

# 14<sup>th</sup> Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) for the Arab States

## Draft Concept Note on Regional Coordination of Statistical Activities Session 2 – Item 2

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### Regional priorities in official statistics

Following dialogue with the national statistical offices in the region, as well as regional and international organizations active in official statistics, the expectations of the statistical community in the region can be summarised as the following priority areas:

1. To identify priorities and gaps in statistical capacity-building; organizing and, where appropriate, coordinating capacity-building activities in cooperation among regional and global organizations;
2. To coordinate data collection and dissemination in the region, involving national statistical offices, notably clearing discrepancies between data produced by national statistical offices, regional and international organizations, and improving coverage and comparability; and
3. To inject the regional perspective to global initiatives in standards setting and harmonization of statistics, in particular taking into account statistical aspects resulting from the policy needs in the region, cultural specifics and the statistical expertise accumulated in the region.

### Regional actors engaged in statistical activities

There are a number of regional and global organizations undertaking statistical activities in the region. Their mandates emanate from different governance structures, but often overlap in scope. There are positive coordination efforts already existing, however there is great room for improvement.

Coordination of capacity building efforts, data collection or standards setting and harmonisation all require concerted coordinated efforts. The following organizations are key for effective coordination, including (but not limited to):

- UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA)
- League of Arab States (LAS)
- Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS)
- Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC)
- Euro-Mediterranean Statistical Cooperation programme (MEDSTAT)
- UN Economic Commission for Africa (UN-ECA)
- Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC)
- Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), and mainly the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD)
- World Bank
- UN specialised agencies.

### Why is the coordination of statistics important?

Non-coordinated statistics produces inconsistent data. In this way the users, whether policy makers, media or public get different figures for the same indicator, and this reflects poorly on whole system of official statistics. Most importantly, this affects the confidence of users of our data which may have as great an impact on official data providers as it does on international actors. Effective coordination by all regional and international organisations, with the purpose of delivering a consistent statistical service for the users is critical.

The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics as well as the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities call for coordination and sharing of statistical data. This formal requirement is well founded on the need to provide users with a consistent set of statistics.

## Relationship with national producers of official statistics

Various ministries and government departments produce official statistics at the national level. Regional and international organizations have usually identified their typical counterparts inside countries, and communicate with them with respect to all matters including collection of statistical data in their area of work. This appears efficient to the international organizations concerned. However, this model has a significant deficiency, because it does not promote a coordination among data producers either nationally or internationally.

The United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics calls for coordination at the national level. The regional and international organizations have a role to promote such coordination. The ideal model is centred around the National/Central Statistical Office of the country that has, in addition to the own production of statistics, also a role of ensuring coordination among all national producers of official statistics. Following to this model the international organizations should approach the national statistical office whenever data is requested from the country.

By way of example, the balance of payments data are important to central banks. To compile this, the producer of data needs the trade balance. This may lead some international organizations to getting trade statistics from the central bank, while others get it from the national statistical office, and this may produced already one set of discrepancies.

Another example relates to the health statistics. If the international organization obtains it from the ministries of health, it seems logical. A little addition to this is to obtain also the basic demographic characteristics from the same source. And here we touch one of the most painful problems of the region, and that is having good population and vital statistics on member countries. Not only that we pull different data from the same countries, the international estimates are also based on different models. The data published therefore are more likely to confuse users than to help them.

***As a conclusion the national statistical offices should participate in all data flows to the international organizations, including cases when data are produced by another ministry or department.***

## Joint UN-ESCWA and LAS Plan of Action 2011-2015

Building on good experience in cooperation between UN-ESCWA and LAS, notably with the Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization (AIDMO) and the Arab Labour Organization (ALO), we propose to begin the streamlining of regional statistical activities between the two organizations. This shall include the following actions

### **In the area of statistical capacity building:**

- To compare statistical capacity building work programmes of the two organizations. By combining them, whenever applicable, we would be able to combine our forces, bring more experts and maximise impact;
- To utilise the expertise and potential of our organizations for the benefit of training workshops, seminars and conferences organized by partner organizations;
- To increase the number of workshops organized jointly; and
- To gradually expand coordination of statistical capacity building to other regional and international organizations.

### **In the area of collection, processing and dissemination of statistical data:**

- To review the data collected by ESCWA from national statistical offices and other sources, and to seek for complementarities with data collected by the LAS and its specialised agencies. This exercise would aim at avoiding duplications on one hand, and covering eventual gaps on the other;
- To compare the statistical publications and data dissemination of the two organization, with a view of reverting to joint publications when feasible;
- To ensure comparability of statistics across countries of the Arab region;
- To ensure compatibility of data published by UN-ESCWA, LAS and UN-ECA; and
- To seek possibilities for expansion of a mutual coordination of activities related to statistical data to other regional and international organizations, and in particular possibilities for developing joint questionnaires.

### **With respect to the regional input into the global standards setting initiatives:**

- To maintain an inventory of “city groups”<sup>1</sup> and other relevant groups, and to bring the information on the objectives, current work and outputs of these groups to the attention of national statistical offices of Arab countries; and
- Adopt a common approach to grants and fellowships for support for Arab countries in the work of city groups and other methodological initiatives at the global level.

### **Positive examples of collaboration**

Existing efforts in coordinating statistical activities have resulted in some concrete achievements, including:

- The UN-ESCWA and AIDMO cooperated in the preparation of Bulletin on Industrial Statistics in Arab Countries, as well as an electronic data product;
- The UN-ESCWA cooperated with AIDMO and with the ALO in organizing training activities aimed at statistical capacity building;
- The UN-ESCWA coordinates the statistical capacity building programmes with the Arab Institute for Training and Research of Statistics;
- The UN-ESCWA participates in the global initiative of coordinating the collection of energy statistics through a common set of questionnaires. This initiative is led by the International Energy Agency of the OECD;
- The UN-ESCWA has a coordinated approach to the collection of environment statistics with the UN Statistics Division and
- The UN-ESCWA coordinates the efforts in the implementation of the system of national accounts with the UNSD and IMF.

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<sup>1</sup> City groups are groups of interested national statistical offices that specialise in methodological development. The following are examples of existing city groups: Canberra group on household income statistics, Delhi group on informal sector statistics, London group on environmental accounting, Ottawa group on price statistics, Wiesbaden group on business registers, Voorburg group on service statistics, Washington group on disability statistics, Wye group on statistics on rural development and agriculture household income statistics.