

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL  
COUNCIL**

Distr.  
LIMITED  
E/ESCWA/C.1/2024/7  
29 August 2024  
ENGLISH  
ORIGINAL: ARABIC

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Statistical Committee  
Sixteenth session  
Manama, 22–23 October 2024

Item 8 of the provisional agenda

**Empowering national statistical systems to bridge gaps  
in SDG indicator data****Summary**

Data gaps are not only limited to data loss or inadequacy, but are also related to disparities in data availability, leading to incomplete analysis and incorrect conclusions owing to a lack of statistical knowledge. Despite improved data production to monitor progress in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), significant gaps remain in the databases of some SDGs. While Arab countries show disparities in SDG implementation, they have all made insufficient progress in this regard.

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) supports the establishment of statistical systems capable of producing data to report on indicators, through its collaboration with the national statistical offices of member States and its partnerships with other actors at various levels. There is still an opportunity to improve data availability and reporting on indicators to achieve the SDGs, using the best tools and methodologies that take into account national contexts and development priorities. This will help to develop a common framework that captures the minimum SDG indicators in Arab countries.

The present document reviews data availability in Arab countries, and provides recommendations to improve it. The Statistical Committee is invited to take note of the present document, and to comment on the recommendations therein.

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## Introduction

1. Data gaps arise when countries do not produce enough data to report on progress towards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Groups that are most likely to be left behind or to be inadequately represented are usually those most affected by data gaps. These include women and girls, people living in fragile contexts, persons with disabilities, refugee and displaced populations, and other marginalized groups. Therefore, data and statistics should be provided in a disaggregated and accurate manner to understand the circumstances of different groups and address important issues, such as poverty, health, education, employment and many other issues facing all segments of society in various geographical regions.
2. It is necessary to explore data gaps in their broad sense and manifestations, which include not only data loss or inadequacy, but also disparities in data availability, leading to incomplete or unbalanced analysis, inadequate interpretation of data and incorrect conclusions owing to a lack of statistical knowledge. To identify data gaps, there is a need to cover all relevant thematic aspects, assess the accuracy of data, and update them within a timeframe appropriate to the nature of short- or medium-term indicators.
3. Whatever the form of data inadequacy and gaps, the result is an absence or insufficiency of data to make informed decisions and understand some issues in a holistic manner. In other words, there is a lack of basic inputs that affects data functionality.
4. The present document examines gaps in data needed for monitoring progress towards SDG implementation in the Arab region, and provides recommendations on potential ways to close these gaps and produce more disaggregated data to achieve the principle of leaving no one behind.

### I. Data on sustainable development indicators in the Arab region

5. Since the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was launched in 2015, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has strived to support the establishment of statistical systems capable of producing data to report on SDG indicators, through its collaboration with the national statistical offices of member States and its partnerships with other actors at various levels.
6. Despite improvements in recent years in producing a significant amount of disaggregated data at broader levels to monitor progress in the implementation of the SDGs, significant gaps remain in the databases of some SDGs, particularly those related to nature and the environment, gender equality, and peace and prosperity, with some disparities between Arab countries. When evaluating available data, it is clear that the Arab region is far from achieving the 2030 Agenda, which needs an estimated additional period of 60 years to be met at the current pace. With less than half of the period remaining until 2030, Arab countries must take serious actions to build resilience to growing challenges.<sup>1</sup> The development of national statistical strategies to bridge gaps in data that are critical for effective monitoring should be at the forefront of such actions, so as to enhance the implementation of the SDGs.
7. The Arab region is not the only region globally that is facing a lack of data and a gap in sustainable development data. For example, countries in Africa and Asia have data available to monitor only 20 per cent of SDG indicators, on average. In addition, only 35 per cent of sub-Saharan African countries have collected data on poverty since 2015. Policymakers are struggling to accurately track some 25.4 million refugees

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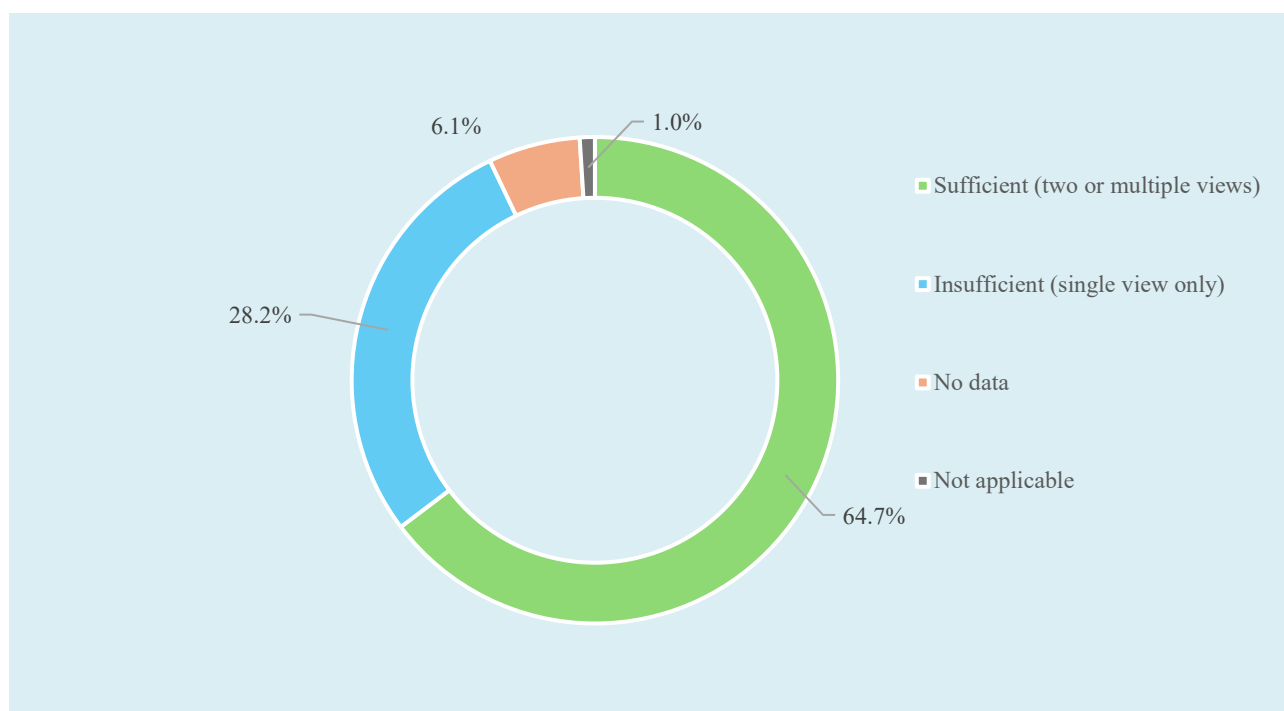
<sup>1</sup> E/ESCWA/CL4.SIT/2024/TP.1.

worldwide, on whom national statistics lack data.<sup>2</sup> All countries of different income levels face a lack of data, which hinders progress towards SDG implementation.

**Data availability in Arab countries**

8. The available databases on the 248 sustainable development indicators reflect a not too bleak picture of the Arab region. One indicator lacks data out of 10 indicators, indicating a high possibility of closing the data gap. The data available for almost a quarter of indicators (28 per cent) are insufficient, meaning that available data are limited to a single observation. In contrast, almost two thirds (65 per cent) of indicators have enough data, meaning that available data allow for two or more observations. These data provide space for action to improve data availability and accelerate work in that direction, using the best tools and methodologies that take into account national contexts and development priorities (figure 1).

**Figure 1. Availability of data on sustainable development indicators in Arab countries, 2024 (Percentage)**

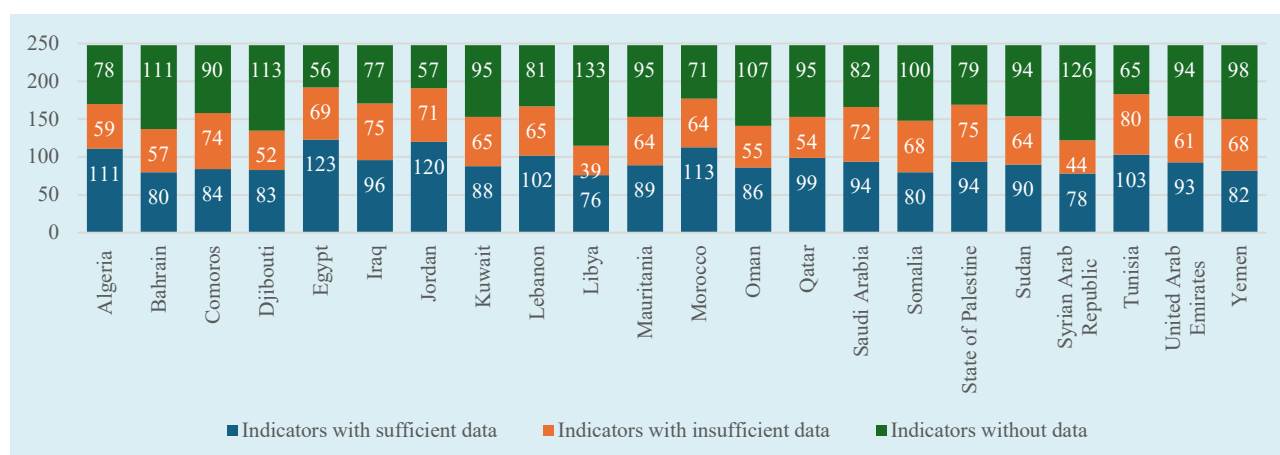


Source: ESCWA calculations.

9. At the country level, figure 2 shows that Egypt has recorded the highest number of indicators for which sufficient data are available, totalling 123 indicators, in addition to 56 indicators for which data are not available, and 69 indicators for which available data are insufficient. In contrast, Libya has recorded the lowest number of indicators with sufficient data at 76 indicators, compared with 133 indicators for which data are not available, and 39 indicators for which available data are insufficient.

<sup>2</sup> Thematic Research Network on Data and Statistics, [Counting on the World to Act: A Roadmap for Governments to Achieve Modern Data Systems for Sustainable Development](#), 2019, p. 7.

**Figure 2. Availability of data on sustainable development indicators in the Arab region by country, 2024**



Source: ESCWA calculations.

10. The size of the data gap in different countries is illustrated by the number of indicators for which data are not available, or for which the available data are insufficient (figure 2). This information can be used to identify the data gap and provide a more disaggregated analysis of its areas. For this purpose, the present document provides charts illustrating selected SDGs.

11. The database of indicators for SDG 1 on no poverty shows that the achievement rate ranges from 5 per cent (in the Syrian Arab Republic) to 67 per cent (in the United Arab Emirates). Sufficient data are available for two to seven indicators for this Goal (out of 12 indicators), as is the case for Algeria, Egypt and Jordan. Countries with high poverty rates are the ones most in need of monitoring and disaggregating SDG 1 indicators to develop more successful anti-poverty policies (figure 3 (a)).

12. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have the highest achievement rate for SDG 3 on good health and well-being (69 per cent), while Djibouti has the lowest at 19 per cent. Data are available for 12 of the 27 indicators for this Goal, as is the case in Algeria, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, compared with data covering only seven indicators for the State of Palestine.

13. For SDG 4 on quality education, the highest number of indicators for which data are available is in Egypt, namely 8 of 11 indicators, compared with data available for only one indicator in a number of countries. Qatar has recorded the highest achievement rate for this Goal at 77 per cent, compared with a 20 per cent decline in Somalia.

14. Regarding progress in achieving SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, Oman scored the highest number of indicators for which sufficient data were available, namely 6 of 23 indicators for this Goal, compared with two indicators in Djibouti and Mauritania. Somalia recorded the highest decline in achieving this Goal, at 27 per cent.

15. With regard to SDG 17 on partnerships for the Goals, the United Arab Emirates recorded the highest achievement rate of 59 per cent, while Mauritania faced a decline in achievement by about 3 per cent.

16. Most Arab countries have not reached sufficient progress towards the achievement of the six selected SDGs. Many countries are also facing a decline in achieving some SDGs, which indicates that the adopted actions and policies have not responded equally to challenges in these countries. To correct these policies, more data must be available for SDG indicators that reveal a clear gap, as shown in the available databases.

**Figure 3. Rate of progress towards achieving selected SDGs, and availability of data on their indicators**



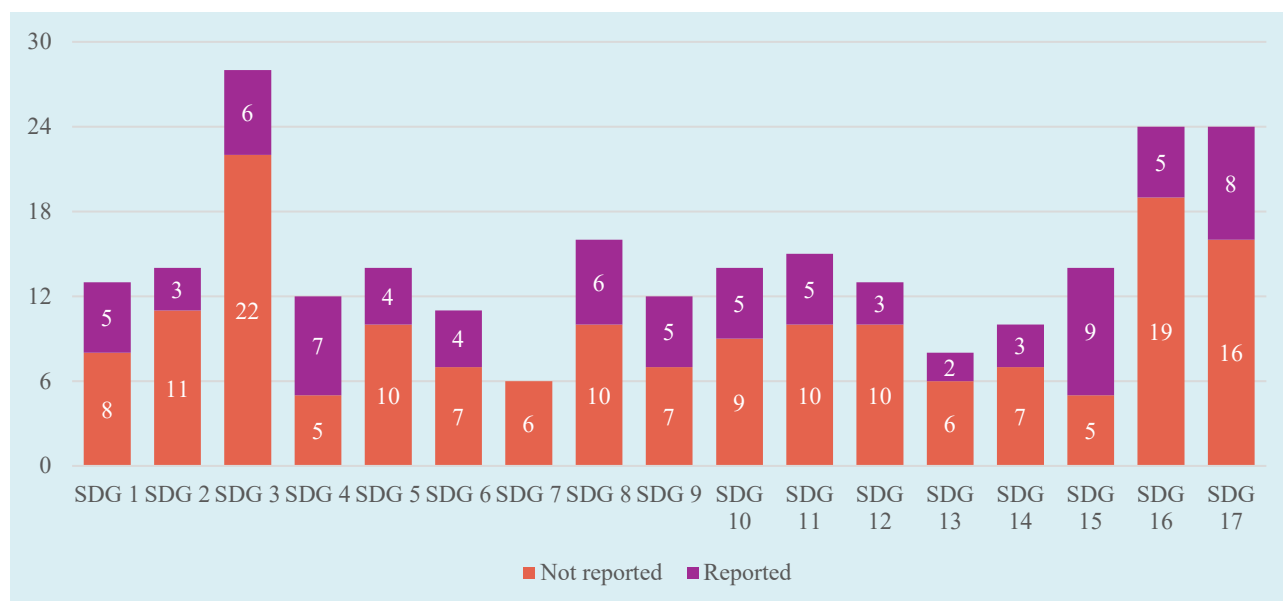
Source: ESCWA calculations.

## II. National reporting on sustainable development indicators in Arab countries

17. The number of nationally reported SDG indicators in Arab countries varies between SDGs, and the reporting of indicator data varies between countries. This does not include indicators whose data are disseminated through other agencies or bodies without coordinating with the State, and with national authorities entitled to monitor progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in their country. For the purposes of the present document and to provide an overview of indicator reporting, an indicator is considered reported if it has national data available in 11 or more Arab countries (at least half of the Arab countries).

18. Available databases indicate that the number of nationally reported indicators did not, at best, exceed one third of the SDG indicators in the Global Indicator Framework. Despite the varying number of indicators reported for each SDG, one third of indicators are reported in most SDGs with some exceptions, such as in SDG 7 on affordable and clean energy that has no indicators reported by a minimum number of Arab countries (figure 4). In contrast, SDG 15 on life on land has the highest proportion of nationally reported indicators, at almost two thirds (9 of 14 indicators). A trade-off between SDGs is not possible because of their complementarity and interlinkage, in particular SDG 17 on strengthening the global partnership, which mobilizes all available resources from the three national sectors (public, private and civil society), the United Nations system and other actors. This Goal is essential for achieving equitable progress for all and increasing support to developing countries. It also plays an equally important role as SDG 16 in achieving all Goals. The reality is that data needed to report on these SDG indicators are lacking, thus delaying the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

**Figure 4. Number of nationally reported indicators in Arab countries, 2019–2024**



Source: ESCWA calculations.

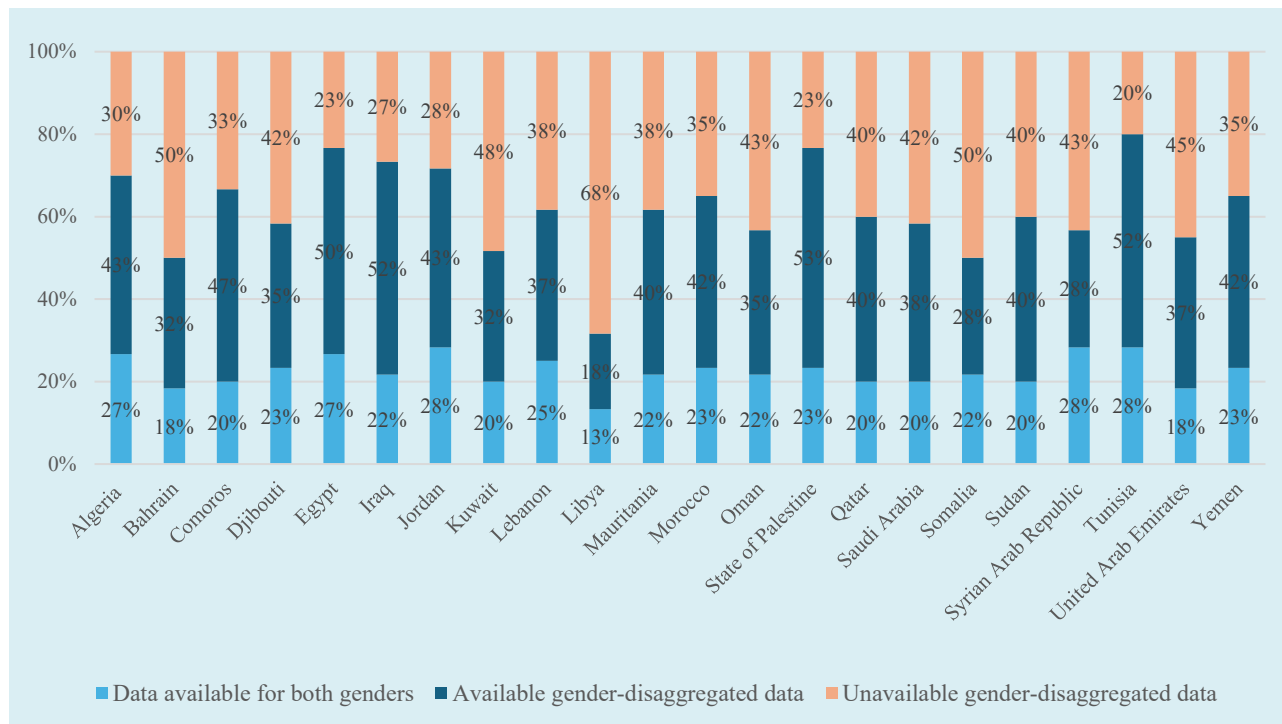
### A. Disaggregated data

19. A distinctive feature of the 2030 Agenda is its emphasis on providing data on all groups to ensure that no one is left behind. The present document includes examples of these groups to provide a snapshot of data gaps, and show the extent to which the most marginalized groups are affected by a lack of disaggregated data.

### 1. Gender-disaggregated data

20. Gender is one of the most prominent classifications for which disaggregated data must be provided. Figure 5 illustrates a lack of data for 60 indicators under which gender-disaggregated data should be provided. Data are available at the indicator level in general but gender-disaggregated data are lacking, which is a clear example of multilevel data gaps. The overall lack of data related to these indicators is approximately 38 per cent. This does not mean that the remaining 62 per cent of indicators have the necessary disaggregated data, as only 39 per cent of this set of indicators are disaggregated by gender.

**Figure 5. Gaps in gender-disaggregated data in the Arab countries, 2024**



Source: ESCWA calculations.

### 2. Disability-disaggregated data

21. The disaggregation of data by disability is another example of multilevel gaps in disaggregated data. Figure 6 shows that data are available for about 60 per cent of the 45 indicators, while disability-disaggregated data are available for less than 2 per cent of these indicators. These facts illustrate a serious lack of data, as shown by the need for disaggregated data for these indicators.

22. Available data indicate the importance of developing means, tools and methodologies to collect data disaggregated by different categories that include, in addition to gender and disability, subnational geographical areas, poverty status, income levels, and age groups. Key methodologies include increasing reliance on administrative record data, maximizing the use of open and big data, expanding representative samples in household surveys that produce sufficient disaggregated data, and collaborating with data providers to secure the largest amount of disaggregated data of all kinds.



**Figure 6. Gaps in disability-disaggregated data in Arab countries, 2024**

Source: ESCWA calculations.

## B. Applicability of indicators

23. In addition to the issue of data availability, it is important to highlight indicators that are underreported or not reported at all, owing to their limited applicability or irrelevance to national contexts in the Arab region. Some indicators must be excluded as they place a burden on national development work. To regulate this exclusion, the Global Indicator Framework should be reviewed, and indicators reclassified based on the development priorities of individual countries. Such a review process would help to focus efforts on priorities, thus targeting indicators that are most relevant to the national context, plans and strategies. This process would also exclude indicators that are not applicable to the national context, thereby reducing the gap in data required for a particular country. The completion of this review is critical, as it accelerates data gap bridging at the national level and at the level of Arab countries.

24. In addition to the importance of data availability to compare between countries at the regional and international levels, some important dimensions need to be taken into account in the restructuring of indicators. These include the relevance of indicators to the global classification of development indicators, and a country's geographical nature, topography and other characteristics. Not all indicators can be considered as relevant to all countries. For example, how can a country measure aspects related to mountains and their impact on ecosystems if it lacks mountains? How can a country allocate resources to monitor social issues that do not fall among its priorities, or that cultural heritage does not prioritize over more important needs? Consequently, the issue of relevance is associated with the national context, the available resources, and the management of the entire development process.

## III. ESCWA strategies of action with member States to bridge gaps in SDG data

25. The following are the main initiatives and strategies undertaken by ESCWA in collaboration with member States to enhance data flows and reduce gaps:

(a) *Building national data partnerships*: supporting national statistical offices in building and developing national partnerships, and collaborating with United Nations agencies that are custodians of indicators in data collection, sharing, dissemination and analysis, by maximizing the benefits of administrative record data, developing tools to collect data from surveys and censuses, and investing in modern technology;

(b) *Modernizing national statistical systems*: establishing guidelines for statistical legislation to support the modernization of statistical systems in accordance with the General Law on Official Statistics, so as to keep pace with new business developments and requirements, such as promoting open data, using data from relevant national institutions, and exchanging data with international agencies in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. In this context, ESCWA has developed the Self-assessment of National Statistical Laws tool, which facilitates the evaluation of current statistical legislation in Arab countries with a view to updating it, so as to ensure that all components of the statistical system are included and managed credibly and responsibly. ESCWA is also organizing consultative meetings with several countries to support their efforts in reviewing statistical laws and drafting new ones;

(c) *Strengthening statistical capacity*: further investing in national statistical offices and data providers to improve their capacity to collect, process, analyse and disseminate SDG data. This also includes providing training and infrastructure development programmes, such as the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (ESCWA SDMX Converter for SDGs) tool developed by ESCWA, upgrading other technologies, and ensuring that national statistical offices have the tools and skills to produce reliable data;

(d) *Enhancing data infrastructure*: developing a robust data infrastructure such as the SDMX tool that supports data interoperability, and facilitates data exchange while maintaining confidentiality and security. This tool can be scaled up and used across various government departments and sectors. Common data standards, protocols and frameworks can also be developed to allow for seamless data exchange. In this context, ESCWA organized a series of training workshops for member States on the SDMX tools for reporting on SDG data, in collaboration with relevant United Nations agencies and other regional organizations;

(e) *Promoting regional cooperation (South-South cooperation)*: encouraging and facilitating regional cooperation to share best practices, resources and experiences; and helping countries that are less developed in their data systems to learn from the experiences of others, and develop successful strategies to bridge data gaps. In this context, ESCWA is organizing South-South cooperation workshops to identify best practices in the collection, dissemination and analysis of SDG indicator data;

(f) *Collaborating at the global level*: ESCWA collaborates with United Nations agencies and other international organizations that are custodians of SDG indicators in promoting statistical capacity-building for indicators that are less widely deployed, do not produce sufficient data, or are not well understood by national statistical offices. ESCWA also organizes webinars to enhance understanding of metadata, improve statistical capacity to stimulate the production, flow and use of comparable SDG indicator data, and enhance institutional coordination;

(g) *Establishing systems for monitoring and evaluating disaggregated data to achieve the principle of leaving no one behind*: developing platforms and tools to produce data disaggregated by disability, age, gender and other categories to provide policymakers with data needed to formulate inclusive policies that leave no one behind;

(h) *Encouraging electronic monitoring of SDG reporting*: ESCWA designed and launched the [Monitoring Application for Reporting on SDGs \(MARS\)](#), a tool that enables countries to manage the flow of national data from the administrative records of ministries and other data providers to the custodian agencies of indicators through national statistical offices. MARS facilitates data reporting at the national and global levels through the digitization of coordination, thereby enhancing accountability and transparency at the level of data-provider institutions. The application also helps to assess the effectiveness of data provision initiatives, and identify areas that require additional focus or resources;

(i) *Developing strategies for survey-based indicators*: advising countries on integrating questions related to survey-based indicators into surveys to enhance data availability;

(j) *Promoting technical cooperation with member States*: responding to short- and medium-term requests for technical cooperation from member States is one of the main areas of the ESCWA technical cooperation programme. ESCWA responds to these requests by harnessing its potential as a house of expertise, stimulating networking, especially South-South cooperation, or securing local or international experts to carry out the required tasks, in an effort to bridge the data gap.

26. In addition, ESCWA undertakes many other activities in the same context, including assisting and encouraging States to participate in international initiatives on bridging data gaps and implement them at the national or regional levels, such as the Data for Now initiative. ESCWA also seeks to achieve continuous coordination with experts of national statistical offices and other stakeholders, so as to contribute to the development of working methodologies and to steer efforts towards a better flow of reliable and comprehensive data on SDG indicators.

#### IV. Recommendations

27. Closing or reducing the gap in SDG indicator data requires a set of strategies and methodological steps to obtain accurate and comprehensive data. The following are some recommendations to that end:

(a) Review and evaluate data collection systems to ensure their continuous improvement, and address any gaps with a view to formulating effective policies and achieving the SDGs more efficiently in the second half of the 2030 Agenda implementation period. It is also recommended to review the priorities of the Global Indicator Framework for the SDGs in coordination with national planning bodies, and to identify indicators that are not relevant to countries or do not fit national contexts according to country priorities. This will result in a common framework that captures the minimum indicators in Arab countries;

(b) Develop and update legal and regulatory frameworks to keep pace with developments and needs, so as to promote and encourage regular and accurate data collection, ensuring transparent access and use of data in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics;

(c) Continue to strengthen institutional capacity, improve technical infrastructure and refine the capacity of staff in government and private institutions to collect and analyse data on sustainable development;

(d) Use diverse data sources and expand the use of new and advanced technology to benefit from the potential of available technologies, such as artificial intelligence, open data, big data, remote sensing technology, satellite data, and official statistics from field surveys and administrative records, so as to obtain a comprehensive and accurate picture for improved data collection;

(e) Strengthen national partnerships with the private sector and civil society in data collection and analysis to enhance transparency and credibility, adopt protocols to establish a national open data platform, and engage citizens in local data production to bridge data gaps;

(f) Encourage collaboration between United Nations agencies and national statistical offices, and promote the exchange of data and best practices between States and international organizations to ensure that everyone benefits from various experiences, harmonize standards, help identify and address data gaps, and commit to the [United Nations Power of Data initiative](#).

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