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# Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2019

## Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith an overview report on economic and social developments in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia region for the period 2018–2019.



## **Economic and social developments in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia region for 2018–2019**

### *Summary*

In a region that continues to suffer from widespread instability and conflict, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia steadfastly supports global, regional and national efforts towards a more stable and prosperous Arab region. The Commission remains more than ever committed to a brighter future for the Arab region, where “no one is left behind”.

The Commission continues to be a trusted partner to member States in the region in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Its strategic framework for the biennium 2018–2019 is structured along three main priorities: sustainable development, social justice and regional integration. The present report highlights the work undertaken by the Commission to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in these three regional priority areas.

## I. Introduction

1. In a region that continues to suffer from widespread instability and conflict, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) steadfastly supports global, regional and national efforts towards a more stable and prosperous Arab region. The Commission remains more than ever committed to a brighter future for the Arab region, where “no one is left behind”.

2. Closely aligned with supporting its member States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the Commission’s strategic framework for the biennium 2018–2019 is structured along three pillars that reflect the main priorities of its work: sustainable development, social justice and regional integration. The present report highlights the work undertaken by ESCWA in these three regional priority areas.

3. Progress was made in 2018 with respect to implementing the 2030 Agenda. In June, the thirtieth ministerial session of ESCWA drew the broadest and highest-level attendance in the recent history of the Commission. Leaders from across the region renewed their commitment to the 2030 Agenda and adopted the Beirut Consensus on Technology for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region.

4. The Commission shares a conviction that those who stand to benefit most from the positive effects of technology are the most marginalized segments of the population. For rural populations, women, girls and people with disabilities, technology, when properly harnessed, can play an important equalizing role, opening up new pathways towards inclusion, safety, empowerment and access.

5. In a crisis-prone region, ESCWA sees mobile technology playing an essential role in early warning and response, while geospatial information has become a critical component of humanitarian interventions. From renewable energy sources to ever more sophisticated gathering and analysis of data, from smart government and improved service delivery to deeper, more meaningful forms of political participation, the pace of technological innovation inevitably exceeds the ability of governments to regulate it.

6. The Commission is keeping pace with those rapid technological developments. It has adopted a comprehensive view of reform that draws its strength from collaboration with United Nations development entities, the newly reformed United Nations development system, regional organizations, civil society and the private sector.

7. The Commission will adopt new technologies and innovation to implement its vision and improve its working methods. The objective is to provide more relevant services to the Arab region and its peoples, to help them build entrepreneurial and knowledge societies, transition towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution and confidently move forward in their development paths.

8. Financing for development has been given increased prominence as the international community rallied behind key initiatives to push resource mobilization forward, recognizing such financing as an essential means of implementation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. In November, in Beirut, ESCWA held a high-level forum on financing for development, during which participants explored possible untapped resources in the region and beyond, highlighting the need for regional collective action to utilize them.

9. Several States members of ESCWA reaffirmed their commitment to the 2030 Agenda in delivering their voluntary national reviews during the high-level political forum on sustainable development, in 2018, and senior officials gathered in Beirut in

April 2018 at the annual Arab Forum on Sustainable Development in demonstration of this same regional dedication.

10. In December 2018, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was resoundingly adopted, reflecting the importance of regional dialogue as a stepping stone towards global consensus. The work of ESCWA across the region, from technical advisory services to regional forums for knowledge exchange, was essential in drawing attention to critical migration issues for the region and in ensuring that those concerns were properly reflected in the deliberations that shaped the global compact.

11. The Commission's vision is to involve young people in reforms aimed at revitalizing ESCWA, updating its working methods and increasing its effectiveness and efficiency, so as to make it fit for purpose. The Commission is striving to be a modern, flexible, youthful and reinvigorated institution. As part of efforts to bring ESCWA work closer to the youth of the region, the Commission welcomed an expanded delegation of students for the third Model ESCWA Conference. The spirited debates and outcome document of the conference reflected the commitment of young people in the region to addressing sustainable development challenges.

### **The Commission in brief**

12. 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 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**

13. 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 2018 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.

14. 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, subregional 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 the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region

15. The Commission has made major strides in following up on the 2030 Agenda and the Goals, including through the following actions: aligning the structure of the organization with the transformative features of the 2030 Agenda; readjusting or updating results-based budgeting and management, including performance indicators; and developing strategies, plans or work programmes that are specific to the Sustainable Development Goals.

16. In December 2015, ESCWA presented a comprehensive strategy to its member States on how it will provide them with support in efforts towards the Goals. The strategy was further complemented by the Doha Declaration on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, adopted at the twenty-ninth ministerial session of the Commission, in 2016. The Doha Declaration set a regional road map for implementing the Goals; in the Declaration, member States requested ESCWA to play a more active role in building the capacities of member States in integrating development planning to implement the 2030 Agenda.

17. Since then, ESCWA has produced more than 350 knowledge products, including policy tools, guidelines, methodologies and training modules, which have had an impact on policymaking in the Arab region and beyond.

18. The primary clients for such products are policymakers. Civil society and the private sector are being increasingly engaged as partners in the development process. The Commission mobilizes those actors through its convening power.

19. On the basis of the above-mentioned efforts, ESCWA formulated its strategic framework to shape its programme of work. For the biennium 2018–19, it is structured along three main priorities: sustainable development, social justice and regional integration. Each subsequent section details the work undertaken by ESCWA to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in these three regional priority areas.

### A. Sustainable development

20. The Commission's work regarding sustainable development focuses on the integrated management of natural resources and on climate change adaptation and mitigation, as described in further detail below.

#### 1. Integrated management of natural resources

21. Throughout 2018, ESCWA continued to promote regional and subregional cooperation around the Sustainable Development Goals in the fields of energy, water resources, food and the environment. The Commission promotes multisectoral policy dialogue on sustainable development based on an enhanced science-policy interface, ensuring coherence across sectors, fostering institution-building, providing policy recommendations and championing green technology. The Commission has developed climate change adaptation and mitigation mechanisms and regularly conducts impact and vulnerability assessments. It examines associated socioeconomic and environmental issues to inform policymaking and support member States in negotiations.

##### *Energy*

22. In March 2018, ESCWA and the League of Arab States (LAS) convened the Arab preparatory meeting on energy-related issues in Beirut. The meeting paved the

way for the 2018 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development also held in Beirut, in April 2018, and served to harmonize the regional outlook on energy. Participants agreed on the following key priorities: transitioning towards sustainable energy systems, improving resource management and reducing the overwhelming reliance on fossil fuels.

23. The Commission published a study on assessing the potential of renewable energy manufacturing in the region in cooperation with the International Renewable Energy Agency. It identified gaps and barriers in the sector and provided policy recommendations to promote such manufacturing.

24. Working with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, LAS and the Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization, ESCWA also convened the first coordination meeting of the regional initiative for promoting small-scale renewable energy applications in rural areas of the Arab region in Beirut, on 25 and 26 September 2018. The initiative aims to improve livelihoods, social inclusion and gender equality in Arab rural communities by promoting investment in small-scale renewable energy technologies for productive activities. The initiative initially focuses on Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, with a view to expansion of the initiative and the sharing of experiences across the region.

#### *Food security*

25. Measuring food security is a complex task, but an essential one in order to help communities in the Arab region become more resilient to climate change, control natural resource depletion, shift towards terrestrial ecosystem conservation and adopt more sustainable consumption and production patterns.

26. A series of country factsheets on food security in the Arab region have been produced by ESCWA and provide an overview on food security in 22 Arab countries. They cover indicators and key findings related to the four dimensions of food security.

## **2. Climate change adaptation and mitigation**

27. In 2018, ESCWA developed a comprehensive framework for understanding issues relating to water security in the Arab region, taking into account regional systemic constraints. The framework emphasizes the centrality of water to the three pillars of sustainable development and stresses the importance of a rights-based approach that empowers the most vulnerable so as to ensure that no one is left behind.

#### **Box 1**

#### **World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought 2018: Smart Choices to Preserve our Land**

The theme of the 2018 World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought (17 June) was “Land has true value – invest in it”. The Commission carried out an awareness-raising campaign on land loss and the importance of revitalizing livelihoods through wise consumption and product choices, including through the issuance of a flyer on “Smart choices to preserve our land”. In a region particularly affected by the rapid depletion and degradation of its scarce resources, the adoption of responsible consumption patterns is much needed. Through smart consumption, smart shopping and smart decisions, it is possible to help improve land resources through increased efficiency, meaning more persons fed per unit of land, and through the decreased generation of waste or the increase in easily degradable waste as a proportion of all waste generated.

28. Working with LAS and the World Meteorological Organization and the State Meteorological Agency of Spain, ESCWA organized a regional workshop on sand and dust storms, held in Cairo, in February 2018. Participants from meteorological services across the region enhanced their operational and research capacities on the analysis, prediction and projection of sand and dust storms, including ground and satellite observations, storm modelling and prediction and dust classification. They discussed the multidimensional impact of sand and dust storms and opportunities to expand regional cooperation in that area.

29. The workshop immediately followed a meeting of the Arab Climate Outlook Forum, which addressed institutional, financial and technical aspects of climate outlook and made decisions and recommendations to be submitted to the Permanent Committee for Meteorology of LAS. A dedicated website was created for the Forum as part of the efforts of the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socioeconomic Vulnerability in the Arab Region. A regional knowledge hub that promotes wide access to the Regional Initiative assessment findings and related data sets was established in order to facilitate cooperation and dialogue on issues relating to climate change and water resources in the Arab region.

#### Box 2

##### **Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies**

At the thirtieth ministerial session of ESCWA, member States welcomed the establishment of the Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies, which will focus on five pillars of work: delivering multisectoral technical assistance and advisory services; building capacity through institutional strengthening and policymaking; strengthening regional platforms for exchange, coordination and consensus-building; promoting integrated responses to and management of climate-related challenges affecting water, energy and food security; and providing access to regional knowledge products, data and information through the Regional Knowledge Hub.

The Centre is the first of its kind in the region. It builds on and expands the work achieved as part of the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socioeconomic Vulnerability in the Arab Region. Partners include: the League of Arab States, the Arab Centre for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI), the World Meteorological Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Institute for Water, Environment and Health of United Nations University, the project on adaptation to climate change in the water sector in the Middle East and North Africa Region, Sustainable Energy for All, the International Renewable Energy Agency, the Islamic Development Bank, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the German Agency for International Cooperation of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

30. In response to demand from ministries of agriculture, water and the environment, ESCWA held regional and national capacity-building workshops, drawing upon new regional knowledge to support member States in their climate change impact assessments. The tenth regional workshop on capacity development for climate change negotiations for the Arab countries was held in Kuwait City, from 3 to 5 April 2018. The main objectives of the workshop focused on the implementation of the provisions of the Paris Agreement in the Arab region, the impact of climate change

on agriculture and the development of negotiation skills of Arab officials in climate change negotiations on new and emerging issues.

31. Building on the scientific knowledge base aggregated under the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socioeconomic Vulnerability in the Arab Region, ESCWA hosted a regional meeting in Cairo, in November 2018, to engage Arab States on climate change issues, so as to prepare young officials for global climate negotiations, and to provide an opportunity for climate funds to engage with Arab counterparts. The meeting immediately preceded the twenty-fourth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Katowice, Poland, in December 2018. The Commission briefed participants on the status of negotiations, presented possible scenarios, facilitated discussions on desired outcomes, difficulties, red lines and linkages in order to strengthen the preparations of member State delegates.

32. The Government of Iraq highlighted ESCWA support on climate change issues as a key factor in its obtaining a \$10 million project from the Adaptation Fund in 2018. The Sudan recognized the Commission's critical role in helping it obtain Readiness Programme funding from the Green Climate Fund.

## **B. Social justice**

33. The work of ESCWA in the field of social justice is focused on achieving equitable, inclusive and participatory social development in line with the 2030 Agenda. The three main areas of activity are inclusion and participation, population and human development, and conflict and occupation.

### **1. Inclusion and participation**

34. In 2018, ESCWA published major studies and reports on social protection, persons with disabilities and international migration. Those studies were complemented by capacity-building tools on equality, social justice and governance and by enhanced dialogue regarding social-related policies, namely social inclusion, population welfare and the impact of conflict-related issues on social equity.

35. Social inclusion means enabling people to fulfil their civic and political rights and encouraging them to participate in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. Research and analysis by ESCWA points to a lack of empowerment and participation among young people, women, residents of rural areas and persons with disabilities. The Commission strives to ensure that their voices are heard and their stories told in informing government approaches to inclusion and participation.

36. Arab governments are showing increasing commitment to leaving no one behind: social insurance and health care are being expanded and consolidated, while universal subsidies are gradually being substituted with targeted social assistance. The Commission closely monitors these and other reforms undertaken by member States in their social protection systems.

37. Persons with disabilities have lower rates of literacy, education and economic activity. Girls and women with disabilities in rural areas are acutely disadvantaged. With the support of ESCWA, governments in the region are making progress in implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

38. The Commission continues to support the work of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability, which it established in 2017. Nearly every member State in the region is an active participant in the Group, exchanging knowledge on intra- and interregional cooperation. In May 2018, policymakers convened in Saudi Arabia to

review progress on shifting from the “medical model” to the “social model” in disability assessment, using a rights-based approach and a classification tool developed by the World Health Organization.

39. In September 2018, ESCWA held the first joint meeting between statisticians and policymakers from Arab countries to discuss refining the collection of data on persons with disabilities and to develop a framework of disability indicators for the Arab region. Participants reviewed global best practices and methodologies in data collection and explored the use of additional data sources to supplement the survey and census data collected by national statistical offices. Through the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability, Iraq became aware of Jordan’s successful review of its disability law and subsequently requested support in conducting such a review in Iraq, which ESCWA facilitated.

40. Poverty undermines the Arab region’s chances to achieve development, peace and stability. Over the past two decades, economic growth has failed to bring about the expected reduction in poverty or unemployment, and inequality has remained stagnant or increased. Poverty reduction challenges at the national level include gaps in understanding poverty (manifestations and causes), in designing policies and programmes, and in governance. In addition, across the region, public budgets remain under pressure. In certain cases, poorly designed fiscal policies have fuelled social tension, which in turn has increased demand for more spending to ease high unemployment, poverty and inequality.

41. Against that backdrop and with a view to supporting the realization of Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2, 5, 8 and 10, ESCWA supports member States by informing and promoting global and regional poverty eradication frameworks. The work involves refining the recent and innovative Arab multidimensional poverty measurement methodology, developed with the League of Arab States, and studying the evolution of multidimensional poverty over time.

42. The Commission is developing tools to incorporate multidimensional poverty targets in national plan and budgets, in addition to providing technical cooperation and direct training to member States in partnership with the League of Arab States. Over the past five years, ESCWA and its partners have trained over 200 government officials on the use of multidimensional poverty analysis and policy tools.

43. The Commission is also exploring links between employment and economic productivity by developing employment country profiles and reviewing labour markets and productivity to provide policy guidance in service of the 2030 Agenda. The profiles stimulate policy debate on how to achieve productive and inclusive employment, with a focus on private sector employment, productivity and inclusiveness. In order to help governments design better policies that elevate individual well-being through employment creation, ESCWA is providing country-level and firm-level research on private sector development, job creation, productivity and skills-matching. The Commission also provides technical assistance to member States on employment inclusiveness, promoting private sector development with an emphasis on firms that employ a greater number of young persons and women.

## **2. Population and Human Development**

44. In the Arab region, high rates of population growth and fertility have resulted in a youth bulge and rising urbanization. At the same time, an important ageing transition is under way, whereby the number and share of older persons in society is steadily rising across the region. Given the relatively weak, non-inclusive social protection systems, which leave many older persons vulnerable to poverty, sickness and isolation, the increase in the ratio of older persons relative to other age groups has important social and economic ramifications.

45. Widespread migration also continues to shape the region's population dynamics. It is home to an estimated 38 million migrants; worldwide, approximately 29 million migrants originate from the Arab region, with nearly half of these individuals migrating within the region.
46. The complexity of the political, socioeconomic and environmental factors driving the patterns of migration make it a priority area for national action and regional cooperation. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, adopted in Marrakech, Morocco on 10 December 2018, represents an unprecedented milestone in global cooperation towards a common framework for migration. A non-binding agreement, the Global Compact for Migration seeks to improve the governance of migration and to address the challenges and opportunities associated with it, including its contribution to sustainable development.
47. The Commission engaged its member States in regional consultations leading up to the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration. In partnership with 14 entities in the Working Group on International Migration as well as LAS, ESCWA organized a capacity-building workshop on migration and sustainable development, held in Cairo on 16 and 17 July 2018. Mid-level policymakers from 13 Arab countries, alongside experts and representatives of United Nations system entities, met to strengthen national capacities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, notably target 10.7, pertaining to migration.
48. During the Conference in Marrakech, ESCWA participated in the plenary debate and co-organized a side event, with all the regional commissions, to present regional perspectives on the Global Compact for Migration. The side event increased member States' awareness of the regional mechanisms for implementation, follow-up and review that would ensure harmonized cooperation to achieve the objectives of the Compact. The Commission delivered a statement that presented regional priorities and challenges while highlighting migration's potential for contributing to development.
49. The Commission assists its member States in mobilizing the necessary resources, expertise and partnerships to implement the Global Compact for Migration.

**Box 3**

**Arab Regional Conference on Population and Development: Five Years after the 2013 Cairo Declaration (Beirut, 30 October–1 November 2018)**

The Commission, the United Nations Population Fund and the League of Arab States co-led the five-year review of the Cairo Declaration on Development Challenges and Population Dynamics in a Changing Arab World. The "Arab Regional Conference on Population and Development: Five Years after the 2013 Cairo Declaration" reviewed progress since 2013, focusing on linkages between the Cairo Declaration and the 2030 Agenda, and on the means of moving forward. Close to 200 participants, including senior government officials, parliamentarians, civil society representatives and academics adopted a set of key messages, which were submitted to the Commission on Population and Development and to the 2019 high-level political forum on sustainable development.

50. Throughout 2018, Arab States demonstrated their growing commitment to gender-sensitive legal reform, especially with regard to combating violence against women, a topic on which ESCWA has been leading the provision of policy advice. In February 2018, Morocco became the sixth Arab State to enact a stand-alone law (Law 103-13) on the elimination of violence against women. The following month,

the State of Palestine passed a law repealing a so-called “marry your rapist” provision, whereby alleged rapists could escape prosecution by marrying their victims.

51. The Commission released a policy brief on the concept of due diligence and its applicability to combating violence against women in both the public and private spheres. The brief analyses the content and application of protection orders in Arab States, and provides national and regional recommendations in line with international best practices.

52. Persistent conflict in the Arab region has resulted in an increase in child marriage, despite momentum to formally criminalize the practice. In conflict contexts, child marriage is a negative coping mechanism for many displaced and refugee families, resulting from fears surrounding the vulnerability of young females and from the financial need faced by those families, who may view a dowry as meeting that need. In the short term, the health and safety of girls are compromised and their access to education is denied. In the long term, girls’ health, education and employment prospects are weakened and the risk of domestic violence and child abuse rises, all of which perpetuate the cycle of poverty and insecurity. In order to better understand the long-term impact on girls, their families, communities and States, ESCWA played a role in shaping a regional accountability framework on ending child marriage, so as to address the phenomenon holistically. The Commission is also developing a model for estimating the costs of child marriage, in order to help States develop concrete interventions.

53. Violence against women has a significant and long-term economic impact on individual women, their families, the community and the State. Estimating the cost of violence against women is a long-term, multi-year process that allows States to assess the full impact of violence against women on the economy at the individual, family, community and State levels. In order to encourage better State response, ESCWA has been closely involved with Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the State of Palestine to cost the impact of violence against women, in particular marital violence, owing to the high prevalence of such violence in the Arab region.

54. Efforts were under way in 2018 to estimate the cost of marital violence in the State of Palestine, under the leadership of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. The Government of Saudi Arabia, with support from ESCWA, is also estimating the cost of marital violence through two tracks: seeking to understand the economic costs of violence at the family level, through a national survey, and estimating the cost of services for victims of violence. The Government of Lebanon has also shown a keen interest in estimating the cost of marital violence. The Commission has provided support to the Government of Lebanon through an extensive multisectoral interview process, with key stakeholders providing services to survivors and key research institutions, in order to better understand the quality and availability of administrative and statistical data. The Commission will continue to support Lebanon in this regard through national consultations, developing an operational model on costing violence and seeking financial resources to conduct further research. Lebanon is also currently developing its national strategy on combating violence against women, in collaboration with ESCWA and the United Nations Population Fund.

55. The Government of Iraq is also estimating the cost of marital violence, through a process closely mirroring Lebanon’s approach.

## Box 4

**United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women**

The Commission's commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women is reflected in its remarkable performance in the context of the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

Upon completing the five-year reporting cycle as part of the Action Plan, ESCWA was recognized by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) as the top performer in the United Nations system. Since its early commitment to the Action Plan in 2011, ESCWA has achieved the most significant progress of any United Nations system entity and excels in critical areas, including capacity assessment and enhancement for gender equality and a financial tracking system that provides data disaggregated by sex.

**3. Conflict and occupation**

56. Conflict and occupation are among the most significant challenges to development facing ESCWA member States. Those crises, compounded by the effects of climate change, have led to the highest regional displacement rates in the world. Approximately 29 million displaced people and 50 million people requiring humanitarian assistance originate from the Arab region.

57. The Commission works to generate new knowledge on conflict and human development in order to support United Nations humanitarian operations, for example through the use of household survey microdata to monitor progress towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. It is developing a regional risk assessment framework to provide member States and the United Nations system with regular analysis of the interacting pressure points in the Arab region.

58. The Commission has produced a study on the impact of conflict on human development from childhood to adulthood, presenting evidence from the Arab region. It highlights obstacles to future human development and serves as a guide to agencies, donors and national entities tasked with reconstruction and peacebuilding in order to better target policies and interventions. As a result, a series of partnerships have been developed with the United Nations Children's Fund and the Danish Refugee Council.

59. By concentrating on the effects of conflict on individuals during several critical periods of life, the study on the impact of conflict on human development provides evidence of the effects of exposure to conflict in infancy, early childhood, childhood and the transitions into adulthood. Since the foundations of later-life success are for the most part built in the early years, children exposed to conflict will most likely carry the effects of conflict throughout their lives. Food insecurity, the deterioration of family resources and the reduction of family investments in children will have devastating long-term consequences on children in conflict-ridden countries across the region. In the absence of critical interventions designed to enhance opportunities for children affected by conflict, inequalities will be reinforced. For the Arab region, framing the complex situations of conflict around the 2030 Agenda presents an opportunity to conduct interventions to promote human development.

60. Throughout 2018, ESCWA also conducted an institutional gap analysis for Arab countries facing crises, in order to facilitate structural transformation towards recovery and improved development outcomes. The project develops public sector capacity to support recovery, improve development outcomes and prevent relapse into conflict. The project entailed a series of tailor-made national capacity-building

modules for officials from Iraq and Yemen, based on an institutional diagnostic toolkit that identifies critical gaps in institutional effectiveness. National interlocutors received training and then completed a self-assessment. At the request of the Yemeni counterparts, the gaps assessment focused on institutional budgeting, strategic planning and coordination, which were identified as capacities that were critical and common to all ministries.

61. In the near future, ESCWA will continue to increase the scope of deployment of the gap assessment methodology to Libya and the Sudan. The Commission also continues to provide technical support to national dialogue processes, such as the Libya Socioeconomic Dialogue Project, and monitors governance and institutional development across the region.

#### *State of Palestine*

62. The Israeli occupation in the State of Palestine presents unique challenges in relation to the 2030 Agenda. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals is severely constrained by the capacity of Palestinian institutions to provide adequate and quality services to its population. Palestinians continue to suffer from discriminatory Israeli policies clearly embodied in the application of two different legal systems on the sole basis of nationality or origin, discriminatory planning and zoning policies, as well as mobility restrictions applicable only to Palestinians. The excessive use of force, the expansion of settlements and land confiscations further complicate the picture.

63. In response, ESCWA continues to monitor and report the costs and impacts of occupation and leads the preparation of the annual note by 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.

### **C. Regional integration**

64. Central to the mandate of ESCWA is the development and promotion of regional integration: the furtherance of ever-closer economic and social ties between member States and their peoples. Despite geographic proximity and a shared cultural heritage, trade and economic ties between countries in the Arab region are comparatively lower than in other regional spaces. The benefits of greater integration are of key importance to advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

65. The Commission strives to promote coherence in development policy and planning, and to strengthen institutions, in order to achieve greater regional integration. In 2018, it developed a common regional competencies framework for senior public servants from the perspective of the 2030 Agenda and public policy. Beginning with nine countries, the programme contributes to institutional development and focuses on enhancing the skill set of civil servants in key ministries with responsibility for delivery of the Goals. A series of workshops and sustained engagement, through a standing group of experts, resulted in a road map for the period until 2022, to be presented in Cairo in 2019. A training module on job competencies will also follow.

66. While most countries in the region have mechanisms in place for national planning, including dedicated ministries of planning, many of the ministries face constraints, including structural rigidity and a lack of resources. The Commission supports its member States with a regionally tailored, integrated, strategic and coordinated approach to development planning. The approach is grounded in sound economic governance, namely, legislative and regulatory reform, and contributes to

placing governments on a more inclusive development trajectory in pursuit of the 2030 Agenda.

67. In May 2018, in Tunis, ESCWA held an expert group meeting on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, economic governance and national development planning in the Arab region. At the meeting, participants recognized that sustainable economic growth, the creation of employment, financial stability and sound public finances are given lower political priority in the region compared with the resolution of conflict. Participants sought to shift the perspective and explore conducive conditions for good national development planning, stressing that positive socioeconomic developments and sound economic governance are crucial for the prevention and resolution of political conflict.

### **III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda**

68. Resource mobilization and the identification of innovative sources of financing for development are critical enablers of the 2030 Agenda. In this regard, ESCWA is examining the challenges of fiscal-monetary coordination in the region. The envisaged macroeconomic models developed by the Commission should help better identify the effects of insufficient coordination between fiscal and monetary authorities, thereby yielding policy recommendations for governments. The models will also help design policies that boost growth and social development beyond simple fiscal consolidation. In 2018, ESCWA received requests for technical assistance from Jordan, Kuwait and Tunisia to develop social expenditure and macrofiscal monitoring tools, while Iraq requested support on fiscal policy reform towards economic diversification and employment generation.

69. In the Commission's innovative report, *Rethinking Fiscal Policy for the Arab Region*, the central message was that fiscal policy is crucial to economic reform and social investment on the path to more inclusive and sustainable development. This must be accompanied by governance reforms and political stability. The report made the following recommendations:

- (a) Design fiscal policies to promote economic transformation and decent work;
- (b) Make budget choices to reduce poverty and inequality, and close health, housing and education deficits;
- (c) Expand and sustain fiscal space by raising revenues;
- (d) Harness public expenditure management for inclusive and sustainable development through better quality governance;
- (e) Orient fiscal policy towards peace and development in post-conflict countries.

70. In 2018, Jordan and Tunisia benefited from pilot programmes for capacity development on macrofiscal policies and social expenditure monitoring, which were delivered by ESCWA. The programmes expand the access of policymakers to evidence-based tools for better analysis and implementation of reform.

71. The Commission also provides support to member States for the enhancement of their budgets and fiscal policy through evidence-based policy assessments and the design of appropriate financing policy, which is intended to mobilize much needed domestic and international resources. Through analytical studies, expert group meetings, training workshops and seminars, ESCWA helps member States implement

the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. To that end, ESCWA provides technical assistance, with a focus on investment agreements, tax efficiency, workers' remittances, financial inclusion and debt management.

72. Harnessing vast flows of remittances is an area of great promise for ESCWA member States in financing their development efforts. Recent estimates indicate that the region receives nearly \$50 billion in remittances annually, almost double the amount it receives in official development assistance and official aid, and nearly 20 per cent more than what it receives in foreign direct investment.

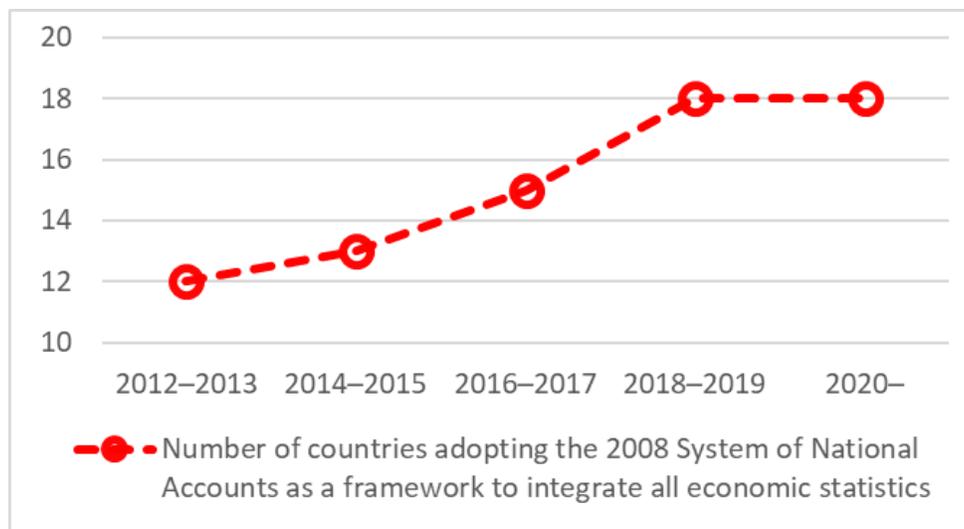
73. The challenges facing the Arab region are no longer confined to the traditional factors influencing economic frailty. At present, the challenges involve a broader stream of factors, including foreign direct investment reflux; private capital constraints and reversals; debt distress; subdued trade growth and increased exposure to illicit finance. National, regional and global reform and policy coordination are thus urgently needed, and ESCWA is at the forefront of those efforts in the Arab region, providing analysis and recommendations and serving as a platform for consensus-building and information exchange.

74. The ongoing work of ESCWA on financing for development led to its hosting, in November 2018, of an international conference on "Financing sustainable development: curbing illicit financial flows", at United Nations House in Beirut, ahead of the High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development to be held in 2019. The conference helped mobilize long-term development finance and advocated the transition from funding individual projects to the financing of transformative change. The conference also promoted measures to combat illicit financial flows, which continue to evolve in both scale and sophistication, thereby undermining national efforts to finance sustainable development.

75. Islamic finance is another area that ESCWA has been exploring as regards innovative sources of funding. Islamic finance is a large and underutilized resource for funding efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda: it is estimated that the current total of resources in Islamic finance exceeds \$2.3 trillion and that it is growing at a rapid double-digit rate.

76. The Commission co-organized a workshop on Islamic finance in national accounts with the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The workshop examined the sectorization of Islamic financial corporations, the classification of Islamic financial instruments and corresponding property income, the calculation of output and value added of Islamic financial services and the coordination between regional and international organizations in the collection of statistics on Islamic finance.

77. The workshop built on the Commission's strong focus on data and statistics as means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In 2018, ESCWA supported Arab governments in producing relevant, reliable and timely data and statistics in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Progress was made in aligning national statistical practices with international statistical standards, methods and concepts. The collaboration resulted in the production, by member States, of data that were not previously available, along with improved quality of existing statistical data, thus the improved suitability of the data for policymaking at the national and subnational levels. The improvements were demonstrated by the increasing level of implementation of the latest revision of the System of National Accounts.



### Statistics: major highlights

78. Through its work on national strategies for the development of statistics, ESCWA and its strategic partners assisted countries in formulating statistical strategies in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

79. As part of the development of statistics on vulnerable groups, 16 countries implemented the basic requirements of ESCWA regional guidelines on the production of statistics on persons with disabilities. International experts on disability statistics commended ESCWA for the guidelines, which are the first of their kind in the region. An integrated toolkit on gender statistics was rolled out and an estimated total of 1,500 participants will receive training thereon.

80. In the area of demographic and social statistics, three countries (Egypt, Jordan, State of Palestine) and seven subnational entities (the seven Emirates of the United Arab Emirates) completed their 2020 round of population and housing censuses, using new technologies in data collection, including portable electronic devices, the automated detection of geospatial coordinates and the use of administrative sources of data. Moreover, experts from Egypt, Jordan and the State of Palestine are providing technical assistance to and sharing their experience with other countries for preparing censuses and/or comprehensive population and housing surveys.

81. As regards economic statistics, 18 countries set the 2008 System of National Accounts as the overarching framework for all economic statistics with the compilation of supply and use tables. The Commission initiated and leads a global initiative that resulted in guidelines for reflecting Islamic finance in the System of National Accounts. Six pilot countries implemented harmonized consumer price indices in 2018, while 13 countries produce their national and subnational data on purchasing power parity on an annual basis – in this regard, ESCWA has benefited from the significant financial support of the World Bank, through the International Comparison Programme, for more than a decade.

82. The electronic publication of data on external trade in ESCWA member States, with individual country profiles, represents a new approach to publishing data in a user-friendly electronic form (see [www.unescwa.org/sub-site/external-trade-escwa-member-countries](http://www.unescwa.org/sub-site/external-trade-escwa-member-countries)). The website provides a fully-fledged publication of country profiles, through the use of business intelligence tools, while providing valuable substantive content and a descriptive analysis of data. During the first six months

since its publication in April 2018, the page was accessed online by around 2,000 users.

83. The Commission launched a bilingual data portal in 2018, making national statistics available online to all with customizable visualizations and regular updates from national statistical offices (see <https://data.unescwa.org>).

#### **IV. Spotlight: technology for sustainable development**

84. In 2018, ESCWA enriched and harmonized the response of its member States to global and regional technology and innovation trends through an innovative national and regional process that links the 11 action lines of the World Summit on the Information Society with the Sustainable Development Goals in five macroclusters, in the framework of its programme on the information society and digital economy hub for the Arab region.

85. Regional stakeholders endorsed ESCWA efforts during a consultative meeting held in March 2018. The commitment of stakeholders to harnessing technology for development was reaffirmed at the thirtieth ministerial session, in June 2018, and in its outcome document, the Beirut Consensus on Technology for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region. In September 2018, ESCWA engaged with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs to incorporate the United Nations E-Government Survey into its work. In order to address the various situations of Arab countries in terms of digital development, the Commission devised an assessment toolkit, which it shared with national focal points in November 2018. That work will yield national digital development reports, which will inform an Arab regional digital development report, to be issued for the first time in 2019.

86. In Amman, in October 2018, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia Technology Centre held the sixth meeting of its Technical Committee to refine its programmatic priorities in line with the outcomes of the thirtieth ministerial session and the Beirut Consensus, as well as the region's evolving technological priorities. Participants included experts in emerging technologies from across the region, representing academia and research institutions, industry, the public sector, the United Nations and other international organizations.

87. In December 2018, ESCWA hosted a regional dialogue and expert meeting on Internet governance and the cybersecurity nexus, on the theme of promoting trust in cyberspace, which was organized in partnership with the League of Arab States in preparation for the fifth Arab Internet Governance Forum. Nearly 50 participants from 14 Arab countries developed recommendations on Internet trust, safety and security issues in line with the second ESCWA and LAS road map for Internet governance, and fleshed out the programme for the fifth Forum.

88. Further to work by ESCWA on national technology transfer, Egypt adopted a new law on incentives for science, technology and innovation. In Morocco, a new five-year scientific research plan was adopted on the basis of a road map developed with ESCWA, while work began on a national smart cities strategy. The latter was supported by ESCWA, with a focus on infrastructure, accessibility, citizen empowerment, data openness and availability, innovation, entrepreneurship, services and applications, governance and institutions, and measurement mechanisms.

89. Also in 2018, ESCWA delivered a road map for a national digital transformation strategy to the Government of Mauritania, as a result of a field mission conducted at the request of its Ministry of Employment, Vocational Training and Information and Communication Technologies.

90. In the Sudan, ESCWA provided support to the National Bureau for the Employment of Graduates on technology incubators, shared best practices and recommended a model ahead of the launch of Mougran incubator in 2019.

### **Open government**

91. ESCWA held a regional workshop on open government in September 2018. Government officials from across the region received training on fostering open government, on the basis of the four-phased open government framework developed by the Commission. On 2 October 2018, the Council of Ministers in the State of Palestine established a special committee for open data, including several ministries and the private sector. Jordan and the Sudan requested national workshops on open government. Throughout 2018, ESCWA reviewed and enriched Jordan's digital transformation strategy, which involved over 40 stakeholder consultations and will result in the launch of a new strategy in 2019.

92. Another implementation-driven workshop was held by ESCWA on 5 October 2018, highlighting tools and actions to implement open government practices in the Arab region. The Commission developed an open government framework, founded on existing systems, using a four-phased scheme (openness, participation, collaboration and engagement). The framework can be used by governments and public institutions to systematically introduce and develop the open government concept.

### **Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development**

93. The Commission continues to provide the Arab region with a dedicated regional platform for knowledge-sharing and policy coordination. It also serves as a channel through which local and national needs are conveyed to the international community and through which international development agreements are in turn distilled into development action at the local and national levels. In order to achieve those aims, ESCWA capitalizes on the deep and wide partnerships it has built over many years with other regional organizations, such as the League of Arab States and United Nations system entities, including the regional commissions. The Commission has also built partnerships with different local and regional constituencies that are central to advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including parliamentarians, civil society organizations and the private sector.

94. The Commission, the Regional Bureau for Arab States of the United Nations Development Programme and the Islamic Development Bank organized the 2018 Arab Region Parliamentary Forum on the 2030 Agenda. The Forum built on ongoing efforts to enhance the awareness of parliamentarians on their role in the implementation of, follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda. Deliberations linked parliamentary functions to the principles of sustainable development and their implications for policymaking.

95. With respect to partnerships with the private sector, ESCWA took the initiative to redefine its engagement with the Global Compact Local Network (Lebanon chapter) and invited small and medium-sized enterprises that participate in the Global Compact to lead the outcomes on domestic private finance and financial inclusion at the first international conference on financing sustainable development, held in Beirut on 28 and 29 November 2018. The outcome document adopted at the conference paved the way for concrete action to be taken, beyond the scope of the Guidelines on a Principle-based Approach to the Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Sector, in order to advance the principles of the Global Compact, providing regional pathways to mobilize the private sector to advance the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the 2030 Agenda. The Commission also capitalizes on its convening

power and builds on existing private sector networks to engage in policy discussions in the framework of expert group meetings and intergovernmental bodies hosted by ESCWA.

96. In leveraging the partnership with civil society, ESCWA held a series of civil society dialogues, which focused on several ESCWA member States and on specific areas of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, such as Goals 10 and 16. In April 2018, ESCWA organized a regional meeting of civil society on sustainable development in the Arab region, which reviewed the efforts of civil society organizations to engage in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Arab region and its follow-up and review processes. It also facilitated the exchange of knowledge and experiences among organizations, as well as launching a platform for dialogue on sustainable development.

97. The Commission has leveraged the Regional Coordination Mechanism for Arab States in order to achieve greater coherence and synergy in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda with United Nations system organizations. The 2030 Agenda was a main theme of the annual meetings of the Mechanism in 2015, 2016 and 2017. In 2017 and 2018, the meeting of the Mechanism was organized back-to-back with the meeting of the Regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group, with joint sessions on the 2030 Agenda. The Mechanism and the Regional Group also set up a joint working group on the 2030 Agenda, composed of all United Nations organizations working in the region and the League of Arab States. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs took part in the 2018 joint meeting of the Mechanism and the Regional Group, at which it was agreed that the Department would be invited to attend all future meetings of the joint working group. The joint working group oversees the work of four distinct task forces on the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development, the *Arab Sustainable Development Report*, data in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the country-specific mainstreaming, acceleration and policy support strategy.

98. In January 2019, the Regional Coordination Mechanism for Arab States and the Regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group further operationalized their commitments to pursue greater coordination by agreeing on a joint operational framework for collaboration, which seeks to:

- (a) Enhance regional coordination through the closer alignment and integration of the meetings and secretariats of the Mechanism and the Regional Group;
- (b) Ensure more effective analysis and action on regional and transboundary issues;
- (c) Improve the capacity of the United Nations development system in the region to deliver integrated policy advice in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to member States and United Nations country teams;
- (d) Enhance leadership and coordination in the area of data;
- (e) Reduce duplication and enhance cooperation in the production of regional knowledge products.

99. The Commission further co-chairs the inter-agency Working Group on International Migration in the Arab region, the main goal of which is to promote joint research and interventions on international migration in the region. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, several joint activities have been focused on target 10.7, which calls for facilitating orderly, safe and regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of well-managed migration policies.

100. The Commission partners with the International Labour Organization, the World Food Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the United Nations Children's Fund in supporting Arab countries as they reform their social protection systems. The Commission also partners with the International Labour Organization in a joint regional project on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market to advance a common and inclusive approach throughout the Arab region with regard to the employment of persons with disabilities in a way that respects social justice, human rights and decent work.

101. In addition, ESCWA provided substantive inputs, interventions and proposals and furnished regional perspectives on financing for development within multilateral and United Nations-led processes, forums and meetings relating to financing for development. Those contributions informed the high-level meeting on financing the 2030 Agenda, held in September 2018; the work of the strategic results financing think tank, in October 2018; the special session on financing for development organized by the Regional Coordination Mechanism, in October 2018; the regional commissions' side event on regionalism and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in September 2018; the commissions' side event on regional perspectives on financing for the 2030 Agenda, as part of the Economic and Social Council forum on financing for development follow-up, in 2018; and the workshop on revisiting socioeconomic policies to address poverty in all its dimensions in middle-income countries, organized in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in May 2018.

## Annex

### The year in review (key milestones and events)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Description</i>
<b>January</b>		
16 and 17	Beirut	Workshop on trade, transport and logistics: implementing a single-window system in Iraq
29–31	Cairo	Regional workshop on the use of technology in population and housing censuses in Arab countries
<b>February</b>		
10–12	Cairo	Workshop on sand and dust storms in the Arab region
13	Dubai, United Arab Emirates	Meeting of the directors of e-government programmes in Arab States (World Government Summit 2018)
13 and 14	Cairo	Arab Climate Outlook Forum
<b>March</b>		
22 and 23	Tunis	Disseminating the culture of good governance as a development factor and a conflict prevention tool: expert group meeting on the role of civil society
27 and 28	Riyadh	National consultation on costing violence against women in Saudi Arabia
<b>April</b>		
3–5	Kuwait City	Tenth regional workshop on capacity development for climate change negotiations for the Arab countries
15–19	Amman	United Nations-wide capacity-building workshop on innovation policies for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region
24–26	Beirut	Arab Forum for Sustainable Development
<b>May</b>		
8	Beirut	Workshop: revisiting socioeconomic policies to address poverty in all its dimensions in middle-income countries
9	Tunis	Expert group meeting on implementing the 2030 Agenda: economic governance and national development planning in the Arab region
<b>June</b>		
21 and 22	Beirut	Expert group meeting on frontier technologies and the 2030 Agenda in the Arab region: implications for employment and youth
25–28	Beirut	Thirtieth ministerial session of the Commission

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Description</i>
<b>July</b>		
16 and 17	Cairo	Capacity-building workshop: migration and the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region
25	Beirut	Leaving no woman behind: addressing gender intersectionality in the Arab region
26	Beirut	Expert group meeting on water, energy and food security: challenges and opportunities for the peacebuilding phase
<b>August</b>		
14	Beirut	Exploring policy alternatives for post-conflict reconstruction
28 and 29	Beirut	Expert group meeting on persons with disabilities living in institutions in Arab countries
<b>September</b>		
18 and 19	Beirut	Regional workshop on combating violence against women in the Arab region
18–20	Cairo	Inter-agency and expert group meeting on improving statistics on persons with disabilities in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals
25–27	Beirut	Regional workshop on open government in the Arab region
<b>October</b>		
3	Amman	Expert group meeting on mitigating the ramifications of conflict through development: operationalizing pathways for peace in the Arab States
24 and 25	Beirut	Expert group meeting on “Technology as a renewed hope to achieving gender equality in the Arab region: fact or illusion?”
30 Oct– 1 Nov	Beirut	Arab Regional Conference on Population and Development: Five Years after the 2013 Cairo Declaration
<b>November</b>		
17	Beirut	Third Model ESCWA Conference
26–28	Beirut	Nineteenth session of the Committee on Transport and Logistics
27 and 28	Beirut	Regional workshop on road safety management in the Arab countries
28 and 29	Beirut	Conference on financing sustainable development: curbing illicit financial flows

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<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Description</i>
29	Beirut	International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People
<b>December</b>		
4	Beirut	Expert group meeting on women and peace and security: national women's machineries, conflict, occupation and transition in the Arab region
4	Beirut	Arab regional dialogue and expert group meeting on Internet governance and the cybersecurity nexus: promoting trust in cyberspace
18 and 19	Beirut	Fifth meeting of the Executive Committee

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