



# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
6 May 2021

Original: English

---

**2021 session**

23 July 2020–22 July 2021

Agenda item 15

**Regional cooperation**

## **Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia for the period 2020–2021**

### *Summary*

During the period 2020–2021, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) adapted and strengthened its programmes and operations in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The Commission focused on mounting rapid and agile responses to the needs of member States in order to support the immediate response to and longer-term recovery from the pandemic. In particular, ESCWA developed a series of regional policy briefs to guide Governments in their response to the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic. It has also set up a live online stimulus tracker that monitors the policy responses of national authorities across the globe.

To advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the region, ESCWA adapted the existing programme of work to the new global environment. That effort included the delivery of assessments, analyses and technical support on the issues of poverty, gender equality, migration, food and water security, and climate action. To support the means of implementation, ESCWA has developed simulators to enhance economic and national planning and support for fiscal policy reform, which included the provision of economic modelling tools, and tools for trade policy development and negotiations. The Commission has launched an innovative initiative known as the climate/Sustainable Development Goals debt swap mechanism that lets middle- and low-income Arab States, in partnership with developed countries and donor institutions, finance sustainable development and climate action.

The Commission worked closely with partners among United Nations system agencies, academia, regional institutions, civil society organizations and private sector entities to deliver comprehensive responses and programmes. The Commission plays a significant role in the regional collaborative platform as vice-chair, member of the platform's joint secretariat and co-convenor of multiple issue-based coalitions. The Commission also co-convenes the regional operations management team, which is working to increase efficiencies in the region. Finally, ESCWA hosted the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development, which brought together key actors to deliberate on and guide the priorities of the region for the coming year.



## I. Introduction

1. In the wake of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Commission reassessed its programme of work and adjusted many of its interventions to include a COVID-19 component for outputs that could be pursued under the travel restrictions imposed, introduce COVID-19-related activities to better respond to the needs of member States and requests for support, and adjust operational modalities with a focus on innovation and on information and communications technologies (ICT) so as to ensure the timely delivery of planned outputs.

2. The focus of the Commission's work was on supporting member States in the immediate mitigation of the pandemic's negative impact, such as by saving lives and protecting livelihoods, on protecting fragile development gains, and on supporting the recovery and "build forward better". This was done by providing technical expertise and analysis, enabling information and the sharing of good practices, and supporting peer-to-peer exchanges, and policy- and decision-making support.

3. More specifically, at the pandemic's early stages, in March 2020, ESCWA initiated its response and produced its first policy brief, which was entitled "Regional emergency response to mitigate the impact of COVID-19". Soon after, ESCWA introduced a live COVID-19 case tracker for countries in the region,<sup>1</sup> helping them to track the pandemic's progress with cases, deaths, recoveries and other data. Since then, ESCWA has produced 12 regional policy briefs in which it addressed the impact of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> In addition, ESCWA, led the effort to produce a policy brief of the Secretary-General on the Arab region written from the perspective of "building back better".<sup>3</sup> Finally, ESCWA developed a tracker that continues to track all the stimulus packages enacted by all countries in the world to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on their national economies and societies.<sup>4</sup> The combined effects of the series of policy briefs, the policy brief of the Secretary-General and the stimulus tracker has helped most countries in the region to shape their policy response to the pandemic.

4. In response to a complex and multifaceted crisis in Lebanon that included one of the worst economic and political crises in the country's history, the explosion of 4 August 2020 in the port of Beirut and the pandemic, ESCWA supported Lebanon by producing three specific policy briefs on poverty, food security and the private sector. Furthermore, ESCWA supported the United Nations country team for Lebanon in developing the analytical background needed for certain aspects of the port explosion response plan, including technical support for the authorities with regard to a comprehensive strategy under which rebuilding the port of Beirut was tied to the larger transport requirements. In response to the significant loss of jobs, ESCWA developed, with the Ministry of Labour and with Coursera, a skills development platform, free courses in Arabic and English from which more than 25,000 Lebanese citizens have benefited so far.

5. The Arab Forum for Sustainable Development was held from 29 to 31 March 2021. The Forum was focused on the regional response to the pandemic and on ways to plan for recovery. It was highlighted that education, health care and social

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Prevalence of COVID-19 in the Arab region". Available at <http://publications.unescwa.org/projects/covid-19/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.unescwa.org/publications/socioeconomic-impact-covid-19-policy-briefs](http://www.unescwa.org/publications/socioeconomic-impact-covid-19-policy-briefs).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, "The impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region: an opportunity to build back better", policy brief, July 2020.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, ESCWA, "COVID-19 stimulus tracker". Available at <http://covdata.unescwa.org/RPT/RPTDSH1.aspx>.

protection systems must be transformed to provide equal access for all. Addressing inequality was a key theme, particularly the need to address gender inequality at all levels.

6. Participants in the discussions emphasized the importance of strengthening institutions and improving collaboration between all levels of government. The private sector was highlighted as crucial to economic recovery and growth. Participants stressed the need for a sustainable and green development that addresses climate change and the threat of food insecurity. Finally, the need for more data and financing for development was highlighted. Without reliable data and funding, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the region would be increasingly difficult. Enhancing national resource mobilization and allocation efforts demanded better alignment of national budgets with the Sustainable Development Goals and national sustainable development plans and programmes.

7. The Commission continued its engagement with member States in such core areas of work as gender justice, governance and the strengthening of institutions. In doing so, it supported decision-making based on evidence from, among other sources, statistics, policy briefs, and trend analysis. It also supported sound fiscal policies, technological and ICT advancement, including the online delivery of essential government services. It further supported the strengthening of financing for development and of policies aimed at addressing migration, poverty, social cohesion, vulnerabilities, in particular food security and insecurity, climate change, resources management, micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, and entrepreneurship.

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

8. In the wake of the pandemic, ESCWA capitalized on its expertise and proactively embarked on an analysis of emerging trends, risks and opportunities and identified good practices in support of policy- and decision-making by member States and in the region on COVID-19-related issues. Specifically, ESCWA led the preparation of the policy brief of the Secretary-General entitled “The impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region: an opportunity to build back better”. The Commission produced 12 thematic policy briefs on a wide range of topics including the impact of the pandemic on certain vulnerable groups such as young and elderly people and on gender equity, as well as on core socioeconomic factors such as food security and poverty, fiscal and financial stability, natural resources and trade, and future-focused proposals for recovery and building back better.<sup>5</sup> The Commission’s foresight and the early actions it took were used by member States for inspiration for their own COVID-19 policies. The briefs received extensive media coverage, which contributed to awareness-raising among various stakeholders in the region and beyond.

9. The Commission participated in international technical cooperation efforts to monitor and mitigate the effects of the pandemic and prevent the spread of the virus, such as through the website entitled “Observatory on border crossing status due to COVID-19”. It contributed to the design of the observatory website with the Economic Commission for Europe and worked with Arab Governments to provide content for their countries.

10. The Commission has developed a simulation tool for the Multidimensional Poverty Index that enables decision makers to quickly and accurately gauge the poverty and deprivation levels in a member State, and the successes and failures of the development process over time. The tool can be used to analyse data by gender,

<sup>5</sup> See: [www.unescwa.org/publications/socioeconomic-impact-covid-19-policy-briefs](http://www.unescwa.org/publications/socioeconomic-impact-covid-19-policy-briefs).

the education level of heads of household, wealth, income level and geographical areas within a country. Discussions are currently under way for its application in several Arab countries. The Commission also called for a solidarity tax to address the impact of COVID-19 on poverty in the region and to devise ways for households to generate income so as to reduce wealth inequality and poverty from a multidimensional perspective.

11. The Commission finalized the development and roll-out of its most recent self-assessment tool, the policy gap assessment tool, which helps member States to assess to what extent their existing policies are mainstreaming social justice principles such as equality, equity, rights and participation. The tool has been utilized in three workshops with member States and is the main vehicle for an upcoming study on wage policies and labour protection. Furthermore, in cooperation with the Center on International Cooperation of New York University, ESCWA has launched a series of three webinars on, respectively: social justice and social protection; food security; and wage policies. In the webinars, the nexus between social justice and equality, on one hand, and each of the themes, on the other, is examined. In collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Sudan, ESCWA has launched a series of online workshops including two workshops on developing equality-sensitive public policies and mainstreaming social justice in social policies.

12. The Commission produced a technical paper on targeted social protection in Arab Countries containing an overview of programmes in selected countries and their expansion during the pandemic. To facilitate regional cooperation and learning from experiences, ESCWA organized meetings entitled “Policy response to the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 epidemic: social protection”, held on 22 April 2020 with the International Labour Organization, and on the Arab Multidimensional Poverty Index and practical simulator, held on 2 November 2020. Senior policy makers attended the meetings and strengthened their capacity to design and implement inclusive social policies and interventions. To further reinforce South-South cooperation on the social protection response to the pandemic, in April 2020, ESCWA established the Group of Experts on Social Protection Reform to serve as a forum for policy dialogue, the exchange of knowledge and cooperation between member States. Seventeen member States have appointed focal points. The Commission facilitates the work of the Group of Experts by organizing periodic thematic meetings and disseminating relevant substantive materials.

13. To mobilize a coordinated global response to address the social, economic, and financial impacts of COVID-19, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the regional commissions have launched a project entitled “Strengthening social protection for pandemic response” to strengthen national capacities to design and implement social protection policies with a gender perspective to facilitate a rapid recovery from COVID-19 and to increase resilience to future shocks, in particular for the most vulnerable populations. The project is being implemented from July 2020 and December 2021 and consists of three workstreams: enhanced capacity for social protection; strengthened gender emphasis; and improved poverty measurement. The Commission leads the global implementation of the workstream on social protection.

14. The Commission is delivering targeted technical assistance to several Member States. In Jordan, ESCWA is delivering technical assistance to the National Aid Fund for the analysis of the database of informal workers to evaluate social assistance programmes delivered by the Fund, inform evidence-based policy choices and build the capacity of Fund staff. In the Sudan, ESCWA is providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Labour and Social Development for the development of a national social protection strategy.

15. The Commission has developed a job monitor for the Arab region that enables member States to monitor the demand for newly needed skills. It uses big data to have a more dynamic and agile monitoring platform for demanded skills to cope with the dynamism of the fourth industrial revolution. When matching the demand for skills with the supply, the job monitor identifies the mismatch and provides information disaggregated by gender, age and disability. The monitor also provides information on sector development, job growth predictions and Sustainable Development Goal mapping. In addition, the Commission will be publishing a regional study entitled “Towards a productive and inclusive path: job creation in the Arab region”. The study concerns the impact of technology on employment creation in the private sector in particular how technology is promoting investment in machines but less so in human capital.

16. Following national lockdown measures, 2020 saw an increase in violence against women and girls in the Arab region, including online violence. In response, ESCWA studied the impact of the pandemic on gender equality in the region. In the resulting policy brief, it raised awareness of the lockdowns’ gendered impact and of gender equality concerns connected with addressing the pandemic. The policy brief was accompanied by an open letter to the Governments of all Arab States in which alternative solutions aimed at assisting survivors of domestic violence across the region were advocated. In the subsequent policy brief, entitled “Violence against women and girls, and COVID-19 in the Arab region” qualitative and quantitative data were outlined on violence, the availability of support systems and good and emerging practices for preventing and combating it. The efforts were complemented by the ESCWA Committee on Women with a special meeting at which it discussed the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality at the regional and national levels.

17. Since April 2020, ESCWA has supported the national family safety programme of Saudi Arabia through a series of training workshops, held in collaboration with United Nations system partners, to protect women from violence. The Commission provided support to the Sudan to improve shelter services for women survivors of violence, which was concluded with a workshop held from 25 to 27 August 2020. In Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, ESCWA analysed the impact of the pandemic on the most affected sectors and issued six working papers with analysis and recommendations for Iraq and Yemen on the mitigation of the effects of the pandemic on women’s economic and political participation and social protection. The Commission collaborated with UN-Women, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), CARE, and the Abaad Resource Center for Gender Equality in Lebanon to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion on gender equality in the country. In the same context, ESCWA is working with Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Saudi Arabia to study the responsiveness of available services to care work, in particular care for children, older persons and people with disabilities, in the light of the pandemic so as to guide countries’ responses.

18. The Commission published a policy brief entitled “Impact of COVID-19 on young people in the Arab region”, in which it examined the effects of the pandemic on young people and the ways in which it aggravated already existing inequalities.

19. With regard to older persons, ESCWA provided technical support to several Arab countries, including Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, in developing strategies, policies and comprehensive action plans. The Commission collaborated with the League of Arab States (LAS) and the United Nations Population Division to host a virtual workshop on 30 November 2020 dedicated to building the capacity of Arab parliamentarians to protect the rights of older persons and ensure that laws take their needs into account.

20. In response to the continuing exclusion of persons with disabilities, ESCWA hosted, on 24 June 2020, a consultative high-level meeting for senior officials in the

Arab region working on mitigating the impact of the pandemic on persons with disabilities. That was followed by an exercise in mapping disability-inclusive responses to COVID-19 and accessible information materials in Arab States to facilitate knowledge-sharing. On 24 June 2020, ESCWA, in cooperation with LAS and in coordination with the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, held a consultative meeting for senior officials in Arab countries concerned with issues regarding persons with disabilities so as to coordinate efforts to address the impact of the pandemic on persons with disabilities and identify national initiatives. In that context, ESCWA provided advisory services to Libya and coordinated a national working group in that country that included representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNFPA, Humanity and Inclusion, the Libyan ministries of social affairs, health and education, and the national centre for disease control. The group developed a comprehensive action plan for all health, social and education themes.

21. In 2020 ESCWA strengthened its efforts to help member States to operationalize the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, building on previous work done in 2019. It did so by supporting evidence-based policymaking through the design of knowledge products and tools, such as an online database aimed at facilitating access to migration-related policies in the region, and the *Situation Report on International Migration in the Arab Region 2019* in which data were presented on migration patterns and trends in Arab countries, together with an analysis of the policy implications of the Global Compact for the region. The Commission helped to build regional dialogue platforms to enhance collaboration concerning migration. It led the regional review of the Global Compact and brought member States together to discuss progress made and challenges faced, and possible ways to overcome those challenges. The Commission held a series of workshops to build the capacity of policymakers to operationalize the Global Compact and give follow-up to or review its implementation at the national level. Support was provided to the Government of the Sudan for the development of a first draft of a national migration strategy aligned with the Global Compact. That work contributed to 133 new policies, programmes and actions in 2020, some of which were aligned with the Global Compact, which exceeded the planned target of 70 new migration policies, programmes and actions for 2020.

22. The Commission prepared two policy briefs on the impact of COVID-19 on food security and water resources, respectively. In the briefs, it demonstrates how the pandemic would influence food security in Arab countries in the coming decade, taking into account sources of vulnerability such as climate change, food trade and conflicts, analyses how member States can mitigate those threats, alleviate the impact of COVID-19 and build a more food secure future, and gives recommendations for national, regional and global actors. The Commission developed an analysis on ways in which food security could be ensured in the Arab region while facing the challenge of COVID-19. It enabled ESCWA to update simulation parameters and prepare alternative scenarios, and thus to better support member States in their responses to the new food security crisis. To make pertinent information available at the national level, ESCWA revised the results of 22 food security country profiles, using the regionally adopted Arab food security monitoring framework. It added a section on the impact of COVID-19 on food security at the national level, as well as references to national initiatives undertaken to improve the situation.

23. In 2020, ESCWA further refined the baseline mappings of energy use in the building sector in Jordan and Tunisia. The mappings had been started in 2019. The results were validated through national dialogues with relevant stakeholders; ESCWA assessed the related policy and institution-building needs in both countries. The evidence gathered enabled ESCWA to better target its technical assistance in support

of the efforts of Governments to design and implement energy-efficiency policies and programmes for the sector. The Commission undertook assessments of energy performance certification standards for energy-intensive household appliances and equipment in both countries. Consequently, it supported institutions in Tunisia in setting up a digitized process aimed at reinforcing the certification programme. Furthermore, ESCWA worked with both countries on identifying energy-efficiency measures that could be replicated on a large scale, and on developing implementation schemes, including incentives and financing instruments for end users, to retrofit building envelopes and adopt more energy-efficient equipment and appliances. The work contributed to finalizing the development of two large-scale energy-efficiency schemes in Tunisia comprising roof insulation and the replacement of old refrigerators, and the start of the process to develop two similar schemes in Jordan comprising roof insulation and the dissemination of solar water heaters.

24. In 2020, ESCWA initiated multi-stakeholder consultations on extractive industries in the region as part of a series of consultations hosted by the regional commissions. In March 2021, ESCWA hosted a high-level round table on extractive industries in the Arab region attended by government ministers, senior government officials and subject-matter experts from across the region. The Commission further led the development of a regional policy brief, drawing on the outputs from the five regional round tables. In 2021, ESCWA will provide substantive input for the global report, which will contain proposals for tangible action to transform the extractive industries and build a more sustainable, equitable and inclusive development.

25. In 2020, ESCWA refined a methodology and tool enabling public institutions, particularly in member States affected by crisis, conflict and occupation, to assess their key gaps and close them. It produced a series of tailor-made national capacity-building modules for Iraq, the State of Palestine and Yemen. Eighty-six civil servants took part in training sessions and grew their capacity to enhance institutional effectiveness for conflict recovery and prevention, and better development outcomes. The gaps assessment methodology was formally adopted by the Ministry of Planning of Iraq. Training-of-trainers courses were delivered to 40 civil servants in Yemen. The General Personnel Council of the Palestinian Authority adopted the methodology to support its workforce planning strategies. In 2020, ESCWA gave Iraq, the State of Palestine and Yemen policy recommendations based on institutional gap assessment reports produced in 2019 and 2020.

26. The pandemic has highlighted the pivotal role of State institutions in addressing crises. The Commission examined the interplay between the various repercussions of the pandemic and the institutional response to them, and developed technical support in the field of institutional reform by focusing on two interlinked fundamental dimensions. The first dimension is knowledge-based. The Commission held a series of seminars with 16 member States, represented by participants belonging to public institutions including ministries and parliaments, the private sector, civil society organizations and regional and international organizations including LAS, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Islamic Development Bank, WHO, IOM, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and UNDP. The aim was to understand structural and institutional challenges and identify gaps and weaknesses in the response of public governance systems response to the pandemic, strengthen the response capacity and explore innovative solutions to build back better. The seminars demonstrated the need to strengthen and develop the role of public institutions, and to enhance cooperation between them and with private sector institutions and civil society. The second dimension relates to ESCWA programmes and techniques for reforming the governance system and enhancing the effectiveness of public institutions, which have proved their effectiveness in responding to institutional challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis. The

programmes have been enriched by the outcomes and conclusions of the seminars and by discussions held with member States in 2020.

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

27. The Commission developed a simulator for 10 international indices that makes it possible to streamline economic planning and assist member States in identifying effective and efficient procedures that could be implemented in the short, medium and long terms to enhance their ranking and impact the socioeconomic development at the national level. The Commission also developed a series of simulators for technical and non-technical audiences. They can generate simulations focused on one specific international index, by theme (such as gender, innovation or competitiveness) or using a curve. The Commission continues to develop the database on trade flows, tariffs and structural policy factors so that it can generate detailed estimates of trade costs by product and has produced a technical paper with reviews of the various approaches to estimating trade costs at the product level. The Commission facilitated contacts between experts and representatives of Arab Governments to further support the exchange of knowledge and experiences with regard to integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into national development plans with a focus on ways to enhance coordination for effective service delivery in the context of COVID-19.

28. The Commission has developed an interactive COVID-19 stimulus tracker that maps and visualizes, in a user-friendly way, the fiscal and social protection policy responses to the pandemic adopted in all countries of the world. The tracker has facilitated peer learning and dialogue on fiscal policy and social protection options. It has informed the social protection policy responses dialogue with representatives of the ministries of social affairs of the Arab States in a virtual meeting held in 2020. The Commission used information generated by the tracker to produce the series of policy briefs aimed at further informing webinar discussions on topics related to the economic and social impact of the pandemic. This included a policy brief entitled “Limited fiscal space puts the Arab region recovery from COVID-19 at risk”. A harmonized set of social protection measures agreed upon by the five regional commissions was produced with the help of the tracker, which helped to advance the analysis of social protection policies and their effectiveness in a comparative context of regions and countries.

29. On the basis of its experience in statistics and technology, ESCWA developed the social expenditure monitor in 2020 at the request of Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait. The monitor reflects the social and economic aspects of government spending for seven social dimensions according to beneficiary groups. What distinguishes the monitor is that it is a practical framework in which concepts, standards, definitions and measurement methods are unified for all parties concerned with social policy spending and links their outputs to the budget of each State and the Sustainable Development Goals. The monitor results in models and scenarios for any type of social policy spending, enabling the State to choose the type of spending in line with the fiscal space available. In 2020, data collection for the monitor was completed, the necessary international standards, definitions and classifications were applied to it and a database was established. The Commission has ensured that the definitions and concepts on which the monitor is built are compatible with international standards, concepts and classifications, in particular the concepts of national accounts and government finance statistics.

30. In 2020, ESCWA continued to support member States in identifying avenues to finance sustainable development, including through fiscal consolidation and domestic



resource mobilization. The Commission published a fiscal policy review of Arab States that gave a baseline for the tax and expenditure reforms needed to mobilize domestic public resources. Over the past year, ESCWA provided technical expertise to Governments in matters of fiscal policy reform, including in the form of economic modelling tools, to support Governments in the formulation of socially acceptable reform proposals focused on decreasing fiscal deficits and increasing the understanding of the linkages among fiscal policy choices. The Commission supported Jordan in addressing tax base erosion and adopting optimal tax policies. The Commission contributed to the adoption by Tunisia of a subsidy reform proposal related to its financial law that included an automatic monthly mechanism for adjusting energy prices.

31. In 2020, ESCWA contributed to the six discussion groups emanating from the Initiative on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond. The Commission ensured that regional responses and priorities, including on expanding fiscal space and domestic resource mobilization by combating illicit financial flows, were factored into the menu of financing policy options. The Commission played a critical role in aligning the region's discourse by disseminating analysis, messages and common positions so as to assist Arab representatives who took part in the ministerial meeting on the Initiative held on 8 September 2020. Since the event, ESCWA has been coordinating the multi-agency and multi-stakeholder workstream tasked with developing a policy brief of the Secretary-General on illicit financial flows. The brief is intended to show the elements of the United Nations vision to combat illicit financial flows and advance the global pact for financial integrity for sustainable development along with the commitment to use the proceeds released by this action to make additional investments in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

32. In 2020, ESCWA began to develop integrated national financing frameworks for a pilot group of middle-income Arab countries that expressed their interest during the first meeting of the Committee on Financing for Development in the States members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. The integrated national financing frameworks offer a detailed anatomy and analytical diagnostics of the financing instruments, channels and non-financial means of implementation that make up the aggregate mix of financing available for national authorities to finance national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and targets. The integrated national financing frameworks are based on national financing distinctions and factor the risks associated with regions financing landscape, thereby providing a premise on which detailed financing-for-development reform agendas are to be built in collaboration with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNDP and resident coordinator offices.

33. The Commission continued to provide advice and capacity-building for member States regarding their compliance with trade agreements to which they are parties and regarding negotiations on the terms of and access to new trade agreements between Arab States and around the world, such as the Arab Customs Union, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the European Union and the African Continental Free Trade Area. The first version of the Arab economy-wide trade simulator interface was completed on the basis of a tailored global dynamic computable general equilibrium model comprising 18 Arab economies, of which 8 have been added to the latest global database of the Global Trade Analysis Project. The interface enables non-technical users to perform a large set of simulations on tariffs and other trade costs for goods by partner, sector and year. In 2020, ESCWA was responsible for the data on Arab countries for the United Nations International Trade Statistics Database (UN Comtrade) following an agreement in 2019 with the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The Commission supported national statistical offices in improving the quality and granularity of data

and building national statistical capacity. This has supported States in meeting the standards of the global six-digit level of the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System and improved data on Arab trade in the UN Comtrade database.

34. The Commission has developed an online data portal, which is a comprehensive platform for data and statistics for the Arab region, based on data obtained from national sources and United Nations custodian agencies. Data are complemented by estimates (“nowcasting”) for the most recent time periods and data based on non-conventional data sources and big data. Currently, the data platform comprises over 1.5 million data points forming over 160,000 time series. The portal enhances the availability of data related to the Sustainable Development Goals, which has increased by 8 per cent by comparison with 2019, and increased the availability of country data in the Global Sustainable Development Goals Indicators Database.

35. The Commission hosts the Arab SDG Gateway, which includes an interactive monitoring tool that can be used to assess progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals at the regional and national levels. The Gateway further includes Goals-related regional and country profiles; a comprehensive Goals-related data portal; specific data dashboards on leaving no one behind; an e-handbook on Goals-related metadata; a section on financing for development; knowledge and learning material on the Goals; a calendar of Goals-related events; and a repository of evidence-based policy material.

36. The Commission continues to promote the use of big data and non-traditional data sources in the region, to support decision-making and improve access to the latest data. For example, ESCWA produced an analysis of the socioeconomic challenges facing refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic and host communities in Lebanon using information obtained from telecommunications companies.

37. In 2020 ESCWA continued and scaled up its promotion of the use of modern technologies and a geospatial dimension to enhance the availability of census data for the 2030 Agenda. Six additional States members of ESCWA (a jump from 10 to 16 compared with 2019) are now ready to conduct a population and housing census with the help of new technologies.

38. In 2020, ESCWA convened national research workshops to help Governments to assess their national digital development reviews conducted earlier in 2019. The targeted ESCWA support led to the development of thematic strategies and policies on ICT-related issues by Jordan, Morocco, the State of Palestine and the Sudan. In November and December 2020, two regional expert group meetings were convened to refine and endorse the digital development framework and process manual initially developed by ESCWA and aimed at facilitating the next round of national digital development reviews, in 2021. In early 2021, ESCWA produced *Proposed Arab Digital Agenda: Preliminary Framework for the Arab Information and Communication Technology Strategy for Sustainable Development* and *ESCWA’s Vision on the Work Modalities for Producing, Developing and Implementing the Arab Information and Communication Technology Strategy (The Arab Digital Agenda)*. Both have been endorsed by the working group of the Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers, paving the way for the inception of a unified regional ICT strategy. To date, three regional events were convened in collaboration with LAS, to advance its development.

#### **IV. Spotlight on debt sustainability and debt swap**

39. In 2020, ESCWA called on the international community to support debt relief for the low- and middle-income countries in the region that are facing high debt

burdens and a limited fiscal space to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19, while Governments in the region are called upon to improve their fiscal policy responses with a view to improving debt sustainability in the medium to long term.

40. The Commission has launched a key initiative on a mechanism for swapping debt for climate-resilient investment<sup>6</sup> that offers an innovative opportunity for middle- and low income Arab States, in partnership with developed countries and donor institutions, to finance sustainable development and climate action, particularly in countries where continuous borrowing has become a less viable option for supporting the poorest and the vulnerable and building forward better from the pandemic. The debt swap mechanism lets debtors, creditors and donors accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and under the Paris Agreement, and advances North-South and triangular cooperation.<sup>7</sup> A pilot case is being prepared in Jordan and an advisory committee is being formed to guide the process of operationalizing the debt swap mechanism. In addition to Jordan, other member States including Egypt and Tunisia are interested in participating in the mechanism as well.

41. The Commission's flagship publication entitled *Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region 2019–2021* included a thematic chapter on fiscal policy responses to public debt and debt sustainability in Arab countries. The publication contained a call for the international community to support debt relief efforts in the least developed countries and in middle-income developing countries. For the least developed countries, that meant the following: extending the period of the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative to the end of 2021; including multilateral debt in the Initiative, which is currently limited to bilateral debt; and providing them access to debt relief under the heavily indebted poor country initiative to benefit countries such as the Sudan. For middle-income developing countries, it meant: broadening the scope of the Debt Service Suspension Initiative to include middle-income developing countries and vulnerable countries; enhancing private sector participation; improving access to concessional loans; and supporting a debt reduction mechanism, including debt swaps and debt restructuring on a case-by-case basis. In the analysis and policy messages, Governments were called upon to design fiscal policies to promote economic transformation and decent work with a view to improving debt sustainability in the medium to long term.

42. The country profile regarding debt sustainability for Egypt was produced and shared with the United Nations country team for Egypt so that the challenges and informing policy could be analysed, including for the common country analysis.

43. The Commission produced a policy brief entitled “Limited fiscal space puts the Arab region recovery from COVID-19 at risk”, in which concrete policy messages were highlighted for addressing fiscal constraints faced by the low- and middle-income countries in the region, in particular: additional fiscal needs for fighting the impact of COVID-19 in the region amount to approximately \$80 billion; a global commitment to the delivery of official development assistance is important to avert possible shortfalls in health-care spending in the Arab region; and solidarity from the wealthiest countries can contribute to creating a strong regional social solidarity fund.

44. The Commission has advocated for a medium- to long-term debt sustainability review in the context of enhancing fiscal space for financing efforts to recover from the pandemic and efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, in addition

<sup>6</sup> ESCWA, “Climate/SDGs debt swap mechanism”. Available at [www.unescwa.org/publications/climate-sdgs-debt-swap-mechanism](http://www.unescwa.org/publications/climate-sdgs-debt-swap-mechanism).

<sup>7</sup> The launch of the debt swap mechanism is timely. It is pursuant to the outcomes of the High-level Event on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond, in which a menu of options was set out for consideration by Heads of State and Government, including the use of debt swaps to assist countries that are facing high debt burdens.

to extending and expanding the Debt Service Suspension Initiative. Those messages were reflected in the Commission's contributions to the policy briefs of the Secretary-General entitled, respectively, "Debt and COVID-19: a global response in solidarity" (2020), "The impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region: an opportunity to build back better" (2020) and "Liquidity and debt solutions to invest in the Sustainable Development Goals: the time to act is now" (2021).

45. The Commission's engagement as a convenor with issue-based coalitions on macroeconomic management in the Arab region (ESCWA-UNDP-United Nations Industrial Development Organization) has resulted a policy tool and a regional webinar on stabilizing debt scenarios with a view to managing debt sustainability while generating fiscal space for efforts to recover from the pandemic and for financing efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The webinar brought together regional United Nations system agencies and United Nations country teams, who discussed ways forward to inform the work of the United Nations country team on debt sustainability and macroeconomic policy in selected country contexts.

## V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

46. With regard to inter-agency cooperation, ESCWA plays a lead role in the Arab region in implementing the reform of the United Nations development system at the regional level, in line with General Assembly resolution [72/279](#). The Commission maintains its approach to multi-stakeholder engagement at the national and regional levels, continuing to create unique regional platforms in which government representatives, parliamentarians, civil society and the private sector can exchange good practices and identify innovative solutions.

47. The regional collaborative platform for Arab States was formally established in July 2020 and is chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General. The Executive Secretary of ESCWA is one of its two vice chairs. All previous mechanisms, including the regional collaboration mechanism and the Regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group, have now been transitioned to regional collaborative platform.

48. The regional collaborative platform is the primary coordination instrument for United Nations system entities operating at the regional level. It serves as the main platform for defining, articulating and optimizing the regional United Nations system in support of the efforts of member States to realize the 2030 Agenda and tackle emerging development challenges. The platform adds value for the region by facilitating efforts to tackle transboundary development challenges, ensure more effective engagement with global and regional agendas and address regional issues of common interest to member States.

49. Throughout 2020, ESCWA helped to ensure that the regional collaborative platform delivered support in an agile, proactive and pragmatic manner directly to member States, if requested, or through resident coordinators and United Nations country teams. That support included relevant and innovative knowledge products, policy simulation tools, actionable policy recommendations, and coherent and meaningful data, including statistics, big data and other innovative forms of data.

50. In 2020, the regional collaborative platform established a joint secretariat, which, in addition to ESCWA, included the regional office of the Development Coordination Office and UNDP. The Commission works closely with those partners to serve the platform by providing briefing materials, organizing the platform's workplan, arranging meetings and ensuring its ongoing operations.

51. In 2020, the regional collaborative platform established eight issue-based coalitions. Those coalitions inform the platform's work and are chaired by United

Nations system entities with relevant mandates and expertise. The coalitions produce joint regional public goods in the form of knowledge products, data, tools and policy recommendations targeted at the most pressing issues in the region. Issue-based coalitions in the Arab region cover the following domains: migration; food security, climate action and the environment; the humanitarian-development-peace nexus; urbanization; gender justice and equality; the empowerment of adolescents and young people; macroeconomic management and social protection; and quality social services.

52. The Commission is a co-convenor of three of the issue-based coalitions, in particular the issue-based coalition for migration, the macroeconomic management pillar of the issue-based coalition for macroeconomic management and social protection, and the climate action and energy-efficiency pillar of the issue-based coalition for food security, climate action and the environment.

53. In early 2021, the regional collaborative platform released its first system-wide annual regional results report. The Commission supported the production of the report as part of the joint secretariat and the task force on reporting.

54. In March 2021, the joint secretariat of the platform held consultations with the Resident Coordinator Offices in the region and with member States in a special session of the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development to refine the workplans of the issue-based coalitions.

55. The Commission continues to lead the development of the platform's regional knowledge and data hub known as "Manara" as the main access point for knowledge and data produced by the United Nations at the regional and global levels. Manara has been developed with the full involvement of the platform's members and in consultation with resident coordinators in the region. Manara is intended to be a one-stop-shop for all knowledge and data from United Nations sources, member States and other development actors to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is accessible to regional cooperation organizations, United Nations country teams and member States, and the several tools it hosts are accessible in Arabic and English, including the Arab SDG Gateway; the data portal; an intelligent search engine tailored to the needs of users; an application capable of assessing documents against the Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations resolutions and national development plans; an assessment-building wizard to support users in developing tools for assessments and/or surveys and analysing data; an e-learning platform for development issues, including public policy; a roster of regional expertise; an online Arab geospatial data hub; and policy simulation tools based on various economic models, including computable general equilibrium models, to help users in assessing the impact of policies on various population segments and economic sectors.

56. The Commission is working closely with UNDP and the regional office of the Development Coordination Office to improve back-office efficiencies in the region. The regional operations management team is aligning regional business operation strategies with global and national strategies based, in part, on feedback from regional cooperation organizations, as required. The Secretary-General has proposed a global network of shared service centres to be launched by 2022. A regional common back office will be established prior to that global launch date.

57. The Commission continues to work closely with the regional office of the Development Coordination Office and United Nations resident coordinator offices in the Arab region to ensure greater complementarity and synergy of its own projects with those implemented as part of the sustainable development cooperation frameworks. The purpose of the collaboration is to optimize programming in the Arab

States and to accelerate progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Commission and the regional office of the Development Coordination Office are closely working together to develop the regional roster of expertise hosted on Manara giving resident coordinators access to skills and expertise available in the region. The Commission is a member of the United Nations country team in each member State and provides support as requested by each Resident Coordinator. In 2020, ESCWA contributed to the common country analyses and strategic documents for Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Arab Republic. Commission support is typically focused on macroeconomics, data, transboundary issues and governance, as requested by individual resident coordinators when required. The Commission has given 10 country teams unique access to the ESCWA data portal, giving each a tailored and password-protected area through which they can access all data available from national statistical offices, supplemented by ESCWA data. The Commission has trained staff of country teams in making the best possible use of the data portal. The members of each country team can manipulate the data to present it in graphic formats, as well as use it for analytical purposes and as input into the common country analyses and research.

58. To support country-level capacity, ESCWA has provided training and support to country teams and government officials in the region on various socioeconomic issues. In Egypt, Iraq and Jordan, support has been provided for the development of the national Multidimensional Poverty Index. The Index is determined by using global normative methodologies adapted to the needs of the Arab region. In Egypt, ESCWA has supported the Resident Coordinator Office in assessing the impact of COVID-19 on household poverty and determining mitigation measures. In Lebanon, Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic, ESCWA has supported the United Nations country teams in developing and submitting their expressions of interest for the fourth funding round of the multi-donor trust fund for the United Nations Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In the Syrian Arab Republic, ESCWA, together with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, organized training on Sustainable Development Goals, human rights and linkages to the universal periodic review. In Jordan and Tunisia, ESCWA provided training on the social expenditure monitor, which provides a comprehensive measure of public social expenditure in seven areas. In Bahrain, ESCWA has supported the Resident Coordinator Office with technical advice on disability, older persons and road safety. In Iraq, ESCWA has worked with the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq and the Resident Coordinator Office for Iraq to engage on women's political participation, including through training and the joint production of a needs assessment and a policy brief.

59. The Commission has consolidated its strategic and historic partnership with LAS. The partnership is focused on monitoring and reporting on progress made in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, on supporting member States in dealing with climate change through the ESCWA-based Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies and on jointly working to revisit multidimensional poverty, measure non-income poverty and promote the eradication of poverty in line with the 2030 Agenda. The two bodies also cooperate on the normative and capacity-development dimensions of regional economic integration, including trade, customs, migration, transport, energy, water, food security and other transboundary and development-related challenges.

60. The Commission has a partnership with the Islamic Development Bank that covers the following topics: transport corridors as trade facilitators leading to increased economic activity and job creation; mainstreaming climate action in national development plans; and the role of parliaments in promoting and monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In parallel, ESCWA has partnerships with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development, the World Trade Organization and a multitude of global and regional actors.

61. The Commission is closely engaged with academic institutions and think tanks, in particular through its academic network for development dialogue, with the aim of promoting dialogue, collaboration and knowledge-sharing between the United Nations and academia in the Arab region, and of enhancing proactive and informed policymaking aligned with national ambitions for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

62. The Commission works closely with United Nations agencies, funds and programmes on a variety of thematic issues. For example, ESCWA, UNFPA, UN-Women and local partners in Lebanon have worked together to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion on gender equality in the country. The Commission is working with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, WHO, the International Organization for Migration, UNESCO, UNDP and other partners to strengthen institutional capacity in the region. Furthermore, ESCWA led a task force of 19 United Nations system agencies to collaboratively organize the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development and its key sessions, briefings and online knowledge portal.

63. The Commission and United Nations system partners jointly developed the policy brief of the Secretary-General entitled “Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region: an opportunity to build back better”. The policy brief, launched by the Secretary-General in 2020, highlighted the severe impact of the pandemic in the Arab region and contained recommendations for Governments and partners.

64. In 2020, all five regional commissions and UNCTAD worked together on transport and trade connectivity in the age of pandemics, to formulate and implement measures to ensure the continued flow of transport and trade across borders while preventing the spread of pandemics by implementing digital solutions. In cooperation with the other regional commissions and UNCTAD, ESCWA is reviewing trade and trade facilitation responses to the pandemic, such as trade financing, to assist countries in coordinating responses and include specific provisions in trade integration schemes.

65. The Commission has collaborated with the Economic Commission for Europe on the eTIR international system in the region. The purpose of the eTIR international system is to ensure the secure exchange of data between national customs systems in connection with the international transit of goods, vehicles or containers in accordance with the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets and to enable customs to manage data on guarantees issued by guarantee chains to holders authorized to use the TIR System (customs to customs).

66. With regard to the assessment of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, the statistics divisions of all five regional commissions worked on harmonizing the methods for interpreting and presenting data. The common approach is to indicate progress since 2000, the likelihood of the target being achieved and the gap between the predicted and target values. It also includes a clear indication whether targets are on track to being achieved by 2030. The common approach gives senior United Nations and government officials a clear and fast understanding of critical issues and shows them where progress is slowing.

67. In addition, after successful consultations within the regional collaborative platform for Europe, the Economic Commission for Europe has joined ESCWA in the Manara project to develop a European knowledge and data hub. The Commission is currently in conversation with the task force for the regional collaborative platform

for Africa about the knowledge hub to determine whether the regional collaborative platform for Africa will also join the Manara project.

## VI. Conclusions

68. In reflecting on its experience during the period 2020–2021, ESCWA has underscored several lessons worth bearing in mind for the coming period:

(a) Flexibility: it is critical to build into programme planning a measure of flexibility that enables United Nations Secretariat entities to quickly adapt to urgent crisis, serve member States and implement their mandates without being too constrained by aspects of programme design that were put in place in an earlier year in line with the standing programme planning process. That flexibility should also be exercised in the evaluation of the results of such entities, in contexts where unforeseen emergencies require such flexibility in implementation, even it means a slight departure from activities planned before the onset of the crisis;

(b) Readiness: in line with the principle of flexibility, United Nations Secretariat entities can strengthen their risk mitigation measures and further build capacity to reinforce their operational and substantive and/or programmatic resilience;

(c) Timeliness: the Commission's immediate response to the pandemic raised its credibility and effectiveness, not only among member States but also among national, regional and global development actors. Member States and actors recognized the reliability, timeliness and availability of the data and preliminary analysis that they needed and favoured having access while events were still unfolding over having to wait for comprehensive data that had been analysed thoroughly. In such circumstances, speed was of the essence;

(d) Interactive online tools: the Commission's experience has clearly demonstrated the great utility of easily accessible, interactive tools and platforms that include databases, knowledge products and, perhaps most importantly, simulation tools that let users test a variety of scenarios and their impact on socioeconomic indicators necessary for policymaking. By investing in interactive simulation tools, ESCWA is positioning itself at the regional and national levels as a reliable entity within the United Nations system;

(e) Operational agility: the legislative, financial and operational flexibility to recruit and procure quickly, transparently, within the bounds of United Nations rules and regulations but bolstered by greater agility and speed is fundamental to enabling United Nations Secretariat entities to respond immediately to emerging priorities;

(f) Collaboration with other United Nations system entities: in responding to the COVID-19 crisis, ESCWA found that its collaboration with other United Nations system entities had made the response quicker, more reliable and more comprehensive. Consulting regularly with resident coordinators and United Nations country teams ensures that Commission products are designed to also serve the needs of resident coordinators and country teams as they engage national authorities in areas that require quick multi-agency responses. In that connection, the recently established regional collaborative platform and the associated issue-based coalitions can be a powerful tool.

69. The Commission is cognisant of the importance of continuous improvement. In responding to the evolving needs of member States, it will consider the above and other best practices and lessons learned and mainstream them so as to be able to adjust



and adapt its programme when similar crises arise in the future. Meanwhile, it continues to strengthen its COVID-19 response.

70. Additional operational lessons learned include the need to invest in new work modalities, in particular in:

(a) Tools necessary for online and hybrid engagements, including new investments in existing and new ICT and continued refinement of their use, and exploration of alternative delivery models, for example, hybrid meeting formats, electronic formats for publications and technical materials, innovative massive open online courses and mentoring platforms for capacity-building;

(b) Building capacities for staff in those new work modalities;

(c) Giving due consideration to the impact of such new modalities on staff morale and effectiveness of work. Even in the early period of adaptation to the new modality, it was clear that online meetings and engagements had limitations, and that realization was corroborated over time. This is particularly important for regional-level work that requires staff to travel so that the Commission can deliver its mandate. Perhaps even more important and relevant to the Commission's work is the need to convene partners for consensus-building, capacity-building, peer-to-peer learning, sharing good practices and other dimensions of the Commission's work that require face-to-face and hands-on interactions necessary for building trust, which is foundational for consensus, particularly on important regional issues of high consequence;

(d) Staff health and mental well-being. Investing in those is not only a moral and ethical obligation, but something that pays off in the long run.

---