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Global and regional issues

**The Sustainable Development Goals:
Setting regional progress indicators**

Summary

The present report provides an update on the development status of indicators to monitor the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It contains an overview of the process initiated by the United Nations Statistical Commission in this regard and the role of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals. It highlights some issues that occurred during the regional consultation process and sets out the principles underpinning the regional framework for monitoring the SDGs.

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I. MANDATE BY THE UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION

1. The forty-sixth session of the United Nations Statistical Commission, held in New York from 3 to 6 March 2015, resulted in a detailed discussion on a global set of indicators for monitoring progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) highlighted their common position¹ during this discussion. They asked for a minimized reporting burden (i.e. a small number of multi-purpose indicators) and stressed that statistics played an important role in policy formulation and analysis. At the close of the discussion, the Statistical Commission endorsed the proposed road map for the development and implementation of an indicators framework.
2. The Statistical Commission approved the formation of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG/SDGs), tasked with developing a proposal for a global set of SDG indicators. To limit the reporting burden on national statistical systems, the Statistical Commission decided that the global indicator framework should contain only a limited number of indicators, strike a balance between reducing the number of indicators and policy relevance, and take into account conceptual indicator frameworks that have already been developed. Consequently, IAEG-SDGs was requested to look into the possibility of developing multi-purpose indicators. It was also agreed that composite indicators, which usually rank countries rather than provide policy relevant data, should be avoided.
3. The Statistical Commission also formed the High Level Group to provide strategic leadership for the sustainable development goal implementation process. The Statistical Commission requested the High Level Group to promote national ownership of the post-2015 monitoring system and foster capacity-building, partnership and coordination for post-2015 monitoring.
4. The Statistical Commission emphasized that national statistical offices should play a leading role in defining the set of indicators, in line with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Unfortunately, numerous Member States were not represented by members of their national statistical offices, but rather by representatives of their permanent missions in New York, at the first IAEG-SDGs meeting, held in New York on 1 and 2 June 2015. However, there was a positive change in terms of participation at the second IAEG-SDGs meeting, held in Bangkok from 26 to 28 October 2015. As a result, the forty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission, to be held in New York from 8 to 11 March 2016, will have before it a solid proposal for discussions on the global set of indicators.

II. INVOLVEMENT OF THE REGIONAL STATISTICAL COMMITTEES

5. The United Nations statistical system is backed by an intergovernmental structure that incorporates the following six foundational building blocks: the United Nations Statistical Commission, comprising 24 member States elected by the Economic and Social Council, with other countries participating as observers; and the statistical committees of the five regional commissions.
6. Links between the regional committees and the Statistical Commission are, however, relatively weak. From this viewpoint, it was a historical breakthrough that the regional statistical committees were brought in as partners in this important global activity. Initially, the Statistical Commission Bureau had decided that the nomination of members to IAEG/SDGs and the regional consultation process should be carried out according to the statistical classification M49 “Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistical Use”. This caused several problems, however, and it was finally decided that each regional consultation on the SDGs would be carried out by the relevant regional commission and its statistical committees through their original membership.

¹ As in the previous year, ESCWA Member States held a consultation, with the support of ESCWA secretariat, between national statistical offices with a view to present a common regional position on all agenda items for discussion and decision at the forty-sixth session of the United Nations Statistical Commission.

III. ARAB REGION PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

7. In IAEG-SDGs, the Arab region is represented by Algeria (nominated in agreement with the Economic Commission for Africa), Bahrain and Egypt. In the High Level Group, it is represented by Morocco and the State of Palestine.

8. To enable IAEG-SDGs representatives of the Arab region to discuss a wide range of regional specificities and needs, the ESCWA Statistical Committee Bureau gauged the position of Arab countries from regional events. The positions of and suggestions by Arab countries were discussed at the following two events.

9. The first event took place on the sidelines of the second session of the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development organized in Bahrain, from 5 to 7 May 2015, by ESCWA, the United Nations Environment Programme, the League of Arab States and the Government of Bahrain. The discussion was based on the outcomes of the forty-sixth session of the Statistical Commission, the initial list of SGD indicators and a study on the regional specificities and needs of the Arab region, prepared by an ESCWA consultant. At this event, an agreement was reached on a regional position and the needs of the Arab region.

10. The second event was a regional workshop on SDG priority indicators in the Arab region, held in Cairo on 5 and 6 October 2015, organized by the United Nations Population Fund, ESCWA and the League of Arab States. It resulted in the establishment of a technical committee to study and review SDG indicators based on the needs, priorities and capacities of the region, and to come up with a final regional position to be presented by Algeria, Bahrain and Egypt at the second IAEG-SDGs meeting.

11. A technical group looking into details of the SDG indicators was also formed, which pursued its activities using electronic communication. It held a videoconference on 22 October 2015, just before the second IAEG-SDGs meeting, to ensure that the regional position was ready for submission at that meeting.²

IV. IMPORTANT ISSUES RAISED BY ARAB STATES

12. A number of recommendations were made during various discussions throughout the regional consultation process in the Arab region, as follows.

(a) *General observations*

- Several indicators show a “percentage of countries” – these indicators do not belong to official statistics, but should rather be obtained through a desk review of administrative records;
- Some indicators do not refer to a precise measurement unit, such as “number of policies”, “number of cities”, etc. These cause ambiguity and national statistical offices doubt their accuracy and comparability;
- There are indicators for some of the goals and targets that do not apply to the national level. While this may be fine for global indicators, it disconnects the global, regional and national monitoring.

(b) *Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere*

In addition to income poverty that may provide an important but restricted view, Arab countries support multidimensional poverty measurement. The multidimensional poverty measurement would also be applicable to goals 10 and 12.

² Representatives of the national statistical offices of all Arab countries were invited to this coordination meeting. Moreover, all Arab countries were included in the email exchange on the SDG indicators.

(c) *Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture*

Regional specificities raise the issue of access to water as a precondition for sustainable agricultural production. Attention was also drawn to the importance of measuring access to adequate nutrition.

(d) *Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages*

With respect to life expectancy, Arab countries have emphasized the importance of measuring healthy life expectancy.³

(e) *Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*

Arab countries have stressed the importance of quality of education and how this further translates into questions of decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

(f) *Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*

Arab countries recommend including data disaggregated by age and sex. This originates from the policy requirement not only to ensure gender representation, but also representation of young people in decision-making. In addition, owning a mobile phone is not directly related to empowerment, therefore Arab countries do not support indicator 5.b.1.

(g) *Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all*

Access to water is of the utmost important to Arab countries, many of which use desalinated water requiring energy resources. Arab national statistical offices recommend including “percentage of population by water sources” as an indicator. This links to Goal 2 above and there is scope for multipurpose indicators on water access.

(h) *Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all*

No specific comments other than those already brought up by IAEG-SDGs.

(i) *Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*

Statistical measurements should reflect gross domestic product (GDP) in real prices, households value added GDP by activity, breakdowns by age groups (to prevent child labour), and support for entrepreneurship.

(j) *Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation*

Suggested measures include investment into research and development as a percentage of GDP.

(k) *Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries*

Arab countries have suggested, on the one hand, to address the issues of migration, including the internal displacement and forced migration, and on the other, the issue of brain drain from the Arab region to western economies.

³ Traditionally, life expectancy at birth was used. However, recently, taking into account the lengthening of human life, the focus is moving towards decent life. Consequently, the measurement focus has moved from a simple life expectancy to healthy life expectancy, defined as the average number of years that a person can expect to live in "full health", excluding the years lived in less than full health due to disease and/or injury.

(l) *Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*

Statistical offices have noticed that there is an ambiguity in measurement units (e.g. “city”) and concepts (“land use” vs “land cover”). There are many important issues, such as sustainable transport, that need to have adequate measures developed that do not exist at present.

(m) *Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns*

There are links to goals 1, 6 and 10 related to multidimensional poverty measurement and measurement of access, consumption and utilization of water. In general, national statistical offices of Arab countries consider that it is difficult to find accurate measurements for several targets of this goal.

(n) *Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change)*

Climate change in the Arab region relates, in principle, to access to water and sustainable agriculture production (goals 1, 6, 10 and 12).

(o) *Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*

Measurements for this goal generally do not relate to national statistics. This is a global issue that needs to be measured and addressed globally.

(p) *Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss*

No specific comments other than those already raised by IAEG-SDGs.

(q) *Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*

No specific comments other than those already raised by IAEG-SDGs. Arab statistical offices have supported proposals for dropping breakdown by mechanism and type of perpetrator, because this would create a heavy reporting burden, and the issue is not of great importance at the global level. Statistical offices also supported alternate indicators.

(r) *Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*

National statistical offices have suggested that data may not be easily available and a number of indicators do not apply to the national level. A particular comment was made on Target 17.11 for which detailed data at the enterprise level are not available, so the data on exports of goods and services may not be available in the detail expected.

V. DEFINING THE REGIONAL SDG MONITORING FRAMEWORK FOR ARAB STATES

13. Basic principles for the regional SDG indicators framework were discussed at the second session of the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development. A technical report by ESCWA⁴ served as a basis for discussions and recommendations. It was proposed to define a small set of core indicators (about 30) that would be regularly reported, and provide an overview of the status of sustainable development in the region. Inevitably, these would have to be multi-purpose indicators applying to multiple goals and targets.

⁴ The report was prepared by a leading expert in sustainable development measurement. He analysed the situation using data and statistics on sustainable development in Arab countries, and compared it with experiences from other regions.

14. The issues raised by Arab national statistical offices in the previous section,⁵ with respect to the global set of indicators, should be taken into consideration when developing the regional set. It is important to point out that the regional set of indicators is not supposed to serve as input for global indicators, but rather as an independent regional monitoring framework. It should also be recognized that the role of statistics begins with well-informed policy formulation and evidence for policy analysis; therefore there should not be a heavy reporting burden on national statistical systems, meaning that the regional set of indicators should be limited.

15. The technical group created for the purpose of the regional consultations on the global set of indicators should continue its work and add to its agenda the development of the regional set, under the leadership of the ESCWA Statistical Committee and its Bureau. Specific technical issues and issues of policy relevance to Gulf countries should be discussed under the auspices of the Statistical Centre for the Gulf Cooperation Council, and subsequently brought to the regional framework.

16. An agreement among States on a road map towards establishing a set of indicators is expected to be reached at a meeting of the Arab Working Group on Sustainable Development Indicators, to be held in December 2015.

VI. ACTION REQUIRED OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

17. The Executive Committee of ESCWA is invited to:

(a) Take note of progress towards developing sustainable development indicators and the regional issues related to the process of defining global and regional sets of indicators;

(b) Comment on possible ways for addressing issues that occurred in the process of establishing the global set of indicators. In particular, it is important that the Headquarters based intergovernmental bodies, such as the United Nations Statistical Commission, respect the actual membership of intergovernmental bodies at regional commissions, such as regional statistical committees. Usage of classifications designed for other purposes, such as M49 Country and Area Codes, should not be applied for structuring regional consultations and nomination of experts to global expert groups;

(c) Discuss and make recommendations for the process of defining a set of regional SDG indicators to be undertaken under the auspices of the ESCWA Statistical Committee.

⁵ The ESCWA Statistics Division has on record more detailed technical points emanating from the discussion. The present report provides only an overview and summary.