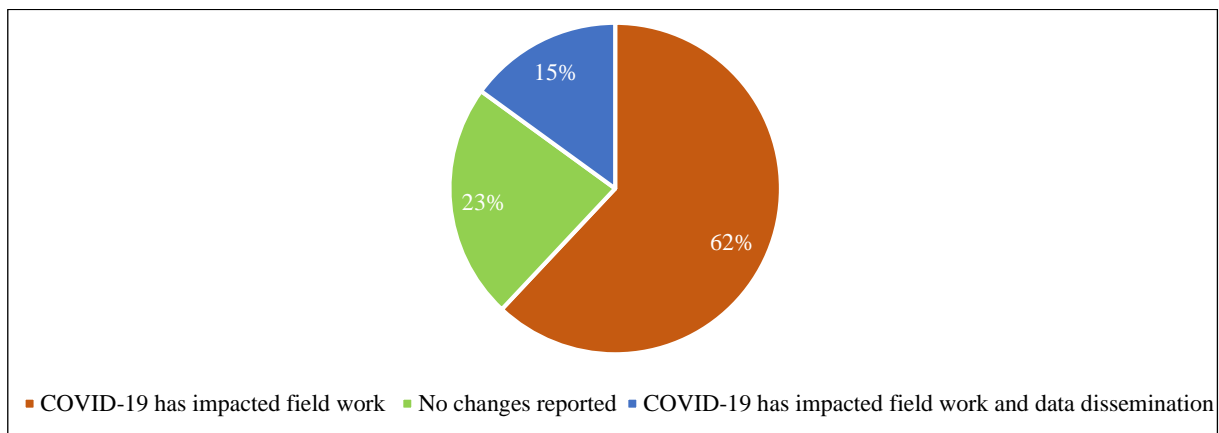
To assess the impact of COVID-19 on statistics, in general, and price statistics, in particular, ESCWA conducted a survey in 14 of its member States. The questionnaire was distributed by email on 24 March 2020 and responses were received from 13 countries, but the results were not robust since the effects of the pandemic were still unclear in most countries. The survey was sent again to the same member States on 3 April 2020, to which new responses were received from 10 countries and no updates from the remaining three countries. Responses were consolidated for the 13 countries, and the findings are detailed below.

Figure 1. Effect of COVID-19 on statistical activities



As shown in [figure 1](#), 85 per cent of respondents stated that their statistical work had been affected by COVID-19, with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia reporting no effect at all. These effects were mostly felt in data collection, as illustrated in [figure 2](#).

Figure 2. Country responses on impact of COVID-19 on data collection and dissemination



Although field data collection may have been reduced or completely stopped in most Arab countries (more so for the purposes of the International Comparison Programme (ICP) than for the CPI, but also for other regular statistical programmes) around 77 per cent of respondent countries stated that they were collecting data through non-traditional methods, such as phone calls, emails, websites, or direct linking with outlets for almost all household consumption items.

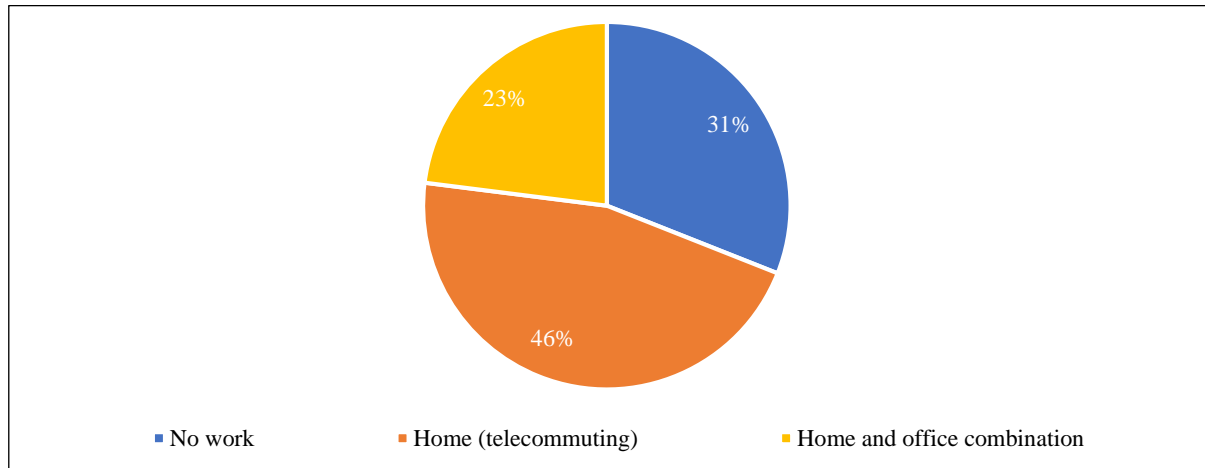
A total of 85 per cent of countries stated that regular statistical programmes other than price statistics had been affected by COVID-19, and that they were expecting delays in data dissemination, with the exception of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

When asked which work programmes and processes were expected to be affected by COVID-19, responses indicated that data collection would be more affected than data dissemination, and that monthly collection and dissemination were expected to be more affected than quarterly and annual collection and dissemination, which can be associated with the uncertainty surrounding the duration of emergency precautions and alternative work modalities. ICP and CPI are mostly affected, however with a larger effect on ICP. The effect on compilation and dissemination of national accounts data was lower than that on both CPI and ICP.

In addition to the above-mentioned price and expenditure surveys, all surveys requiring field data collection were reported to be affected by measures implemented to battle COVID-19 in most countries. The following is a summary of the surveys, questionnaires and other statistical operations reported to be affected by the responding national statistical offices: household budget surveys, agricultural questionnaires, industrial questionnaires, transport questionnaires, education questionnaires, construction questionnaires, producer price index surveys, volume indices for industrial production, labour statistics, tourism registers, survey frameworks for industrial facilities, data collection for administrative records for economic and social sectors, unemployment surveys, immigration surveys, civil status statistics, and research and development surveys. Moreover, some countries had also planned to conduct a census in 2020, which has also been postponed.

In relation to work modalities, 46 per cent of the respondent national statistical offices stated that employees were working from home, 31 per cent stated that work had stopped completely, and the remaining 23 per cent had adopted a combination of work from the office and work from home (figure 3).

Figure 3. Work modalities reported by Arab national statistical offices

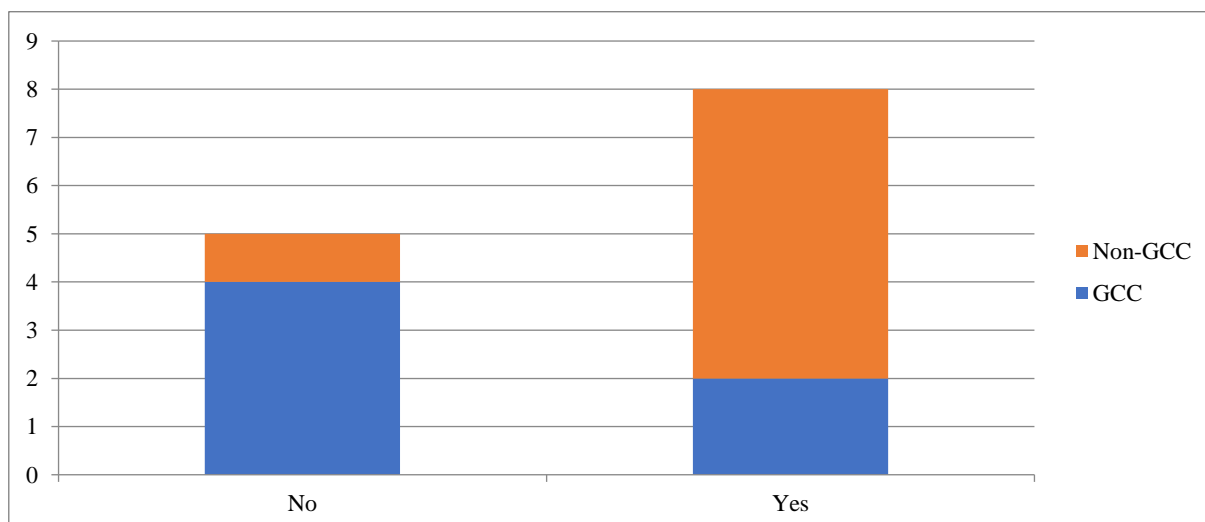


National Statistical offices were also asked about the availability of laptops to staff working from home, thus enabling them to sustain statistical work activities. Only nine countries responded to the question, with six responding positively.

Most countries expecting delays in data dissemination have informed data users of the expected delay. Around 69.2 per cent of respondents stated that the date of resumption of data collection activities was unknown, 15.4 per cent stated that data collection will resume in May 2020, and 15.4 per cent said that data collection was still ongoing.

When asked about the effect of coronavirus on prices, eight countries confirmed that prices had been affected by the spread of the virus (figure 4). Six of the eight countries whose prices had been affected are not Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, while four of the five countries which stated that their prices had not been affected by COVID-19 were GCC countries. The reason for this noticeable difference between the GCC and non-GCC countries is due to government control in GCC countries, where Governments interfered in setting prices or price ceilings.

Figure 4. Effect of COVID-19 on prices



In Iraq, COVID-19 caused a 10 per cent increase in the prices of food and beverages, a 20 per cent increase in the price of personal care items, such as soap, and over 50 per cent increase in the prices of therapeutic appliances and protective equipment, such as medical masks and gloves. In Jordan, an increase of 20 per cent was reported in the prices of food and beverages, and a 100 per cent increase in the price of therapeutic appliances and protective equipment.

In the Sudan, an increase in prices was noted across different consumption categories: increases of 30 per cent on food and beverages, 25 per cent on water, electricity, gas and other fuels, 25 per cent on goods and services for routine household maintenance (cleaning products), 200 per cent on therapeutic appliances and protective equipment, and 100 per cent on appliances, articles and products for personal care (including toothpaste, shampoo, hand soap, sanitizers and toilet paper).

In Tunisia, the price increases were less pronounced: increases of 5 per cent on food and beverages, 10 per cent on goods and services for routine household maintenance (cleaning products), 7 per cent on therapeutic appliances and protective equipment, and 8 per cent on personal care items.

The United Arab Emirates reported a 10 per cent price increase on food and beverages, a 5 per cent increase on cleaning products, a 25 per cent increase on therapeutic appliances and protective equipment, and a 20 per cent increase on personal care item. However, a decrease in prices was noticed in some consumption categories: a 20 per cent drop was witnessed in the prices of restaurants and hotels, and the Government also reduced fees on water, gas, electricity and other fuel prices by 10 per cent for three months.

In Qatar, price increases were lower than in other countries and only affected one category, with a 20-25 per cent increase in the price of therapeutic appliances and protective equipment, especially in the prices of masks.

The State of Palestine did not witness out-of-the-ordinary changes in prices, but the national statistical office is expecting prices to change as follows: an increase is expected in the price level of food and beverages, routine household maintenance products, therapeutic appliances and protective equipment, and products for personal care, while a reduction is expected in the prices of oil, clothing, footwear and furniture.

In Bahrain, the Government interfered by providing food and beverages for six months, cancelling electricity and water fees for three months, and setting stable pricing for masks, gloves and sanitizers.

The national statistical offices also provided feedback, which can be summarized as follows: the current situation has shed light on the importance of non-traditional data collection methods, which some countries resorted to in the absence of field collection to ensure sustainability of statistical work; specific consumption patterns have emerged, suggesting that food, education and health are the greatest necessities, while all other items appear to be luxury items in times of uncertainty; and the effect of COVID-19 is not clear yet, especially with no indication of its duration.

Price increases owing to COVID-19

Country	Food and beverages (Percentage)	Basic goods and services (Percentage)	Therapeutic appliances (Percentage)	Personal care (Percentage)
Iraq	10		50	20
Jordan	20		100	
Sudan	30	25	200	100
Tunisia	5	10	7	8
United Arab Emirates	10	5	25	20
Qatar			20-25	
State of Palestine	<i>No out of the ordinary changes in prices</i>			
Bahrain	<i>Government prevented price changes</i>			
Saudi Arabia	<i>Government prevented price changes</i>			

II. ESCWA measures

The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented the continuation of statistical operations in the same way as before, particularly data collection which was mostly carried out through field visits. Consequently, national and regional agencies are now looking for an alternative to traditional statistical methods to keep statistical operations functional, especially given the importance of data availability.

Prior to the outbreak, ESCWA had already started preparing for the use of big data sources in statistical data collection, and the application of non-traditional methods to complement the traditional field visits. In early 2019, the price statistics team at ESCWA began conducting research and case studies on this subject. Directly before the pandemic, ESCWA conducted comprehensive training sessions in two member States, namely Bahrain and Kuwait, on the use and application of web scraping for price data collection, allowing them to start direct application in their offices. Another training workshop was scheduled for Qatar, but unfortunately it could not be conducted because of the travel ban.

The training aimed to assess the feasibility of price data collection through web scraping in Arab countries, with a focus on certain categories of household consumption goods, such as fast evolving technology items whose prices were to be scraped for the purposes of both CPI and ICP.

Furthermore, ESCWA presented its initiatives, progress and efforts on this matter at the High Level Seminar on the Future of Economic Statistics for the Arab region, held in Riyadh on 21 and 22 January 2020. Its efforts were commended by all countries, the United Nations Statistics Division, and participating regional agencies. The presentation was also made at the World Bank meeting for the ICP Technical Advisory Group, held in Washington D.C. in February 2020, and was warmly welcomed by all participants.

With COVID-19 presenting a challenge to data collection, the price statistics team at ESCWA responded by looking for ways to assist member States' national statistical offices in sustaining their operations. ESCWA prepared two different web scraping templates for Qatar, corresponding to two different online outlets that cover a wide range of household goods and services (not only items related

to fast evolving technology); and provided detailed electronic instructions in a manual to the Qatari statistical office to help conduct price web scraping given that no formal training had yet been conducted. Currently, ESCWA is also looking for ways to assist other member States in centralizing data collection through the proper use of big data, to ensure the sustainability of data collection and computation of important indicators such as CPI in a reliable and timely manner.

The annual PPP production developed by ESCWA is another initiative that places it at an advantage compared with other regions in terms of sustainability of data collection. ESCWA was thus able to create networks and partnerships between member States' national statistical offices and suppliers/vendors, owing to annual data collection of non-household consumption surveys, such as construction, machinery and equipment, a practice which is not applied in other regions. Creating this communication line and fostering partnership between data suppliers and statistical offices enables them to sustain data collection via non-traditional means by communicating with suppliers. This data is important as it sheds light on the effect of COVID-19 on gross fixed capital formation within a country, and enables the comparison of this effect across Arab countries.

III. Effect of COVID-19 on the real size of economies

The global economic downturn as a consequence of this unprecedented crisis will lead to appreciations and depreciations in currencies' real purchasing powers. From an economic perspective, the real GDP measures and the real wealth of economies will be distorted. In the midst of economic uncertainty, many industries have had to close down, either temporarily or permanently. This has led to higher unemployment levels and will cause a spike in poverty rates, thus distorting the poverty line.

COVID-19 will also impact the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) will be obstructed and delayed. Notably, SDG 3 on good health and wellbeing will be significantly affected. Progress towards SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth will also slow. Furthermore, SDG 1 on poverty eradication may not be achieved by 2030 with the increase in poverty and unemployment. Moreover, SDG 2 on zero hunger is related to SDG 1 and will be similarly affected. SDG 4 on quality education will also be negatively affected, as the lockdown measures have denied access to education to many children who do not have access to online learning tools. Gender equality may also be at stake since more women are affected by the spread of the pandemic than men, given that women make up the majority of health and social care workers. The COVID-19 pandemic may also widen the wealth gap between people and reinforce existing inequalities, thus hindering progress made towards reducing inequalities.

The wellbeing of people in countries worldwide will be affected by the pandemic. For instance, if the purchasing power of the United States dollar depreciates against the Chinese yuan, Americans would experience a loss in wellbeing measured by GDP per capita. The comparison of real wellbeing measures can only be performed using purchasing power parities (PPPs). However, the use of PPPs with reference year 2017 or 2011 would not provide accurate comparisons, as the purchasing power of different currencies would have changed, and rankings would have shifted as a result of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, to accurately capture the effect of COVID-19 on the real size of economies, reliable PPP measures are needed, which are computed using data collected during the relevant period. This underscores the importance of producing current PPPs to enable such measures and comparisons in real terms.

PPPs are computed under the framework of the International Comparison Programme (ICP). ICP is now conducted in three-year cycles at the global level with a rolling approach to produce PPPs for the middle year which is benchmarked as the reference year, whereas PPPs for non-reference years are extrapolated from benchmark years. The latest ICP cycle was launched with the reference year 2020. However, the pandemic outbreak has halted data collection activities in most countries globally. Moreover, multidimensional distortions resulting from the pandemic, whether in terms of the irregularity of prices or expenditures in countries worldwide, along with the difficulties in conducting national annual price surveys or producing reliable and representative GDP structures, render 2020 a less than ideal benchmark year, as it may fail in acquiring the required normality for a year to be a reference year and could project its distortions onto non-benchmark years, providing a wrong basis for the extrapolation of PPPs for 2019 and 2021.

However, in contrast to other regions, the case is different for the Arab region where the production of PPPs for 2020 would be an advantage. Using the established ESCWA strategy for producing annual PPPs by relying on a combination of data collection and data extrapolation/retrapolation with increased reliability on actual data, ESCWA has built and developed national statistical capacity and encouraged member States to annually collect a major part of required price data, whether for household consumption or non-household consumption. Some member countries have even started collecting price data for the 2020 ICP cycle. Annual data collection has encouraged member States' national statistical offices to establish connections and networks with data providers and suppliers, facilitating their data collection exercises. This initiative has placed the Arab region in a pioneering position in this field. Moreover, the production of PPPs for 2020 in the Arab region will not jeopardize the quality of PPPs for the previous or subsequent years, as it will not serve as a reference or benchmark year, given that the region produces annual PPPs. PPP production for 2020 will produce value added indicators to the region, as it will shed light on any deviations in the ranking of the real wealth of Arab countries, and will highlight changes in the real sizes of Arab economies and the purchasing powers of the region's different currencies, both compared with other years and against other countries, which will provide valuable insight on the economic impact of COVID-19 in the region.

It is therefore vital to sustain data collection to ensure the availability of price data, thus enabling the evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 on the economy by performing temporal and spatial comparisons of prices and indices of economic performance. To perform temporal comparisons, that is, to compare changes within the same country over the years, CPI is needed to deflate household consumption and show real changes. In contrast, spatial comparisons, which are comparisons of real economic indicators between countries within the same year, are conducted using PPPs. As such, although CPI and PPPs serve different purposes, they complement each other as tools for economic analysis. These two valuable economic indicators rely on price statistics, thus highlighting the need to sustain price data collection. The importance of PPPs does not only lie in their use as an economic indicator to derive real measures of economic sizes and wellbeing, but they also enter into the computation of indicators for eight SDGs, namely Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 and 10, thus assisting in monitoring progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

IV. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on statistical programmes in general, especially on surveys requiring field data collection, such as price and expenditure statistics. However, the effect cannot be clearly denoted yet, especially since the pandemic is still ongoing and its duration, along with the duration of the implemented precautions, is not known. That said, it is essential to sustain statistical operations to provide data enabling the evaluation of the pandemic's impact on national and

global economies. Therefore, now more than ever, there is a need to introduce non-traditional data collection methods into statistical programmes. Moreover, data reliability cannot be guaranteed during this period. Moreover, the year 2020 will demonstrate a shift in GDP structure and other important indicators in comparison with other years, an effect which might be temporary or could potentially linger.

Lastly, at such time of crisis and uncertainty, and with the considerable changes occurring in the prices of household consumption items, along with the shift in GDP structures and the cessation of major industrial activities, it is crucial crucial to have reliable PPP measures based on actual data collected in 2020 to assess and isolate the impact of COVID-19 on the size of economies in the Arab region. Therefore, the Arab region has an advantage over the other regions thanks to its annual PPP production, as indicated above. However, at the global level, 2020 is not an ideal benchmark year and will not lead to accurate comparisons owing to the widespread repercussions of COVID-19.

Annex

Questionnaire

Preliminary assessment of the effect of COVID-19 on various statistical activities, specifically international programmes in the Arab region

Country Name:

1. Did the Coronavirus affect your country in terms of statistical work and data collection?
 Yes No
2. Which operations have stopped?
 Field operations (data collection) Data dissemination None
3. Did field data collection for ICP price data stop?
 Yes No
4. Did field data collection for CPI price data stop?
 Yes No
5. Are you collecting any price data through non-traditional data collection methods?
 Yes No
6. If you answered “yes” to question 5, please specify the non-traditional data collection methods used and the categories whose prices are collected through these methods.

Non-traditional methods used:
Categories whose prices are collected through these methods:
7. Were regular statistical programs other than ICP and CPI affected by coronavirus?
 Yes No
8. Do you expect any delay in data dissemination?
 Yes No

9. Please specify the work periodicities of the below price statistics areas which are affected by the virus outbreak:

Affected programmes	Monthly work		Quarterly work		Annual work		No work was affected	
	Data collection	Data dissemination	Data collection	Data dissemination	Data collection	Data dissemination	Data collection	Data dissemination
International Comparison Program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consumer Price Index	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
National Accounts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. Please specify all other statistical programs which were affected by the virus outbreak:

Affected programmes	Monthly work		Quarterly work		Annual work		No work was affected	
	Data collection	Data dissemination	Data collection	Data dissemination	Data collection	Data dissemination	Data collection	Data dissemination
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11. Was work from home activated?

Work from the office Work from home No work

12. In case of work from home, are all employees provided with computers to continue their work?

Yes No

13. Were data users notified of the delay in statistical data dissemination?

Yes No No delay

14. When is data collection expected to resume?

May 2020 Unknown Data collection is still ongoing

15. Were prices in your country affected by COVID-19?

Yes No

If you answered “yes” to question 15, please answer questions 16 and 17 with the required estimations given the importance of that question.

16. Please provide estimations on the percentage change (specifying if increase or decrease) in the prices of goods related to the below categories as a result of COVID-19:

Category	Percentage change (%)
Food and beverages	
Water, electricity, gas and other fuels	
Goods and services for routine household maintenance (i.e. cleaning products)	
Therapeutic appliances and equipment (including medical masks, gloves and thermometers)	
Telephone and Internet services	
Appliances, articles and products for personal care (including toothpaste, shampoo, hand soap, sanitizers and toilet paper)	

17. Please specify other categories in which prices were affected by COVID-19:

Category	Percentage change (%)

18. Please indicate the source of price change estimations:

CPI data Price expert estimation Another source, please specify:

19. Please indicate below any relevant comments that you believe are important for us to consider.