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Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia for the period 2019–2020

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia continues to support Member States in the Arab region in more effectively implementing their plans relating to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals contained therein. The Commission works with its national and regional partners to address transboundary and regional development issues and to help them to achieve shared prosperity and dignified lives for all people in the Arab region. In a context of continued crisis that has caused significant slippage on Goal indicators in most conflict countries, and given that economic, social and environmental challenges need to be addressed in a holistic manner, the Commission's multidisciplinary value-added role is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for integrated sustainable development policies in the Arab region.

The Commission focuses on economic integration, social inclusion and environmental sustainability while helping to develop the data and statistical foundations for evidence-based policy recommendations and technical support. The Commission's annual Arab Forum for Sustainable Development continues to be the premier event that brings policy makers, civil society organizations and development partners together to examine the implementation status, progress and challenges relating to the Goals in the Arab region. The Commission's monitoring of progress towards the Goals and its analysis of related trends in development and of barriers to implementation serve as a major input for regional discussions within the Forum and are a catalyst for sharing lessons learned. The present report serves to describe the work of the Commission in these strategic focus areas.

During the reporting period, the Commission advocated for a whole-of-society approach to the 2030 Agenda, bringing together parliamentarians with civil society, community groups and development partners. The Commission further developed new approaches to inequality and inclusion in the region, including a common regional approach to migration. The Commission's economic work focused on improving integration and competition policy, joined with strengthened governance. The Commission's environmental work strengthened the approach to the sustainability of food, water and energy supplies in the region while it is adapting to climate change.



I. Introduction

1. During the reporting period, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) worked closely with other United Nations system entities and regional partners to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Arab region. Pursuant to its mandate, ESCWA takes on the role of voice for, think-tank of and adviser to the region. In developing the *Arab Sustainable Development Report* and in preparing for the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development, ESCWA analysed progress in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and outlined the barriers standing in the way. ESCWA has supported Member States in improving implementation of the Goals through use of new technologies and improved data collection, including the online resource known as the Arab SDG Gateway. ESCWA has focused on economic analysis, particularly in the current crisis caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), linking it closely to environmental and social issues.

The Commission in brief

2. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia promotes inclusive and sustainable development in the Arab region. It provides a regional presence for the Economic and Social Council in its 18 member States and serves as a platform for Arab countries on the global stage. Its member States share a cultural, historic and linguistic heritage, and face common development challenges and opportunities. Such challenges are most effectively tackled through collective, coordinated and mutually reinforcing action.

Work of the Commission

3. The Commission leverages its convening power to promote dialogue and knowledge-sharing at the national, regional and global levels, in order to foster interregional cooperation and vibrant South-South partnerships (a number of the activities undertaken in 2019 are presented in the annex to the present report). The implementation of global policy frameworks, chiefly the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, are among the top priorities for ESCWA in the region.

4. The Commission links development knowledge to policy through research and analysis. In bringing together policymakers, researchers, experts and relevant stakeholders through its convening power and transforming development knowledge into constructive dialogue and concerted action, ESCWA plays four essential roles in the region:

(a) **Voice.** A regional platform for deliberation, coordination, consensus-building and advocacy;

(b) **Think tank.** A source of innovative research, supporting quality data collection and analysis for forward-looking, evidence-based policymaking;

(c) **Adviser.** A provider of regional, sub-regional and national capacity-building and technical advisory services, strengthening national efforts to adopt norms and policies;

(d) **Provider of support in achieving the 2030 Agenda and implementing its goals.** A partner to member States in the Arab region in their efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals.

II. Advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region

Whole-of-society approach to the 2030 Agenda

5. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia has positioned the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development as the primary platform for a whole of society approach to the 2030 Agenda. To that end, the 2019 meeting of the Forum was designed to shed light on the major challenges relating to planning for sustainable development in the region. In the outcomes of the meeting it was stressed that the region would require overarching policy reform, deeper integration of the environmental, social and economic sectors and the conditions necessary to tap new sources of finance.

6. In preparation for the meeting, ESCWA supported or organized preparatory meetings with the aim of strengthening the whole of society approach. Chief among them was the Arab Region Parliamentary Forum on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, held in Beirut in January 2019. ESCWA is committed to strengthening the long-term engagement of parliamentarians across the region in the implementation of, follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda, providing them with a platform through which they can learn from each other and support each other at the regional level.

Rethinking inequality

7. In 2019, ESCWA released *Rethinking Inequality in Arab Countries: Overview*, which contains its analysis of inequality in the Arab countries. The authors took an integrated and multidimensional approach, chiefly focusing on non-income dimensions (health, education and living conditions). The results shed a new light on the inequality narrative and support inclusive development policies that are focused on inequality.

8. As reliable and timely data collection on persons with disabilities continues to be a challenge in the region, ESCWA has developed a regional data repository and regional guidelines with a view to improving the standardization and implementation of the short set of questions on functioning developed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics and related indicators used to capture data on people with disabilities. Using those data to develop a regional Arab disability indicator framework will allow for better tracing of the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the Arab region in relation to all Sustainable Development Goals. Two regional intergovernmental working groups are striving to improve data collection, in particular by improving administrative data gathered using improved disability assessment and determination procedures.

Reforming social protection

9. To support Arab States in their efforts to expand and increase social protection, ESCWA published *Social Protection Reform in Arab Countries 2019*, a flagship publication in which it examines existing social protection systems and identifies successes and challenges of national reforms. The study included a thorough analysis of the way in which national social protection systems are designed, as well as of the extent to which they are shaping social cohesion, social justice, the structure of the labour market and the prevention and alleviation of poverty. The analysis revealed the vulnerabilities persisting in social insurance funds, which tend to be unsustainable, as well as in the quality of social services, such as health care.

Supporting female and young entrepreneurs

10. In 2019, ESCWA focused on innovation models, including those at the grass-roots level, and their importance for achieving the 2030 Agenda, in particular Goal 9 (Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation). The Commission produced a study in which it identified issues related to entrepreneurship among women and young people and provided clear recommendations on ways to address these barriers and promote entrepreneurship. It showcased the potential that technology and innovation offer to improve entrepreneurship among women and young people. Many United Nations system agencies participated in related ESCWA events, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and the United Nations Technology and Innovation Labs.

Gender equality in policy and law

11. In 2019 ESCWA launched the report *Gender Justice and Equality before the Law: An Analysis of Progress and Challenges in the Arab Region* with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the United Nations Population Fund. The report is the culmination of four years of collaborative work of unprecedented depth. It contains an analysis of regional patterns and trends, and is accompanied by separate reports on each country's laws relating to women's health, well-being and security. The guide provides member States with an analysis of legal gaps and lessons from the region on ways to resolve conflicting laws and address inequalities.

12. ESCWA published a study on the impact of conflict on child marriage and adolescent fertility. The study adds to the understanding of the link between violent conflict, marriage patterns and fertility behaviours among young women, the role of public policies to mitigate such practices in conflict-afflicted countries and the ways in which demographic changes can generate social exclusionary dynamics, leading to self-perpetuating poverty traps and the long-term disempowerment of women and girls.

Common regional approach to migration

13. Migration is one of the regional priorities, given its scale, its complex patterns and trends, and its potential for contributing to sustainable development in the region. ESCWA continues to play a leading role in the development of a common regional perspective on migration and advocates for aligning migration policies in the region with the 2030 Agenda and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. To that end, ESCWA, in collaboration with its partners, held a regional conference on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in December 2019. The conference served to foster dialogue on migration priorities and challenges in the region and raise awareness of the follow-up and review mechanisms and processes for the Compact at the regional and global levels.

14. ESCWA contributed to building the capacity of member States to better address migration issues in their policy agendas by holding a capacity-building workshop in 2019. In the *Situation Report on International Migration 2019: The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in the Context of the Arab Region*, the third of its kind, ESCWA focused on the policy implications of the Compact for the Arab region in addition to providing a regional analysis of the latest migration-related data.

Social expenditure model

15. In 2019, ESCWA launched the social expenditure monitor for Arab States, a tool to support budgeting and fiscal policy reform. The monitor provides comprehensive mapping of public social expenditure and enhances the ability of member States to target public expenditure on social development priorities and macrofiscal sustainability.

Strengthening competition policy

16. ESCWA, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) joined forces to help to strengthen competition law and policy, and address competition policy challenges across the Arab region. In the dialogue with the member States, specific areas were identified that required attention and a concerted effort focused on the need to more explicitly link competition policy to the 2030 Agenda. Together, ESCWA, UNCTAD and OECD began to leverage their individual strengths for the benefit of the people in the Arab region. In collaboration with the States members of ESCWA, the three partners developed a joint approach to foster: (a) coordination and policy coherence at the regional and interregional levels; (b) support to national capacity-building, technical cooperation and advisory services; and (c) research and analysis.

17. On 23 and 24 January 2020, ESCWA, UNCTAD and OECD inaugurated their new cooperation agreement by holding their first joint competition forum for the Arab region in Beirut. The forum is to become an annual knowledge-sharing platform on competition policy and competition-related enforcement for the Arab region. The topics addressed at the plenary meeting included competition and economic development; effective competition frameworks; and fighting bid rigging in public procurement. Break-out sessions were held on competition as it relates to employment, gender and good governance. The discussions centred on ways in which competition can make invaluable contributions to Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 8 (employment), Goal 10 (reducing inequalities) and Goal 16 (effective institutions).

Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies

18. Under the umbrella of the Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies, ESCWA continues to support member States in building their human and technical capacities and access to regional knowledge resources for informing climate change policies, plans and actions. Regional knowledge products focused on a range of topics related to the water-energy-food nexus, green technologies, the transition to sustainable energy, food security, water security, climate finance and related negotiations. The launch of the Regional Knowledge Hub data portal of the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region (RICCAR) enabled open access to regional maps and datasets generated for the Arab region on the basis of regional climate modelling, hydrological modelling and vulnerability assessment applications.

19. In 2019, ESCWA conducted an assessment of the impact of climate change on groundwater. In 2019, ESCWA undertook an assessment of the impact of climate change on groundwater resources in Morocco using the regional climate projections generated under RICCAR. The results are being used to inform national and local decision-makers about the sustainable use of groundwater for irrigated agriculture under changing climate conditions. The modelling methodology and lessons learned from the project can also be adapted to other aquifers in the region.

20. ESCWA conducted a detailed assessment of financial flows relating to climate change from multilateral and bilateral donors to Arab countries. Trends, gaps and opportunities for improved access to climate-related financing were identified. One of the findings was that bilateral support from developed countries to Arab States for climate change mitigation exceeded financing for climate change adaptation by a factor of 5 to 1, despite the importance of adaptation in a region where water is scarce. Loans exceed grants by 5 to 1, despite the financial hardship being experienced by many countries in the region. Finally, the least developed Arab countries receive just 2 per cent of bilateral climate-related financial flows to the region, which runs counter to global efforts to support the least developed countries as a priority under the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.

Tracking regional food security

21. In cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and member States, ESCWA developed a food security monitoring framework for the Arab region as a tool to effectively assess and monitor the national and regional food security situation. Agreed upon by Arab ministers for agriculture through the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development of the League of Arab States, the Framework is detailed and applied in the publication *Tracking Food Security in the Arab Region*. It includes three outcome indicators grouped under a core pillar and 21 causal indicators distributed along the four food security dimensions: availability, access, utilization and stability.

Promoting sustainable energy

22. ESCWA is implementing the regional initiative for promoting small-scale renewable energy applications in rural areas of the Arab region, which is aimed at promoting entrepreneurial development, gender empowerment and the use of appropriate small-scale renewable energy technologies for productive activities. In 2019, ESCWA hosted a national workshop in Jordan on gender empowerment and entrepreneurial development in the rural context, with a focus on the role of renewable energy. The workshop resulted in a series of recommendations regarding national collaboration on data collection and sharing, stakeholder cooperation and coordination, and capacity-building and awareness-raising opportunities.

23. ESCWA leads a project on upscaling energy efficiency, which includes a mapping of the energy situation of the building sector in two countries, capacity-building among the main actors and the promotion of high energy performance in buildings. The project will conclude with the design of implementation instruments for the wide dissemination of energy efficiency measures in the building sector.

Monitoring the situation in Palestine

24. ESCWA continues to collaborate with the United Nations country team in the State of Palestine in monitoring and reporting on the social and economic impact of the Israeli occupation. ESCWA receives input and feedback in preparation for the note of the Secretary-General on the economic and social repercussions of the Israeli occupation on the living conditions of the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and of the Arab population in the occupied Syrian Golan. That note is mandated by Economic and Social Council resolution 2019/29 and General Assembly resolution [74/243](#). In 2020, agencies that provided contributions to the report included the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UN-Women, the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the World Food Programme, UNCTAD, the Office of the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation

Organization and the Palestinian Authority, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNICEF, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Population Fund.

Regional risk assessment framework

25. ESCWA is continuing its work to develop a regional risk assessment framework with key partners, including the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO); Uppsala University and the International Security and Development Center. The framework will serve to analyse drivers of vulnerability in the Arab region using a diversity of tools, including forecasting, indices, big data and qualitative approaches. The framework is being designed to assist member States in managing and preventing threats to national development trajectories.

26. In that context, a regional expert group meeting on developing a risk assessment framework for the Arab region was held in Beirut on 17 and 18 October 2019. It was organized by ESCWA in partnership with PRIO, the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs of the Secretariat and the European Union Institute for Security Studies. Discussions were focused on how policymakers and stakeholders must consider the drivers of risk, which are not only multidimensional, but are also interconnected with transboundary and regional aspects, such as climate change, demography, urbanization, economic stagnation, migration and natural resource exploitation. These numerous conflict and non-conflict stress factors, ranging from forced displacement to aid dependency, from water stress to food insecurity, and from governance deficits to gender inequality, need to be appraised regularly against the backdrop of an extremely fluid regional context. Given their magnitude and long-term impacts, which cross borders and are affecting national development trajectories of other States members of ESCWA, analysis at the national level alone is no longer sufficient.

27. Thus, in cooperation with PRIO and the European Union Institute for Security Studies, ESCWA is finalizing the publication of a study on developing a risk assessment framework for the Arab region. In the study, ESCWA proposes a regional risk assessment framework, defined in the study as a methodology for understanding and communicating about the risks of violent conflict, humanitarian crisis and political instability in the Arab region, the sources, drivers and interactions of those risks, and their potential future trends. The proposed framework rests solidly on existing best practices found in the political, economic and environmental risk literature and is organized around the four main components of risk: hazard, exposure, vulnerability and capacity.

Studying the impact of the fourth industrial revolution on development

28. ESCWA released its first study on the technologies of the fourth industrial revolution, which was primarily focused on the technologies, not on digital enablers. In the report, ESCWA advocated for adopting human rights-based approaches to offer a robust framework for the responsible development and use of frontier technologies, in particular artificial intelligence. Most of the references to existing literature on the topic (specifically, 22 references to regional sources contained in the full list of references) were surveyed and utilized to produce the most comprehensive report possible on the subject as it relates to Arab countries, despite its relative newness and the lack of related data.

III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda

Supporting voluntary national reviews

29. ESCWA is taking the lead, in the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development and in other contexts, in influencing the regional understanding of voluntary national reviews and their preparation. The focus is on the process of voluntary national review preparations rather than the report as a product, and a whole-of-society approach in which multi-stakeholder engagement is ongoing and not limited to one-off consultations. Deliberations on voluntary national reviews have confirmed that their preparation was inextricably linked to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The aim of the reviews, other than their presentation to the high-level political forum on sustainable development, should be to stimulate open and genuine debate at the country level on development opportunities and challenges.

30. ESCWA worked with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the League of Arab States to organize a regional workshop to build the capacity of policymakers involved in the preparation of voluntary national reviews. Noting the clear need for further support and information on the preparation of the reviews, and for follow-up and review in general, ESCWA launched a community of practice on the topic for policymakers across the region.

Monitoring and supporting progress on the Sustainable Development Goals

31. ESCWA released an e-handbook in Arabic and English on the framework and metadata relating to the Sustainable Development Goals to support the national statistical systems of the Arab States in their efforts to increase the availability of Goals-related data produced by the national statistical systems of the Arab States. For each indicator, the e-handbook provides information on the institutional set-up (custodian agency), concepts (definitions, rationale, limitations), methodology (computation, disaggregation, treatment of gaps, and regional averages and discrepancies), data sources (description, list of sources and details on the collection process), overview of data availability (since 2000) and the data-related calendar (collection schedule and data release dates). The current version corresponds to the Sustainable Development Goal indicator framework as at October 2019. Further updates will be provided to keep up with the changes in the indicator framework.

32. In 2019, ESCWA further updated the Arab data portal with the help of smart analytics. The portal is an advanced dissemination and visualization tool that provides accurate data relating to all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It serves to manage millions of data points relevant to the economic, social, demographic and environmental status of the region. A powerful visualization tool that turns data into insights, the portal is publicly accessible at <https://data.unescwa.org>.

Enhancing sex-disaggregated data

33. ESCWA has developed its first gender statistics e-learning software as part of its integrated toolkit on gender statistics in the Arabic language. An attempt has been made to fully integrate a gender perspective, issues of empowerment and the equality of women into official statistics in the Arab region. In March 2020, the number of enrolments for e-learning had reached 12,500. The e-learning software is user-friendly. Use is made of a variety of methods to stimulate trainees' interest in the curriculum, which addresses gender issues and priorities. The gender statistics curriculum includes five modules: gender concepts and issues; the importance of gender statistics; the conceptual frame of gender statistics analysis; measurements of gender statistics; and presenting gender statistics.

Strengthening national development planning processes

34. In 2019, ESCWA established a network of national project focal points, who serve as liaison between it and in-country institutions throughout the project's life cycle. The network held annual regional meetings that served to: (a) review the status quo of planning in the region; (b) identify the opportunities and challenges relating to current national development planning approaches; (c) build capacity to integrate behavioural insights into national development planning; and (d) explore advocacy requirements and stakeholder engagement. Moreover, ESCWA designed and implemented: (a) targeted interventions and capacity-building measures under the United Nations Development Account project on development planning; (b) national capacity-building workshops; (c) general regulatory reform trainings; and (d) institutional partnerships established to address policy challenges related to economic resilience.

35. Finally, ESCWA developed a comprehensive handbook for development planners in the Arab region that includes good practices and tools identified within and outside the region. National planners can use the handbook as a guide throughout the various stages of planning. The handbook has been acknowledged by member States and project focal points alike for its ability to provide planners and stakeholders in the Arab region with practical means and tools to apply behavioural insights in their work. The manual helps them to identify the behavioural biases that occur during the planning process and highlights possible behavioural interventions.

Improved data for climate modelling

36. The launch of the RICCAR Regional Knowledge Hub data portal created open access to regional maps and datasets generated for the Arab region on the basis of regional climate modelling, hydrological modelling and vulnerability assessment applications.

Improving transport for development

37. ESCWA continued the development of geographic information systems for transport networks and facilities in the Arab countries as a tool for remote data collection and for monitoring the performance of regional transport networks and facilities. In 2019, ESCWA held two regional training workshops, one in July and one in December, with the support of the Islamic Development Bank and the cooperation of the Economic Commission for Europe. The purpose of the workshops was to build the capacity of planning officials from 14 ministries of transport to use the functionalities of the tool. It is expected that the newly developed capacity will help the focal points to conduct evidence-based analyses with the tool and enable policymakers to make informed transport policy decisions that benefit the population of the Arab region.

38. ESCWA has started to implement a Development Account project on sustainable transport connectivity and the implementation of transport-related Sustainable Development Goals in selected landlocked, transit and bridging countries. The project is aimed at strengthening the capacities of five countries (Georgia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Paraguay and Serbia) to design and implement an evidence-based transport policy framework that fosters sustainable transport connectivity and the implementation of transport-related Goals.

39. ESCWA supported its member States in the preparation and submission of road safety project proposals to the United Nations Road Safety Fund for the 2019 funding cycle. As a result, the Fund financed the implementation of road safety projects in Jordan and Tunisia.

40. At the macro level, ESCWA continued its advocacy for the interlinkage of transport and sustainable development through the mapping of the Sustainable Development Goals and key transport indicators. The weak coverage of national transport networks in the Arab region, as compared with global averages, was put forward as an important challenge to sustainable development, one that required intensifying the efforts of member States to mainstream transport infrastructure and services into their national development plans.

Financing maritime infrastructure

41. In 2020, ESCWA showcased public-private partnerships for ports as a model to finance the development of resilient maritime transport infrastructure in the Arab region (Goal 9) and continued its activities to enhance road safety (targets 3.6 and 11.2). It coordinated the participation of member States at the third Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety, held in Stockholm on 19 and 20 February 2020. Five high-ranking officials of Arab States took the floor, including the ministers for transport of Morocco and Saudi Arabia. The Conference led to the adoption of a declaration in which the United Nations was invited to extend the first Decade of Action for Road Safety 2011–2020 by proclaiming the period 2021–2030 as the second Decade of Action for Road Safety with the goal to reduce road traffic deaths by at least 50 per cent between 2021 and 2030.

Enhancing the information society and digital development

42. Given the great potential of technology, mainly information and communications technology, to help to deliver the Goals, ESCWA held the second Arab high-level forum on the World Summit on the Information Society and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Beirut in 2019, in line with the global process. The forum was focused on the linkages between the World Summit action lines and the 2030 Agenda. It brought together various stakeholders from the Arab region concerned with the information society, the digital economy and Internet governance. Participants discussed the linkages between the Goals and information and communications technology, as well as Internet governance issues and priorities for the Arab region, with a particular focus on empowerment and inclusiveness, which was the theme of the global 2019 high-level political forum on sustainable development.

43. In the same context, ESCWA launched the Arab digital development process to assess the status of digital technologies in the Arab region and evaluate how they were being harnessed for sustainable development. In that regard, in 2019, ESCWA started a series of reports based on the national digital development reviews of individual Arab countries. The reviews covered the status of national policies, initiatives, plans and measurement methods in various areas of digital development.

44. In 2020, 10 Arab countries contributed to that process and prepared their national digital development reviews. They were Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. They formed a reasonably representative sample of the Arab countries as a whole, as they included high-income, middle-income and low-income countries in the Gulf region, the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, other regional organizations in the Arab region, such as the Arab office of the International Telecommunication Union, the Cairo office of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs participated in an Arab digital development review.

45. The primary focus of the digital development review is to provide a thorough review of digital technologies in the Arab region as it seeks to close rapidly widening

gaps by 2030. The secondary focus of the reports is developmental in nature derived mainly from the theme of the 2019 high-level political forum on sustainable development, which was “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”.

46. The 2019 Arab digital development report contains an overview of the status and progress made in the main areas of digital technologies in the Arab region, with an extensive and up-to-date situational analysis of the main efforts made, challenges faced and policy reforms undertaken in the field of digital technologies and digital development through the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society. Linkages to development are discussed with a focus on the main theme of the high-level political forum, which was, as stated, “Empowerment and inclusion”.

Measuring digital development

47. In recent years, ESCWA has been engaging in the development of a tool that supports policymakers in the Arab region to measure the digital development and delivery of e-government services and assess their national progress towards digital transformation. The novelty of the tool, the government electronic and mobile services maturity index, is that it combines traditional supply-driven assessments with demand-driven indicators related to the user experience, the maturity of the services and user satisfaction.

48. Twelve member States undertook a first assessment of their electronically delivered government services and requested ESCWA to analyse the results. In the ensuing report, issued in 2019, gaps were identified in the awareness of individuals of available electronic government services and in their capacity to access and use those services. The report also revealed that there was a need to improve the user experience by offering more mobile applications.

49. ESCWA supported those 12 member States with capacity-building workshops and advisory services at the national and regional levels. The workshops were focused on South-South cooperation and served to highlight good regional and international practices in developing and updating national digital government transformation plans. Also, the government electronic and mobile services maturity index was presented as a means to measure progress. The work contributed to progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region through technology and innovation.

50. Cooperation is envisaged with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs to use some of the key performance indicators of its global e-government development index. The cooperation will also be mentioned in the Department’s upcoming e-government survey, among other ESCWA activities related to this field.

IV. Spotlight on the coronavirus disease in conflict settings

51. The socioeconomic challenges resulting from COVID-19 have exacerbated the impact of conflicts and their spill-over effects, as well as the structural economic challenges that Arab States are facing, in particular those hosting refugees. In that context, ESCWA prepared a series of policy briefs in which it analysed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on poverty, the economy, employment and the natural environment, and made regional and national policy recommendations to mitigate the negative impact of the crisis on the economies and societies of the region. In the same context, ESCWA is partnering with UNHCR, the Central Administration of Statistics of Lebanon and Data-Pop Alliance to examine the potential of leveraging digital data and technologies to provide the most up-to-date insights and inform humanitarian

development policies and programmes targeting the most vulnerable groups, particularly refugees, and their hosts. The majority of the forcibly displaced are women and children.

52. The project will include an analysis of passively emitted data such as anonymized aggregated cellular telephony data and social media posts, which contain unique insights into population density and movements, to inform analysis on the impact or effectiveness of some of the alleviation measures or programmes that authorities have put in place to target vulnerable populations in Lebanon and other countries.

53. The objective of the project is to develop a tool that leverages non-traditional data sources to estimate, in real time, the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on displaced persons and their host communities. The tool is to facilitate a regular appraisal of the vulnerabilities and the impact of mitigation measures deployed by the United Nations system and State institutions.

V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

The Arab Sustainable Development Report

54. The *Arab Sustainable Development Report*, a publication for which ESCWA is the lead organization, is produced in collaboration with other United Nations system entities and issued once every four years. In the 2020 edition, which was prepared in 2019, stock is taken of the region's progress by highlighting key facts across the spectrum of targets and indicators, assessing the barriers to achieving progress and identifying concrete actions needed to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and ensure that countries of the region embark on a sustained and sustainable path.

Increased efficiency of the United Nations statistical system

55. Following a trial period of one year, ESCWA and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs set up a structure for collecting data on external trade among the Arab States. All such data are currently collected by ESCWA only and stored in the global United Nations International Trade Statistics Database (Comtrade). The approach helps to avoid a duplication of efforts as well as a reporting burden on the member States. More importantly, it significantly reduces the problem of non-responses and of gaps in Comtrade data for the Arab States and the Arab region. Currently, ESCWA and the Department are working on an automated data exchange that will allow more timely updates.

Committing to gender equality

56. ESCWA, in partnership with UN-Women and the League of Arab States, led a participatory regional review process of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 25 years after its adoption. The review process consisted of a series of activities and concluded with a high-level meeting held in Amman on 28 November 2019, which resulted in the adoption of the "Arab declaration on progress in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action after 25 years". In the declaration, the participants presented a road map and reaffirmed the commitment of Arab countries to fully realizing the Beijing Declaration and other global commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals, and advancing women's rights in the region.

Policy coherence in agriculture

57. ESCWA, the League of Arab States, the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development and FAO are promoting coordination among ministries of water and agriculture, as well as related institutions and ministries, to ensure policy coherence across national strategies and plans. A guideline on water allocation in the agricultural sector will be presented at the high-level joint committee on agriculture and water in the Arab region in October 2020.

58. ESCWA, in cooperation with FAO and the Arab Centre for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands, developed a tool to assess the impact of climate change on water availability and crop productivity using AquaCrop growth modelling, developed by FAO, and RICCAR climate data sets, for policymaking and to further build resilience of the agriculture sector.

59. In collaboration with FAO and the League of Arab States, ESCWA is supporting increased integration of agriculture into national climate change policies and actions. Regional dialogues are organized to assist countries in their follow-up to the Koronivia joint work on agriculture and inform their agricultural policies.

Institution-building

60. ESCWA has been implementing an inclusive socioeconomic dialogue in Libya to provide a technical platform for Libya to design and agree on a socioeconomic vision for the country's future in the post-conflict phase. Through a consultative process with experts from the region, ESCWA also proposed two roadmaps for institutional building in post-conflict Yemen and Libya, and has been cooperating with the Arab Administrative Development Organization on a series of workshops on administrative reforms and institutional development in the Arab member States.

61. ESCWA and the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States held an expert group meeting entitled "Towards a regional monitoring framework for enhancing institutional effectiveness, advancing inclusiveness, ending violence, and strengthening anti-corruption" in Amman on 12 and 13 December 2019. The participants included practitioners from academia, think tanks, decision makers and United Nations system staff. They discussed the significance of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) in the Arab regional context.

62. Given the strong focus of Goal 16 on public institutions and the role of Governments and public policies in advancing the 2030 Agenda in a context of peaceful and inclusive societies, Goal 16 was framed as a transformational goal and was seen as key to ensuring that the 2030 Agenda could be accomplished within a participatory framework of accountability. The numerous methodological issues and technical challenges to measuring Goal 16, as well as contextual and implementation issues around sources of data, data collection and statistical capacity were also Part of the consultations.

63. The primacy of national ownership was underscored as one of the principles of Sustainable Development Goal monitoring. Such monitoring needs to be an inclusive, country-led process. Decisions on national indicators are to be driven by national priorities while being aligned with global targets and indicators. Sustainable Development Goals should be integrated into national development programmes and national monitoring and evaluation systems, utilizing existing platforms and processes.

64. At the national level, the Goals should be integrated into policymaking, implementation and monitoring cycles. There was also a consensus that a common

understanding of related methodologies, concepts, targets and indicators was necessary for progress to be made towards the attainment of Goal 16, as was evident, in a number of instances, at the national level and between various actors (national institutions, civil society organizations, academia and the multilateral system).

65. The exchange of lessons learned among Arab States was deemed critical to building trust among stakeholders involved in the advancement of Goal 16. Representatives of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, the State of Palestine and Tunisia participated in the expert group meeting, where they presented their experiences and practices. The meeting also served to kick-start a process among those countries to formulate a monitoring tool that civil servants could utilize to assess progress towards the attainment of Goal 16.

Building transparent and accountable governance

66. During 2019, ESCWA continued to build the capacities of Arab countries in the field of open government so as to enhance transparency and accountability, and adopt a more participatory approach to governance in line with Goal 16, in particular targets 16.6 and 16.7. In that regard, ESCWA published capacity development materials relating to open data and participatory approaches, and held one regional and three national capacity-building workshops in Jordan, the State of Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic. Many United Nations system agencies, such as the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations University and the World Bank, as well as OECD, contributed to the regional capacity-building workshops on open government.

VI. Conclusions

67. ESCWA has continued to take the lead in the region by fostering partnerships between regional entities, United Nations country teams, United Nations system entities and member States. The importance of partnerships was further highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly with regard to working with private-sector, academia and civil-society organizations. Only with all stakeholders involved and a whole-of-society approach will the Arab region be able to sustain peace, prosperity and dignity.

68. Below is a list of key lessons learned that are also of relevance to other regions:

- (a) Long-term development visions relating to more sustainable and inclusive growth need to be clear and well-developed;
- (b) Practical means and tools are needed to learn to implement and plan for national development;
- (c) Awareness, engagement and capacity-building for policymakers are crucial to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth;
- (d) The introduction and development of innovative tools is crucial to solving major challenges;
- (e) Policy challenges need to be addressed to achieve resilience.

69. The development approach used in various projects has been successful owing to:

- (a) Development tools that are based on extensive consultations with stakeholders and correspond to the reporting requirements of major global processes (Sustainable Development Goals and climate change);

(b) The provision of tools to targeted users, together with extensive training and follow-up to implementation;

(c) Regular reviews of and updates to tools to keep them agile and responsive to the needs of member countries.

70. To improve the planning, financing and implementation of projects, ESCWA advocates the application of a participative, integrated and holistic approach and business model, based on partnership, practical know-how and informed advisory support, coupled with capacity-building and the strong involvement of national and local government and stakeholders.

Annex: The year in review (milestones and key events)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Description</i>
January		
16	Amman	Seminar on recent air quality technology developments: management, assessment and modelling
13 and 14	Cairo	Regional seminar on the rights of persons with disabilities under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda
29 and 30	Beirut	Statistical Committee, thirteenth session
30	Beirut	Launch of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) data portal
February		
6 and 7	Dubai	Expert group meeting on national digital development reports
18 and 19	Beirut	Expert group meeting on shelters for survivors of violence: availability and accessibility
18 and 19	Beirut	Expert group meeting on multidimensional inequality in Arab countries
25–28	Beirut	First regional workshop on social protection reform in Arab countries
March		
4–6	Beirut	Green technology investments and access to sustainable financing in the Arab region
13	Beirut	Focus group meeting on the regional initiative to promote small-scale renewable energy applications in rural areas of the Arab region
19–21	Beirut	Second Arab high-level forum on the World Summit on the Information Society and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
20 and 21	Beirut	Committee on Technology for Development, second session
21 and 22	Beirut	Regional consultation on climate change in preparation for the 2019 Arab Forum for Sustainable Development and the high-level political forum
22	Beirut	World Water Day 2019
27 and 28	Beirut	Capacity development workshop on methods to cost violence against women
April		
1–7	Istanbul, Turkey	Regional meeting on the development of purchasing power parities
8	Beirut	Expert group meeting on empowerment, inclusiveness and equality as pathways to peace and sustainable development in the Arab region
9–11	Beirut	Arab Forum for Sustainable Development 2019
15	Beirut	Expert group meeting on the <i>Situation Report on International Migration 2019: The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in the Context of the Arab Region</i>

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Description</i>
23 and 24	Bi'r Zayt, State of Palestine	International conference on sustainable development under crisis and conflict conditions
24 and 25	Amman	Expert group meeting on tracking food security in the Arab region
May		
13–16	Cairo	Regional training workshop on reforming and restructuring the electricity sector
June		
15 and 16	Marrakech, Morocco	Executive Committee, sixth meeting
24 and 25	Beirut	Regional workshop on a framework for the social expenditure monitor for Arab States
24 and 25	Beirut	Committee on Energy, twelfth session
27 and 28	Beirut	Committee on Water Resources, thirteenth session
July		
1 and 2	Tunis	High-level meeting on the future of Arab economic integration in a changing global trade landscape
2–4	Beirut	Regional workshop on open government and emerging technologies in the Arab region
10 and 11	Beirut	Training on geographical information systems for an integrated transport system in Arab States
15–17	Cairo	Common Arab regional job competencies framework for senior public servants
23–25	Tunis	Regional workshop on poverty measurement in Arab countries
30 and 31	Amman	ESCWA Technology Centre expert group meeting on green technology transfer, adaptation and investment for implementing Sustainable Development Goal 12 on sustainable consumption and production
30 and 31	Beirut	Expert group meeting on conflict, crisis and occupation with a focus on the 2030 Agenda
September		
4	Beirut	Digital enabling portal for small and medium-sized enterprises the Arab region
16–18	Beirut	First regional workshop on the development of transport statistics and transport-related sustainable development indicators in the Arab countries
19 and 20	Beirut	Second regional meeting on enhancing integrated national development planning in the Arab region
24–27	Istanbul	Regional International Comparison Program meeting for the creation of public-private partnerships and the development of price statistics in the Arab region

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Description</i>
27	Beirut	Youth workshop entitled “The road to ECOSOC 2019”
30	Beirut	International Translation Day 2019: the power of languages
30	Rabat	Expert group meeting on the evaluation of population censuses in Arab countries
October		
1–3	Beirut	Mainstreaming climate action into national development plans in the Arab region
7–9	Beirut	United Nations Library and Information Network for Knowledge Sharing and the Lebanese Library Association: open dialogue
8 and 9	Beirut	Committee on Social Development, twelfth session
10 and 11	Beirut	Workshop on the voluntary national reviews in the Arab region
16	Tunis	High-level meeting with ministry directors-general on mainstreaming equality into policies, plans and programmes
29–31	Amman	Disability statistics in the Arab region: expanding the coverage to leave no one behind
November		
18 and 19	Beirut	Capacity-building workshop on accessing disruptive technologies for improved water resources management in the context of climate change
25–27	Amman	Expert group meeting on mainstreaming climate action into national development planning in the Arab region
26 and 27	Amman	Committee on Women, ninth session
26–28	Amman	Expert group meeting on technological innovation and entrepreneurship: the role of sustainable development in the Arab region
27 and 28	Amman	Regional meeting on promoting food and water security in the Arab region
28	Amman	High-level meeting on progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action after 25 years
December		
3 and 4	Cairo	Regional conference on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: implementation and policy implications for the Arab region
8 and 9	Amman	Committee on Trade Policies in the States members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, first session
9 and 10	Amman	Committee on Transport and Logistics, twentieth session
11 and 12	Amman	Committee on Financing for Development in the States members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, first session
15 and 16	Cairo	Workshop on leaving no one behind: disability assessment and determination as a means for better inclusion of persons with disabilities in Arab countries

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Description</i>
20	Amman	Technical Cooperation Network: eighth meeting
21 and 22	Amman	Sixth special session of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
