



Demographic and Social Statistics in the Arab Region

Strategic Framework for Strengthening
National Capacities



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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Demographic and Social Statistics in the Arab Region

**Strategic Framework for Strengthening
National Capacities**



United Nations
Beirut

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ILO	International Labour Organization
NSDS	national strategy for the development of statistics
RSDS	regional strategy for the development of statistics
SC	Statistical Committee
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TAG	Technical Advisory Group
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WHO	World Health Organization

I. Overview

The adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 brought increased attention to the international community on the need to strengthen the statistical capacity of developing countries to measure, monitor and report on the SDGs and their targets and indicators. During the period leading up to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, there was widespread acknowledgement by member States of the United Nations system on the critical need to strengthen at all levels the capacity of national statistical systems to produce timely and reliable disaggregated statistics to assess the implementation of the Goals. The emphasis on disaggregated data undoubtedly increases the level of complexity for many Arab countries, many of which face challenges to produce even basic statistics aligned with international standards.

In the Arab region, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) took up the challenge of making available up-to-date, reliable and disaggregated statistics by establishing very early a Statistical Committee (SC) under ESCWA resolution 179 (XVI) of 2 September 1992, which was adopted by the Economic and Social Council resolution 1993/2 of 2 February 1993.¹ The objective of the SC was to follow up the progress of member States in developing their statistical systems and to provide technical advice, propose training programmes and organize workshops and seminars to strengthen their statistical capacity. Since then, it has assisted member States in the standardization of national statistics for increased comparability at the regional and international levels and supported them in coordinating statistical data and information with the outputs of the United Nations Statistical Commission and with other member countries, particularly in surveys and censuses.

Moreover, in the area of sociodemographic statistics, a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on Demographic and Social Statistics for Arab Countries was established by ESCWA including the national statistical offices and regional organizations. The main goal of TAG is to provide recommendations on strategies as well as substantive and methodological guidelines for achieving goals in the area of population and social statistics. Since its inception, TAG has met twice. In its first meeting held in Tunis on 17 and 18 October 2016, TAG focused on ensuring that all countries in the region have the capacity to deliver a core set of population and social indicators needed for the SDGs among other planning and monitoring purposes.² In its second meeting held at the United Nations House in Beirut on 18 and 19 December 2018, TAG discussed suggested additions to the core indicator list that correspond to SDG indicators, developed a strategy to bridge gaps in data

¹ <https://www.unescwa.org/about-escwa/governing-and-advisory-bodies/ministerial-sessions/resolution/setting-statistics>.

² <https://www.unescwa.org/events/technical-advisory-group-demographic-and-social-statistics>.

series under the core indicators agreed at the first meeting, and concluded with a set of recommendations, notably adopting draft metadata for indicators proposed at the first meeting.³

In addition, the ESCWA Statistics Division, through its Demographic and Social Statistics Section, publishes a biennial report titled *Arab Society: Demographic and Social Trends*. The key thematic areas covered by this publication include population, household composition and family formation, housing conditions, health, education, labour, poverty and inequality, and cultural and social participation. The data used are primarily provided by the national statistical offices of ESCWA member States through questionnaire responses to the Population Bulletin and Compendium of Social Statistics, and supplemented by publicly accessible data from international agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank and the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Despite these efforts, there remain large gaps in the provision by member States of demographic and social data based on the core list of indicators developed by TAG. Challenges are frequently associated with measuring, monitoring and reporting on the core list of indicators and on SDG indicators including the effect of conflict, instability and forced displacement on national statistics systems, in addition to the measurement challenges associated with large labour migration flows.

Thus, the ESCWA Demographic and Social Statistics Section conducted an assessment on data gaps and the lack of data disaggregation in household surveys for different population subgroups (age, sex, disability, migratory status) and geographical location (urban and rural areas) to highlight the requirements to overcome these gaps and to make recommendations for their reduction. An internal report provided an overview of data availability on basic demographic and social statistical indicators for the period 2000-2018. For each thematic area, the overall reporting, reporting over time, reporting by country and reporting by indicator are assessed with summary statistics and heat map visualizations.

In order to address the data gap issue, ESCWA's Demographic and Social Statistics Section drafted a strategic framework that would set the stage for designing a regional strategy for the development of statistics (RSDS) in order to support the development of national capacities for providing quality and reliable demographic and social statistics in the Arab region, and thus reducing the data gap. This framework focuses on challenges facing national statistical offices in the region, including lack of funds to implement household surveys, limited technical capacities and lack of coordination and cooperation of data providers within the same country.

³ <https://www.unescwa.org/events/technical-advisory-group-demographic-and-social-statistics-0>.

II. Methodology and Key Findings

Statistics on data availability are presented as a percentage of data points that are available in a given country, year or thematic area, covering the period of 2010-2017, for 18 ESCWA member States. The indicators considered herein coincide with the list of social and demographic indicators published by the Social and Demographic Section at ESCWA in its biannual publication, *Arab Society: Social and Demographic Trends*, and on the ESCWA data portal. The indicators have been classified as either annual or periodic, depending on whether an estimate is expected on a yearly basis or once every few years (table below).

Indicators by thematic area and type (annual, periodic)

	Annual	Periodic
Population	Population size	Infant mortality rate
	Average annual population growth	Life expectancy at birth
	Population sex ratio	Total fertility rate
Household composition	Registered marriages	Average household size
	Registered divorces	Female-headed households
Health	Density of hospitals	Ante-natal care
	Density of pharmacists	Births attended by skilled health personnel
	Density of physicians	Maternal mortality ratio
		Use of contraception
		Prevalence of stunted children
		Prevalence of underweight children
Education		Prevalence of wasted children
	Net enrolment rate	Adult literacy rate
	Pupil teacher ratio	Youth literacy rate
Labour	Labour force participation rate	
	Youth labour force participation rate	
	Unemployment rate	
	Youth unemployment rate	
	Employment by economic activity	
Poverty	Employment by sector	
		Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line
		Expenditure shares
		GINI index
		Poverty gap at national poverty line
Housing conditions		Access to improved drinking water
		Access to improved sanitation facilities
		Access to electricity
		Type of dwelling
		Tenure of housing unit

Note: The GINI index is a synthetic indicator that captures the level of inequality for a given variable and population.

Indicators that were classified as annual typically come from yearly estimates (e.g. total population), administrative records (e.g. registered marriages), or yearly surveys such as labour force surveys. Periodic indicators typically come from decennial censuses, expenditure surveys, and demographic and health surveys; as these data collection activities are costlier, they are usually not conducted yearly. Accordingly, more than half of the annual indicators fall under the thematic areas of population and labour, with the other seven covering household composition, health and education; the bulk of periodic indicators fall under the thematic areas of health, poverty and housing conditions. Additional periodic indicators are within the categories of population, household composition and education. In assessing data availability across the region, these distinctions between periodic and annual indicators are relevant as data collection activities vary within countries of the Arab region.

Statistics for data availability for this set of indicators were calculated as follows: for annual indicators, if an indicator is available in a given country in a given year from 2010 to 2017, it is attributed a value of 1 for that country and year, and zero otherwise. Periodic indicators were considered available in a given country if a statistic was gathered for any year within the period of 2013-2017, and thus attributed a value of 1 for that given country. To calculate the data availability of a country in a given year or thematic area, the sum of available data points was divided by the total amount of possible data points. As annual indicators are expected yearly, it is possible to relay availability statistics for annual indicators as trends, whereas periodic indicators yielded one static availability estimate for each country that could be disaggregated by thematic area or aggregated for the whole region.

Sixteen annual indicators and 23 periodic indicators were considered; to calculate overall data availability scores for each country and the region as a whole, annual indicator scores were averaged for the entire time period of 2010-2017, and then a weighted-average was taken in conjunction with the overall periodic indicator scores, accounting for the fact that more data points were observed for annual indicators.

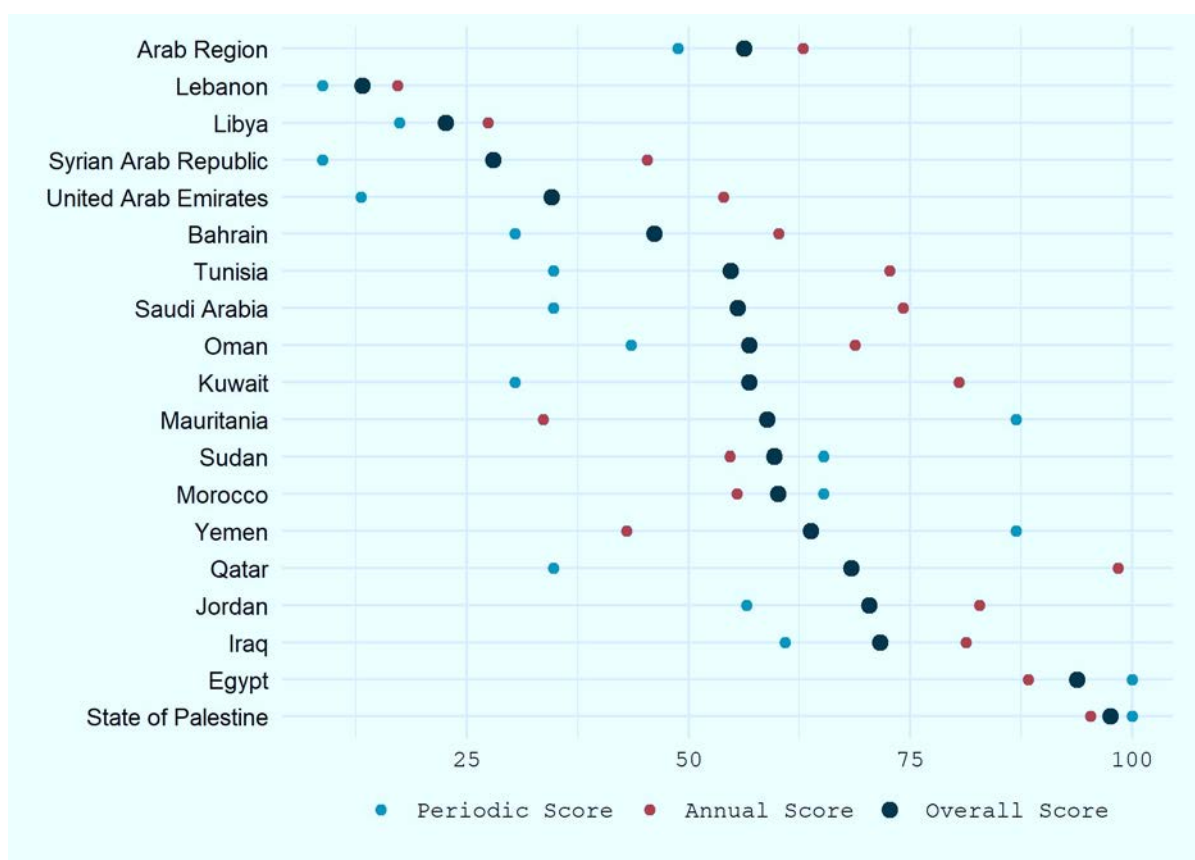
Scores presented in this paper are considered an approximation of the percentage of data that have been made available to ESCWA for dissemination purposes as only a selected set of indicators and years has been considered.

A. Data lacking across the board in Lebanon, Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic

The below graph (figure 1) shows indicator scores for each country by indicator type. On average, some 56 per cent of indicators requested by ESCWA are available for dissemination in the Arab region, ranging from 13 per cent in Lebanon to 97 per cent in the State of Palestine; the interquartile range of the scores is between 49 and 67 per cent. Less than 30 per cent of indicators considered herein were available from Lebanon, Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic. In all countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), annual indicators are more available than periodic indicators, pointing

to the fact that labour force surveys are regularly administered in most GCC countries. Compared to wealthier GCC countries, periodic data are more available in least developed countries such as Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan, and Yemen.

Figure 1. Availability scores by country and type of indicator



Low data availability in Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic is apparent as both countries remain in the midst of prolonged violent conflict, which has hampered data collection activities. Moreover, as Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic remain divided with various authorities controlling different swaths of territory, statistical offices are not centralized and are likely unable, or unwilling, to cooperate and provide national estimates of social and demographic indicators. This could also be true of Yemen, where only 43 per cent of indicators classified as annual are available.

In Lebanon, the general lack of available data stems from the lack of a recent population census; the last one on record was conducted in 1932. In the absence of census-based population estimates, statistics in Lebanon are based on sample household surveys that use a sampling frame from a census of buildings, dwellings and establishments; these sample surveys are conducted on an irregular, non-yearly, basis. As much as the lack of regularly timed surveys negatively affects the availability of social and demographic data in Lebanon, the lack of a recent population census raises

doubts over the accuracy of the current population estimates. Furthermore, the latest population estimates published by Lebanon's central administration of statistics differ significantly from population estimates published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.⁴

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain also scored within the lowest quartile of scores, even though more than 50 per cent of annual indicators in the two GCC countries are considered available. Only 13 per cent of periodic indicators were considered available in the United Arab Emirates, the third lowest periodic score in the region. Statistics on poverty (for instance poverty lines) from expenditure and consumption surveys are seldom published in GCC countries, and demographic surveys are conducted less frequently than in other Arab subregions. The statistical systems in the GCC rely heavily on administrative records, which may partly explain the observed disparities in the availability of indicators. Qatar, for example, has the widest disparity in the region between the availability of annual indicators and periodic indicators: 98 per cent of annual indicators are available compared to 35 per cent of periodic indicators.

Periodic indicators are mostly available from Mauritania and Yemen, 87 per cent from both, the highest scores for periodic data in the region aside from Egypt and the State of Palestine, where 100 per cent of indicators are available. This is despite the fact that Mauritania and Yemen score below the lowest quartile of annual scores (48 per cent), which is explained by more frequent demographic and health surveys than labour force surveys in those countries.

B. Data availability steadily decreased from 2010 to 2017 in most countries

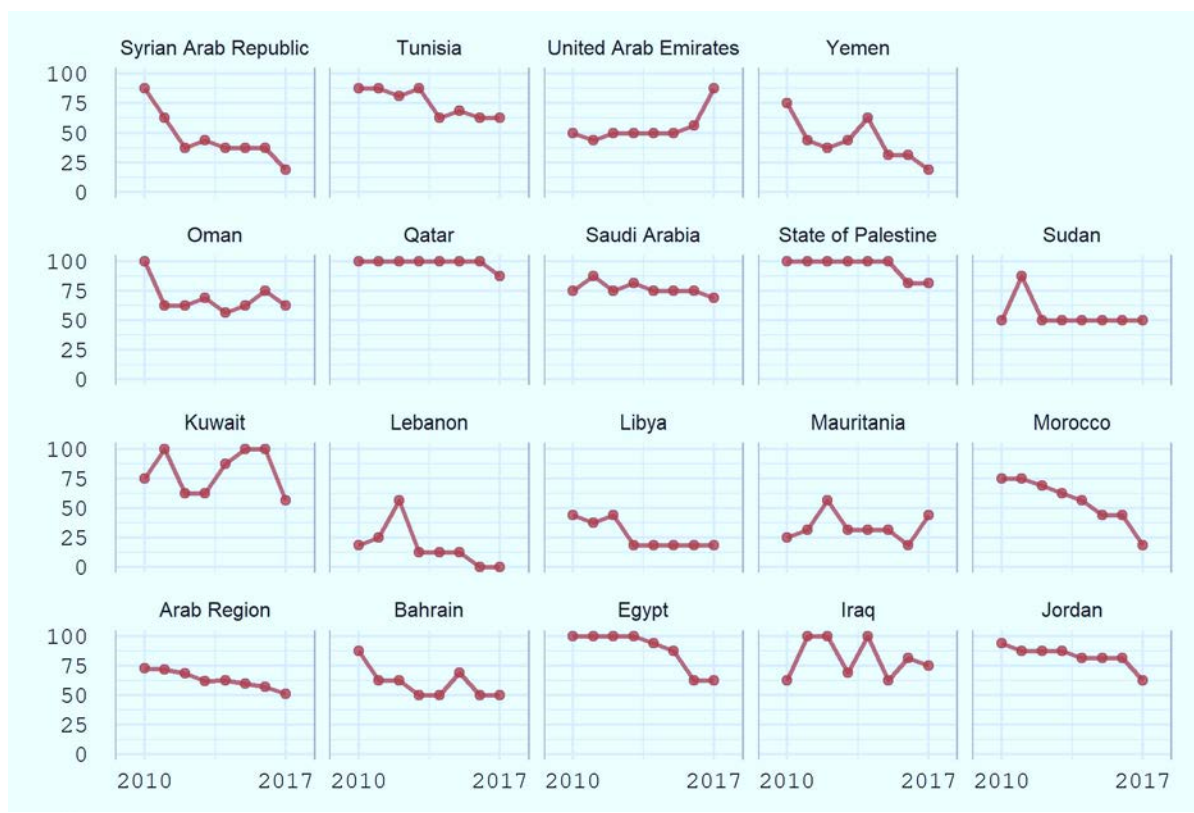
In general, data in the Arab region became less available from 2010 to 2017, on average by approximately 3 per cent each year, a trend that is observed across the region to varying degrees (figure 2). Among other factors, this may be mostly explained by delays in dissemination; often, it takes more than one year to receive the requested data after a survey or census has been conducted for ESCWA. This is likely the case for Egypt, Jordan, the State of Palestine, and Qatar, for example, where only the most recent years show a significant decrease from years prior.

Data availability for annual indicators fluctuated over the time period in Iraq, Kuwait and Oman, and 50 per cent of annual indicators in the Sudan are available for every year from 2012 to 2017. There are few indicators available from Lebanon and Mauritania over the time period, less than one third in most years. For 2011, 88 per cent of indicators are available from Saudi Arabia, compared to 69 per cent for 2017. The number of indicators available in Bahrain and Tunisia steadily decline from 2010 to 2017 at a similar average rate to the region as a whole, at five and four per cent, respectively.

Steep declines in data availability over time are observed in the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, coinciding with ongoing conflicts in those countries, as well as Morocco. For 2010, 75 per cent of indicators are available from Morocco and Yemen, and 88 per cent of indicators from the Syrian Arab Republic. In all three countries, only 19 per cent of indicators are available from 2017.

⁴ <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.

Figure 2. Availability scores of annual indicators, 2010-2017

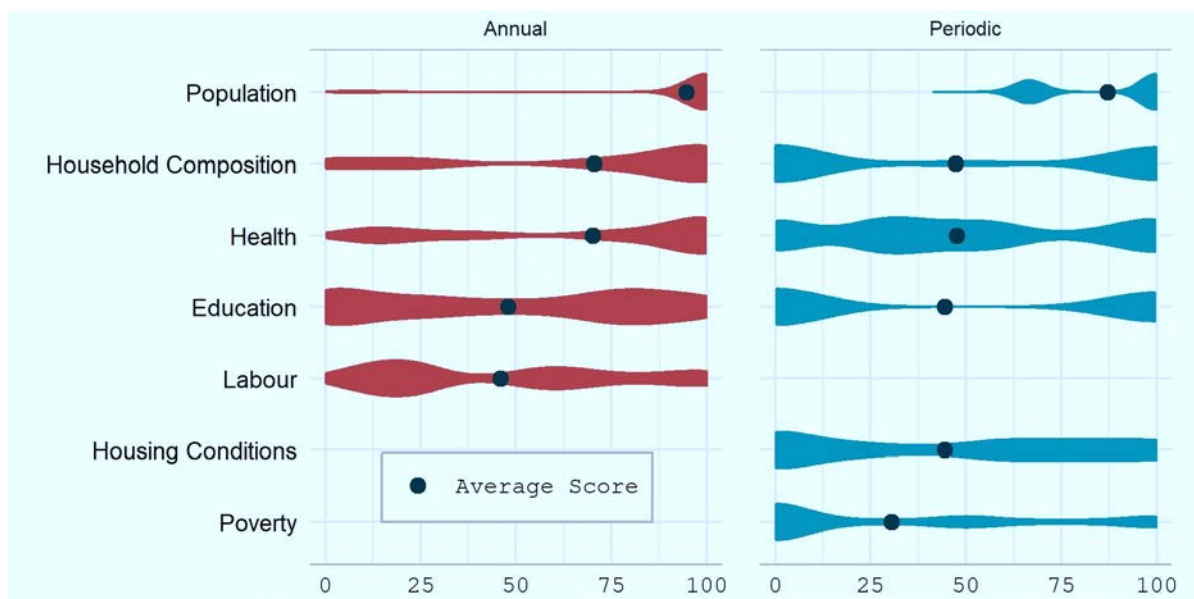


C. Statistics on population widely available, while on poverty lacking

Demographic and social indicators considered herein cover seven thematic areas: population, household composition, health, education, labour, poverty, and housing conditions. Indicators classified as annual cover the thematic areas of population, household composition, health, education, and labour, whereas periodic indicators cover population, household composition, health, education, poverty, and housing conditions. There are less periodic than annual indicators available for each thematic area that is covered by both classifications. Availability by thematic area varies in the Arab region.

Figure 3 below describes the distribution of annual and periodic country scores across thematic areas. Population indicators are almost entirely available, followed by household composition and health, which have similar scores; roughly 70 per cent of annual indicators are available within household composition and health, compared to almost 50 per cent of periodic indicators. Approximately 50 per cent of education, labour, and housing conditions indicators are available with varying distributions of scores. Poverty stands out as the thematic area with the least amount of data available; for the entire Arab region, only 31 per cent of poverty indicators considered herein are available.

Figure 3. Availability scores distribution by thematic area and type



As mentioned above, indicators classified as annual come from population estimates (population), civil registrations (population, household composition, health, and education) and labour force surveys (labour), while periodic indicators come from less frequent data-gathering activities such as decennial censuses or demographic and health surveys (population, household composition, housing conditions, and health), expenditure surveys (poverty), or periodic surveys specific to a certain theme (education and health).

Composite country scores for each thematic area are shown below in figure 4. Lebanon is the only country in the region that does not provide reliable population estimates, which are essential to compute additional indicators within the thematic area of population, in addition to other per capita indicators in other thematic areas. Few poverty indicators are available in the Arab region; all four poverty indicators considered herein were classified as periodic, and only Egypt, Mauritania, the State of Palestine, and Yemen have more than two of them available. ESCWA has access to more than two-thirds of requested labour data from 2010 to 2017 from six countries, namely Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, while less than 30 per cent of data is available from the bottom nine countries.

Availability of annual indicators in household composition, health, labour, and education decreased from 2010 to 2017 at similar rates (figure 5), whereas annual population indicators are consistently available from 2010 to 2017 in every country of the region, except for Lebanon. Less than 50 per cent of labour indicators are available in each year from 2013 to 2017. Some 60 per cent of annual education indicators (net enrolment rates and pupil-teacher ratios) are available from 2010 to 2013, however, their availability decreases precipitously during the following years to only 17 per cent in 2017.

Figure 4. Availability scores by country and thematic area

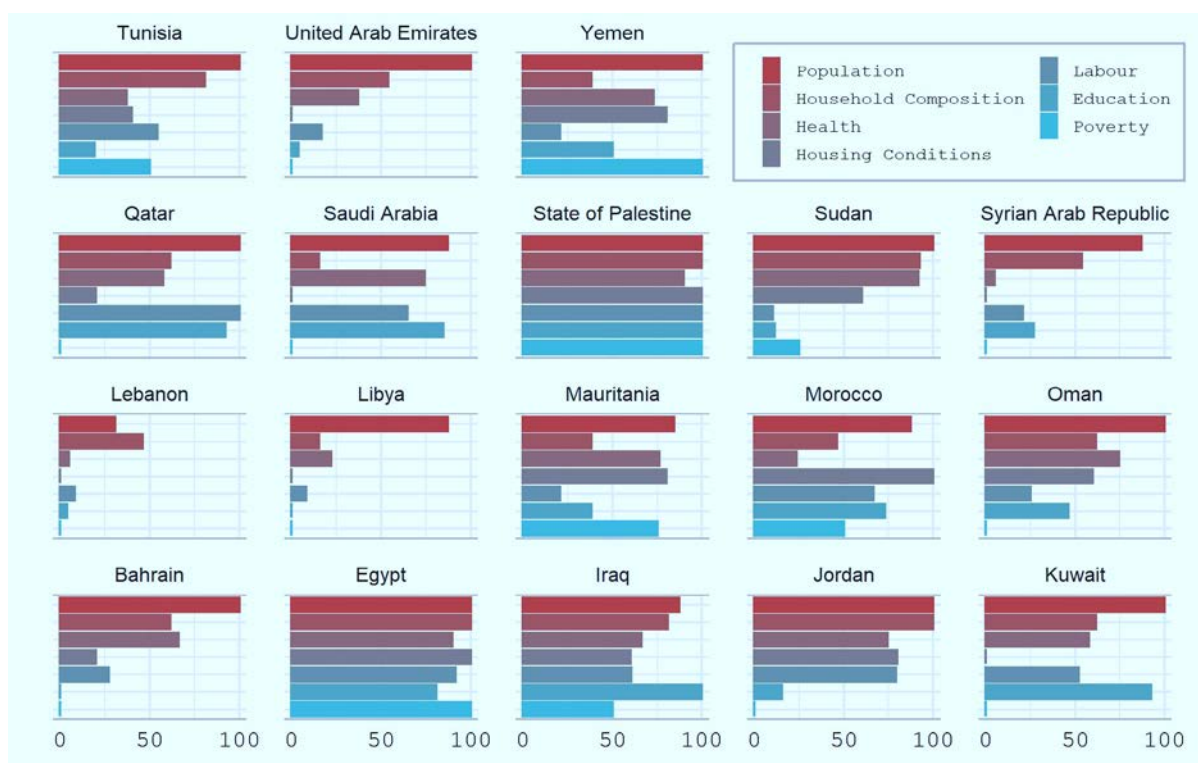
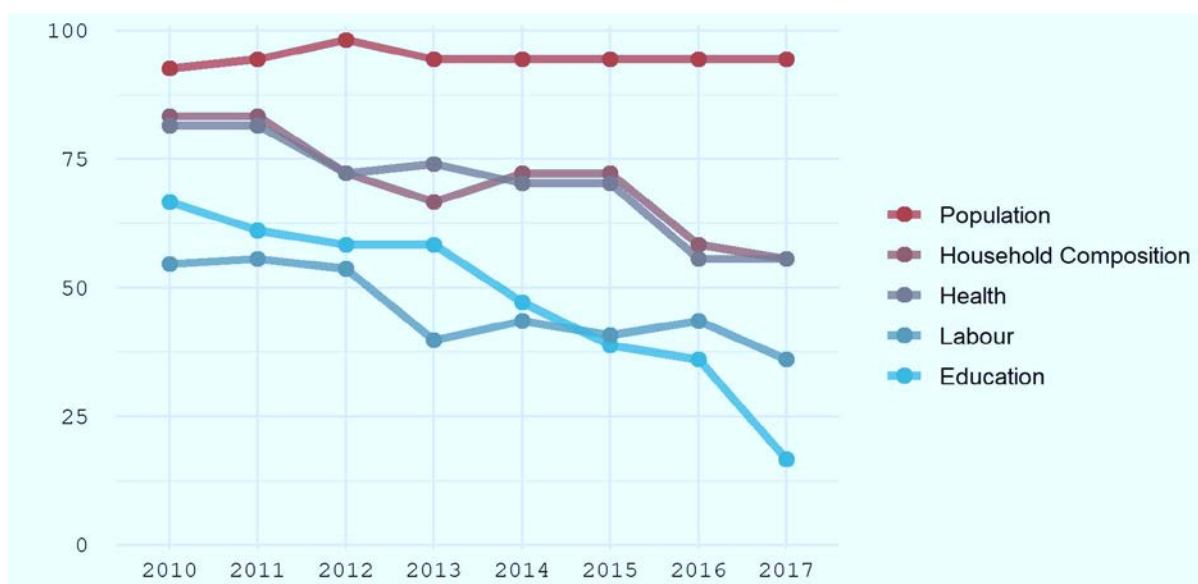


Figure 5. Availability of annual indicators by theme, 2000-2017



III. Country Notes and Suggestions

In addition to calculating data availability scores based on the data that have been received from member countries, ESCWA sent a questionnaire to member States requesting information on challenges and difficulties that national statistical offices of the region may be having in collecting and disseminating social and demographic data. ESCWA received substantive responses from Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The questionnaire contained four modules, namely, reducing data gaps, reducing capacity constraints, reducing funding gaps, and current efforts for reducing data gap. Most answers concerning reducing data gaps cited disaggregation as a point of concern, particularly by migration status, disability and geographic area. For example, the State of Palestine noted that disaggregation by urban or rural areas is not available for the Gaza Strip, and Morocco is only able to disaggregate by urban or rural areas when the census is conducted. Classifications for these disaggregations are lacking. Similarly, Egypt, Kuwait, the State of Palestine, and the Sudan lamented the lack of clear definitions for indicators on housing conditions.

The second module concerned capacity constraints. Aside from the State of Palestine, all countries reported a deficiency in human capacities for certain thematic areas, particularly health statistics. Reported reasons for this include turnover of staff, retirements and lack of specialized training in certain domains. The Sudan reported a shortage of means in producing data for all thematic areas; and the United Arab Emirates reported that data production in all thematic areas aside from labour suffers from lacking human capacity and staff training. Egypt reported the need for better cooperation and coordination with data sources for the harmonization of methods and definitions in domains, while Kuwait noted that all links between the national statistical offices and other data providers are currently manual, suggesting that the establishment of an electronic communication means for exchanging records and files would greatly facilitate sharing information more rapidly and with less reporting errors between data providers.

Funding remains a large issue for data production in Iraq and the Sudan. Egypt and Tunisia expressed the need to explore new sources of supplemental funding, such as from the private sector or United Nations agencies, and the State of Palestine expressed the need for additional funding for collecting data on maternal mortality. The final module received responses concerning current efforts for reducing data gaps and suggestions to do so. In general, countries of the region are taking the following steps:

- Improving current data collection methods by using new technologies, such as tablets;
- Introducing legal reform for improving the national institutional environment;
- Improving statistical literacy for the use of data;
- Strengthening data processing capabilities;
- Exploring new data sources for reducing data gaps, such as big data;

- Improving methodologies and standards for the production and dissemination of data and indicators;
- Supporting the evidence-based formulation of public policies;
- Developing mutually accountable partnership agreements among data producers and users within countries;
- Undertaking additional data collection.

IV. Proposed Strategic Framework

A regional strategy for the development of statistics (RSDS) is a masterplan for developing national capacities in demographic and social statistics in the Arab region. Such a strategy should also offer a framework for the regional institution, in this case ESCWA, for assisting member States in building their statistical capacities for the production and dissemination of regional sociodemographic indicators and global SDG indicators.

RSDS should be linked to national priorities set by member States and regional priorities set by regional development partners and institutions. It should be consistent with national strategies for the development of statistics (NSDS)⁵ in member States where it has been formulated and implemented, and with national statistical priorities in member States where no NSDS has been formulated yet.

To be successful, RSDS should stem on the following three prerequisites that will facilitate a constructive dialogue between data producers and data users at national and regional levels, mobilize necessary resources at national and regional levels, and pursue continuous coordination and collaboration with technical and financial partners.

1. **Building a strong political commitment** and validation by the authorities of the regional United Nations agency, namely, ESCWA, and national authorities at every stage of the process.
2. **Establishing an overall process**, covering the entire regional statistical system involving ESCWA, national statistical offices and related authorities of member countries.
3. **Establishing a regional statistical steering committee** that would spearhead the RSDS design and monitoring process. Technical and secretariat support may be provided by the Statistics Cluster at ESCWA.

The RSDS should be instrumental for ensuring that the “no one left behind” commitment taken by the international community for the SDGs is mirrored in the statistical domain. In order to live up to this promise inherent within the SDGs, timely, comprehensive and disaggregated data is needed to better understand the situation of the poorest and most marginalized.⁶

The RSDS could stem on the following five principles developed in the Inclusive Data Charter:

- All populations must be included in the data: no individual or group of population should be excluded from the count;

⁵ See NSDS Guideline developed by PARIS21, available at <https://nsdsguidelines.paris21.org>.

⁶ As stated in the United Nations General Assembly resolution 68/261, available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fp-new-e.pdf>.

- All data should, whenever possible, be disaggregated in order to accurately describe all populations: data should be disaggregated by sex, age, geographic location, and disability status, and, where possible, by income, ethnicity, migration status, and others;
- Data should be drawn from all available sources: high-quality and timely data from official (administrative records and household-based surveys) and non-official sources should be accessible, including new data sources, in consistency with international statistical standards;
- Those responsible for the collection of data and production of statistics must be accountable: transparency, confidentiality and privacy should ensure that personal data is not abused, misused, or any individual identified in accordance with national laws and the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics;
- Human and technical capacity to collect, analyse and use disaggregated data must be improved, including through adequate and sustainable financing: building national capacities is a permanent task that needs renewable financing by governments as well as by businesses, civil society and citizens.

The RSDS would have to address the needs for strengthening the statistical process at the regional and national levels. The issues to be addressed would include the following actions:

- Provide institutional support to member States for introducing legal reform for modernizing statistical laws that strengthens national statistical systems, and takes into account new technologies;
- Raising awareness of policymakers in the member States for the need for quality data on which evidence-based national policies may be formulated;
- Enhancing coordination between national stakeholders (producers-producers and producers-users), and promoting the dialogue between national producers to ensure increased sharing of sociodemographic indicators collected and produced at the national level by local producers including national statistical offices, line ministries and other official data producers;
- Developing statistical literacy for policymakers, researchers, media, non-governmental organizations, and the general public;
- In line with the recommendations of the Statistical Committee for the ESCWA region for the standardization of concepts, definitions and methodologies for the collection of timely, regionally comparable and quality statistics in economic and social areas, identifying priority areas for statistical activities in the region;
- Assisting national statistical authorities to expand data collection programmes for better coverage of sociodemographic indicators in line with national priorities as well as with the regional agenda (list of core indicators developed by ESCWA) and the global agenda (SDG indicators); either enlarging the scope of current household surveys by integrating new dimensions or undertaking new data collection operations in the form of household surveys;
- Aiding national statistical authorities to upscale current census and survey methodologies by incorporating new procedures and rules elaborated by international organizations as well as new lessons learned in other sectors and other partner countries.

Challenges and constraints that can hinder the production and dissemination of sociodemographic data at the national level from official sources can be grouped around seven key factors that are linked and reinforce each other, which are the following:

- The mandatory data collection operations in the member States may not be carried out, may be slow or may be inaccurate;
- The necessary legal frameworks for producing and disseminating social and demographic statistics may be lacking;
- Clear methodologies and standards for specific indicators, or a multiplicity of them, may be missing;
- Technical capacity, in particular to add value to and interpret data, may be insufficient;
- Data use and statistical literacy may be limited;
- National financial resources may be insufficient, resulting from budget limitations;
- Coordination between national statistical offices and data sources, such as ministries, may be lacking.

Proposed actions to be undertaken

In order to ensure consistency between the RSDS and the NSDS of member States, NSDS must include activities aiming at producing data needed at the regional level, and the RSDS must recognize the constraints and limitations placed on countries at the national level and their needs for building statistical capacities. The ESCWA core list of indicators and SDG indicators should be incorporated into the national budget process and supporting efforts to map national actions to link SDGs to the budget investment and spending in socioeconomic development programmes.

ESCWA's core list of indicators and SDG indicators should be collected in ways that enable sufficient disaggregation. For some indicators, this may require an innovative approach by twinning official metrics with geospatial data or using larger sample sizes. Each indicator will need to be accompanied by related metadata that would include a comprehensive template explaining how detailed disaggregated data can be produced, compiled, disseminated, and used. It may also enable countries to leapfrog the use of labour-intensive statistical tools, in favour of cost-saving metadata analysis.

Technical assistance programmes should be conducted that would help each ESCWA member State improve its data collection and dissemination process, in order to provide ESCWA with the required sociodemographic indicators.

Global standards for data harmonization will be essential for national governments and NSOs to effectively compile, interpret and utilize the broad range of development data sets. Standardization will be particularly important for non-official sources of data, such as business monitoring, which, over time, may be used to complement official metrics.

A faster and more efficient data exchange protocol should be implemented by ESCWA, such as a digital online platform, where member States can upload their data on a regular basis, from which ESCWA can update its publicly accessible data portal.



