

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Committee on Statistics

Seventh session

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Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*

Advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: progress made in support of the collective vision and framework for action by groups responsible for regional initiatives of the Committee on Statistics and by the secretariat

Reports of the 8th and 9th meetings of the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific**

Summary

The Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific was instated by the Committee on Statistics at its second session in 2010 with its scope and ambition level determined by the core set of economic statistics, endorsed by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific at its sixty-seventh session in 2011.

To ensure the continued relevance of the Programme, the Committee at its sixth session in 2018 recommended that the Regional Programme be aligned with the collective vision and framework of action, and extended to 2030. The present document contains the reports of the 8th and 9th meetings of the Steering Group held in 2019 and 2020 respectively. The Steering Group at these meetings deliberated and decided on approaches and actions to implement the most recent decisions by the Committee.

I. 8th meeting of the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

A. Participation

1. The 8th meeting of the Steering Group was held during the Asia-Pacific Economic Statistics Week 2019 in Bangkok on 21 June 2019. Steering Group members from the following countries were represented at the meeting: Bangladesh; Cambodia; China; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Republic of Korea; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Malaysia; Maldives; Mongolia; Papua New Guinea; Samoa; Singapore; Turkey and Viet Nam. Members from the following entities were also represented: Asian Development Bank (ADB),

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International Labour Organization (ILO), Pacific Community and United Nations Statistics Division. International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific also participated in the meeting. Representatives from Fiji, New Caledonia, Timor-Leste and Department for International Development (DFID) attended as observers

2. Two of the four co-chairs of the Steering Group, Mr. Mohd Yazid Kasim (Malaysia) and Ms. Wai Yee Yen (Singapore) chaired the sessions of the meeting.

B. Meeting objectives

3. The objectives of the meeting were as follows:

(a) Review recommendations by the sixth session of the Committee on Statistics on future implementation of the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, including the recommendation to review the Core Set of Economic Statistics which had served to define the scope and ambition level for the Programme during 2010–2018;

(b) Consideration of extending the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific to 2030 to facilitate alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

(c) Recommendation to apply the policy-data integration tool (EPIC) as a feature of future Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific implementation.

C. Decisions and resolutions

1. Issues raised by the Committee

4. The Steering Group deliberated on decisions and recommendations by the 6th Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Committee on Statistics including a proposal developed by the co-chairs on the future of the programme, and resolved that:

(a) The Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific be extended to 2030 to ensure alignment with 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development;

(b) A new programme matrix be developed by the co-chairs and in consultation with the Secretariat for consideration by the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific;

(c) Maintain the current core set of economic statistics as a definition of the scope of the regional programme but replace it with the objectives of the collective vision as the ambition level of the programme;

(d) The policy-data integration tool (EPIC) be integrated as a feature of future Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific implementation;

(e) Maintain the current task forces –Asia Pacific Economic Statistics and Capacity Screening and their activities.

2. Programme implementation and working arrangements

5. After adopting a proposal by the co-chairs on recasting the programme, the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of

Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific identified modalities of implementing the recast Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific as follows:

- (a) That the Co-chairs alongside the Secretariat develop a set of objectives and goals up to 2030 based on the proposal put forward;
- (b) Use of a community of practices as a modality for delivery of substantive work of the regional programme involving various economic statistics experts with the current Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific providing guidance;
- (c) That the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics week continues and act as a forum for sharing knowledge and developments in the field of economic statistics;
- (d) Promote the use of results of the capacity screening results in advocating for support towards economic statistics.

D. Updates on programme implementation

6. The steering group received updates from various countries and international partners on activities supporting the implementation of the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. These included:

- (a) Activities of the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics and the Capacity screening taskforces regarding the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week 2019 and country fact sheets of the second capacity screening exercise respectively;
- (b) Progress on the training package developed by ESCAP on basic economic economics that will be piloted in Maldives, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal and made available to all countries/institutions interested in conducting training programmes;
- (c) Progress on implementing the International Comparison Programme (ICP), trade statistics, business statistics, 2008 System of National Accounts (SNA) implementation, labour statistics including the 2018 International Conference of Labour Statistician and micro data access and use of the policy-data integration tool (EPIC) tool;
- (d) On-going global consultations on the future of economic statistics led by the United Nations Statistics Division with further consultations with Chief Statisticians of the ESCAP region expected at the SIAP management seminar in December 2019;
- (e) Strides in integrating new technologies such as big data/scanner data in compiling a select set of economic statistics including establishing special units in some national statistical offices to lead the adoption of emerging technologies associated with big data;
- (f) Various challenges in implementing the programme were cited and included: coordination of capacity building activities among different partners and limited skills to adopt new technologies to produce economic statistics.

II. 9th meeting of the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

A. Participation

7. The Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific convened its 9th meeting virtually on 19th June 2020. Steering Group members from the following countries were represented at the meeting: Australia; Bangladesh; Cambodia; China; Hong Kong, China; India; Malaysia; Maldives; Mongolia; New Zealand; Pakistan; Singapore; Turkey and Viet Nam. Steering Group members from ADB and Pacific Community also attended. Representatives from Myanmar, Maldives and the Philippines attended as observers.

8. The 9th meeting marked the 10th anniversary of the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. To examine results from ten years of regional collaboration and seek views on the future of the Programme, a survey was administered among Steering Group members prior to the meeting. Given the virtual modality of the meeting, preparations also included email consultations on draft decisions to be considered by the Steering Group.

B. Meeting objectives

9. The meeting was convened to:

- (a) Agree on priority areas for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics, 2021-2030;
- (b) Agree on priority Programme activities for 2021-2023;
- (c) Agree on Programme monitoring approach;
- (d) Agree on working modalities for the Steering Group;
- (e) Agree on draft terms of reference for the Steering Group, for consideration by the Committee on Statistics.

C. Reflections on the Programme and the coronavirus disease

10. The Steering group reflected on various areas of the programme that underpinned its success in the past ten years as captured by capacity screening exercises in 2014 and 2017 and the 2020 survey among its members. It was observed that over the last ten years, the programme has raised the profile of economic statistics across the Asia-Pacific region. Progress was noted in areas such as business registers, trade statistics, training and the formulation of national strategies for the development of statistics (NSDS). Despite the progress, challenges remain and include the need for continued awareness raising and the enhanced use of international manuals for production of economic statistics. Members noted that countries have diverse statistical needs and it remains important to ensure that individual countries contextualize the Programme at national level. Members acknowledged the importance of strengthening and supporting the capability of countries to produce economic statistics of national priority.

11. Members shared their experiences on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on production of economic statistics. The experiences reflected opportunities and challenges that may shape the Regional Programme

in the future. Countries encountered increased demand for economic statistics as users require timely data on key areas such as trade, tourism, prices and employment. While most countries continue to produce the planned economic statistics, changes in data collection mechanisms are plentiful due to health restrictions. Alternative measures include use of special diagnostic studies, telephone interviews and use of big data from the internet and banks to complement traditional collections to produce statistics on labour, livelihoods, tourism, industry, consumption and industry production amongst others.

12. With respect to opportunities, countries observed an increased demand for economic statistics during the pandemic which provides leeway to advocate the usefulness of economic statistics for making policy decisions. Similarly, members noted the pandemic has prompted reflection on modernizing data dissemination for example through enhanced visualization, online live feeds and dedicated online pages for COVID-19 related economic statistics to increase uptake and use of economic statistics.

13. COVID-19 provided opportunities for partnerships and collaboration among data users and producers. Specific examples were highlighted such as the collaboration between commercial banks and national statistical agencies to work together in producing macroeconomic forecasts including quarterly gross domestic product (GDP) in Pakistan. In other countries, such as New Zealand, national statistical agencies were able, through partnerships, to access high frequency data such as employment and transport and produce weekly data sets by working closely with other agencies.

14. One major challenge that members highlighted was the shift in balance between data accuracy and frequency caused by the pandemic. Some countries now produce weekly data on employment, transport, trade and border crossings, which was before the pandemic produced monthly. While this meets the current demand and has enabled statistical agencies to remain relevant during the pandemic, the added attention to two dimensions of statistical quality, relevance and frequency, raises issues with respect to a third quality dimension, accuracy.

15. The Asian Development Bank notified members that the International Comparison Programme 2020 (ICP) has been postponed to 2021 due to COVID-19.

D. Decisions

1. Current Programme issues: advocacy and dissemination, 2020

16. The Steering Group reiterated the importance of advocacy and dissemination of Programme results which were in even higher demand given the need for timely economic statistics to measure impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Steering Group decided that:

(a) Members of the Steering Group will advocate and disseminate Programme results and products between June 2020 and December 2020;

(b) Members of the Steering Group will share activities and experiences with advocacy and dissemination with the Steering Group in January 2021.

2. Future of the Programme

17. The Steering Group reflected on the future of the Programme and its alignment with “Advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a collective vision and framework of action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community”, as had been decided by the Committee on Statistics at its 2018 session. The Steering Group on this background made decisions on the Programme matrix, Programme activities, draft Terms of Reference for the Steering Group, and working modalities.

(a) Priority areas for a three-phased implementation of the Programme

18. The Steering Group agreed to the Programme matrix for the period 2021-2030, with a minor amendment – an addition of “the closing of capacity gaps” under focus area 1.2¹. The Steering Group agreed that an implementation plan for each of the three phases will be developed in January 2021, January 2024, January 2027, respectively.

19. The programme matrix is available here: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/02_Proposed_RPES_Programme_Matrix_9th_SGRPES_19Jun20.pdf.

(b) Priority activities for the first phase of the Programme, 2021–2023

20. The Steering Group decided to:

(a) Form a Task Team comprising the four Co-chairs of the Steering Group and the Secretariat to develop a list of Programme activities for the first phase of the Programme (2021–2023);

(b) In drafting the activity list, the Task Team will:

(i) Take into consideration suggestions received from Steering Group members during past consultations as reflected in the survey of members;

(ii) Include COVID-19 related issues as leverage point for promotional activities.

21. A first draft list of Programme activities will be shared for comments by Steering Group members in October 2020. The final draft list of Programme activities will be considered for approval by the Steering Group in January 2021.

(c) Terms of Reference for the Steering Group, 2021–2030

22. The Steering Group approved the proposed Terms of Reference for onwards submission and approval by the Bureau of the Committee on Statistics, with two amendments: (a) Change paragraph 7 from “The membership shall include representatives from central banks and ministries of finance ... “ to “The membership may include representatives from central banks and ministries of finance ... “; (b) Include a reference to the Declaration on Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind in Paragraph 2.

23. Upon the approval of the new terms of reference, the Secretariat will contact countries (through the heads of the national statistical office) and development partners inviting nominations of qualified experts to the Steering Group.

(d) Modalities of work of the Steering Group

24. The Steering Group noted most of its work will be done through electronic means using a variety of modalities and arrangements including task teams. The Steering Group also expressed a need to maintain forums such as the Asia Pacific Statistics Week as one effective delivery mechanism of the Regional Programme.

¹ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/03_TOR_for_SGRPES_2021-2030__draft_9th_SGRPES_19Jun20.pdf.

25. The Steering Group decided to:
- (a) Form a task team comprising the four Co-chairs and the Secretariat to draft a list of working modalities to implement priority activities for the first phase of the programme (2021–2023);
 - (b) Convene a virtual meeting in January 2021 to:
 - (i) Share activities and experiences with advocacy and dissemination of Programme results and products;
 - (ii) Agree on the list of Programme activities for the first phase of the Programme (2021–2023);
 - (iii) Agree on its modalities of work during the first phase of the Programme (2021–2023).
26. On (a) above, a first draft list of working modalities will be shared for comments by Steering Group members in October 2020. On (b) above, members proposed the development of a standard template for countries to use when reporting on activities and experiences with advocacy and dissemination to the Steering Group.
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