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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

**OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON NATIONAL
ACCOUNTS AND ECONOMIC STATISTICS
AMMAN, 12-14 JULY 2011**

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in coordination with the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS), held an Expert Group Meeting on National Accounts and Economic Statistics in Amman, Jordan, during 12 to 14 July 2011.

The Meeting succeeded in bringing together National Accounts experts from all of ESCWA member states, together with ESCWA, UNSD and other regional agencies, to discuss the following main issues:

- Availability of basic data sources for National Accounts estimation in the ESCWA region;
- Short-term and early warning economic indicators;
- Strategy for improving basic data sources and short-term economic statistics in the ESCWA region;
- Follow-up on the 2010 regional seminars in Muscat (Oman) on the 2008 SNA implementation in the ESCWA region: way forward and national actions plans;
- The research agenda on the 2008 SNA;
- Discussion on selected challenging issues on SNA 2008 implementation.

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ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

VENUE AND DATE

The Expert Group Meeting on National Accounts and Economic Statistics for the ESCWA region was held at Days Inn Hotel in Amman, Jordan from 12 to 14 July 2011.

OPENING OF THE MEETING

The Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS) opened the EGM and welcomed the participants. AITRS emphasized the continued fruitful cooperation with ESCWA whose objective is to increase the sharing of knowledge and experience of participants in National Accounts and economic statistics in general. AITRS also pointed at the possibility of generalizing the recommendations of the EGM and circulating them to the countries that could not attend.

ESCWA thereafter also welcomed the participants and commended the cooperation between ESCWA and AITRS in many meetings and conferences. Then ESCWA presented the objective of the meeting and informed the participants that this EGM is a supplement of the EGM that was held in Cairo and will focus on data sources, economic statistics and short term statistics. The strategy of ESCWA in this regard is a continuous effort and an EGM will be organized every two years to discuss the main challenges concerning National Accounts and Economic Statistics and in this context a suggestion of a training workshop was proposed.

The following topics were discussed in the EGM (Agenda of the meeting is at Annex-I):

1. Availability of basic data sources for National Accounts estimation in the ESCWA region.
2. Short-term and early warning economic indicators.
3. Strategy for improving basic data sources and short-term economic statistics in the ESCWA region.
4. Follow-up on the 2010 regional seminars in Muscat (Oman) on the 2008 SNA implementation in the ESCWA region: way forward and national actions plans.
5. The research agenda of the 2008 SNA.
6. Discussion on selected challenging issues on 2008 SNA implementation.

PARTICIPANTS

The meeting was attended by 25 participants including experts from the National Statistical Offices of ESCWA member countries, ESCWA staff, support staff from AITRS and an expert from UNSD. The list of participants is in Annex-II.

The first session discussed the importance of availability and quality of basic data sources for National Accounts estimation and the importance of National Accounts as a common conceptual framework that ensures the integration of economic statistics. The session tackled different issues including an assessment of the state of economic statistics in ESCWA region in general and highlights of the features of implementation of 2008 SNA, weaknesses and challenges linked to source data, Milestones and Minimum Data Requirement Sets in 2008 SNA, and how countries can benefit from other advanced countries in the area. The session also informed the participants of the internationally recommended classifications and identified the different types of data sources including administrative and statistical ones.

Lack or inadequacy of data sources appears to be one of the major problems constituting a hindrance in all phases of estimation of national accounts and economic statistics. Following ESCWA's presentation, a long discussion was initiated, and representatives of each of ESCWA member countries reflected their views on the importance of business registers, and gave an overview of how their registers were being updated, if applicable. Participants reached a consensus that the maintenance and regular updating of administrative and business registers are important prerequisites for having reliable information and data sources.

At the end of the discussion, a set of recommendations was proposed as follows:

1. Consensus was reached that the establishment of a statistical business register by countries along with a systematic updating mechanism forms a necessary precondition for improvement of the availability of basic data source for national accounts and the related economic statistics.
2. Countries need to take initiatives to progressively use more data from administrative sources, given the increasing pressure on the NSOs to reduce expenditures, cut costs and increase efficiency.
3. Countries should take steps to establish communications with administrative data source agencies for alignment of their reporting units with that of the statistical unit's concepts and definitions.
4. Countries should be aware that there is a need to reorient national statistical practices to cope up with changing economic environment – doing more with less resources, and this requires steps be taken to:
 - (a) Monitoring response burden;
 - (b) Orienting current surveys to capture small and informal sector enterprises adequately;
 - (c) Using integrated surveys to cover all economic activities rather than conducting separate activity specific surveys;
 - (d) Integrating infra annual surveys with annual surveys.

The second session tackled the area of short-term and early warning economic indicators and the outcomes of recent global initiatives. The session discussed the availability and quality of a core set of short-term economic statistics. A major focus was on timeliness, frequency and treatment of the indicators and a scheme highlighting different positions with respect to good practices was presented. ESCWA member countries were involved in the discussion as each expert presented a snapshot of the situation in the represented country, leading to a clearer understanding of the situation in the region. Regional recommendations were derived on the basis of the outcomes and the discussions which will also feed into the regional strategy for improving economic statistics and National Accounts in the region.

At the end of the discussion, the main recommendation was to recognize and emphasize the importance of short-term economic indicators for the early detection of changes in economic trends. Countries agreed to review the appropriateness and feasibility of collecting short term economic indicators, as reflected in the internationally accepted data template endorsed by the 42nd session of the United Nations Statistical Commission, with the aim of developing a central national data hub, as part of the implementation programme for the 2008 SNA and supporting statistics.

The third session was dedicated for a round table discussion on the availability and adequacy of data sources for the implementation of SNA 2008. ESCWA, in coordination with UNSD representative, facilitated the discussion by raising five important points around which the discussions revolved. Discussions were conducted following each raised point, and corresponding conclusions and recommendations were derived, as follows:

TALKING POINTS

1. Given that the availability of regularly updated business registers is a fundamental pre-requisite for good quality National Accounts estimation, how do you suggest overcoming the main challenges/obstacles facing NSO's in the ESCWA region.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- ✓ Agreement was reached on the importance of business register in the development of national accounts;
- ✓ The strategy must guarantee the continuity of work and development, therefore the cost must be taken into account;
- ✓ NSOs must benefit from developments in the field of information technology;
- ✓ The importance of cooperation between the concerned parties in the business register;
- ✓ International organizations must support national statistical offices in this area through missions related to policies.

2. Given the current conflict between increasing demand for statistics and reduction of resources for statistics, what efforts should be made in order to keep a satisfactory data quality for National Accounts estimation?

Conclusions and recommendations:

- ✓ Importance of developing a practical framework for leading the process;
- ✓ Some responsibilities need to be transferred from National Statistical Offices to other public institutions with coordination between the different parties in order to produce data with unified concepts and classifications;
- ✓ Reducing the cost and the time and trying to rely on some indicators which do not depend on costly economic censuses, therefore censuses could be done every 5 years;
- ✓ The correct use of information technology from social security and VAT sources, which can provide some data that can be considered as alternative for surveys;
- ✓ Training staff who conduct censuses;
- ✓ Coordination with international organizations to submit recommendations to the government to allocate money from the national budget for statistical work;
- ✓ Relying on extrapolated indicators as alternative for conducting surveys in some cases.

3. What mechanisms would you suggest to promote:

- (a) Integration;
- (b) Coordination;
- (c) Statistical advocacy;
- (d) User-producer dialogue.

Conclusion and recommendation:

- ✓ Reactivation of the role of existing boards or the establishment of a high committee to put a statistical strategy and have the ability to develop and follow up the implementation of decisions and the involvement of all beneficiaries.

4. How to maintain coherency between short term indicators and structural statistics?

Conclusion and recommendation:

- ✓ Quarterly indicators can be used to estimate annual indicators; therefore it is necessary to coordinate between officials responsible for both quarterly and annual data.

5. Efforts made at the national level in order to establish hubs as unique registry of data on short term economic indicators as recommended by UNSC.

Conclusion and recommendation:

- ✓ Consensus was reached at the importance of establishing such hubs to facilitate and make more efficient the disbursement of short term economic indicators.

The following session was mainly dedicated to the strategy for improving basic data sources and short term economic statistics in the ESCWA region. Participants reflected that in most of ESCWA countries, the main problem lies in the fact that other departments or ministries that provide data for National Accounts do not adhere to some conditions or requirements and do not coordinate with the national statistical offices.

Thus it was advised that a short term and a long term strategy should be put in place, and a memorandum of understanding should be signed between the national statistical offices from one side, and the concerned ministries and other providers of data from the other side, in order to ensure coordination and improve the quality and availability of statistics.

ESCWA pointed to the importance of developing a national strategic plan for statistics, to achieve national coordination between the ministries and the different national parties which provide statistics. It was emphasized that it should not be difficult to identify the relationship between the ministries and the different parties and implement the plan with an initial deadline, if driven by with a well defined and efficient implementation mechanism, unless there are legal obstacles.

ESCWA then concluded with a consensus to formulate a regional strategic plan for action and proposed starting the exercise at the national level by offering advisory services to support and help member countries in the commencement of the strategic plan at the national level. ESCWA thus called for and encouraged if couple member countries can report back as volunteers for initiating the national strategic plan at their countries and offered to provide advisory services to help support the implementation of the plan.

A questionnaire (Annex III) was distributed among participants, aiming at collecting information and facts on the availability of basic data sources in the different countries, and the practices of countries and their references when collecting and compiling data for different areas of economic statistics. This should help ESCWA and the countries themselves to identify the gaps in order to be better informed and to better set a strategic plan for improving the data sourcing practices and methodologies in the region.

The session was fruitful in reaching a general agreement on the importance of building a national strategic plan for the improvement of the availability and quality of basic data sources for National Accounts estimation within ESCWA member states, and developing the practices of member countries in updating frames, registers and statistical data sources whether it be at the political, institutional or infrastructural level.

Following this session, the next one was dedicated for the follow-up on the 2010 regional seminar which was held in Muscat (Oman), and the strategic plan for the implementation of the 2008 SNA.

ESCWA thanked the National Statistical Office of Kuwait for the great effort made in translating the 2008SNA into the Arabic language, and for providing soft and hard copies of the translated document. The participants were then called upon to form a volunteering task force for the revision of the Arabic translation of the SNA 2008 in order to avoid possible errors in translation. ESCWA also pointed out at the importance of establishing a road map and initiating the strategic plan for implementing the 2008 SNA in the region.

Few conclusions and recommendations were derived out of the last two sessions, listed below:

- ✓ The EGM decided to constitute a peer review group to review the Arabic translation of the 2008 SNA and requested the ESCWA to take necessary action in this regard. ESCWA advised the participants to consult with the directors of their offices and report back on their availability as members of the peer review group;
- ✓ Participants agreed to review the Arabic translation of the '*glossary*' and the '*Annex-3 Changes from 1993 SNA*' of the 2008 SNA as a first step, so as to post them on the ESCWA website to help ECSWA member States in their implementation of 2008 SNA;
- ✓ Participants welcomed the UNSD template to help countries prepare the Self Assessment Report on the status of National Accounts and Supporting Economic Statistics. Participants agreed that this template used with the *Self Assessment Diagnostic Tool* (Annex IV) introduced in the 2010 regional seminars in Muscat (Oman), would help them prepare assessment report on the current status of the statistical capacity in the country;
- ✓ Agreed that a statement of strategy taking into account the national and regional policy needs is an important step to establish a road map for the implementation of the 2008 SNA and supporting statistics at the national level and to incorporate this statement of strategy in the review of their NSDS;
- ✓ Agreed that a vision document, based on the self assessment of the statistical capacity, needs to be prepared to establish a set of actions to accomplish statistical and institutional goals and is instrumental in the sustainable improvement of the statistical agenda ensuring adherence to best practices in official statistics;
- ✓ Qatar and Jordan volunteered to prepare the statement of strategy on pilot basis, with the technical assistance from the ESCWA. The ESCWA confirmed the availability of the services of its Regional Advisor and the necessary resources for the purpose.

THE LAST SESSION THE RESEARCH AGENDA ON THE SNA 2008

The last session of the EGM was devoted to the discussion on the update of the work on issues listed in the research agenda on the 2008 SNA, where the participants were informed about the outcome of the recent research work on two issues namely (i) financial intermediation services indirectly measured and (ii) recording, in the SNA, of the emission permits issued under cap and trade scheme. Discussion was also held on selected challenging issues on 2008 SNA relevant for countries in the ESCWA region, namely (1) Allocation of FISIM by economic activities and institutional sectors, (2) treatment of insurance services; and (3) treatment of holding companies.

The EGM was then concluded and the general feedback for the workshop was positive, and most of the participants expressed their satisfaction with the outcome of the EGM, with revealed need and willingness to participate in similar and follow up meetings. For evaluation of the EGM, please refer to the Annex-V.

Annex I

**EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON NATIONAL ACCOUNTS
AND ECONOMIC STATISTICS
12-14 JULY 2011, AMMAN**

PROVISIONAL AGENDA

Tuesday, 12 July 2011

Morning session: 9:00 hrs. – 13:00 hrs.

9:00 – 9:30 *Registration*

9:30 – 10:00 *Opening of the meeting*

Objectives of the meeting

Administrative matters and introduction of participants

10.00 – 10.30 *Coffee break*

10:30 – 13:00 **Item 1: Availability of basic data sources for National Accounts estimation in the ESCWA region**

- The frame (business registers, censuses, business economic surveys)
- Administrative data sources
- Classifications and definitions

The session will discuss the availability and quality of basic data sources for National Accounts estimation. For each item discussed (frame, administrative data, classifications and definitions), there will be a brief introduction on international available recommendations and good practices followed worldwide. A scheme highlighting different positions with respect to good practices, from 'best' to 'worst' practices, will be presented, and a snapshot of the situation in each member country will be tentatively made in order to have a clear understanding of the situation in the region. On the basis of the outcomes, and after a discussion of the strategies for improvement at the national level, the major gaps and problematic areas will be identified and regional recommendations will be derived. The discussion will feed into the regional strategy for improving economic statistics and National Accounts in the region, which will form the object of discussion under Item 3 of the agenda.

13:00 – 14:00 *Lunch*

Afternoon session: 14:00 hrs. – 17:00 hrs.

14:00 – 15:30 **Item 1 (cntd.): Availability of basic data sources for National Accounts estimation in the ESCWA region**

15:30 – 17:00 **Item 2: Short-term and early warning economic indicators**

After a brief introduction on recent developments in this area and the outcomes of recent global initiative, this session will discuss the availability and quality of a core set of short-term economic statistics. The focus will be on a minimum set of principal (Arab) economic indicators, composed by: industrial production, prices (consumer, producer and unit values of imports and exports), retail trade and turnover, and

employment/unemployment indicators. For each indicator discussed, there will be a brief introduction on international recommendations available and good practices worldwide. A major focus will be on timeliness, frequency and treatment of the indicators (seasonal adjustment, trend-cycle estimation and working/trading days corrections). A scheme highlighting different positions with respect to good practices, from 'best' to 'worst' practices, will be presented and a snapshot of the situation in each member country will be tentatively identified in order to have a clear understanding of the situation in the region. On the basis of the outcomes, and after a discussion of the strategies for improvement at the national level, the major gaps and problematic areas will be identified and regional recommendations will be derived. The discussion will feed into the regional strategy for improving economic statistics and National Accounts in the region, which will form the object of discussion under Item 3 of the agenda.

Wednesday, 13 July 2011

Morning session: 9:00 hrs. – 13:00 hrs.

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|---------------|---|
| 09:00 – 10:30 | Item 2 (cont.): Short-term and early warning economic indicators |
| 10:30 – 11:00 | Coffee break |
| 11:00 – 13:00 | Item 3: Strategy for improving basic data sources and short-term economic statistics in the ESCWA region (breakout group discussion) |

Participants will be divided into two groups, which will be responsible to identify – based on the discussion of the previous two sessions – the main elements of a strategy for improving basic data sources and short-term economic statistics in the region, respectively. A plenary session will follow (afternoon) for further discussion and consolidation/synthesis of the main recommendations.

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| 13:00 – 14:00 | Lunch |
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Afternoon session: 14:00 hrs. – 17:00 hrs.

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|---------------|---|
| 14:00 – 17:00 | Item 3 (cont.): Strategy for improving basic data sources and short-term economic statistics in the ESCWA region (plenary meeting) |
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Thursday, 14 July 2011

Morning session: 9:00 hrs. – 13:00 hrs.

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| 09:00 – 10:00 | Item 4: Follow-up on the 2010 regional seminars in Muscat on the 2008 SNA implementation in the ESCWA region: way forward and national actions plans |
|---------------|---|

Member countries will be requested to briefly report on advances made in the implementation of the SNA in the last year with respect to recommendations of the seminars held in Muscat and future plans, including the preparation of the national action plans for implementation of the new system.

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| 10:00 – 10:30 | Item 5: The research agenda on the 2008 SNA |
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The session will consist in a brief overview of the work on the research agenda of the 2008 SNA, coordinated under the auspices of the ISWGNA.

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|---------------|---|
| 10:30 – 11:00 | Coffee break |
| 11.00 – 13.00 | Item 6: Discussion on selected challenging issues on SNA 2008 implementation |

Following the outcomes of the Expert Group Meeting held in Cairo in 2009, successive events organized by ESCWA in National Accounts, and the publication of the “Booklet on National Accounts in the ESCWA region: Sources and Methods”, this session will serve as a discussion for selected topics in SNA 2008 implementation. Three issues will be tackled: (1) Allocation of FISIM to branches of economic activity and implementation of SNA recommendations; (2) Insurance services; and (3) Holding companies

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|---------------|-------|
| 13:00 – 14:00 | Lunch |
|---------------|-------|

Afternoon session: 14:00 hrs. – 16:00 hrs.

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|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| 14:00 – 15:30 | Meeting evaluation and future steps |
| 15:30 – 16:00 | Closing |

Annex II

**EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON NATIONAL ACCOUNTS
AND ECONOMIC STATISTICS
12-14 JULY 2011
AMMAN, JORDAN**

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Annex III

EVALUATION OF THE EGM QUESTIONNAIRE ON OPINIONS OF PARTICIPANTS NUMBER OF RESPONSES = 15

Please evaluate the following	Very good	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
1. Evaluation of quality	20%	80%	-	-	-
2. What were your expectations of EGM?					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To discuss issues related to statistical data sources for National Accounts; - Develop a clear roadmap for the region for the implementation of SNA 2008; - Review of availability of data and main challenges in data sources; - Exchange of knowledge among countries concerning the implementation of SNA 2008; - To provide recommendations to the concerned parties to develop economic statistics; - Discuss the agenda and to know countries program for the development of National Accounts; - Exchange of expertise concerning basic data sources; - Benefit from the successful experiences of some countries in SNA2008; - Develop using data sources optimally and to improve economic statistics; - Short term and long term indicators related to the quarterly national accounts; - Development strategies; - Develop national accounts through practical exercises. 					
3. Were your expectations met?	Yes 50%		No -	Partially 50%	
Please evaluate the following	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
4. a. Relevance to the subject of your work/area of expertise	71.4%	28.6%	-	-	-
4. b. Knowledge and skills obtained for your future work	21.4%	57.2%	21.4%	-	-
4. c. Providing a forum of exchange with other participants	35.7%	64.3%	-	-	-
4. d. Providing an opportunity to establish new useful contacts	46.2%	46.2%	7.6%	-	-
4. e. Usefulness of exchange of experiences among participants	38.5%	61.5%	-	-	-
5. a. Clarity of presentations	23.1%	61.5%	15.4%	-	-
5. b. Quality of written material circulated by the organizers	15.4%	38.5%	46.1%	-	-
5. c. Organizational arrangements for and during the event	23.1%	61.5%	15.4%	-	-
6. Duration of EGM should have been					
Shorter	6.5%	Same	87%	Longer	6.5%

If you see need for longer or shorter EGM, specify which session(s) should have been shorter or longer

- Economic indicators;
- Practical application of SNA2008;
- Experiences of countries in the implementation of SNA2008.

7. Would you be able to benefit in your work from the information acquired at this EGM, or to introduce such information to other specialists in your country or community?

To some extent	27%	No	-	Yes	73%
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8. Would you recommend that other experts from your country or other colleagues in your profession participate in similar EGM that may be held in the future?

To some extent	7%	No	-	Yes	93%
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9. Have you participated in activities on the same topic in other organizations?

No	67%	Yes	33%
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If your answer is 'Yes':

Specify topic? Requirements of implementation of SNA2008, Development of SNA1993, implementation of SNA1993/2008 (Quarterly statistics), National Accounts data sources.

What organization? AITRS, MEDSTAT, League of Arab States, Khawarwzmi conference.

When and where? 2010 Qatar, 2010 Jordan, Egypt, 2009 Hungary.

10. Would you like any follow-up action on the meeting?

Yes	94%	No	6%
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If your answer is 'Yes':

Please specify the type of action:

- Households sector account and payments account;
- Follow-up on implementation of SNA2008;
- Follow up meeting to monitor the progress in the light of adopted recommendations;
- Training and development activities in the field of national accounts;
- Other meetings on the SNA2008 and the revision recommended by the committee;
- National strategy to improve the statistical system;
- Develop plans and strategies to follow-up the implementation of the recommendations;
- Develop regional plans for national accounts and to develop ways of moving to SNA2008;
- Short term statistics and evaluation of national accounts;
- Supply and use table and informal sector.

If your answer is 'No':

Please state why:

-
- Most of topics were discussed among member countries and regarding SNA2008, it will be followed up in the coming meetings.
-

11. Do you have any suggestions to improve and develop similar meetings to be held in the future?

- Translate all presentations and documents to Arabic;
 - Send suggestions to participants before the meeting in case that some decisions need to be taken;
 - Distribute materials before the meeting to give time for suggestion and notes;
 - Held the meeting annually for two years to move forward the implementation of SNA2008 in a comprehensive way;
 - Involvement of concerned key parties in such meetings;
 - Focus on development of action plans to guide countries to the best and more appropriate way for the implementation of SNA2008;
 - Better selection of translators.
-

12. Would you like to make any observations or comments or pose any questions to ESCWA regarding the EGM?

- Choose a place with better facilities and services for participants;
 - The translation was below average.
-