The 2011 Round in Western Asia region...
An increased awareness

Ever since the launch of the 2011 round of the International Comparison Program (ICP), the Western Asia (WA) Regional Office at ESCWA directly identified its objectives and priorities. The Regional Office devised a comprehensive regional work plan, managed the funding strategy and dedicated a qualified team to implement the different stages of the program.

Close to thirteen workshops/meetings were organized throughout the various phases of the round. Starting with the launch of the round and the formation of the regional executive board, to the preparation of the regional product list, to the training on the program’s surveys and the validation sessions, leading to the final meeting held in February 2014 during which the ICP 2011 final regional results were released. The results were widely accepted by the participating countries given their objective and accurate representativeness of the purchasing power of national currencies.

Throughout the 2011 round, Mr. Majed Skaini – ICP Regional Coordinator for WA Region – was keen on maintaining a constant communication with the National Coordinating Offices. This was translated through the continuous phone calls and emails, and the provision of instant responses to the countries’ queries in both English and Arabic, in addition to the provision of necessary instruction booklets and manuals. Despite the tight budget, the Regional Office also managed to provide financial aids to four of the participating countries, in order to finance some of the national activities that were not covered by the national administrations. The Regional Team conducted ten training visits/missions to seven participating countries, and provided the necessary technical assistance in order to insure the continuation of the program’s implementation on both the national and regional levels. Moreover, the team strived to maintain a family-like ambiance among the participating parties throughout the strict stages of the program.

The Regional Team made every effort to raise awareness on the program and devised for that reason several outreach tools that were unique to WA region. Out of these tools was the WA ICP monthly newsletter, discussing the technical aspects of the program and the various challenges faced during the implementation process. The WA Team also developed the first Online Real Currency Converter which is the first converter relying on Purchasing Power Parities (PPPs) instead of market exchange rates, updated the WA ICP website and the relevant social media pages and released an explanatory booklet entitled “The International Comparison Program in Western Asia Region... A Window To The Future”. The WA Regional Office also maintained a constant relationship...
with various international organizations and other regional coordinating agencies throughout the 2011 round; the objectives of the Regional Office are not limited to the current round, as the Regional team is looking forward to sustain the program and its results, and benefit from the wide statistical experience of these organizations. This stands witness to the profound dedication of the Regional Office to this enormous project and the Office’s acknowledgment of the importance of the program to the development of the region.

Furthermore, many financial, administrative and security related challenges hindered the implementation of the program in WA region. However, the National Coordinating Offices displayed a remarkable commitment to the program and exerted serious efforts to overcome these obstacles and successfully implement all the stages of the program with the help of the Regional Office. This was reflected by the feedback of the participating countries and their assessment of the round’s activities; National Offices were thankful to all the efforts exerted by all the participating parties and expressed their willingness to take part in any of the regional activities organized by the Regional Office and which aim at the development of the statistical work in the region, both economic and social.

It is also worth mentioning that the Regional Office at ESCWA is hoping to make the transition phase – following the release of the final results and preceding the launch of the coming round – a development phase, in the purpose of further integrating WA region within the global agenda of future development and join other countries for a better world. Furthermore, the Regional Office wishes to invest the experiences gained through the 2011 ICP round in order to contribute to the accomplishment of the objectives of the “Post 2015 Development Agenda”.

The 9th Regional Meeting... A unanimous endorsement of the final results

The Statistics Division at ESCWA concluded the 2011 ICP round in Western Asia through the release of the final regional results of this round during a meeting that was held in Istanbul - Turkey, from 23 to 26 February, 2014.

The meeting sessions were managed by Mr. Majed Skaini, ICP Regional Coordinator for Western Asia region, and were attended by the Director of the Statistics Division at ESCWA, Mr. Juraj Riecan, and the Director of the Economic Statistics Section, Ms. Wafa Abul Hosn. The meeting also hosted price experts from fourteen countries and the Directors of five National Statistical Offices, in addition to the Regional Coordinator of Asia and the Pacific, Ms. Chelam Palanyandy, and the ICP Global Manager, Mr. Michel Mouyelo-Katoula who participated via Skype.

The meeting featured presentations on the work progress of the ICP activities in Western Asia region throughout the 2011 round, in addition to many experience sharing contributions from the participating countries and other regions. The main purpose of the meeting was the release of the final regional results which, given their accuracy and their high quality, were well endorsed by all the participating countries and reflected the massive efforts exerted by the Regional Team and the participating countries during the 2011 round. The detailed results and major findings of the 2011 ICP round in Western Asia can be found on the official website through the following link: http://www.escwa.un.org/icp2011/docs/AnalysisFINAL14.pdf

Furthermore, the Regional Office at ESCWA allocated two days for the display of its future vision and plans for the harmonization of the Consumer Price Index and the integration of ICP with the CPI activities. The Regional Office is
seeking to invest in the transitional phase between the ICP rounds through proposed projects, in order to transform it into a developmental phase for the price statistical system of the region and its economies.

“The International Comparison Program in Western Asia Region... A Window To The Future”

Throughout the 2011 ICP Round, the Regional Office was always keen on the delivery of the newest attractions in order to captivate all the categories of society and draw their attention to the importance of the ICP and facilitate their interaction with the program.

“The International Comparison Program in Western Asia Region... A Window To the Future” is one of these attractions. The booklet summarizes the experiences of the countries taking part in this round, which conveyed their point of views and experience during the implementation of the project’s activities over the past few years. Countries described the main events of the 2011 round, the difficulties faced and the solutions employed in order to ensure the continuation of the project. Despite the diversity of their content, the articles consented on the importance of this project and the importance of raising awareness about its benefits by the respective administrations in each country, thus highlighting the need for increased support of the program in the future rounds, and any future related activities.

The booklet also conveyed the different opinions and views of regional and international experts, as well as views from the Global and the Regional Office. All parties praised the efforts exerted by the Regional Coordination Office in Western Asia region, which played a key role in the distinction of this region and in making the 2011 round the best ICP round yet.

The electronic version of this booklet can be found through the following link: http://www.escwa.un.org/icp2011/docs/adicpwin.pdf

The Way Forward

The International Comparison Program (ICP) is the largest statistical initiative ever attempted, rallying close to two hundred countries worldwide for the purpose of producing the most accurate and comprehensive set of Purchasing Power Parities (PPPs) yet.
One of the main implications of the ICP is the application of a somewhat identical data collection and processing methodology in all the participating countries, which is developed by a special team of international experts and relies on the latest techniques in order to ensure the best outcome. Hence the obvious capacity building potential of the program which offers countries, developing and developed alike, an enormous learning experience and the opportunity to enhance their regular statistical work, especially in the field of prices and national accounts.

After coordinating the ICP activities in Western Asia (WA) for two consecutive rounds, 2005 and 2011, the ICP Regional Team at ESCWA had already witnessed the short and long term constructive impacts of the program on the regional and country levels; representatives of National Statistical Offices repeatedly underlined the numerous uses they are making of the ICP methodology and elaborated on the development it brought to the regular data collection and validation procedures. Consequently, serious attempts were made by the WA Regional Office to develop a strategy that would sustain the capacity building benefits of the program and capitalize on the experiences gained in the ICP rounds in order to enhance regular work programs. Given that both the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the ICP are closely related to price and national accounts data, the WA Regional Team put together a thought out plan to integrate the ICP with the CPI activities and develop a Harmonized Consumer Price Index (HCPI). The achievement of these objectives could ultimately lead to regular PPP production on the country, sub-regional and regional levels and comes in line with the recommendations of the 45th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSD) which clearly underlined the presence of a definite need for the production of more frequent PPP estimates in all the regions.

Achieving ICP-CPI integration will help strengthen national statistical systems through the improvement of the survey capacity and local capabilities of participating countries. The process will encourage countries to build on existing data strengths and utilize local knowledge and capital to extend and refine CPI coverage and expand price data collection. Moreover, it will encourage regional cooperation and strengthen regional data exchange. On the other hand, the construction of an HCPI will bring many benefits to the region as it will answer the growing demands on comparable price indicators and provide comparable measures of consumer price movements. The HCPI will form a stepping stone for the formation of a unified Arab market and the achievement of monetary union among the GCC countries. Furthermore, it will provide a solid platform for the attempt of regular PPP production, which will allow governments to better assess their comparative growth and advantages, international competitiveness, and patterns of specialization among industries.

Regular PPP production will undoubtedly bring about numerous benefits to both the private and the public sectors, but most importantly, it will provide a very useful data link between ICP rounds and allow for regular revision and update of the official PPP data. Flown