

Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies: An OECD Regional Pre-Conference for the Middle East and North Africa - Sana'a, Yemen April 19 2007

80 participants representing 15 countries from the Middle East and North Africa and 8 international and regional organisations gathered in Sana'a for the OECD's regional pre-conference on 'Measuring the Progress of Societies' on 19 April 2007. The meeting was organised back to back with the Third Arab Statistical Forum led by Paris 21.

The opening roundtable looked at ways to improve the match between the supply of information and the demands of policy-makers. The conference heard from a speaker from the Gulf Organisation of Industrial Consulting, the head of the Yemeni Women's Union (an NGO), and Algeria's Chief Statistician. Speakers explained the importance that both the private sector and civil society put on having solid information to take their decisions and highlighted the role those sectors could play in helping to collect statistical information.

The second session discussed progress and its measurement. Leading statisticians – from Jordan and SESRTCIC - discussed the ways in which this multi-dimensional and inherently subjective concept could be measured. Participants agreed that the region had its own views of progress, influenced by culture and history. This indeed was to be expected - every region of the world has a distinct view of progress that has been influenced by culture and history.

The last session before lunch examined ways in which the links between statisticians, policy makers and society could be strengthened. A speaker from Alarabiya Television noted the important role the media played in disseminating information and thought there were opportunities to improve the way statistics were presented to the media, as well as they way the media presented them. A speaker from the Egyptian Policy Centre discussed ways in which this might be done.

After lunch a panel discussed the importance of statistical capacity building for the region vis a vis efforts to measure progress. A speaker from MEDSTAT spoke about their role in the region, while PARIS21 explained how their work on statistical capacity building linked into measuring progress style projects. The regional perspective was given by a speaker from the United Arab Emirates.

The penultimate session - on the Millennium Development Goals - brought together speakers from UNESCWA the OECD and Palestine's chief statistician. The importance of the project in terms of the future of the MDG's was acknowledged as was the importance of cooperating with the UN in 2015 when the MDGs would be reviewed. The Palestinian speaker noted the project would be a way to ensure statisticians were more involved in decision-making around the MDG indicator selection process.

Conclusions

The OECD made some concluding remarks about the “3Ps of the conference”: Partnerships, Policy and Progress.]

Partnerships - The conference had heard about the ways in which official statistics could benefit from strong– mutually beneficial – partnerships, with civil society, the media, the private sector and policy makers.

Policy - The conference had also discussed the ways in which a set of progress measures could help policy-makers in the region focus on what was truly important (by focusing on what society felt was key to their country’s progress) as well as helping to make policy-makers more accountable.

Progress – it was agreed that the region had considerable interest in the idea of measuring the progress of their societies. Participants had noted the importance of this work, and the benefits it could bring to the region and official statistics. Many of those present expressed their interest in attending the OECD’s conference on Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies in Istanbul in June 2007.

The organisers expressed their thanks to the Yemeni hosts for their generous hospitality and participants also thanked Mr Shabaneh for his hard work in organising the day’s agenda.



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