



INSPECTION AND EVALUATION DIVISION

**Evaluation of the Economic and Social
Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

30 March 2016

Assignment No.: **IED-16-002**

INSPECTION AND EVALUATION DIVISION

FUNCTION

“The Office shall evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of the programmes and legislative mandates of the Organisation. It shall conduct programme evaluations with the purpose of establishing analytical and critical evaluations of the implementation of programmes and legislative mandates, examining whether changes therein require review of the methods of delivery, the continued relevance of administrative procedures and whether the activities correspond to the mandates as they may be reflected in the approved budgets and the medium-term plan of the Organisation;” (General Assembly [Resolution 48/218 B](#)).

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Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) fosters comprehensive, equitable, integrated and sustainable development through effective economic and social cooperation in the region.

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) examined the relevance and effectiveness of ESCWA, focusing on how its three core functions – consensus building, research and analysis and advisory services - support member States in their policy discussions, formulation and implementation. The evaluation was conducted using surveys, interviews, on-site visits, direct observation, case studies, document reviews and secondary data analysis.

ESCWA has operated in an environment characterized by protracted conflict and political instability that has affected social dynamics in the region and posed several challenges to ESCWA's work. Against this backdrop, ESCWA has provided an important platform for building regional consensus and facilitating decision-making on global agenda items and thematic areas by providing an evidenced-based, strategic and neutral platform for dialogue. While ESCWA has addressed the main priorities of its member States through its subsidiary body structure, it lacks a more systematic and regular approach to fully address newly emerging issues in the region.

ESCWA's knowledge generation, through its research and analysis work, has not been fully utilized to increase awareness of development in the region, primarily due to deficient dissemination practices and feedback mechanisms. While discussions are ongoing to improve its publications programme, concrete strategies are yet to be implemented.

ESCWA's advisory services have been generally well received, but their influence on policy has not been widespread. These services have also not been adequately linked with ESCWA's other two core functions of research and analysis and consensus building to support policy formulation.

As member States focus on the 2030 development agenda, ESCWA has played a key role in facilitating a regional position on the sustainable development goals and on developing a strategy to move forward in support of their implementation.

OIOS makes five important recommendations:

- Strengthen capacity to address newly emerging issues
- Develop and implement a comprehensive publication strategy
- Strengthen methodologies for collecting, analysing and reporting on programme performance
- Develop a detailed strategy and action plan for strengthening linkages between its three core functions
- Propose options to increase support provided to member States for the Sustainable Development Goals

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I. Introduction and objective

1. The Inspection and Evaluation Division (IED) of the [Office of Internal Oversight Services \(OIOS-IED\)](#) identified the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) for evaluation on the basis of a risk assessment undertaken by OIOS to identify Secretariat programme evaluation priorities. The Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) selected the programme evaluation of ESCWA for consideration at its 57th session, in June 2017.¹ The General Assembly endorsed the selection in its resolution A/RES/70/8.

2. The general frame of reference for OIOS is set out in General Assembly resolutions 48/218 B, 54/244 and 59/272, as well as ST/SGB/273, which authorizes OIOS to initiate, carry out and report on any action that it considers necessary to fulfil its responsibilities. OIOS evaluation is provided for in the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation².

3. The objective of the evaluation was to determine as systematically and objectively as possible the relevance and effectiveness of ESCWA. The evaluation topic emerged from a programme level risk assessment and covers all substantive areas of the programme and is described in the evaluation inception paper³. The evaluation has been conducted in conformity with the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG).

4. The ESCWA management comments were sought on the draft report and taken into account in the preparation of the final report. The formal ESCWA response is included in the annex.

II. Background

Mandate

5. ESCWA⁴ was created by Economic and Social Council resolution 1818 (LV) of 9 August 1973 and resolution 1985/69, which amended its terms of reference to underscore the social functions of the Commission. Furthermore, Economic and Social Council resolution 2005/50 requested ESCWA to provide support to member States in realizing the Millennium Development Goals.

6. ESCWA's mandate is to foster comprehensive, equitable, integrated and sustainable development through effective economic and social cooperation in the region. It assists member States in addressing policy weaknesses and enhancing their capacities to address inequalities and uses its convening power to provide a forum for member States to discuss and share views on overall economic, social and sustainable development issues in the region. ESCWA pursues the following specific objectives:

¹ Report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination, Fifth-fifth session, A/70/16, June 2015.

² [ST/SGB/2000/8](#), Regulation 7.1.

³ IED-15-003, OIOS-IED Inception Paper: Programme Evaluation of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

⁴ Commission Resolution 321 re-designated the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia as the "Economic and Social Commission for Arab States," still to be endorsed by the General Assembly.

- (a) support economic and social development in member States;
- (b) promote interaction and cooperation between member States;
- (c) encourage the exchange of experience, best practice and lessons learned;
- (d) achieve regional integration and ensure interaction between Western Asia and other regions; and
- (e) raise global awareness of the circumstances and needs of member States.

Governance

7. ESCWA is composed of 18 members⁵, with most recently Libya, Morocco and the Republic of Tunisia becoming full members in 2012 and Mauritania in 2015. The Commission – through the Ministerial Session of ESCWA – meets once every two years, in even years.

8. Member States exercise corporate governance through their participation in the Commission. ESCWA management brings key issues to the attention of member States to facilitate the decision-making process, implement decisions and provide secretariat services to the Commission and its nine subsidiary bodies:

- a) Technical Committee re-designated Executive Committee
- b) Statistical Committee
- c) Committee on Social Development
- d) Committee on Energy
- e) Committee on Water Resources
- f) Committee on Transport
- g) Committee on liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization
- h) Committee on Women
- k) Committee on Technology for Development

Management, organizational structure and resources

9. ESCWA is led by an Executive Secretary (ES) at the Under-Secretary-General level and is assisted by two Deputy Executive Secretaries (DES) - one for Programme and one for Programme Support.

10. As shown in Table 1, ESCWA's total regular budget for 2014-2015 was US\$ 73.986 million. ESCWA's extra-budgetary resources have more than tripled from 2010-2011 to 2014-2015. ESCWA has 260 staff, 119 at the professional level. ESCWA's budget can be broken down as follows:

- a) Policymaking organs, with US\$ 156,000, representing less than 1 per cent;
- b) Executive direction and management, with US\$ 4.376 million, representing 6 percent;
- c) Programme of work, with US\$ 35.461 million, representing 51 percent; and
- d) Programme support, with US\$ 29,737 million, representing 43 percent.

⁵ ESCWA members: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, The Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, The United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

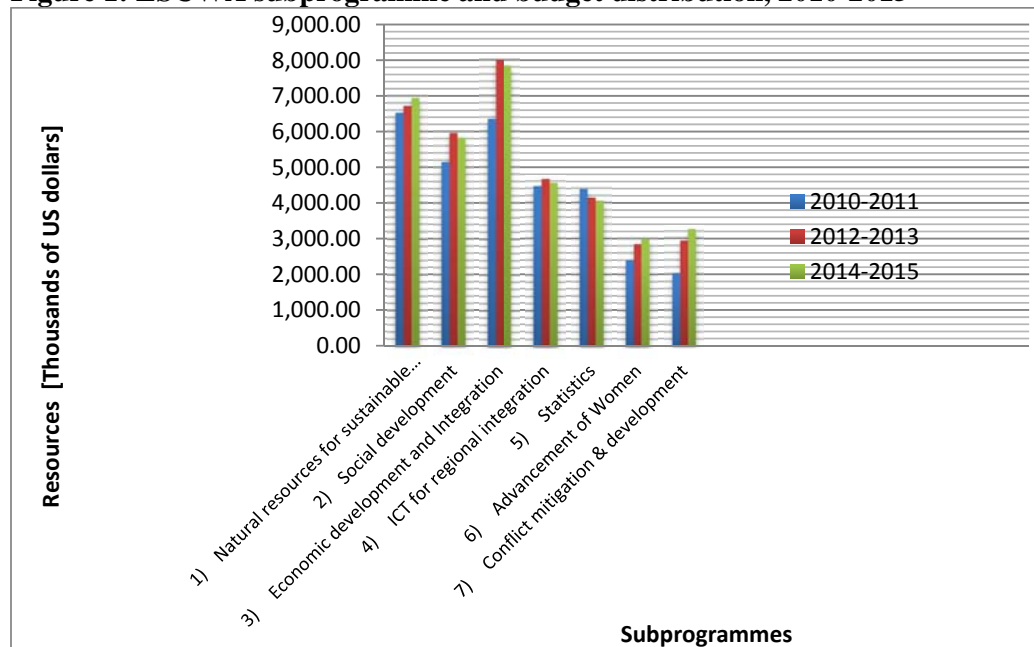
Table 1: ESCWA regular budget and extra-budgetary resources, 2014-2015

ESCWA	Resources (thousands of United States dollars)			Posts		
	2010-2011	2012-2013	2014-2015	2010-2011	2012-2013	2014-2015
Regular Budget	64 409.2	69 177.9	73 986.9	261	264	260
Extra-budgetary	3 580.4	11 160.1	12 120.4	0	0	0
Total	67 989.6	80 338.0	86 107.3	261	264	260

Source: (A/68/6 (Sect.22) and ESCWA final appropriations report

11. ESCWA’s programme of work is implemented by seven interdependent and complementary subprogrammes, shown in Figure 1 together with their resource distribution from 2010-2015.

Figure 1: ESCWA subprogramme and budget distribution, 2010-2015

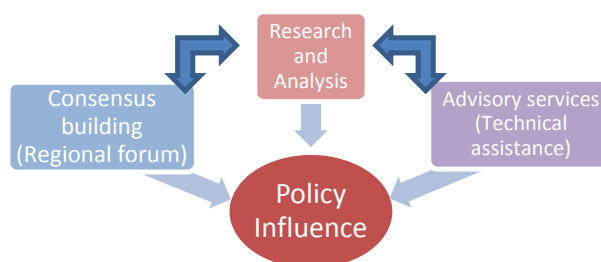


Source: A/68/6 (Sect. 22), A/66/6 (Sect. 22)

Core functions

12. ESCWA’s mandate is delivered through three inter-related core functions: i) serving as a regional forum and consensus builder on regional and thematic development issues; ii) providing analysis, research and evidence-based policy alternatives; and iii) providing advisory services to facilitate the formulation, adoption and implementation of development policies. Figure 2 depicts how the three core functions are linked to influence policy in the region.

Figure 2: Functional linkages in support of ESCWA’s policy influence



Operational environment

13. ESCWA operates in an environment characterized by protracted conflict and political instability. Conflict situations currently exist in nearly half of these countries, making it one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the world. By 2015, 37.5 per cent of the population in the region lived in a country affected by conflict or instability.⁶ The political landscape of the region has experienced dramatic transformation in recent years. Since 2011, political uprisings in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and other Arab countries have illustrated demand for good governance and better economic and social conditions.⁷

14. Deteriorating security conditions have negatively affected the region’s economies. It includes the developed economies of most of the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries⁸, the Arab Mashreq⁹ and Arab Maghreb countries¹⁰, which have middle income and least developed countries, as well as Arab least developed countries¹¹. The average growth rate of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Arab region in real terms for 2014 was estimated at 1.5 per cent, a negligible change from 2013. Gulf Cooperation Council Countries grew by approximately 4 per cent in 2014 and were estimated to grow by 3.4 per cent in 2015. However, the Arab Mashreq countries have contracted by an average of about 0.6 per cent in 2014 and were estimated to grow by only 1.2 per cent in 2015, while the Arab Maghreb countries, which have contracted by 3.9 per cent in 2014, were expected to grow by only 1.2 per cent in 2015. According to available data for the fourth quarter of 2014, unemployment rates for Palestine stood at 26.5 per cent; for Saudi Arabia at 11.6 per cent among Saudi nationals; for Egypt at 12.9 per cent; for Jordan at 12.3 per cent; and for Morocco at 9.7 per cent¹². A significant fall in oil prices has become a further economic concern.¹³

15. Intensifying armed conflict in the region has also affected social dynamics, including mass displacement. In 2014, there were 10.6 million refugees and 15.2 million internally displaced people in the region. This number has significantly increased in Iraq, Libya, Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen over the past years, causing humanitarian crises. Moreover, the scale of displacement has eroded human capital and hampered social development in the region. Social impacts are being increasingly felt in Jordan and Lebanon,

⁶ As reflected by E/ESCWA/2015/EC.2/4 (Part VII).

⁷ Report on Monitoring Progress on Governance: E/ESCWA/ECRI/2014/W.G.2/Report.

⁸ Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates.

⁹ Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic.

¹⁰ Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

¹¹ Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

¹² Survey of Economic and Social Development in the Arab Region - E/ESCWA/EDID/2015/2/Summary.

¹³ E/ESCWA/EDID/2015/2/Summary.

for example, where demographic structures have changed due to the influx of refugees and where basic services have been strained.

III. Methodology

16. The evaluation examined how ESCWA has delivered its three core functions to support member States in their policy discussions, formulation and implementation, and whether it is fit for purpose to support member States' implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It did not cover the programme support areas of ESCWA's programme of work relating to conference management services and administration.

17. The time frame for the evaluation was primarily 2012-2015. Selective data and information from earlier years were also reviewed to support the analysis of particular thematic issues.

18. The evaluation employed the following combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. All evaluation results are based on a triangulation of multiple data sources.

- (a) **Interviews:** A total of 81 semi-structured interviews with ESCWA staff, member States and key stakeholders;
- (b) **Missions:** to ESCWA headquarters in Beirut, and four country visits to Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The missions included direct observation of two back-to-back intergovernmental processes;
- (c) **Surveys:** Web-based surveys of a non-random sample of ESCWA staff¹⁴ and all ESCWA member States;¹⁵
- (d) **Document review:** Structured content analysis of key reports and documentation, including: ESCWA strategic plans and financial documents; programme performance reports; senior management meeting minutes; reports and resolutions of the intergovernmental bodies; technical material and publications; and press releases;
- (e) **Secondary data analysis:** analysis of data from: the Integrated Management and Documentation Integrated System (IMDIS); social media such as Facebook and twitter; and audit and evaluation reports;
- (f) **Analysis of intergovernmental decisions**¹⁶;
- (g) **Case studies:** in-depth analysis of four thematic areas - social development; gender mainstreaming; national development planning; and sustainable development goals¹⁷;

19. The evaluation encountered a limitation with regard to the low response rate to the member State survey, where 5 of 18 member States responded.

14 The staff survey was sent to a non-random sample of 193 staff. It comprised all senior and professional staff members and research assistants with substantive responsibilities. In total, 107 staff responded, for a 55 per cent response rate.

15 The member State survey was sent to all 18 members and targeted at individuals at the ministerial level who participated in the 2014 Ministerial Session. In total, 5 responded, for a 27.7 per cent response rate.

16 Decisions were assessed from the 26th, 27th and 28th Commission session and last three Committees sessions on Energy, Water, Trade, Transport, Statistics, Social Development, Women and the Executive Committee.

17 Case studies were selected on the following criteria: subprogramme coverage; relevance of thematic area to ESCWA's mandate; extent of advisory services provided; and potential number of policy instruments influenced. Case study analyses were integrated into the evaluation results as an additional source of evidence.

IV. Evaluation results

A. ESCWA has provided an important platform for building consensus and facilitating decision-making on global agenda items and thematic areas in a volatile region

The complex regional context has posed several challenges to ESCWA's work

20. As highlighted in paragraphs 13 to 15, ESCWA has operated against a backdrop of protracted armed conflict and violence, increasing disruption to intra-regional cooperation, and a transition in some member States towards good governance. This complex regional context has impacted ESCWA's work. The most frequently cited challenge to ESCWA's overall effectiveness, volunteered both by staff surveyed (40 per cent) and external stakeholders interviewed (22 per cent), were the conflict and political instability of the region. Conflict was seen as having a significant impact on the consensus building work of ESCWA, since current security conditions in the region have limited the full participation of member States in inter-governmental meetings, especially if organized in security restricted duty stations such as Beirut. Conflict not only causes structural barriers to consensus building in a regional setting, but also affects governments' ability to address policy issues that ESCWA focuses on. Restricted interactions with and responses from some relevant counterparts in several countries, such as Yemen and Syria, have affected the type and extent of technical assistance and follow-up that ESCWA has been able to provide. The volatile situation in some countries has made it challenging to address development issues since political and governance issues have been higher priority.

ESCWA's main comparative advantage has been its provision of a neutral, strategic and evidenced-based platform for dialogue and consensus building

21. ESCWA has played an important role in promoting dialogue and consensus in the region. Most external stakeholders interviewed (73 per cent) reported that ESCWA added value through its role as a regional platform for exchanging ideas, bringing stakeholders together and building consensus around important development issues. Similarly, most staff surveyed (73 per cent) indicated that ESCWA was either very effective or effective in providing a fora for regional dialogue and deliberation of key development policy issues in the Arab region. ESCWA has played this role through the provision of evidenced-based analysis to various intergovernmental deliberations and expert group meetings related to gender, social development, statistics, water, energy, trade and transport issues. A recent example of ESCWA's consensus building role was member States' adoption of the Tunis Declaration of Social Justice in the Arab Region in 2014, which lays out a vision on social justice in the region and establishes commitments to ensure that progress is made to achieve sustainable development.

22. ESCWA has been able to play an important broker role in the region. Most government officials (20 of 22) and regional partners from the League of Arab states (6 of 6) interviewed noted that ESCWA's neutral broker role has enabled it to promote dialogue and facilitate discussion both by incorporating a range of different perspectives in its analyses and by providing a technical support role to those discussions; they also noted that ESCWA was effective in facilitating regional and thematic forums in support of regional decision-making. Most member States in a survey conducted by ESCWA in 2015 (85 per cent) gave it positive ratings for its technical servicing and contributions to facilitating intergovernmental

meetings, both for the Ministerial Commission sessions, as well as for technical subsidiary committees.

23. ESCWA has contributed to building consensus and facilitated decision-making at three different levels – global, regional and thematic – each of which is discussed in more detail below.

ESCWA has facilitated regional consensus on global agenda items

24. ESCWA has successfully facilitated the formulation of regional positions on a number of global development items, as demonstrated through the positive outcomes identified in Table 2. In addition to promoting dialogue, it has achieved this by bringing specific issues to the discussion table and providing technical analyses, reports and presentations to inform those discussions. In addition to the Tunis Declaration on Social Justice for the Arab Region discussed in para 21 above, which was a significant achievement in that it addressed social justice from a multi-sectoral perspective and illustrated ESCWA’s strategy of providing a vision of integrated development, ESCWA facilitated the adoption of other regional positions and agreements on global agenda items over the past four years. This enabled its member States to better articulate a common voice at global policy-making processes.

Table 2: Key regional positions and agreements on global agenda items facilitated by ESCWA, 2012 to 2015

Facilitated the adoption of the Arab Ministerial Declaration on the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, which contributed to the Rio+ 20 discussions - 2012
Facilitated a regional position on the SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda - 2015
Facilitated a regional position on the follow up to the Beijing declaration - 2012
Facilitated an Arab Common Position for the Financing for Development Conference III - 2015
Facilitated the adoption of the Cairo Declaration on the Post-2015 Development Agenda for Women - 2015
Supported the League of Arab States in crafting priority development goals that led efforts towards the adoption of the Arab Framework for Sustainable Development - 2014
Supported the Arab Ministerial Water Council in the preparation of its action plan to implement the Arab Water Security Strategy - 2014
Supported the development of the regional implementation strategy of the 2008 System of National Accounts – 2012-2013
Facilitated the Declaration on the review of the implementation of the MDGs with the Social Affairs Ministers - 2014

ESCWA has also contributed to the adoption of key regional resolutions

25. In the last three biennia, ESCWA has supported member States in reaching regional consensus across nine sectoral areas, shown in Table 3. Through their facilitation of the

ministerial sessions that take place every two years, member States have agreed on twenty resolutions to advance the economic, social and environmental development in the region.¹⁸

Table 3: Regional resolutions reached at ministerial sessions facilitated by ESCWA, 2010-2014

<i>Ministerial session by sector</i>	<i>26th Session Resolutions, 2010</i>	<i>27th Session Resolutions, 2012</i>	<i>28th Session Resolutions, 2014</i>
Social Development	1	2	
Economic Development	1	1	
Technology for Development	1	1	1
Statistics	1		
Women	1		
Emerging Conflict and related	1	1	1
Administrative and Planning	4	5	5
Political		1	
Sustainable Development		1	1
Total number of regional resolutions	10	12	8

Source: Resolutions E/2010/41; E/ESCWA/26/9/Report; E/2012/41; E/ESCWA/27/9/Report; E/2014/41; E/ESCWA/28/9/Report.

26. Emanating from the twenty resolutions approved above, ESCWA has also facilitated the adoption of 33 Commission decisions per year on average since 2010. These decisions fall into four types: requests to ESCWA; agreements; recommendations and calls for member State action. Examples of requests to ESCWA included: to follow up on successful public sector development initiatives in support of the Millennium Development Goals and to prepare a report and assist member States in addressing the outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference. Examples of agreements included: the adoption of the statute of the ESCWA Technology Centre and the adoption of the ESCWA draft strategic framework. Examples of recommendations included recommending the Economic and Social Council to “redesignate the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia as the Economic and Social Commission for Arab States”. Examples of calls for member State action included: asking member States to participate in the sessions of the Arab Forum of Sustainable Development and calling upon all member States to enhance coordination between national statistical offices to implement national strategies for statistical development.

ESCWA has also generated dialogue and facilitated decision-making across various thematic areas

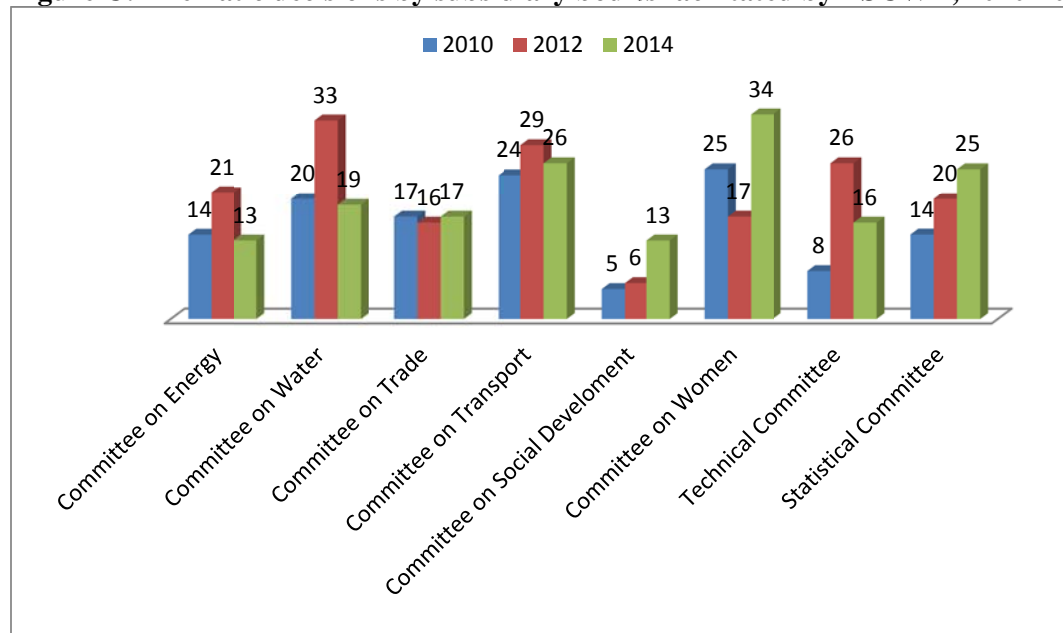
27. As part of their overall consensus building effort, ESCWA has promoted thematic debate through its subsidiary body structure. Whether on statistics, gender, social development, trade and transport, water or energy, ESCWA has played a catalytic role by bringing government officials together to exchange experiences and to discuss relevant technical issues, challenges and policy options. Most member States interviewed (16 of 22) and all six partners from the League of Arab States confirmed that they valued ESCWA’s thematic consensus building work. Direct observation of recent meetings of the Trade and Transport Committees illustrated ESCWA’s effective facilitation of thematic decision-making through its presentation of supporting analyses and technical papers that guided debate and informed member State decisions. For example, government officials from two

¹⁸ There are no quantitative targets for number of resolutions against which to compare this number.

member States interviewed noted that improvements in road safety in the region had been due in part to the road safety measures discussed and adopted by the Transport Committee.

28. Through its subsidiary structure of thematic committees, ESCWA has facilitated consensus in eight specific thematic clusters over the past three biennia, shown in Figure C. For the three sectoral areas with specific performance measures - water, energy and women - the number of decisions taken exceeded the target. In total ESCWA's subsidiary bodies have taken some 458 decisions over this time period.

Figure C: Thematic decisions by subsidiary bodies facilitated by ESCWA, 2010-2014



Source: Subsidiary body ESCWA reports

B. ESCWA has addressed the main priorities of its member States, but lacks a systematic approach to fully address newly emerging issues in the region

ESCWA's overall work programme responds to priorities as approved within its intergovernmental structure

29. Through the subsidiary thematic bodies highlighted above, technical counterparts in government ministries, in consultation with ESCWA, have consistently decided upon ESCWA's proposed programme of work and a set of priorities for each thematic area. A review of the most recent deliberations of the subsidiary bodies shows that government officials have highlighted certain thematic areas and priorities within ESCWA's mandate.

30. On average, 11 member States have participated in the seven thematic committee discussions over the past five years, indicating fairly active participation of member States in the establishment of ESCWA's priorities. A survey of the subsidiary committee deliberations conducted by ESCWA after each committee session from 2012 to 2015 showed that 75 per cent of government officials participating in the committee meetings were largely satisfied with the discussions and relevance of the topics presented to them by ESCWA. These sessions included discussions on: trade and transport; water management and energy issues; social development; gender; and statistics. The Commission subsequently endorsed all of the

thematic priorities recommended in the committees. Table 4 shows that member States have approved programmes of work for all subprogrammes through their subsidiary bodies over the past three biennia and indicates a good number of member State participation in the process.

Table 4: ESCWA Member State participation in approval of thematic work programmes across subsidiary bodies, 2010-2014

Biennium	2010-2011	2012-2013	2014-2015	
Subsidiary body	# of MS	# of MS	# of MS	Thematic areas covered
Statistical Committee	12	10	10	Multidimensional measurement of poverty; measurement of social justice; economic, social and environmental statistics; national accounts, SDGs; International Comparison Parity Prices.
Committee on Social Development	11	10	13	Social justice and equity; civil society and citizen participation; demographic shifting; youth; migration; aging; employment and labor market; social cohesion; inclusive development; poverty; disability.
Committee on Energy	14	11	12	Sustainable energy; natural resources management; energy efficiency; renewable energy; energy-food-water nexus.
Committee on Water Resources	11	13	13	Integrated management of Water Resources, RICCAAR; sustainable development; water management; water and sustainability; food security.
Committee on Transport	12	12	11	Transport and trade facilitation; International railways; transport logistics and efficient trade costs; infrastructure efficiency; road safety, integrated transport systems; sustainable transport.
Committee on liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization	11	17	14	Private and public partnerships; trade policies; foreign trade; trade negotiations; economic globalization; financing for development.
Committee on Women	12	13	14	Gender mainstreaming; gender violence; women's rights.

Source: last three sessions of each of the thematic subsidiary bodies.

In contrast to its regular approved work programme, emerging strategic issues have been addressed less systematically

31. ESCWA has received a number of requests to address emerging issues that were not initially planned in its programme of work. Due to their unanticipated nature, ESCWA has identified them in an ad hoc manner. There have been programmatic and financial challenges to this approach, such as exploring further opportunities for replicability, identifying the resources to deliver the support being requested, and fitting the additional activities into an already approved work programme. Despite these challenges, ESCWA has been able to address some significant recent developments in the region through this demand driven approach. For example, ESCWA:

- Supported analysis for and organization of high-level meetings to promote dialogue and discussion on issues stemming from the Arab Spring.¹⁹

¹⁹ E/ESCWA/EDGD/2013/WG.1/Report.

- Facilitated analysis of the implications of conflict on the macro-economy and Millennium Development Goals in Syria and preparation of a needs assessment report and facilitation of discussion on the National Development Agenda for the Future of Syria.
- Initiated work to facilitate discussions in Yemen with regard to its current conflict and to articulate reforms needed to move towards recovery and a sustainable development agenda for the future.
- Supported requests for assistance on national development planning and monitoring of indicators in Saudi Arabia.
- Assisted in development of a preliminary vision and strengthening of Lebanon's national development planning capacities and initiated similar support to Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates on this topic.

32. To respond to newly emerging strategic issues and requests such as those discussed above, ESCWA has been hampered by the lack of a more strategic and systematic approach for discussing and following up to such demands for its support. Despite the critical importance of some new issues ESCWA faces, such as national development planning, and although meetings of the Executive Committee do include discussions on regional and global priorities, ESCWA has lacked a more dedicated approach for regular consultation and dialogue with member States around these issues, especially on issues that have regional relevance. Most of ESCWA's senior leadership interviewed at the D1 level and above noted that one of their major challenges is their limited flexibility in responding to new member State demands and requests, especially in the context of a dynamic and rapidly changing regional environment. They noted that ESCWA's programme of work has to be proposed and discussed almost four years in advance, leaving little room for responding to newly emerging priorities and requirements and no opportunity for continuous discussion and consultation with member States to decide on strategic options that might require more immediate attention and follow-up. In the absence of a more strategic and systematic approach for discussing and responding to unforeseen demands, ESCWA has not been able to maximize the value that it can provide to the region and leverage its unique regional mandate.

33. Member States have acknowledged this need, particularly within crisis situations. It was recognized by the Commission through the upgrading of an Emerging and Conflict related Issues Division (ECRI) and also with the establishment of a subsidiary committee on emerging issues and development under crisis through Resolution 292(XXVI) and 296 (XXVI). However, since that resolution, member States decided that the work done by ECRI on emerging and conflict-related issues was sufficient and therefore eliminated the need to establish this specialized intergovernmental committee. However, not all emerging issues are related to conflict, and most emerging issues are addressed in an interdisciplinary manner through cross-cutting task forces and mostly supported by other budget sources such as the Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation or the Development Account. In this regard, the establishment of ECRI has not fully addressed the need to establish a more regular approach for consultation with member States on newly emerging issues of potential relevance to the entire region.

C. ESCWA's research and analysis have not been fully utilized to increase knowledge on critical development issues

Knowledge generation and promotion - a key component of ESCWA's mandate - has been hindered by deficient dissemination practices and feedback mechanisms

34. One of ESCWA's main objectives is to provide "a home for expertise and knowledge" on social and economic development issues facing the region. Accordingly, a significant amount of human and financial resources are dedicated to its research and analysis activities that generate knowledge, primarily through its publications programme. For 2014-2015, over 72 per cent of ESCWA's outputs were recurrent and non-recurrent publications, technical material and related expert group meetings.²⁰ Similarly, nearly 75 per cent of the organization's total staff work months were dedicated to producing knowledge²¹.

35. Dissemination practices for ESCWA's publications have not been as effective as they could be due to the lack of a planning and outreach strategy for targeting readers. An analysis of ESCWA publication concept notes²² produced in 2013-2014 showed that explicit dissemination goals are not required and do not exist for most of ESCWA's knowledge products. Distribution of these products has not been strategic and data on actual report distribution is inconsistent; rather, dissemination lists have been managed by each individual division and have varied in size and content. Therefore, the total targeted volume and type of readers intended for each product is unknown across the organization. On a more ad hoc basis, some publications, such as the *Arab Governance* and *Arab Women and Access to Justice* reports, have been presented in expert group meetings as a forum for dissemination and raising awareness. However, this practice is not systematic and there is insufficient data to determine its effectiveness in enhancing utility. In prior years, ESCWA had developed a readership survey for users to provide feedback for publications both electronically and in print, but it is no longer used and no data were available from previous surveys.

36. Staff and external stakeholders interviewed have mixed views regarding awareness of ESCWA publications. One-third of external stakeholders interviewed stated they were unfamiliar with ESCWA's publications. Just over half of staff survey respondents (57 per cent) stated that ESCWA was effective with regard to promoting awareness of important national development issues through its research and analysis work, while 27 per cent were neutral and the remaining 13 per cent rated ESCWA ineffective in this regard.

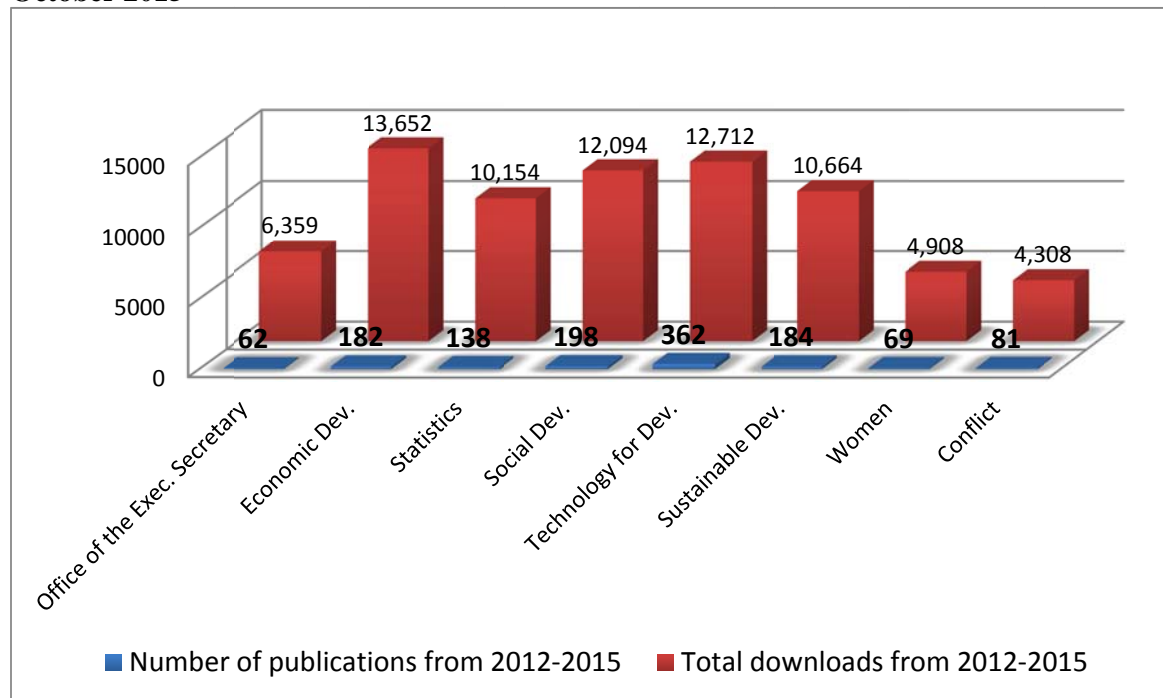
37. While only a proxy measure of use, particularly in a region where internet access may limit digital availability of publications, download data, presented in Figure D, give little clarity on the extent to which knowledge produced by ESCWA is used by its intended beneficiaries. In 2014, the most downloaded publication was its main flagship document – the *Arab Integration Report* – and it received 1,433 downloads. Other 2014 flagship reports such as the *Arab Millennium Development Goals*, *An Arab Perspective on the Post 2015 Agenda Report*, and *Summary of the Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region* received only approximately 300 downloads each, suggesting that more can be done to maximize utility of these key publications. Moreover, from 2012, 51 percent of all ESCWA knowledge products downloaded had no more than ten downloads, including 97 of which had registered only one download.

²⁰ The remaining 28 per cent are dedicated to capacity building and advisory services.

²¹ The remaining 25 per cent relate to advisory services and capacity building.

²² Publication concept notes are outlines approved by the publications committee.

Figure D: ESCWA publications and downloads by subprogramme, 1 January 2012 to October 2015



38. As shown in Table 6, ESCWA has been less active on leveraging social media outlets, such as Facebook and Twitter, to increase its visibility and achieve greater awareness of its work when compared to other regional organizations in this regard. ESCWA does not have specific strategies, targets, or benchmarks for social media outlets and programme managers rarely use this data to inform publication outreach and dissemination strategies.

Table 6: Media outlet data, as at January 7th 2015

Organization	Facebook Likes	Tweets	Twitter Followers
ESCWA	5,111	1,388	700
World Bank – Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region	1,044,334	7,247	7,936
League of Arab States	6,266	3,218	1,246

Discussions are ongoing to improve ESCWA’s publications programme, but this reform is not fully implemented

39. ESCWA’s Publications Committee is currently reviewing ESCWA’s overall publications programme and processes in order to reform the publications programme. Part of the reform initiative has involved the development of the following recommendations, none of which have been fully implemented:

- approve the suggested list of readership indicators;

- undertake external review of publications;
- implement a communication plan;
- revamp the website to a portal associated with Google scholar;
- e-publish in different formats;
- have clear strategy to add publications to social websites; and
- add ESCWA bulletins to Arab development journals and citation databases.

40. While these internal efforts intend to improve the publications programme, and initiatives have also been planned to address issues such as publication quality and internal coordination, the ongoing reform has not fully addressed the lack of any dissemination strategy and user feedback mechanisms. It is also unclear if the reform effort will involve consultation with targeted users such as member States, academia, civil society and other stakeholders for a more comprehensive reform.

D. While ESCWA’s advisory services have been generally well received, their influence on policy in the region has not been widespread

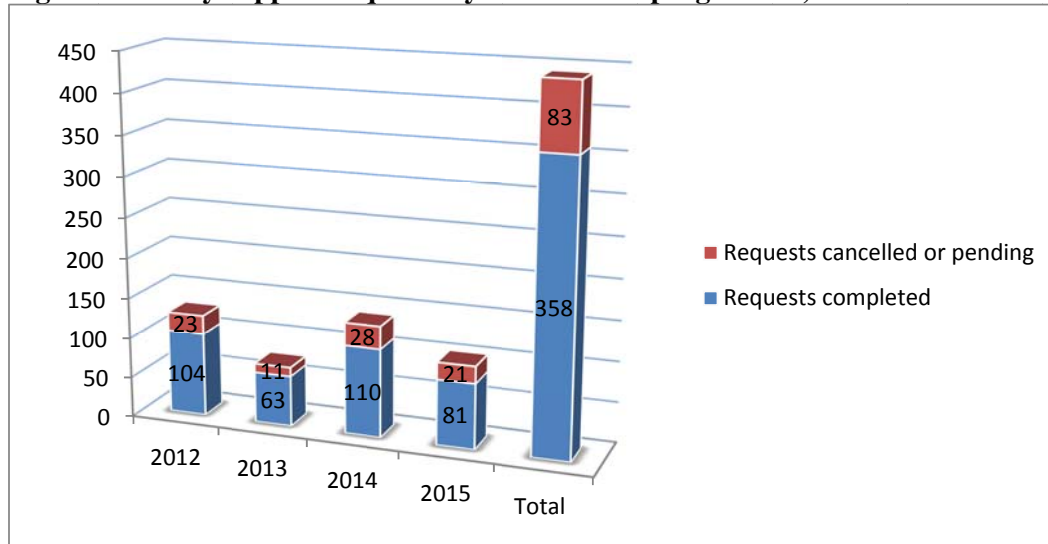
ESCWA’s advisory services have been acknowledged as high quality

41. ESCWA’s advisory services accounted for 33 per cent of its expected results and related indicators of achievement in the 2014-2015 biennium. Over the last three years, all acknowledgement letters ESCWA received for its advisory services (20 in total) from 6 countries and one regional organization highlighted appreciation for their work, with half specifically mentioning appreciation for advisory support on policy advice. In these letters, member States referred to specific examples of helpful policy advice in areas such as multidimensional poverty indexing, national development planning, gender mainstreaming, social protection, national accounts, information and communication technology strategies and the green economy. All five respondents to an ESCWA member State survey to assess its advisory services indicated that a high quality of service had been delivered.

42. Currently, requests for advisory services for policy support are primarily demand driven. During 2012-2015, there were 441 total requests made for advisory services from member States, shown in Figure E. Of the total 441 requests, more than half (241 of 446)²³ were made for policy advice and support, with the highest number occurring in the areas of economic development, technology and innovation and statistics. Seventeen per cent of those were not carried out due to transfer to another United Nations entity or postponement to 2016 or because of security concerns, non-issuance of visas or insufficient recipient follow-up.

²³ The remaining 215 requests were for capacity building or research.

Figure E: Policy support requests by ESCWA subprogramme, 2012-2015



Source: ESCWA programme data

While ESCWA has contributed to some policies in the region, this influence has not been extensive

43. From 2014 to 2015, ESCWA contributed to actual draft legislations and policies across various sectors in 13 countries, shown in Table 7, primarily through advisory services. As two examples, ESCWA provided technical advice and facilitated the creation of a water management system and strategy and developed, in collaboration with national counterparts, a national development plan, which included goals, indicators and a monitoring system (dashboard) to track those goals and indicators.

Table 7: ESCWA contributions to member State policies, 2014-2015

Country	Subprogramme	Policy area
Palestine	Sustainable development	Water policy
	Social development	Gender sensitivity
UAE		Youth policy
Sudan		Integrated social policies
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	Economic development	National development planning
Lebanon		Macroeconomic policy
Jordan and Egypt		Public-private partnership
Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Bahrain	Technology for Development	E-commerce legislation
Egypt		Communication technology policies
Saudi Arabia	Statistics	National accounts
Yemen	Women	Gender equality
Iraq		Gender based violence
Yemen	Conflict	National dialogue

Source: Programme Performance Report, Technical Cooperation Report, interviews and case studies

44. Despite the examples of policy influence in Table 7, however, ESCWA staff and member States provided mixed assessments on ESCWA's policy influence in the region. None of the five member State survey respondents rated ESCWA effective in supporting policy formulation, stating they did not know if ESCWA had been successful in that regard. Government officials interviewed from four member States stated that they could see no influence of ESCWA's work on policy formulation in the region. A majority of ESCWA staff (59 per cent) rated its policy influence more positively, though the remaining 41 per cent did not have a positive view and noted that more could be done to maximize ESCWA's policy influence in the region.

45. External stakeholders cited a lack of awareness about ESCWA's advisory services as a challenge that limited policy influence. Four senior government officials from two member States visited on mission expressed that they would like to have technical advisory services from ESCWA, including advice on statistics, gender mainstreaming, and water management, but did not know how to obtain them.

ESCWA has contributed to building member State capacity, but the links between capacity building and policy changes are unclear

46. ESCWA has made some positive contributions to building the capacity of its member States. In the 2010-2015 biennium, ESCWA successfully delivered on all expected accomplishments related to capacity building through sixty-nine workshops. Some external stakeholders interviewed cited successful examples of ESCWA's capacity building activities and stated that these had increased skills and knowledge of technical officers in national governments: examples included training in climate change, economic development, national accounts, information technology, disability, violence against women, and road safety. Most staff survey respondents (73 per cent) believed that ESCWA's technical assistance had contributed to helping member States in the region better respond to their own economic and social development policy needs.

47. Despite the assumption that better capacity leads to better policy formulation, however, ESCWA has been unable to clearly demonstrate this link. There were at least five instances of reported results related to policy influence across subprogrammes in ESCWA's 2014-2015 programme performance report (PPR) that showed an unclear connection between its capacity building activities and policy influence in the region. The example shown in Table 8 below, from ESCWA's 2014-2015 PPR illustrates this weak connection, lack of specificity of actual policies influenced and lack of systematic reporting on the contributions to actual policies and strategies developed. Whereas the indicator of achievement refers to the number of policies, plans and strategies adopted, the actual results reported refer to training and capacity building but do not address the actual number of policies adopted.

Table 8: Example of ESCWA programme performance reporting demonstrating an inadequate connection between capacity building and policy influence

Expected accomplishment: *Enhanced capacities of member countries to develop and implement national, sub regional and regional policies, strategies and action plans for the sustainable management of water, energy and land*

Indicator of achievement. *Increased number of policies, plans and strategies adopted by relevant ministries in member countries addressing water, energy and land needs*

Result: *Through ESCWA's capacity building support on Enhancing Financial Mechanisms for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Projects, Yemeni officials were trained on appropriate mechanisms to promote investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency projects, and thus they were enabled through ESCWA's support to adopt a strategy on financing renewable energy systems and expressed willingness to do so in the future. As such, ESCWA's support contributed to increasing the indicator b (I) by one strategy*

Source: Partial PPR entries as reported by end of January 2016

E. ESCWA has not adequately linked its three core functions to support policy formulation

48. The links and complementarities between ESCWA's three core functions - consensus building, research and analysis, and advisory services – which should work together to support ESCWA's objectives, are difficult to discern. While ESCWA's support to policy formulation is one of its key cross-cutting goals, the three core functions, while individually important, are not sufficiently integrated to reach that goal.²⁴ First, the knowledge that is generated through its research and analysis is not sufficiently disseminated and promoted so

²⁴ A/69/6 (Prog. 19).

that it can increase awareness and be used to better inform member State decision-making. Second, there is no clear strategy to guide its advisory services to effectively respond to and facilitate the implementation of decisions and agreements reached through its consensus building and intergovernmental processes. Third, there is inconsistent follow-up after advisory services are rendered to integrate any new knowledge gained into ESCWA's research and analysis and consensus building functions.

49. Resources specifically devoted to regional expertise in ESCWA are rather limited; it currently has six regional advisors. These advisors have not been able to consistently attend the meetings of the subsidiary bodies in order to better tailor technical support to the issues emanating from them. While ESCWA's research and analysis outputs are often produced without the full benefit of the experience and knowledge obtained by the advisors when working with member States, regular staff are also increasingly delivering technical assistance.

50. As mentioned in para 48, ESCWA's consensus building, research and analysis and advisory service core functions are not fully integrated to support its overall mandate; however, it is currently taking steps to strengthen those linkages. This is primarily through a reconceptualization of its work programme to align itself with the three strategic pillars of inclusive development, regional integration, and good governance and resilience. In doing this, it is also attempting to address the challenge of divisional siloes and promote interdivisional collaboration. While this focus on three pillars attempts to support cross-functional complementarity, it also adds an additional layer of coordination to ESCWA's work. This reconceptualization is also being implemented in the context of the SDGs, and as such, it is still evolving.

F. ESCWA has taken preliminary steps to respond to member States' demand for follow-up and support on the implementation of the SDGs

ESCWA played a key role in facilitating a regional position on the SDGs

51. As noted previously, ESCWA played a significant role in facilitating the process of regional consultation, prioritization and consensus building that ensued prior to global negotiations on the SDGs. Following the initial support to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), ESCWA launched the Arab High-Level Forum on Sustainable Development in 2014. This provided a platform for discussing regional sustainable development priorities which informed and shaped the Ministerial Declarations and positions on the Post 2015 development agenda. At the same time, ESCWA also initiated discussions with member States through the subsidiary committees, as well as with other United Nations organizations, on the steps needed to ensure the implementation and follow up to the SDGs. During the last meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism, it was agreed that ESCWA would chair the Thematic Working Group on the SDGs at the level of United Nations Regional Directors, which took place in November 2015, as well as the Task force on Statistics for SDGs²⁵.

Member States have expressed an increased demand for regional coordination and support for implementation, monitoring and reporting on SDG progress

²⁵ E/ESCWA/OES/2013/RCM.19.

52. With approval of the 2030 development agenda, member States have been engaged in identifying effective ways to integrate and adapt their institutional structures, align their plans and strengthen their capacities to roll out implementation and monitoring of the agenda. On mission, eight government officials (4 countries) indicated that they were particularly interested in receiving further assistance in sectoral areas such as planning, statistics, social development, water and transport. It is clear that in this regard, ESCWA can provide relevant expertise and support on critical thematic areas that are at the core of the SDGs. While technical ministries have not received any specific communication from ESCWA's technical counterparts, last November ESCWA presented the Executive Committee with a strategy and plan of action²⁶ which lays out approaches, priorities and details on how it intends to support countries in their implementation of the SDGs. This was endorsed by ESCWA's Executive Committee in December 2015. Moving forward, this strategy will need to be translated into concrete action plans which provide options to support of member States with their planning and implementation needs.

V. Conclusion

53. Despite working in a complex environment with political and security constraints, ESCWA has been able to play an important catalytic role in sparking dialogue and debate on the critical issues facing its member States. It has facilitated consensus on important areas, such as governance, gender and social justice, which have advanced progress in the region and set the stage for continuing growth and development. Its particular comparative advantage of providing a neutral, strategic and evidence-based platform for reflecting and deciding upon often challenging topics has been well utilized in facilitating the adoption of decisions and agreements that unify the region towards a common goal of sustainable development.

54. In the context of the adoption of the 2030 development agenda, ESCWA will be called upon to play a central role in supporting member States in their efforts to implement and monitor the SDGs. Its regional mandate and technical expertise are well aligned with the key needs of its member States for support. Whether it be adapting national development plans, strengthening national statistics capacities, promoting social development or trade issues, or championing regional cooperation, ESCWA is well positioned to provide the type of assistance its member States will need to be successful in transitioning from conflict and unrest to political, economic and social stability.

55. In its efforts to accompany the region in this transition, ESCWA needs to strengthen its role as a think tank, regional forum and advisor. It will essentially need to strengthen its overall work programme, moving further away from subprogramme silos and closer to a more integrated approach that effectively links its three core functions. While these three functions are important inputs for policy formulation, it takes more to influence policy. ESCWA will need to provide a full range of policy tools and options and help to build policy networks to strengthen regional institutional frameworks for policy making. Given its resource constraints, ESCWA will also need to better leverage partnerships with other United Nations entities, as well as civil society, for a more comprehensive strategy for supporting its member States. Its ability to ensure that information is exchanged and lessons are learned will also be critical to optimizing ESCWA's role in this regard.

²⁶ E/ESCWA/2015/EC.2/4(Part1).

56. ESCWA's SDG strategy and action plan are positive steps in the right direction towards being responsive to its member State needs for support in implementing the SDGs. The 2030 development agenda offers a critical opportunity for ESCWA to reflect on its achievements, identify gaps where it can improve its performance, and strengthen its capacity to bridge global and national priorities through its unique regional role, expertise and perspective.

VI. Recommendations

57. OIOS makes five important recommendations to ESCWA as follows:

Recommendation 1 (Result B)

58. **ESCWA should strengthen its capacity to address newly emerging priority issues in the region and unplanned requests for support by creating a means for more regular and systematic dialogue and consultation with member States**, including through the Executive Committee.

Indicator of achievement: Discussion of emerging issues at sessions of the Executive Committee or other intergovernmental body.

Recommendation 2 (Result C)

59. **ESCWA should implementing the recommendations of its current publication reform and further strengthen the utility of its publications by developing and implementing a comprehensive publication strategy** that includes guidelines on dissemination, communication and advocacy as well as performance indicators and feedback mechanisms to regularly track progress, including targets on clientele and distribution.

Indicator of achievement: Recommendations from reform implemented and publication strategy document with target dates for implementation of each component.

Recommendation 3 (Result D)

60. **ESCWA should strengthen its methodologies for collecting, analysing and reporting on programme performance data** in order to better address the longer term outcomes of its three core functions, and to more effectively demonstrate the linkage between them.

Indicator of achievement: Enhanced programme performance system with clear methodologies and data collection tools.

Recommendation 4 (Result E)

61. **ESCWA should develop a detailed strategy and action plan for strengthening the linkages between its three core functions of consensus building, research and analysis, advisory services.** The action plan should clearly define activities, time frames, authority and accountability for the steps to be taken to enhance these linkages. This plan should be developed with consideration given to the already developed ESCWA strategy on the SDGs.

Indicator of achievement: Action plan with follow-up mechanism for all functional areas.

Recommendation 5 (Result F)

62. **ESCWA should further enhance its capacity to implement the SDG strategy by proposing options to increase the support provided to member States on mainstreaming, implementing and monitoring the 2030 global development agenda in national development planning processes.** In implementing this recommendation, consideration should be given to establishing dedicated capacity and resources for supporting the SDGs.

Indicator of achievement: Options on strengthening member State capacity to implement the SDGs at the regional and national level, including through national development plans.

Annex 1

In this Annex, OIOS presents below the full text of comments received from ESCWA on the evaluation of the Office of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. This practice has been instituted in line with general Assembly resolution 64/263, following the recommendation of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee.

Comments from ESCWA

Executive Secretary's comments on the evaluation of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) thanks the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) for the opportunity to provide comments on the report of the above-referenced evaluation. ESCWA recognizes the importance of this evaluation and extends its appreciation to OIOS for its detailed findings and recommendations.

ESCWA welcomes the report's recognition of the key strengths and challenges faced by the institution. Among the key strengths that the report cites are: ESCWA's strategic efforts in facilitating regional consensus and initiating debate on global and regional priority issues; ESCWA's substantive engagement on issues of regional concern, in particular for countries in transition; and ESCWA's active engagement with member States regarding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and support to member States' work on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

ESCWA has reviewed the report carefully and welcomes its findings and recommendations, which encourage greater performance monitoring and reporting for long-term results, along with the implementation of a comprehensive publications strategy, and the expansion of its strategic partnerships. Towards this end, ESCWA is preparing a detailed action plan, both building on work already underway, as well as forming task teams reporting to Senior Management to draft additional actions plans and standard operating procedures in response to these recommendations.

ESCWA is in agreement with the recommendations in the report, and would like to add the following observations:

Recommendation 1

The Arab region has faced a growing number of emerging issues in recent years, including but not limited to conflict and instability, forced migration, rising poverty and inequality, environmental degradation, and unemployment (especially among youth and women). ESCWA agrees with this recommendation and is committed to facilitating ongoing dialogue and consultations on these and other new and emerging priority issues with all its member States through its intergovernmental bodies, including its Executive Committee, its multi-stakeholder fora, and other regional platforms.

Recommendation 2

As a normative organisation dedicated to regional knowledge production, ESCWA considers its publications to be the cornerstone of its work. ESCWA is in agreement with this recommendation, and has already begun embarking upon the development of a publication strategy and plan of action.

Recommendation 3

ESCWA agrees with the recommendation, particularly on the importance of capturing and reporting on the longer-term results of its normative work. In that regard, ESCWA has revised the scope of work of its monitoring function and is actively reviewing options to adopt the best-suited programme performance system that meets the needs of the Commission.

Recommendation 4

ESCWA views its three core functions of consensus building, research and analysis, and advisory services as mutually reinforcing and integral to the delivery of its mandate. ESCWA agrees with the recommendation and will be acting accordingly in its planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities, building on the efforts already acknowledged in the evaluation report to further strengthen the linkages between its three core functions.

Recommendation 5

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are integral to the Arab region's development and to ESCWA's mandate, and ESCWA fully agrees with this recommendation. ESCWA has assigned dedicated staff to support regional and national efforts on the 2030 Agenda, and will continue to expand upon its provision of unique services related to the achievement of the SDGs.

In conclusion, ESCWA would like to thank OIOS for this comprehensive evaluation report. As it reflects on strategies and modalities to further sharpen its outputs and services, ESCWA will benefit from the findings and recommendations presented in the report. ESCWA will continue to ensure that our three core functions are mutually reinforcing and that they capitalize on our strategic value in support of member States in the achievement of the goals of the new sustainable development agenda.