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Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2022–2023

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith a summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia for the period 2022–2023.

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Summary

The present report contains highlights of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia during the reporting period 2022–2023. The Commission continued to focus on key priority areas for the Arab region, including natural resource and transboundary water management; transition to cleaner energy sources and circular economy; multidimensional poverty reduction and social protection; equitable and inclusive social development; equitable economic growth and prosperity; innovative financing for development solutions; information technology and statistics; as well as governance, the strengthening of public institutions and the assessment and mitigation of transboundary risks, including conflict.

I. Introduction

1.   The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) continued to focus on areas of high priority to the Arab region, including natural resource and transboundary water management and sustainability under changing climate conditions; the transition to cleaner energy sources and circular economy; multidimensional poverty reduction and social protection; equitable and inclusive social development, with particular consideration for the needs of persons in vulnerable situations (women, youth, older persons and persons with disabilities) as part of the commitment to leave no one behind; equitable economic growth and prosperity, supported by improved regional integration and opportunities for trade and for small and medium-sized enterprises; innovative financing for development solutions; information technology and statistics as a means of improving the availability and accessibility of evidence and improving participation and inclusion; as well as governance, the strengthening of public institutions and the assessment and mitigation of transboundary risks, including conflict.

2.   Key achievements in 2022 included:

(a)   The presentation by seven member States (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman and Tunisia) of 26 climate change finance projects to potential investors;

(b)   The development by one member State (Kuwait) of a strategic framework and road map for enabling a just, inclusive, equitable and secure transition of the energy sector, based on the circular carbon economy framework;

(c)   The development by Arab member States of a common position prior to the International Migration Review Forum and their engagement with African States in a joint dialogue on migration;

(d)   The launch of the artificial intelligence-enabled ESCWA skills monitor, which enables working-age populations in four member States (Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Qatar) to identify job opportunities based on their skills. The tool also enables member States to better assess and plan for their future labour market needs;

(e)   The enabling of e-commerce as a business channel for 100 small and medium-sized enterprises, including 46 women-owned businesses, from 15 Arab member States and in sectors such as agribusiness, retail and services;

(f)   The development by one member State (Jordan) of a debt swap programme proposal estimated at $1 billion to finance climate action and activities relating to the Sustainable Development Goals over the period 2022–2030. An additional two member States (Egypt and Tunisia) initiated the process to operationalize the debt swap for climate finance initiative;

(g)   The deployment by an additional two member States (State of Palestine and Yemen) of contextualized and simplified economic modelling tools to inform policymaking at the national level;

(h)   The identification by ministries of planning and finance from five member States (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen) of priorities to improve the alignment of national budgets with national development plans and the Sustainable Development Goals;

(i)   The gaining of access by national institutions and international development partners in one member State (Yemen) to a dedicated e-platform to coordinate capacity development programming;

(j)   The integration by one additional member State (Lebanon) into its national development strategy of risk assessment tools that address transboundary conflict and non-conflict drivers of hazards and vulnerability;

(k)   The introduction by one additional member State (Lebanon) of competition legislation, the introduction by one additional member State (Kuwait) of further legislation on competition and the expansion by one member State (Oman) of its dedicated competition authority.

II.   Advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the region

3.   ESCWA promoted greater collaboration among ministries of planning and finance from five member States (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen), which resulted in the identification of priorities for improving the alignment of national budgets with national development plans and the Sustainable Development Goals.

4.   ESCWA continued to build the capacity of member States to conduct voluntary national reviews, including by facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges. In that regard, a pilot twinning exercise was launched with the participation of two member States (Oman and the Syrian Arab Republic), which discussed solutions to challenges and identified best practices in the voluntary national review process. ESCWA also supported the generation of data on the Sustainable Development Goals and reporting against the targets of the Goals.

5.   ESCWA engaged with select parliaments and supreme audit institutions in the region to promote the principles of the 2030 Agenda and the rights-based and whole-of-society approaches to development.

6.   The various interactive, artificial intelligence-enabled policy tools developed by ESCWA enabled member States to simulate the impact of policies and perform comparative analyses at the regional level, thus facilitating policymaking at the national level.

7.   ESCWA also continued to support the common country analyses through the provision of country data, which served as a basis for United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.

8.   By serving as a member of the joint secretariat of the Regional Collaborative Platform and by co-convening the issue-based coalitions on migration and economic management, ESCWA helped the Platform continue to provide value added support for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In 2022, through its eight issue-based coalitions, the Platform delivered 12 policy briefs, 12 multi-stakeholder regional dialogues, three capacity-building workshops and two major analytical reports. Those deliverables covered a wide range of themes, including climate, migration, energy, food security, social protection, youth and digitalization, and responded to 29 of the requests received from resident coordinators during meetings with the resident coordinator system throughout the year. Furthermore, significant advances were made on the functionality of Manara, the knowledge and data hub through which all United Nations knowledge products and data are made available to member States on a user-friendly, artificial intelligence-driven interactive platform. Finally, through her role as Vice-Chair of the Regional Collaborative Platform, the Executive Secretary of ESCWA provides strategic guidance to the Platform and Regional Directors, in which she promotes inter-agency cooperation on transboundary issues and supports the resident coordinators in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region, through various deliverables of the issue-based coalitions.

III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda

9. In 2022, ESCWA continued to focus on the following:

(a) Improving the availability of official statistics and smart, geospatially-enabled data that is compliant with international statistical and data protection standards, as well as the availability of data on progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In fact, ESCWA has invested significant resources in the artificial intelligence-enabled data ecosystem, which consolidates statistical and non-statistical datasets produced by both national statistical offices and development partners. The system will eventually consolidate into a "one-stop shop" the increasing number of interactive, technology-driven policy simulators that enable member States to simulate the impact of social and economic policies that are being developed;

(b) Supporting the implementation of debt swap for climate action initiatives (working with three member States, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia) and improved access to climate financing overall by helping member States to develop and present projects to potential donors for private sector investment, blended finance and bilateral support;

(c) Establishing ESCWA Learn, an innovative global learning platform that provides training and knowledge and increases the capacities and skills of a much wider audience than could previously be reached through traditional capacity-building initiatives such as workshops and training events. To date, the following 11 courses have been made available to civil servants and development professionals, which have been tailored to regional needs and made available in the Arabic language:

(i) Fighting bid rigging in public procurement (English and Arabic);

(ii) Behavioural insights and strategic planning (English and Arabic);

(iii) Mainstreaming gender in voluntary national reviews (English and Arabic);

(iv) Gender statistics (Arabic);

(v) New Urban Agenda crash course part 1: core dimensions (Arabic);

(vi) New Urban Agenda crash course part 2: means of implementation (Arabic);

(vii) Designing a multidimensional poverty index (Arabic);

(viii) Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Arabic);

(ix) Integrated approaches to mainstreaming, acceleration and policy support for the Sustainable Development Goals (Arabic);

(x) e-learning series on public-private partnerships (Arabic);

(xi) Five videos developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on competition policy;

(d) Providing support to Arab member States (the Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers) in relation to the Arab Digital Agenda 2023–2033, which has been adopted as the official Arab strategy for information and communications technology and digital development for the coming decade;

(e) Continuing to fine-tune and optimize a number of interactive policy simulation tools, building the capacities of policymakers in the region in the use of those tools and making them available to decision makers in ESCWA member States. Such tools include the Arab Trade Gateway (comprising a trade agreement portal, a

trade cost portal, a digital and sustainable trade facilitation measures portal, a logistics performance portal, a system for measuring, monitoring and evaluating Arab economic integration and an Arab trade simulation interface); an index simulator for policymakers in the Arab region; a social expenditure monitor; a skills monitor to facilitate employment; integrated national financing frameworks; a computable general equilibrium model that simulates economic shocks and their impact on various sectors of the economy; and the Multidimensional Poverty Index assist tool, a platform that enables government officials to construct a tailored national multidimensional poverty index for policymaking purposes.

IV. Spotlight on leaving no one behind

10. One of the key pillars of the Commission's work is the principle of leaving no one behind. ESCWA is addressing this matter through a number of approaches. Of particular note is the Commission's engagement with Governments on the development of national policy frameworks for reducing multidimensional and income poverty, supported by the regionally agreed methodology and tools (such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index assist tool) that can be easily adapted to national contexts. At the same time, ESCWA has been helping member States assess the efficiency and effectiveness of their social protection systems and identify improvements to ensure that their coverage extends to groups in vulnerable situations. Furthermore, ESCWA has made its social expenditure monitor available to its member States, a tool that allows member States to gain a deeper understanding of their current spending on social services. An added advantage is that it simulates the impact of reallocating such expenditure to provide more equitable and inclusive coverage, considering the increasingly tight fiscal space in most countries in the region.

11. Member States also have access to the ESCWA skills monitor, which can be used to forecast current and future market needs and thus supports the development of policy frameworks on unemployment and workforce planning in a context in which labour markets are evolving due to technological advancements, among other factors. This enables individuals in the Arab region to identify employment opportunities that match their skills, or opportunities for skills development that will help them adapt to the current labour market.

12. Similarly, the index simulator for policymakers in the Arab region allows Governments to simulate the impact of policies designed to enhance their performance on a number of international indices that measure effective governance and development policies, such as women's economic participation as a means of boosting national economies.

13. Finally, ESCWA risk assessment tools that allow for the integration into national development strategies of transboundary conflict and non-conflict drivers of hazards and vulnerability, including multidimensional and income poverty, have also been made available to member States.

V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

14. During the reporting period, ESCWA focused on the following:

(a) **Collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in relation to the migration dialogue between Arab and African States.** In the context of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, ESCWA, in collaboration with ECA, facilitated an interregional dialogue between African and Arab States. The aim was to identify possible durable solutions and potential areas of

joint action, in particular with respect to existing migration corridors between the two regions;

(b)   **Collaboration with OECD on competition.** In order to boost the competitiveness of the business environment, which remains a challenge for many countries in the Arab region while also being a crucial pillar of shared economic prosperity, ESCWA has been working, in partnership with OECD and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), to enhance the policy frameworks of member States relating to competition. By 2022, all 20 States members of the Commission were engaged in the regional dialogue on competition and four member States had taken concrete steps towards enhancing their legal competition frameworks. At the same time, ESCWA and partners identified inconsistencies in the level of coverage of consumer protection and consumers' rights in national legislation. ESCWA, supported by OECD and UNCTAD, will work with its member States to build capacity in this area and, in particular, to promote and support the development of relevant national policy frameworks and legislation;

(c)   **Collaboration with the Group of Experts on Extractive Industries on the transformation of the extractive industries as a means of supporting a transition to renewable energy sources, economic diversification and circular economy.** Recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of the extractive industries and economic development in many Arab States and the significant climate-related challenges that the Arab region is facing, ESCWA engaged its member States, through the regional Group of Experts on Extractive Industries, in a regional dialogue on transforming the extractive industries with a view to enabling a just, inclusive, equitable and secure energy transition, in line with the net-zero emission targets. ESCWA will continue to work with its member States to promote economic diversification, with a particular focus on people in vulnerable situations, including women, Indigenous communities, youth and those who will initially be affected by the transition;

(d)   **Collaboration with the League of Arab States and United Nations entities on the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region.** ESCWA continued to work in partnership with the League of Arab States, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and the World Meteorological Organization under the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region on generating regional climate models and projections and analysis of the impact of climate change on water resources and overall climate vulnerability. Data generated under the scheme is being used to drive and inform national and regional policy dialogue;

(e)   **Collaboration with the League of Arab States and UNEP on the organization of the first Arab Environmental Forum.** In partnership with the League of Arab States, in particular the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment, and UNEP, ESCWA organized the first Arab Environmental Forum, in preparation for the twenty-seventh Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It provided a unique opportunity for Arab States and relevant stakeholders to share experiences on environmental issues and to agree on and put forward a joint Arab position and vision regarding issues of mutual concern pertaining to climate change and biodiversity;

(f)   **Collaboration with the Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers in relation to the adoption of the Arab Digital Agenda 2023–**

2033, a joint project between ESCWA and the League of Arab States to produce, develop and implement an Arab information and communications strategy. As a result of the Commission's continued engagement with the Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers, all 20 member States of ESCWA have adopted the Arab Digital Agenda 2023–2033. The document outlines the commitments made and provides a road map for the region's transformation of its information and communication frameworks. The aim is to promote greater coherence across the region, new digital technologies and innovation, digital inclusion and accessibility, while also advancing data security and protection. ESCWA has also been engaging with national authorities on assessing their existing policy frameworks and on the adoption, where applicable, of additional legislation relating to information and communication technologies;

(g) **Collaboration with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the League of Arab States to build civil service capacity in the use of national multidimensional poverty indices for policy development and poverty reduction strategies.** ESCWA also joined forces with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the League of Arab States to build the capacity of civil servants in the use of the Multidimensional Poverty Index assist tool. In particular, ESCWA worked with several Arab States on refining their national multidimensional poverty indices as means of analysing key drivers of poverty and related recommendations to enable the development of national poverty reduction strategies. The initiative is ongoing, as other member States have expressed interest in applying the tool at the national level.

VI. Conclusions

15. e-learning has been adopted as an efficient and effective means of building capacity, since it makes it possible to reach broader audiences and to prepare them for more focused capacity-building activities. Making material available in Arabic has expanded the accessibility of courses to much broader audiences.

16. Further investment in the use of modern technologies is foreseen. During the pandemic, those technologies enabled ESCWA to maintain engagement and dialogue, and they have since been used to complement more traditional methods of programme delivery, with the aim of further broadening the range of stakeholders participating in ESCWA consultation processes and thus promoting a whole-of-society approach to development.

17. Based on the positive feedback from end users, ESCWA has continued to place greater emphasis on anticipatory analysis of megatrends and of related needs for policy advice among its member States and on addressing them proactively through the production and dissemination of timely, contextualized and concise knowledge products such as policy briefs and technical materials, as opposed to flagship or larger publications that take longer to develop and require greater resources.

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