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MEASURING PROGRESS IN THE ARAB REGION: ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Measuring progress is a relatively new concept that Arab statistical offices started to discuss during the last few years. The main audience of discussion is still among statisticians and in particular official statisticians. There have been a number of initiatives in the Arab region to discuss the issue of measuring progress and positively interact with the global initiative for measuring progress. In this context, a steering committee composed of country representatives, activists and regional commissions and institutions has been established. The committee has produced a position paper. In addition, an Arab statement supporting the global initiative was declared during Istanbul meeting on measuring and fostering progress mid 2007.

While there is almost consensus among Arab statistical offices on the importance of utilizing measuring progress as a replacement or complementary measure for the current indices to identify the situation in the countries regarding progress, some chief statisticians are still skeptical regarding the role of official statistics system in this regard.

Lack of well defined roadmap regarding the progress and how to reach where is the main challenge that is facing a real progress in this regard. In addition, while it has been not difficult to accept the idea and mobilize fairly good support to accept discussions, the practical movement ahead is still at the runway. A more international interaction and dynamic cooperation is still needed in the Arab region to move the agenda ahead. In this context a fully fledged pilot project is really needed to provide real life evidence and show the difference and compare between the current frameworks and the potential benefits that could be brought at the measurement and partnership levels.

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1. Introduction

Istanbul declaration recognized that while societies have become more complex, they are more closely linked than ever. Yet they retain differences in history, culture, and in economic and social development. Therefore, the declaration was encouraged that initiatives to measure societal progress through statistical indicators should have been launched in several countries and on all continents. Although these initiatives are based on different methodologies, cultural and intellectual paradigms, and degrees of involvement of key stakeholders, they reveal an emerging consensus on the need to undertake the measurement of societal progress in every country, going beyond conventional economic measures such as GDP per capita. Indeed, the United Nation's system of indicators to measure progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is a step in that direction.

The declaration confirmed that a culture of evidence-based decision making has to be promoted at all levels, to increase the welfare of societies. And in the “information age,” welfare depends in part on transparent and accountable public policy making. The availability of statistical indicators of economic, social, and environmental outcomes and their dissemination to citizens can contribute to promoting good governance and the improvement of democratic processes. It can strengthen citizens' capacity to influence the goals of the societies they live in through debate and consensus building, and increase the accountability of public policies.

The declaration affirmed commitment to measuring and fostering the progress of societies in all their dimensions and to supporting initiatives at the country level, and urged statistical offices, public and private organizations, and academic experts to work alongside representatives of their communities to produce high-quality, facts-based information that can be used by all of society to form a shared view of societal well-being and its evolution over time.

The declaration realized that official statistics are a key “public good” that foster the progress of societies. The development of indicators of societal progress offers an opportunity to reinforce the role of national statistical authorities as key providers of relevant, reliable, timely and comparable data and the indicators required for national and international reporting. We encourage governments to invest resources to develop reliable data and indicators according to the “Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics” adopted by the United Nations in 1994. To take this work forward, the declaration identified few needed steps as follows:

- encourage communities to consider for themselves what “progress” means in the 21st century;
- share best practices on the measurement of societal progress and increase the awareness of the need to do so using sound and reliable methodologies;
- stimulate international debate, based on solid statistical data and indicators, on both global issues of societal progress and comparisons of such progress;
- produce a broader, shared, public understanding of changing conditions, while highlighting areas of significant change or inadequate knowledge;
- advocate appropriate investment in building statistical capacity, especially in developing countries, to improve the availability of data and indicators needed to guide development programs and report on progress toward international goals, such as the Millennium Development Goals.

In the Arab region, the 3rd Arab Statistical Forum held in Sana'a, April 2007 recommended the active participation of the Arab countries in the global initiative lead by OECD in its 2nd World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy for Measuring and Fostering Progress of Societies, Istanbul, from 27 to 30 June 2007. A Panel of Arab Experts, composing of representatives from ESCWA, AITRS, PCBS, DOS, met in Amman on 12 June 2007, to discuss the preparation of a position paper on measuring and fostering progress in the Arab societies: towards an integration of Arab region in the global initiative of measuring progress². The final draft was then distributed to all Arab Heads of the National Statistical Offices (NSOs) for review, feedback and endorsement to be presented to the 2nd OECD World Forum.

A Reflection Group, composed of 26 representatives from 12 Arab countries and other international and regional organizations, met during the 2nd OECD World Forum, Istanbul (27-30 June 2007) to discuss the Position Paper. The Reflection Group recommended proposing a project for funding on PAN – ARAB position towards the international initiative on measuring and fostering progress of societies by developing a framework of core list of indicators, identifying availability, challenges and strategies to measuring progress in the Arab societies.

The main objective of Arab initiative is to positively interact with Istanbul Declaration emanating from the 2nd OECD World Forum and the 3rd Arab Statistical Forum, and to identify and integrate the Arab countries' perspective in the global initiative on measuring progress. This included a number of activities such as:

1. Organizing Steering Committee Meetings
2. Presenting the Framework of indicators for endorsement by the Heads of NSOs in the 1st Conference on Statistics and Development ;
3. Conducting a pilot survey in the Arab countries to identify gaps, challenges, and strategies for measuring progress through Arab Framework.
4. Develop related tools, handbook and database, for monitoring the framework.

These activities should lead to the following outputs:

- A final Framework of minimum set of indicators for the Arab countries
- A handbook on measuring progress of Arab societies to include definitions, quality of data and its sources, methods of advocacy and a road map for capacity building activities for statisticians and a variety of other stakeholders;
- A observatory for monitoring progress through establishing a central repository of data

But due to administrative and organizational difficulties at the leading organizations, this agenda did not move forward and few steps has been taken since then.

2. Role of official Statistics

Official statistics system is mandated to provide sound statistics on the demographic, social and

² ESWWA: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
AITRS: Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics.
PCBS: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
DOS: Jordan Department of Statistics

economic trend in the country. The selection of the statistical framework is usually under the authority of chief statisticians despite that there are general trend in the Arab region to follow the internationally recognized well established statistical frames, standards, classifications and indicators. The tendency to follow the international standards is motivated by two factors; lack of technical competence to introduce new initiatives and the unwillingness to go for risky initiatives. Therefore, chief statisticians seemed to envisage the conventional list of indicators supported with well defined methodology as a less risky alternative at least at this stage.

This tendency pushed most of the Arab statistical offices to follow the United Nations statistics division (UNSD), IMF, ILO, WHO and other United Nations organizations, and consequently not to accept materializing ideas before it is certified by the said organizations. This has also affected the boundaries of official statistics and bounded in terms of subjects and areas and bounded it as well from methodological point of view. This fact led to keeping the Arab region a bit behind the global initiative of measuring progress. The role of official statistics has been discussed in the latest meeting of the steering committee and the workshop held just after, and no consensus has been reached despite the recognition of the leading role of the national statistical offices of any national initiative to measure progress.

3. National Initiatives in the Arab region

While there is no specific experience or initiative that has been directly devoted to measuring progress, there are few experiences in the Arab region touched the subject. In particular, Jordan Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC) introduced a framework to measure the progress of the development in the country. This framework was based on the MDGs with specific customization to Jordan. In addition, Palestine launched one survey on measuring democratic governance and one survey on the quality of life and the perception of individuals towards the concept of happiness and satisfaction on certain dimensions of their lives. Kuwait is planning to hold a workshop on measuring progress in November 2009, and Morocco started developing a questionnaire to measure progress. In fact, these experiences were motivated by different reasons. While some of them were pushed by the government to bypass or integrate the HDI by showing progress in other areas. In particular, some governments were not happy with the outcome of the HDI as it does not show societal progress in some areas despite the tangible developments took place. Other countries wanted to argue the well recognized United Nations list of indicators which focus on the survival without giving enough attention on the quality of life. In all cases, these are good indications that more and more attention is being given to the issue of measuring progress in the Arab region despite the late time schedule when compared with other regions.

4. Assessment of Progress is far

Considering the socioeconomic and political Arab region context and the organizational setup of official statistics, we note that introducing new ideas and initiatives for measuring and disseminating new statistics are bound with three main limitations:

1. The well established recognized international standards and recommendations, which are seen as standards that could not be violated and/or argued at the national level.
2. Financial resources available for new initiatives and developing new ideas.
3. The competencies and capabilities to initiate new measures and/or approaches as a

result of the weak involvement of research centers and universities in the making and directions of the official statistical systems.

Therefore, one can observe that these limitations have substantially and negatively influenced the movement forward of the Arab agenda regarding measuring progress. In addition, most of discussions are still in closed circles dominated by official statisticians. It seems that Arab chief statisticians are neither in a position to give bigger role for civil society and research community in the making of official statistics, nor in a position to support civil society initiatives. They are skeptical on the role of national statistics offices and if such initiatives will add a value for the statistical systems. Henceforth, moving ahead is challenged with resistance and chief statisticians need the help of the international community to show different experiences and to give more exposure of Arab official statisticians to move the agenda ahead.

5. Conclusions

The effort in the Arab region towards interacting with the global initiative is still on the runway. While most of Arab statistical offices support the idea that the current indicators used to measure the progress in the Arab region suffer from major drawbacks and the international comparison might not be relevant and there is a need to go beyond these indicators, there hasn't been a consensus on the way ahead. Some chief statisticians are still skeptical on the role of official statistics in this initiative, and others are skeptical towards the timing of the engagement of the region in the global initiative.

It is not quite clear if a certain methodology is appropriate to all Arab countries, and there is still some argument on the quantitative measurement of progress. While some statisticians believe in the composite indicators in the form of multidimensional combination with appropriate weighting system; others believe that composite indicators do not solve the problem of the current indicators and do not give solutions for the challenges faced.

6. Way Ahead

At the end of the steering committee meeting held in Amman 3-4 October 2009, we were able to conclude a two-year programme to advocate for measuring progress in the Arab region. Most of the activities will be advocacy, enlightenment and educational. Few activities were devoted to practical measurement.

In fact this was the choice of the steering committee which preferred to move ahead slowly and gradually to avoid any steps that could lead to unnecessary implications on the project, particularly taking into consideration the surrounding sociopolitical environment. UNESCWA and AITRS will lead the project under the guidance of the steering committee. The project should of course go through some processes and paperwork within UNESCWA and AITRS but what has been achieved is fairly good at this stage. In two year time, we will be able to shape out the region's position and understanding of measuring progress and the way ahead.

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