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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Report

Thirteenth session of the Statistical Committee Beirut, 29-30 January 2019

Summary

The Statistical Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held its thirteenth session in Beirut on 29 and 30 January 2019. The Committee considered the items on the session agenda, including activities undertaken by the ESCWA secretariat in the field of statistics since the previous session, prospects of innovation and technology in official statistics, and the ethical considerations of using technology in official statistics. The Committee also reviewed progress in implementing the Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, and discussed the vision and strategic directions for ESCWA work in the field of statistics for the period 2020-2025.

The present report sets out the recommendations issued by the Statistical Committee at its thirteenth session, and a summary of the discussions under each agenda item.

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Introduction

1. The Statistical Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held its thirteenth session in Beirut on 29 and 30 January 2019, pursuant to resolution [179 \(XVI\)](#) of 2 September 1992, endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1993/2 of 2 February 1993, concerning the establishment of a statistical committee at ESCWA, and in accordance with the recommendations issued at the twelfth session of the Statistical Committee, held in Beirut on 4 and 5 April 2017.
2. The present report sets out the recommendations issued by the Statistical Committee at its thirteenth session, and a summary of the discussions under each agenda item.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

3. At its thirteenth session, the Statistical Committee made the following recommendations to member States and to the ESCWA secretariat.

A. RECOMMENDATIONS TO ESCWA MEMBER STATES

4. The Statistical Committee issued the following recommendations to ESCWA member States:

(a) Welcome activities implemented as follow-up to recommendations made by the Statistical Committee at its twelfth session and activities implemented under the ESCWA work programme in the field of statistics, take note of the proposed programme plan for 2020 as set out in document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/7](#), and benefit from ESCWA services in agreed future activities;

(b) Take note of progress in implementing the Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, which was adopted by the ESCWA Statistical Committee at its twelfth session (Beirut, 4-5 April 2017);

(c) Make national presentations on progress in implementing Statistical Committee recommendations;

(d) Integrate the priorities and needs of national statistical offices in technical cooperation frameworks that the ESCWA secretariat is developing with member States, so as to ensure that those frameworks constitute a comprehensive reference for technical cooperation projects;

(e) Continue updating and developing national statistical systems, benefit from technology in producing, collecting and using information and data, and focus on geospatial technologies and new technologies in censuses and surveys, while taking into account that the success of such processes relies on the availability of technical and financial support, especially in evaluating the infrastructure and readiness of statistical offices;

(f) Refer to the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework developed by the United Nations Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information to improve the quality of official statistics and population censuses, and to develop a statistical geospatial framework for each country that takes into account its circumstances and specificities;

(g) Shift towards using administrative registers as a key source of official statistics, and adapt them to serve such statistics;

(h) Adopt the System of National Accounts 2008 (2008 SNA) as a conceptual and regulatory framework for collecting various types of economic statistics, so as to ensure integration and consistency among them;

(i) Use all available economic statistics from various sources under a practical framework that allows for comparisons to highlight and tackle gaps, and employ supply and use tables given that they are the most appropriate framework to achieve that end;

(j) Develop statistical business registers and related classifications in the collection of trade and business statistics, while focusing on strengthening national partnerships in that field in line with country-specific partnership networks;

(k) Develop statistics on the environment and natural resources, and use appropriate statistical frameworks and geospatial information that assist in calculating sustainable development indicators related to the environment;

(l) Adopt draft metadata for indicators on demographic and social statistics in Arab countries, as agreed at the first meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Demographic and Social Statistics (17-18 October 2016), submit comments on the draft by 15 February 2019, and continue providing data related to those indicators and to the proposed sustainable development indicators;

(m) Welcome the proposal to organize a high-level meeting attended by heads of national statistical offices and decision makers in the Arab region, so as to strengthen dialogue between data producers and users;

(n) Welcome a joint initiative between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the ESCWA secretariat on forming a regional working group to coordinate labour statistics between Arab countries.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ESCWA SECRETARIAT

5. The Statistical Committee made the following recommendations to the ESCWA secretariat:

(a) Continue following up with member States on unimplemented Statistical Committee recommendations, in line with a follow-up mechanism prepared by the secretariat that contains periodic updates on statistical offices' plans and programmes;

(b) Rely on assessments of needs and gaps to provide support to countries according to the development level of their statistical systems and apparatuses;

(c) Work on integrating member States' proposals in the vision and strategic directions for ESCWA work in the field of statistics for the period 2020-2025, in line with the mandate of ESCWA and available resources;

(d) Continue capacity-building efforts to monitor the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under the Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, and develop tools that assist member States to monitor SDG implementation at the national level;

(e) Provide technical support to member States to develop statistical infrastructure, especially through the transfer of expertise between statistical offices in the region, focusing on the following issues:

(i) Developing new statistical strategies that take into account disparities in capacity between statistical offices, and supporting transformations in official statistics towards new data sources and types according to the requirements of measuring progress towards the SDGs;

(ii) Applying alternative statistical collection methods in conflict-affected countries, so as to provide the minimum amount of data required for decision-making;

(iii) Developing supply and use tables and sub-accounts in the System of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA), especially water and energy accounts, to ensure integration in the collection of periodic national accounts and related SDG indicators;

(iv) Supporting the establishment and development of statistical and geospatial information for the 2020 Round of Censuses and in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

(f) Shift towards 2008 SNA and its required statistics, taking into account regional shortfalls and needs that can be assessed through questionnaires and evaluations; and use all available data from various sources, including surveys, administrative registers and statistical business registers, before conducting new economic surveys;

(g) Develop business and trade statistics and statistical business registers and related economic classifications, and link administrative registers to statistical business registers;

(h) Prepare a manual to benefit from international principles on big data and related ethical standards, develop a comprehensive platform for existing initiatives on big data, and assess statistical offices' readiness to use it;

(i) Follow up on priority issues agreed at the second meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Economic Statistics (Beirut, 27-28 August 2018) that inform the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including Islamic financing;

(j) Continue implementing regional programmes on developing and harmonizing price statistics, as represented in the International Comparison Programme (ICP) and the initiative to harmonize the consumer price index for Arab countries;

(k) Continue preparing a strategy and action plan to tackle gaps in data series, taking into account disparities between Arab countries and countries under unfavourable conditions for data production, and build statistical capacity in calculating composite and emerging indicators;

(l) Continue preparing a guide on metadata for indicators on demographic and social statistics in Arab countries that includes concepts, definitions and mechanisms to calculate indicators, their level of disaggregation and ways to disseminate them; add a list of sustainable development indicators related to demographic and social statistics and align them with the core indicators; identify a set of crime indicators; and add metadata elements such as bodies responsible for producing indicators, when they should be produced, their availability and unit of measurement;

(m) Continue developing statistical methodologies to ensure data quality, and provide processed metadata and ways to analyse and disseminate them using emerging methods;

(n) Strengthen partnerships and coordination in the field of statistics between United Nations bodies and specialized agencies and regional and international organizations through existing mechanisms, such as the regional Task Force on SDG Data of the Regional Coordination Mechanism and the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, while focusing on the importance of coordinating various work programmes to avoid duplication.

II. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

A. FOLLOW-UP ISSUES

1. Activities implemented in the field of statistics (Agenda item 4)

6. The present item comprises five subitems on activities implemented in the field of statistics since the twelfth session of the Statistical Committee, held in Beirut on 4 and 5 April 2017.

*2. Follow-up on recommendations made by the Statistical Committee
at its twelfth session and previous recommendations
(Agenda item 4(a))*

7. The representative of the secretariat said that follow-up issues, and related documents presented to the Statistical Committee under the five subitems 4(a) to 4(e) and the activities included therein, were all linked in an integrated framework that covered ESCWA normative work. Such work consisted of studies and reports, technical cooperation activities provided to member States upon request, and specialized technical group meetings aimed at building consensus on challenges faced by statistical offices and ways to tackle them. He added that the Statistical Committee at its twelfth session made 22 recommendations to member States and 12 recommendations to the ESCWA secretariat, and that document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3\(Part I\)](#) gave an overview of activities undertaken by the secretariat to implement the recommendations made to it. He said that the document presented under subitem 4(b) on activities under the programme of work provided further details on the same issue; he therefore proposed that items 4 (a) and (b) be discussed together.

*3. Activities under the programme of work
(Agenda item 4(b))*

8. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3\(Part II\)](#), the representative of the secretariat presented key activities and achievements in the field of statistics since the twelfth session of the Statistical Committee under the ESCWA programme of work. She reviewed publications, reports and technical material, key meetings on managing statistical systems, economic statistics and national accounts, demographic and social statistics, and gender statistics. She also presented IPC activities, including an ESCWA strategy on ensuring continuity in the production of purchasing power parities that had been commended by international and regional organizations. ESCWA had also developed a free e-learning course on that subject.

9. Participants praised ESCWA efforts in implementing recommendations made to the secretariat, and commended the activities under the programme of work that it had undertaken. The representative of the State of Palestine said that there was some ambiguity in reporting on the implementation of recommendations made to member States, and in methods employed to assess the region's progress in the field of statistics. She enquired about ways to benefit from ESCWA membership in the Group on Earth Observations. The representative of Lebanon expressed her wish that national statistical offices be involved in project preparations through consultations with them in project formulation phases rather than simply in implementation phases. The representative of Qatar proposed that ESCWA prepare a manual on big data statistics and their use in official statistics.

10. The representative of Morocco commended activities aimed at supporting national statistical offices with gender statistics. He said that national programmes had been launched in his country to train gender statistics producers and users. Regarding ICP, he said that disparities existed between statistical references in weights, which required additional efforts from statistical offices that were members of several regional organizations, as was the case for Morocco which had adopted weights similar to those employed by the African Development Bank. The representative of Oman said that disparities existed in the methods used by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in calculating gross domestic product (GDP) based on purchasing power parity (PPP), resulting in different results.

11. The representative of Oman welcomed the ESCWA e-learning programme on gender statistics, stressing the importance of correcting some Arabic terms used in that area. The representative of Mauritania said that it was necessary to intensify efforts on gender statistics in the Arab region. He welcomed the ESCWA manual on disability statistics, and added that adopting new concepts in the field of environmental statistics required further capacity-building in data collection.

12. The representative of Jordan enquired about the role of ESCWA in assisting member States in calculating Islamic finance. He addressed the issue of migration, stressing the importance of referring to data

from national statistical offices when calculating migration indicators, in addition to data from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The representative of Libya said that there was a lack of migration data in his country because most migration was illegal, and requested assistance in collecting such data.

13. The representative of the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS) enquired about the feasibility of distance learning, and whether ESCWA had evaluated its benefit to Arab statistical offices. He said that data quality was vital to measuring SDG indicators, especially in fields that had not been sufficiently covered, such as the environment. He proposed that conflict-affected countries should enjoy positive discrimination in technical cooperation activities to assist them in completing their statistics. He said that collecting electronic data under the Global Positioning System was risky, and highlighted weaknesses in managing statistical systems in the Arab region and the importance of intensifying efforts in communicating with the media and in disseminating statistics.

14. In response, the representative of the secretariat said that weaknesses existed in monitoring member States' progress in implementing recommendations issued to them, stressing that the secretariat did not evaluate member States' performance but rather provided assistance to them. He proposed that member States make periodic presentations on the implementation of recommendations. He confirmed that problems existed in the choice of Arabic terms on gender, indicating that ESCWA had developed a glossary of statistical terminology that should be disseminated, employed and continually updated. He said that ESCWA was focusing on national data usage, especially regarding population and migration. He commented on the different approaches followed by the World Bank and IMF, noting that the issue was of significant importance and should be raised at meetings of the Statistical Commission in New York to avoid inconsistencies. He added that the World Bank was leading ICP, which ESCWA had joined. He said that ESCWA used data from national statistical offices to calculate PPP and provided real figures, unlike the World Bank and IMF that provided projections, which explained variations in results. He invited countries not participating in ICP to join because it was ongoing. He said that it was vital to positively discriminate against conflict-affected countries, and that ESCWA was assessing the impact of conflict on national statistics. Regarding e-learning, no formula currently existed to determine its impact and success, but training reports showed benefits to participants. It was also the most appropriate form of training for the future in the light of expected United Nations budget cuts.

4. *Technical cooperation activities* (Agenda item 4(c))

15. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3\(Part III\)](#), the representative of the secretariat gave an overview of technical cooperation activities undertaken by ESCWA since January 2017, including advisory services, workshops and capacity-building activities. He made proposals to strengthen technical cooperation services in line with member States' needs and priorities, including efforts by the ESCWA secretariat to develop bilateral cooperation frameworks with member States that so wished, so as to facilitate the planning and implementation of such activities.

16. Participants welcomed technical cooperation activities implemented by ESCWA, and requested further coordination with national statistical offices to optimize benefits. The representative of Lebanon, in response to the comment made by the representative of the secretariat on the previous sub-item, said that not evaluating countries' performance should not result in untargeted activities; disparities existed in countries' statistical capacity and ESCWA should design regional activities taking those disparities into account. She proposed that national statistical offices submit their annual programmes to the ESCWA secretariat to avoid effort duplication.

17. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic said that conflict and war in some Arab countries had affected statistical activities, and stressed that workshops alone were insufficient to assist countries, especially in the absence of practical capacity, even if countries possessed the ability to conduct statistical work. He requested that ESCWA strengthen coordination with AITRS in identifying technical cooperation activities.

The representative of the State of Palestine agreed with the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic regarding the gap in statistical work in conflict-affected countries, and requested stronger cooperation and coordination with regional organizations to avoid duplication. The representative of Yemen requested that special attention be awarded to war-torn countries. The representative of Libya said that the greater issue facing his country's national statistical office was funding, since international organizations still treated Libya as a donor country, which was unrealistic. He gave examples of strategies and activities that the national statistical office had the capacity to undertake, but had not been implemented because of a lack of funding.

18. The representative of Morocco said that cooperation was vital to bridge the gap between national statistical offices, resulting from disparities between countries. National statistical offices were facing significant challenges in data provision, and were being requested to revolutionize statistical approaches and data collection methods. He expressed his hope that greater attention would be given to new technological means, and that ESCWA would intensify efforts to assist statistical offices in keeping pace with technological progress and in improving quality. The representative of Kuwait said that new types of data were needed, for example on environmental indicators and other SDG indicators, and that it was important to develop new methodologies to that end. He added that shifts towards the use of administrative registers to produce data should follow a well-thought-out approach. Frameworks and legislation should be adopted to keep pace with technological developments in the field of statistics and to employ new data sources, such as big data.

19. The representative of Jordan expressed his wish to increase the length of advisory services provided by ESCWA to member States, especially since some projects required a significant amount of time. He said that it was important to exchange expertise between Arab countries, especially those with considerable experience in statistical work in some fields, and that there was no cooperation or coordination mechanism in that regard. He proposed that every national statistical office give a short presentation on its activities to benefit from experiences. The representative of Mauritania said that statistical sources still provided international data that might not reflect the reality on the ground in Arab countries, despite the availability of national data. He requested that a periodic publication be prepared that presented the latest technological developments in member States' statistical work to improve expertise. He said that his country prepared a poverty survey every four years, and expressed his hope that ESCWA would assist in conducting it. He discussed the shift towards 2008 SNA, and requested that a methodology be prepared to assist countries in implementing it. He also proposed that representatives of Arab statistical offices meet every six months to exchange and benefit from expertise and experiences.

20. The representative of AITRS discussed integrating new technologies in statistical work, and the need to increase coordination between regional organizations involved in statistics. He thanked ESCWA for the meeting that it had held with AITRS to coordinate support and efforts in the field of training. He proposed that an annual coordination meeting be held between various agencies operating in the Arab region to prepare a unified programme on statistical activities.

21. In response, the representative of the secretariat said that some proposals were covered in the reports of the advisory groups that would be discussed in the final two sub-items, and that the discussions following their presentation would clarify the secretariat's position regarding the issues raised by member State representatives. With regard to coordinating technical cooperation activities, the secretariat was keen to avoid duplication and to ensure continual coordination through two regional mechanisms that held periodic meetings, namely the Task Force on SDG Data of the Regional Coordination Mechanism and the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities.

5. Activities of the Technical Advisory Group on Economic Statistics (Agenda item 4(d))

22. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3\(Part IV\)](#), the representative of the secretariat presented the report of the second meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Economic Statistics, held in Beirut on 27 and 28 August 2018. She said that the report contained the outcomes of the meeting and resulting

recommendations, and a summary of discussions on priorities and on implementing international programmes, standards and methodologies related to 2008 SNA, international classifications, knowledge exchange, capacity-building, short-term economic indicators and SDG indicators. The report also set out proposed new areas of work in economic statistics.

23. The representative of Lebanon said that it was vital for the current meeting to reach a limited number of recommendations related to concrete facts and clear, specific and implementable ideas, and to focus on commonalities between member States to benefit all. The representatives of Kuwait and Oman concurred.

24. The representative of the secretariat said that recommendations were presented to the Statistical Committee for consideration and discussion, so that Committee members could then decide which to adopt.

6. *Activities of the Technical Advisory Group on Demographic and Social Statistics* (Agenda item 4(e))

25. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3\(Part V\)](#), the representative of the secretariat presented the report of the second meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Demographic and Social Statistics, held in Beirut on 18 and 19 December 2018. He said that the report contained the meeting's outcomes and resulting recommendations, and a summary of the discussions. He also discussed demographic and social statistical indicators in Arab countries, noting that metadata for the core list of indicators was annexed to the above-mentioned document, as well as proposed additions from SDG indicators. He invited member States to adopt the metadata for the list of indicators, and comment on the addition of a list of related SDG indicators.

26. Participants noted that the list of indicators was clear and beneficial. The representative of Lebanon said that it was difficult to disaggregate data by urban and rural areas, which lacked specific definitions given disparities between Arab countries in those definitions. She requested that countries that did not participate in the Advisory Group's meeting be granted time to further study the indicators and comment thereon. The representative of Saudi Arabia proposed combining various statistical sectors under more comprehensive topics, to ensure that statistical outputs provided a clearer and broader picture of the situation in countries, indicating his country's experience in combining environmental and energy statistics under a framework for natural resource statistics and adding knowledge statistics measuring culture, sports and leisure. The representative of Yemen said that it was necessary to assist statistical offices in conflict-affected countries to produce statistics.

27. In response, the representative of the secretariat said that it was difficult to classify data by urban and rural areas, especially given that such classifications could not be applied in some countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, which mostly comprised urban areas; whereas that classification was key in Morocco and greatly affected data analysis. It was therefore necessary to intensify efforts in defining concepts and classification methods. Regarding statistical fields, ESCWA adhered to the widely accepted classification, but was not against focusing on fields comprising several sectors. He proposed that the secretariat develop a mechanism to review member States' progress in implementing recommendations, either through individual presentations by representatives or through a combined report.

B. TECHNOLOGY FOR STATISTICS: OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPLICATIONS

1. *Prospects of innovation and technology in official statistics* (Agenda item 5)

28. The representative of the secretariat presented previous ESCWA work in using technology to produce and disseminate statistics. He said that, in 2015, ESCWA published a document ([E/ESCWA/SD/2015/IG.1/5](#)) on big data in official statistics, which it presented to the Statistical Committee. In 2017, ESCWA had prepared a preliminary survey to assess Arab countries' use of geospatial information as a data source, which it complemented with a more comprehensive survey in 2018 on Arab countries' experiences and practices in

using those data, geographic information systems (GIS), and statistical data dissemination. Moreover, ESCWA launched a data portal on 31 January 2019, based on an advanced system for disseminating and analysing Arab countries' economic, social and environmental statistical data in Arabic and English. ESCWA also participated in several events in that context.

29. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/4](#), Mr. Omar Oreibi, a consultant on geospatial information management, discussed the opportunities and implications presented by technological developments worldwide in the field of official statistics, especially regarding data sources and methodologies for collection, processing, storage and dissemination, particularly in terms of monitoring SDG implementation. He gave a short presentation on key technologies used in surveys, the results of a survey conducted by ESCWA in 2018, and United Nations recommendations on using geospatial information and linking them to social and economic information to develop a global geospatial statistical framework. He concluded with proposals on the way forward in using technology in official statistics.

30. In the ensuing discussion, the representative of the State of Palestine proposed a recommendation on tackling shortfalls in information technology infrastructure in statistical institutions, especially since the amount of information requested for statistical indicators had increased so much that available infrastructure and information systems were unable to absorb it. She requested ESCWA assistance in that regard. The representatives of Lebanon and Oman reviewed statistical activities in which new technologies had been employed with mixed success. The representative of Lebanon said that success in those activities was fundamentally linked to sufficient funding. The representative of Oman said that the greater challenge was periodically updating geospatial data. The representative of Morocco said that coordination and technical support were vital, since geospatial information was not part of the expertise of statistical offices, which used such information to keep pace with developments and new requirements, but with little knowledge and inaccurate methodologies. The representative of Mauritania said that statistical offices needed geospatial information, stressing the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of such information.

2. *Round-table discussion: Use of technology in official statistics – ethical considerations*
(Agenda item 6)

31. The secretariat organized a round-table discussion at which it presented document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/CRP.1](#). The discussion was moderated by Mr. Bashar Haidar, a philosophy professor at the American University of Beirut. He addressed the issue of data ownership, and whether it was the purview of private enterprises, the State, technology users or data producers. He discussed the right of entities that had acquired data to use them for statistical, commercial or other purposes, and the rights of individuals whom the data related to, including their right to agree or disagree to their use. He said that the issue was not critical when information was collected using traditional methods; however, with the emergence of big data, it was no longer possible to collect data without considering that there was “absolute consent”. He further tackled the issue of privacy, which was a key individual right that deserved protection, regardless of how perceptions changed over time. New techniques were required to ensure anonymity. He asked whether big data contained sufficient information for accurate statistical use, and whether they could be relied on in the activities of national statistical offices.

32. In his intervention, Mr. Fouad Mrad, from the Technology for Development Division of ESCWA, said that many Arab States had signed the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace, which stressed the need to ensure that individuals' online rights received the same protection as their other rights. He invited participants to consider the ethical and legal implications of the issue. He said that ESCWA had participated in establishing the Arab Internet Governance Forum, noting that such governance was without borders and was related to Internet neutrality and openness. He wondered why Arab citizens trusted large foreign enterprises that managed social networks and media applications although their membership conditions contained provisions on privacy violation, whereas citizens lacked trust in national Governments. He said that privacy was an important legal and ethical issue; however, ethics also required keeping pace with technology and its uses in development. He noted the difference between the ethics of virtue that were idealistic, and utility

ethics that focused on improving living standards for the greatest number of people. He said that the United Nations Sustainable Development Group had developed guidelines for using big data, confirming the preparedness of ESCWA to assist Arab States in assessing their technological readiness.

33. In his intervention, Mr. Jonathan Fraine, research scientist at the Space Science Institute in Colorado, the United States of America, discussed the concept of informed consent which underpinned big data collection. He said that data were sometimes misused for commercial or political purposes. If users had been aware, they would not have given their consent. It was vital to develop data ownership frameworks in line with statistical principles. He also considered data used in statistics at the national level, and the need for them to be complete and truthful so as to achieve reliable statistics distributed over the sub-areas commonly recognized in statistics. Despite the dilemmas raised by big data, they were vital to traditional statistical work, because the limited resources available to statistical offices prevented them from accessing all citizens when conducting surveys and censuses.

34. Participants discussed the standards and methodologies followed in the work of statistical offices and the extent to which those standards and methodologies were aligned with big data, the reliability and comparability of big data, their value in statistical work, and the importance of statisticians using their knowledge and expertise in identifying useful big data and exploiting them responsibly. Participants requested that the ESCWA secretariat raise awareness on innovations related to big data and their use, and provide practical guidance to member States.

35. The representative of Oman said that indicator collection, especially economic indicators, was based on internationally recognized statistical standards. Despite the wide-ranging discussion on big data, they ultimately complemented traditional statistical work rather than superseding it. Moreover, big data continued to face several legal, financial and technological challenges. Overreliance on big data was risky because they might be false or inaccurate, and they were often incomparable thus losing their statistical value. The representative of Egypt said that big data could be used to extract tangible facts that could be built upon. He added that false and hidden data existed, and that big data were measurable while others were not.

36. The representative of Lebanon proposed selecting several leading countries to assess technological readiness by sector on the basis of statistically reliable information. She said that Lebanon was officially ready to cooperate practically in that regard. The representative of Saudi Arabia said that his country's statistical office had participated in the Global Working Group on Big Data for Official Statistics. He added that big data uses were not limited to individuals' data, but could also be used to explain various tangible phenomena such as overcrowding on certain roads. He concluded that it was vital for statisticians to keep pace with technological developments.

37. In the ensuing discussion, Mr. Haidar discussed the cognitive problem of big data. He said that the bigger the amount of information, the more it compensated for possible mistakes therein, thus potentially making it statistically useful. Regarding the discussion on the superiority of utility ethics in the use of big data, he said that those ethics did not provide adequate responses to aspects of individuals' rights. Concerning consent, individual consent was often not fundamental since the issue had more comprehensive legal dimensions. In the future, States might intervene to prevent consent, as in the case of organ and blood sales. Such an issue could not be considered with reference only to individuals consenting to become members of websites and applications involved in big data collection.

38. The representative of AITRS said that the multiplicity of opinions indicated the need to consider the development of clear guidelines in that field in all aspects of statistical work, and tackle related challenges. He agreed with interventions that highlighted credibility issues. Regarding methodologies, he said that statistical offices used clear methodologies for data dissemination, and were responsible for checking big data credibility. However, they were also required to handle those data, otherwise they would lag behind technologically. He added that ESCWA should identify least-costly ways to handle big data.

39. In conclusion, Mr. Mrad said that big data required national infrastructure and skills that were not limited to technological fields, and called for integration between those requirements. Regarding statistical offices' ownership of data and protection of individual data, he indicated services provided by institutions such as OPAL (open algorithms), which sent software to data sites for analysis without cloning, transferring or misplacing them.

C. STATISTICS AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1. *Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data: progress in implementation* (Agenda item 7)

40. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/5](#), the representative of the secretariat reviewed progress in implementing the Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, adopted by the Statistical Committee at its twelfth session. He said that the Arab Regional Action Plan focused on the six strategic areas set out in the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, namely coordination and strategic leadership on data for sustainable development; innovation and modernization of national statistical systems; strengthening of basic statistical activities and programmes, with particular focus on addressing the monitoring needs of the 2030 Agenda; dissemination and use of sustainable development data; multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development data; and mobilizing resources and coordinating efforts for statistical capacity-building.

41. The representative of the United Arab Emirates proposed appointing a single focal point in each statistical office to directly communicate with the secretariat and facilitate coordination with regard to progress. He enquired about coordination between ESCWA and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. The representative of Lebanon said direct communication with a single focal point might create administrative difficulties, and proposed appointing instead a national coordinator for statistical activities conducted with ESCWA and sub-coordinators for each field of statistics. The representative of Mauritania requested assistance in preparing voluntary national reviews for the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

42. In response, the representative of the secretariat said appointing a single focal point in each statistical office was a good idea that would greatly facilitate ESCWA work, but it was up to member States to make such decisions because the secretariat communicated with member States through official channels identified by them. He said that there were no coordination mechanisms between ESCWA and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and expressed his hope that they would be established in the future. He confirmed that ESCWA was one of the first regional organizations to form a unit to assist member States in achieving the SDGs, and noted that the 2019 High-level Political Forum would bring together Heads of State for the first time. He said that ESCWA provided support to member States upon request in preparing voluntary national reviews on implementing the 2030 Agenda.

2. *Programme on Statistics and Data: overview and way forward* (Agenda item 8)

43. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/6](#), the representatives of the ESCWA secretariat presented progress and the way forward regarding the Programme on Statistics and Data comprising the following four pillars: means of implementation; environment statistics; social and demographic statistics; and economic statistics. They reviewed activities that the secretariat had implemented or would implement under each pillar in the context of extending the Programme, which was funded by the United Nations Development Account, until the end of 2020.

44. Participants welcomed progress achieved under the Programme. The representative of Lebanon enquired about coordination between ESCWA and IMF on the exchange of statistical data and metadata. The representative of Kuwait discussed supply and use tables, and expressed his hope that ESCWA would focus its programmes on economic data in the coming period.

45. The representative of Mauritania requested that ESCWA assist countries in calculating GDP excluding extractive industries. The representative of the Sudan discussed the political considerations that were involved in calculating GDP and the need to develop better mechanisms for valuing the informal economic sector, indicating disparities between countries in criteria for calculating poverty which required coordination. The representative of the State of Palestine expressed her hope that future ESCWA activities would be more specialized, and called for a return to a questionnaire developed by Paris21 to gauge the needs of statistical offices. The representative of Morocco said that his country had launched a national programme to improve the quality of gender statistics, in parallel with detailed research on violence against women and other forms of domestic violence. He added that the secretariat's presentation had included a map of Morocco that differed from the official map endorsed by the United Nations.

46. In the ensuing discussion, the representative of the secretariat said that ESCWA was following up on the exchange of statistical data and metadata in all fields, and was coordinating with IMF through the United Nations Statistical Commission and the Regional Coordination Mechanism. He called for improved data collection systems and for cooperation between member States which were the data owners. He discussed the challenges associated with GDP resulting from significant activities in the informal economy, indicating that 64 activities were not included in national accounts and that their inclusion would require integration and coordination. He invited all countries, even those with little data, to develop supply and use tables because they improved statistical work in the long run. He agreed that it was vital to conduct wider analyses of statistical offices' needs before holding workshops. ESCWA did not follow the World Bank's approach in calculating multidimensional poverty because it was not applicable to member States. He invited countries to consider and apply the experience of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in that regard. He stressed that poverty and inequality data were unavailable in most Arab countries, and few countries had defined their national poverty line. He requested that countries cooperate in providing such data. He added that the secretariat was committed to using United Nations maps in its work, and was prepared to correct any related errors.

3. *Proposed programme plan for 2020 in the field of statistics*
(Agenda item 9)

47. With reference to document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/7](#), the representative of the secretariat presented the proposed programme plan for 2020 in the field of statistics. He set out the main focus areas in the plan, and requested that the Statistical Committee take note of them. He said that the ESCWA Executive Committee had adopted the plan at its fifth meeting, held in Beirut on 18 and 19 December 2018.

48. Participants welcomed the plan and said that they looked forward to coordinating and collaborating with ESCWA in implementing it.

4. *Round-table discussion: Vision and strategic directions for ESCWA work
in the field of statistics for the period 2020-2025*
(Agenda item 10)

49. Based on document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/CRP.2](#), the secretariat organized a second round-table discussion on the vision and strategic directions for ESCWA work in the field of statistics for the period 2020-2025. The representative of the secretariat presented the proposed directions in accordance with the needs of and challenges faced by national statistical offices in the Arab region in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

50. Participants welcomed the vision and the strategic directions. The representative of Lebanon said that political support for programme implementation was lacking in statistical work, which required raising awareness among politicians on the importance of statistical work. She proposed that ESCWA hold a high-level regional meeting to launch a dialogue between statistical offices and decision makers, similar to the meeting held by the General Assembly on sustainable development.

51. In the ensuing discussion, the representative of the Sudan said that media support for statistical work strengthened government response. The representatives of Libya and Mauritania concurred. The representative of Morocco said that national statistical offices were not the only bodies in the statistical system, since data could not be accurate and reliable without full coordination with Governments. The representative of Jordan stressed that statistical offices were government bodies responsible for statistics; if given a clear vision and implementable objectives, they could secure financing from international donors. The representative of Saudi Arabia discussed a project to operationalize the statistical sector in his country, which ESCWA could consider and disseminate as a successful experience in covering all statistical sectors.

52. The representative of AITRS said that the programme should not target only national statistical offices, but all data producers. He agreed with countries' proposals on collaboration with government bodies.

53. In response, the representative of the secretariat said that awareness of the importance of statistics was increasing, along with the enthusiasm of various government sectors to coordinate with statistical offices. There was also a desire to conduct the Statistical Committee's work alongside that of other ESCWA committees, especially since statistics intersected with all areas of development. He stressed that it was vital for national bodies to undertake national coordination efforts in the statistical system, highlighting the secretariat's role in facilitating dialogue and coordination with other sectors at the regional level. He agreed with member States' proposal on launching a dialogue with high-level national political actors to increase awareness on the importance of data.

5. Coordinating a regional position on the topics of discussion at the fiftieth session of the United Nations Statistical Commission
(Agenda item 11)

54. The Statistical Committee decided to postpone discussions on this agenda item until the meeting of its working group on coordinating a regional position on the topics of discussion at the sessions of the United Nations Statistical Commission, to be held in Beirut on 31 January 2019.

D. DATE AND VENUE OF THE FOURTEENTH SESSION OF THE STATISTICAL COMMITTEE
(Agenda item 12)

55. The fourteenth session of the Statistical Committee will be held at the United Nations House in Beirut in October 2020.

E. OTHER MATTERS
(Agenda item 13)

56. Two presentations were made under this item: the first was a proposal by ILO on establishing a regional working group on labour indicators in the region, and the second was on evaluating the work of the Statistical Committee since 2010.

1. Proposal to establish a regional working group on labour indicators

57. Mr. Raphael Diez de Medina and Mr. Nader Kairouz of ILO made a presentation on a proposal to establish a regional working group on labour indicators. They discussed the reasons for forming the working group, including the region's need for greater efforts to coordinate labour statistics and to follow up on implementing international and regional agreements on labour statistics in the Arab region. They reviewed the issues that the working group would cover, such as implementing the outcomes of expert group meetings on labour statistics, following up on the implementation of labour-related SDG indicators, and sharing information with ILO. They requested that States approve the formation of the working group, identify priority issues, and finance its meetings.

58. Participants welcomed the proposal and ILO interest in statistics, and expressed their readiness to facilitate the success of the working group.

2. *Evaluating the work of the Statistical Committee*

59. The representative of the secretariat made a presentation on evaluating the work of the Statistical Committee by member States participating in its sessions since 2010, so as to improve the Committee's working mechanisms. He gave an overview of the ESCWA evaluation system and its various subsidiary bodies. He also reviewed the history of the evaluation process for Statistical Committee sessions and for participation rates and continuity, and findings on improvements in the Committee's work. He said that it was important to provide proposals to develop the Committee's work.

60. Participants welcomed the evaluation process. The Chair requested that participants complete a questionnaire to evaluate the thirteenth session of the Committee.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE

61. The Statistical Committee held its thirteenth session at the United Nations House in Beirut on 29 and 30 January 2019.

B. OPENING

62. Mr. Sultan Ali al-Kuwari, statistical adviser at the Planning and Statistics Authority and representative of Qatar, which chaired the twelfth session of the Statistical Committee, made an opening statement in which he welcomed participants and thanked ESCWA for its collaboration with the leadership of the twelfth session since 2017. Mr. Mounir Tabet, Acting Executive Secretary of ESCWA, made a statement of behalf of the secretariat in which he noted the unprecedented attention awarded to statistical work, and the significant progress in aligning national statistical practices with international statistical standards, methods and concepts. He considered the statistical fields in which the Arab region was a pioneer, including success in calculating annual PPP, and publishing a booklet on disability statistics at the regional level to which ESCWA has contributed.

63. Mr. Sami Sleiman Al Ali, representative of Kuwait and Chair of the thirteenth session of the Statistical Committee, made a statement in which he thanked participants and commended ESCWA efforts to support statistical capacity in member States and to promote joint statistical work. He expressed his hope that the session would result in recommendations that served member States.

C. PARTICIPANTS

64. The session was attended by representatives of 15 ESCWA member States and of regional and Arab organizations involved in statistics, in addition to experts and consultants. The list of participants is contained in annex I to the present report.

D. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

65. Rule 18 of the Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure of ESCWA states: "Member States shall chair the sessions of the subsidiary bodies of the Commission on a rotating basis, in the Arabic alphabetical order employed by the United Nations". In accordance with this rule, the representative of Kuwait chaired the thirteenth session of the Statistical Committee. Participants elected the representatives of Lebanon and Qatar as vice-chairs, and of Egypt as rapporteur.

E. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

66. At its first meeting, the Statistical Committee adopted the provisional agenda of its thirteenth session, as contained in document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/L.1](#). The Committee included two sub-items under item 13 on “other matters”, namely a proposal to establish a regional working group on labour indicators; and evaluating the work of the Statistical Committee. At the same meeting, the Committee approved the organization of work of the session as contained in document [E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/L.2](#).

F. DOCUMENTS

67. A list of the documents presented at the thirteenth session of the Statistical Committee is set out in annex II to the present report.

Annex I

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

A. ESCWA MEMBER STATES

Egypt

Mr. Tarek Mahmoud Saadallah
First Undersecretary of State
Head of Regional Department Sector
Central Agency for Public Mobilization
and Statistics

Jordan

Mr. Kassem Said Mousa al-Zoubi
Director-General of Statistics
Department of Statistics

Kuwait

Mr. Sami Suleiman Al Ali
General Manager
Central Statistical Bureau

Mr. Othman Abdullah al-Othman
Assistant Undersecretary of the Statistical Work
Sector
Central Statistical Bureau

Mr. Mohammed Mahdi al-Rashidi
Surveyor of Agricultural Statistics
Central Statistical Bureau

Lebanon

Ms. Maral Tutelian
General Manager
Central Administration of Statistics

Ms. Marleine Bakhos
Chief of Accounting Service

Libya

Mr. Abdullah Zaidan Mohammad Alak
Director
Bureau of Census and Statistics

Mauritania

Mr. Dahman wold Abeesh
Technical Adviser to the General Director
National Office of Statistics

Mr. Mohammad Abdul-Rahman al-Dady
Assistant Director of Economic Analysis and
Forecasting
Ministry of Economy and Finance

Morocco

Mr. Mawlay Abdullah al-Sukarati
Deputy Director of Statistics
High Commission for Planning

Oman

Mr. Khalid Said Nassir al-Mothafar
Director-General of Economic Statistics
National Centre for Statistics and Information

Ms. Kawthar bint Hamad bin Saif al-Faresiya
Director of National and International Information
National Centre for Statistics and Information

Ms. Halima bint Youssef al-Wohaibi
Director of the Department of Social Statistics
National Centre for Statistics and Information

State of Palestine

Ms. Ola Awad
Director of the Palestinian Central Bureau of
Statistics

Ms. Rania Abu Ghaboush
Assistant Undersecretary of Statistical Affairs
Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

Qatar

Mr. Mohammad Said Ali al-Mohanadi
Manager of Statistics Department
Planning and Statistics Authority

Mr. Sultan Ali al-Kuwari
Statistics Adviser
Planning and Statistics Authority

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Abdullah bin Mohammad al-Batel
Deputy Chairman for Statistical Affairs
General Authority for Statistics

Saudi Arabia (continued)

Mr. Abdul Karim bin Abdullah al-Duraibi
Director of Agriculture Statistics Department
General Authority for Statistics

Sudan

Mr. Karamallah Ali Abdurrahman Saleh
General Director
Central Bureau of Statistics

Syrian Arab Republic

Mr. Ihsan Amer
General Director
Central Bureau of Statistics

United Arab Emirates

Mr. Nassir al-Mahshi
Senior Statistician
Energy and Agriculture Statistics

Yemen

Mr. Fares Ali Kayed Al-Jahmi
Central Statistical Organization

B. UNITED NATIONS SPECIALIZED AGENCIES

International Labour Organization

Mr. Raphael Diez de Medina
Senior Statistician
Director of the Statistics Division

Mr. Nader Kairouz
Regional Adviser on Labour Statistics
Regional Bureau for Arab States

Statistical Centre for the Cooperation
Council for the Arab States of the Gulf

Ms. Souad Said al-Azkiya
Director of Geographical, Environmental, Energy
and Tourism Statistics

Arab Institute for Training and Research in
Statistics

Mr. Alhadi al-Saidi
Director-General

C. EXPERTS/CONSULTANTS

Mr. Omar Oreibi
Consultant on Geospatial Information Management

Mr. Bashar Haidar
American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Mr. Jonathan Fraine
Space Science Institute, United States of America

Mr. Ragheed Maghrabi
Rafik Hariri University, Lebanon

Annex II

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Title	Item	Symbol
Information note		E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/INF.1
Provisional agenda and annotations	3	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/L.1
Organization of work	3	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/L.2
Activities implemented in the field of statistics	4	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3
Follow-up on recommendations made by the Statistical Committee at its twelfth session and previous recommendations	4 (a)	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3(Part I)
Activities under the programme of work	4 (b)	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3(Part II)
Technical cooperation activities	4 (c)	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3(Part III)
Activities of the Technical Advisory Group on Economic Statistics	4 (d)	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3(Part IV)
Activities of the Technical Advisory Group on Demographic and Social Statistics	4 (e)	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/3(Part V)
Prospects of innovation and technology in official statistics	5	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/4
Round-table discussion: Use of technology in official statistics – ethical considerations	6	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/CRP.1
Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data: progress in implementation	7	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/5 E/ESCWA/EC.5/2018/6/Rev.1
Programme on Statistics and Data: overview and way forward	8	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/6
Proposed programme plan for 2020 in the field of statistics	9	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/7
Round-table discussion: Vision and strategic directions for ESCWA work in the field of statistics for the period 2020-2025	10	E/ESCWA/C.1/2019/CRP.2
List of documents		E/ESCWA/EC.5/2019/INF.2
