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

Sixth session

Bangkok, 16–19 October 2018

Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*

Review of progress by the groups responsible for the regional initiatives of the Committee with respect to the collective vision and framework for action: economic statistics

Reports of the sixth and seventh meetings of the Steering Group for the Regional Programme on Economic Statistics**

Note by the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

Summary

At its third session, the Committee on Statistics endorsed the implementation plan for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, which recommended a phased implementation indicated by three milestone years, 2014, 2017 and 2020. The implementation plan builds on the Regional Programme which, along with a Core Set of Economic Statistics, was adopted by the Committee at its second session. The Core Set was subsequently endorsed by the Commission at its sixty-seventh session.

As part of the implementation plan, the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics provides an annual activity report and a report on results achieved at the end of each phase. The present report, which was prepared by the Steering Group in collaboration with the secretariat, presents progress made by the Programme, at the end of Phase II, milestone year 2017.

The Committee is invited to give guidance on priorities of the third phase including a proposal for the revision of the Core Set of Economic Statistics with respect to its relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals, its alignment with the Collective Vision and Framework for Action and its relevance considering results of the second capacity screening exercise.

* ESCAP/CST/2018/L.1/Rev.1.

** This present document is being issued without formal editing.

I. Introduction

1. The Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific (the Programme) is the longest-running initiative of the Committee, endorsed at its second session in 2010.¹ The 3-phase implementation plan completed its second phase at the end of 2017, leaving a third phase, 2018-2020, before its planned end of 2020.

2. A Core Set of Economic Statistics reflects the scope and ambition of the Programme, and functions as reference for progress monitoring. The Core Set was endorsed by the Commission in 2011 as a regional framework to focus efforts, coordinate training and mobilize donor support for capacity-building of national statistical systems to produce and disseminate economic statistics in line with international standards.² This is further elaborated in the implementation plan for the Programme, which focuses support around four areas: advocacy, coordination, statistical infrastructure and skills.³

3. The Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific (the Steering Group) guides the implementation of the Programme and implements core regional activities through Taskforces. These include the Taskforce for the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics (APES) Week, an annual forum to produce and share practical research on the improvement of economic statistics, which has been organized in 2016, 2017 and 2018⁴ and a Taskforce designing and advising on the application of a “capacity screening tool.”

4. The Steering Group is currently composed of the following member States and international agencies: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong China, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Samoa, Singapore, Turkey, Viet Nam, ADB, ILO, IMF, Pacific Community and United Nations Statistics Division.

5. The present document provides information on discussions by the Steering Group at its 6th and 7th held in Bangkok on the 26th of May 2017 and 10th of May 2018 respectively.

II. The 6th Meeting of the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

A. Participation

6. The sixth meeting of the Steering Group was held during the Asia-Pacific Economic Statistics Week 2017 in Bangkok on 26 May 2017. Steering Group members from the following countries were represented at the meeting: Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Samoa, Singapore, Turkey and Viet Nam. Members from the following entities were also represented: The Asia-Pacific Regional Steering Committee of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural

¹ See E/ESCAP/67/12, decision 2/6.

² ESCAP resolution 67/10.

³ E/ESCAP/CST(3)/CRP.1.

⁴ <http://communities.unescap.org/asia-pacific-economic-statistics/asia-pacific-economic-statistics-week-apes>.

Statistics (represented by the Philippines), ADB, ILO, Pacific Community and United Nations Statistics Division. IMF and Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific also participated in the meeting.

7. The four co-chairs of the Steering Group, Mr Jonathon Khoo (Australia), Mr Fazrul Azlan Othman (Malaysia), Mr Bahrawar Jan (Pakistan), and Ms Suzanne Wong (Singapore) chaired the sessions of the meeting.

B. Meeting objectives

8. The objectives of the meeting were as follows:
- i. Assess the progress and agree on next steps for the four Taskforces of the Steering Group;
 - ii. Discuss the approaches for strengthening in-country capacity for economic statistics training, and make recommendations on potential contributions or involvement by the Steering Group and other development partners;
 - iii. Decide on the future work of the Steering Group: review the effectiveness of current working arrangements; consider alternative working modalities; consider the need for additional Taskforces.

C. Activities of Taskforces

Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week Taskforce

9. Based on the success of the organizing arrangements for the 2017 Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week, it was decided to continue the Taskforce for the organization of a 2018 Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week. For the 2018 Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week, Malaysia will be the Taskforce lead, and membership will include India, Indonesia, Turkey, United Nations Statistics Division and ESCAP.

10. The Taskforce was requested to consider the following in organizing the 2018 Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week 2018:
- i. Feed-back from the 2017 Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week participants;
http://communities.unescap.org/system/files/summary_feed-back_from_the_participants.docx;
 - ii. Options for conducting selected sessions in parallel, which would enable participants to customize their participation to their respective areas of interest;
 - iii. Invitation of members of relevant global groups, such as the Global Working Group on Big Data, as contributors of papers or as session organizers;
 - iv. Timing of the 2018 Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week to avoid important holidays in the region, to the extent possible.

11. The Taskforce was also requested to consult all Steering Group members before making a final decision on the theme for 2018 Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week.

12. The Steering Group further requested the Taskforce explore and recommend options for making further use of papers prepared for the Asia

Pacific Economic Statistics Week, including adding exposure to the research conducted. Considering many challenges presented in the papers require management level intervention to be addressed, added use may also involve turning the papers into knowledge products of interest to Chief Statisticians, policy makers or other management level audience

Capacity Screening Taskforce

13. Following the successful completion of the Programme's Capacity Screening Tool, it was decided the Taskforce would continue with adjusted terms of reference to reflect its main responsibility, and henceforward would be to make recommendations on the processing and use of the information collected through the Tool.

14. Singapore will continue as the Taskforce lead and membership will include China, Japan, Turkey (National Statistical Office and Central Bank), Pacific Community and ESCAP.

15. The Taskforce, with support from the secretariat, was requested to:

- i. Prepare a summary report on the capacity screening by September 2017, including comparison with the results of the 2013 capacity screening as well as comparison among countries and sub-regions.
- ii. Ensure wide dissemination of the capacity screening results, including with development partners.
- iii. Consider the role of national focal points for the Programme, in disseminating the capacity screening results.
- iv. Consider suitable forums at the national, sub-regional, regional and global levels for presentation and discussion of the capacity screening results.
- v. Provide guidance on the type of knowledge products that would be suitable to different audiences in terms of leveraging support for further statistics development and investment.

16. In considering options for knowledge products and dissemination means and forums, bear in mind the leveraging power of Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development vis-à-vis policy-makers.

Quality Assurance Frameworks Taskforce

17. It was decided the Taskforce would continue its ongoing work to prepare country case studies. Australia will continue as the Taskforce lead and membership include Armenia, India, Maldives, Samoa, Turkey (Central Bank), the Philippines and ESCAP.

18. The Steering Group put forward some suggestions for future work of the Quality Assurance Frameworks Taskforce:

- i. Consider added emphasis on country case studies on the practical application of quality assurance frameworks, such as quality management related to the use of Big Data, to CPI production, to the conduct of censuses and surveys, etc.

- ii. Documentation of experiences with tools for quality management that are transferable across statistical domains and countries, such as the use of quality gates at points in the statistical business process.
- iii. Organization of events to present and share quality management or assessment practices, including those pertaining to dissemination, user satisfaction surveys, and the functioning of advisory or audit committees.

19. The Steering Group requested the Taskforce to consider future work of the Taskforce based on the results from the 2017 capacity screening once they become available.

Statistical Business Registers Taskforce

20. In accordance with its terms of reference, the Taskforce on Statistical Business Registers had reviewed existing guidance material, with a view to identifying gaps that could be addressed by adding guidance of relevance to countries in Asia and the Pacific. A preliminary conclusion was reached that sufficient material was already available and on this basis, a proposal for a revised terms of reference was put forward to the Steering Group. The Steering Group did not reach consensus on the proposed revised terms of reference.

21. The Steering Group agreed the Taskforce would continue, but recognized the need to revisit the terms of reference. In addition, the Steering Group agreed the current members of the Taskforce (Armenia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Republic of Korea, ADB, Pacific Community and ESCAP), with Pakistan as the lead and with Mongolia and the Republic of Korea as additional members, would develop new draft terms of reference.

22. The Steering Group requested the Taskforce to:

- i. Develop revised draft terms of reference for its work, considering the proposal made by the Taskforce as well as suggestions made by Steering Group members during the meeting. The terms of reference should include two concrete outputs that could feasibly be delivered by April 2018.
- ii. Circulate the revised terms of reference to the Steering Group for comments and subsequent agreement by the co-chairs of the Steering Group.
- iii. Initiate the work based on the agreed terms of reference, possibly with further expanded or revised membership.

D. Decisions on taskforces

23. All four Taskforces will continue and present their work for review by the Steering Group at its seventh meeting. At its seventh meeting, the Steering Group will also consider the future work and functioning of each Taskforce.

24. Each Taskforce will review their current terms of reference and seek concurrence by the four co-Chairs of any revisions necessary to appropriately capture their work during 2017-2018. The taskforce on Statistical Business Registers will develop new terms of reference in accordance with the specific decisions made on the matter

25. The current membership of the four Taskforces will continue, with United Nations Statistics Division added as a member of the Taskforce on the

2018 Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week, and Mongolia added as a member of the Taskforce on Statistical Business Registers.

26. The secretariat will, by email, solicit confirmation from current Taskforce members of their continued interest, and invite other Steering Group members to join one or more Taskforces. Steering Group members were encouraged to consult and recommend experts beyond the current membership of the Steering Group as members of specific Taskforces.

27. Based on the decisions pertaining to the Taskforce on Statistical Business Registers (see above), communications related to its future membership will be issued upon agreement on its new terms of reference.

E. Strengthening national capacity to deliver economic statistics training

28. Based on the objectives of the Programme, the Steering Group considered options for strengthening national capacity for the delivery of economic statistics training, and the potential role of the Steering Group in supporting such developments.

29. To inspire and inform the deliberations, the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP) presented an overview of statistics training and training institutions in the region, and Steering Group members from Malaysia and the Philippines presented on the functioning of their respective national statistical training institutions. International organizations including ADB, IMF, Pacific Community and United Nations Statistics Division also provided their reflections on the matter, including information on ongoing and planned training activities.

30. Based on the presentation made by the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific, it was suggested the Steering Group may work with and through the Network for the Coordination of Statistical Training in Asia and the Pacific⁵ to support strengthening of national capacity for delivery of statistical training.

31. The Steering Group requested the Co-Chairs to further discuss the matter at the next meeting of the leadership of the Steering Group, in consultation with the Secretariat and the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific.

F. Arrangements for the future work of the Steering Group

32. The Steering Group expressed satisfaction with the working arrangements instituted at its fifth meeting in 2016, and agreed to continue the collective leadership arrangement with four Co-Chairs.

33. The Steering Group requested the Co-Chairs, with the support of the secretariat, to meet regularly to update and exchange views and advice on the work of the Taskforces and broader Programme implementation.

34. Several topics were suggested for future Taskforces of the Steering Group, including data integration, natural resource accounting, Big Data and globalisation.

35. It was agreed to hold decisions on this given (a) the need for existing Taskforces to deliver; (b) the cross-cutting nature of the suggested topics; and

⁵ ESCAP/CST/2018/4.

(c) bearing in mind the pending decisions by the Bureau of the Committee on Statistics concerning the implementation of decisions made by the Committee at its fifth session held in December 2016, as contained in the document: *Advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community*.⁶

III. The 7th Meeting of the Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

A. Participation

36. The seventh meeting of the Steering Group was held in Bangkok on 10 May 2018. Steering Group members from Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong China, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Samoa, Singapore, Turkey, Viet Nam, ADB, ILO, IMF, the Pacific Community and United Nations Statistics Division participated in the meeting.

37. Three of the four co-chairs of the Steering Group: Mr Mohd Yazid Kasim (Malaysia), Mr Bahrawar Jan (Pakistan), and Ms Suzanne Wong (Singapore), as well as Steering Group members from India (Dr Gobinda Prasad Samanta) and Turkey (Ms Aycan Ozek) chaired sessions of the meeting.

B. Meeting objectives

38. The meeting was convened to review the progress of the Programme at the end of Phase II. Specifically, the objectives of the meeting were to:

- (i) Review the status of Programme implementation as at end of Phase II (2017);
- (ii) Review the work of Taskforces established by the Steering Group;
- (iii) Review and make recommendations on future work arrangements for the Steering Group and phase III of the Programme; and
- (iv) Identify issues to report to the Committee on Statistics at its 6th session in October 2018.

C. Programme Results

39. The Steering Group reviewed progress in Programme implementation based on reports by countries, development partners and the secretariat. The Steering Group also reviewed the preliminary results of capacity screening which was undertaken in 2017 and involved administration of a survey questionnaire (the “capacity screening tool”) to all countries in the region. The capacity screening tool was applied also in 2013 to establish a baseline for Programme implementation.

⁶ E/ESCAP/CST(5)/1/Rev.1, available at http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/E.ESCAP_CST%285%29.1.Rev_.1.Collective_Vision.English.pdf.

40. Results from the capacity screening show most countries have made progress in producing the Core Set of Economic Statistics. On average, Asia-Pacific countries produce 72 per cent of the Core Set. The Pacific sub-region produces less than 50 per cent of Core Set items, the lowest of the five Asia-Pacific sub-regions;⁷ North and Central Asia produces on average 90 per cent of the Core Set items, the highest among the five sub-regions.

41. Key findings from the 2017 capacity screening tool include:

- i. Substantial variation between the regions was noted – with Pacific (47 per cent) and South and South West-Asia (63 per cent) lower than the other regions of ESCAP in terms of production and dissemination of the Core Set;
- ii. High income sub-regions of ESCAP produce and disseminate a larger proportion of the Core Set;
- iii. Almost all regions produce Core Set items related to consumer price indices and GDP, but gaps appear in other indicators such as commodities, labour, short term indicators and trade indices.

42. The Steering Group noted with satisfaction the Programme is generally on track towards meeting its goals and objectives.

43. Noting the Programme is designed, owned and delivered by countries with support from development partners, the Steering Group pointed to the importance of integration of Programme objectives in national strategies for statistics development such as National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) and alignment with national development plans to ensure relevance and effectiveness of national implementation of the Programme.

Relevance of the Core Set of Economic Statistics

44. The Core Set reflects the aim and scope of the Programme and serves as the basis for Programme performance monitoring. The Steering Group observed while a majority of the Core Set are regularly produced by most countries, quality dimensions beyond availability and frequency remain an issue and is not captured in current Programme monitoring. The Steering Group also noted the Core Set had been designed prior to Agenda 2030 and hence lacked clear references or linkages to the Sustainable Development Goals, targets and indicators.

45. The Steering Group concluded the following activities remain key to successful Programme implementation:

- i. Continuous capacity building and training at the national level;
- ii. Closer engagement and coordination among national users and producers of economic statistics;
- iii. Active use by national statistical offices/central banks and others of the results of the capacity screening to advocate for resources and other support to economic statistics.

46. The Steering Group also requested the secretariat to continue its efforts to advocate and raise the profile of the Programme, including at events that bring together higher-level government officials to discuss Agenda 2030

⁷ ESCAP sub-regions are Pacific, East and North-East Asia, North and Central Asia, South and South West Asia, South East Asia.

implementation such as the high-level segment of the 6th session of the Committee on Statistics.

D. Activities of Taskforces

Capacity Screening Taskforce

47. The Steering Group expressed its appreciation to the Capacity Screening Taskforce and the secretariat for a job well done. Considering the issues experienced by the secretariat in administering the survey questionnaire and verifying and processing the responses, the Steering Group suggested the following approaches could be considered for Programme monitoring at the end of Phase III of the Programme:

- i. Supplementing or replacing the capacity screening tool with existing publicly available information;
- ii. Organizing workshops to facilitate and assist countries in responding to the capacity screening questionnaire;
- iii. Engaging national Chief Statisticians more directly in the capacity screening process to facilitate coordination of responses by the national focal points.

48. In addition, considering the observations made on the Core Set and its relevance and possible need for adjustment, the Steering Group noted final decisions on future Programme monitoring would be taken following advice by the Committee on Statistics at its 6th session.

Asia Pacific Economic Statistics (APES) Taskforce

49. The Steering Group congratulated the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Taskforce with another successfully organized Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week and strongly recommended the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week continue to be a central regional modality for Programme implementation.

50. The Steering Group made some recommendations and follow up actions as follows:

- i. Parallel sessions for the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics week;
- ii. Inclusion of capacity development events in the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics week;
- iii. Steering Group members making themselves available for review of papers for future Asia Pacific Economic Statistics seminars.

Statistical Business Registers and Quality Assurance Framework Taskforces

51. The Steering Group were advised by the Taskforces on Statistical Business Registers and Quality Assurance Frameworks had not progressed their work since the 6th meeting of the Steering Group. The Taskforces continued to find the two topics of high relevance to the Programme and requested the:

- i. Co-chairs explore best ways into how activities related to Statistical Business Registers and Quality Assurance Frameworks be best addressed in the work Programme,

- ii. The Taskforces on Statistical Business Registers and Quality Assurance Frameworks be discontinued and their activities be integrated into other areas as per the decisions of the co-chairs in (i) above.

E. Recommendations for Phase III

52. Considering the results of the second capacity screening, the Steering Group acknowledged that the Core Set remains relevant in terms of reflecting priority economic statistics outputs, but some changes are necessary to reflect emerging data needs to support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Collective Vision and Framework for Action in the third phase of the Programme. The meeting also observed some Core Set items are now produced by all countries and hence may be less useful to guide a capacity development programme such as the Programme whose goal includes addressing existing gaps.

53. In view of emerging data needs highlighted above, the Steering Group recommended a review of the Core Set be made to focus on priority elements countries struggle to produce, and to align the revised Core Set with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Collective Vision and Framework for Action.

54. The Steering Group recognised countries in the region have varying capabilities to produce the Core Set and recommended continuation of capacity building activities at country level using results of the capacity screening tool as a guide. Considering such disparities in capabilities, the Steering Group recommended intensification of data quality in the capacity screening tool through improved coordination with Chief Statisticians and national focal points.

55. The Steering Group recommended the co-chairs initiate a process of developing a mechanism of raising awareness about the Programme through special studies/reviews and Taskforce activities to track the impact of Programme activities across countries.

56. Efforts by the Steering Group under the leadership of the co-chairs, with secretariat support, should be intensified to raise awareness about the results of capacity screening and use them to engage users and key decisions makers in mobilising support for economic statistics development.

F. Follow-up actions

57. The Steering Group recommends your follow up actions.

- i. Subject to the guidance of the Committee, the co-chairs of the Steering Group consider a comprehensive review by June 2019 of the Core Set of Economic Statistics to ensure its relevance and needs of users. Modalities of the review could potentially include:
 1. Constituting a taskforce or sub-group within the Steering Group to assess the Core Set of Economic Statistics by reviewing the capacity screening results and various proceedings and suggestions from the Asia Pacific Economic Statistics Week component;

2. Engaging with the Network for the Coordination of Statistical Training in Asia and the Pacific on emerging training needs and review different sub-regional and regional capacity building initiatives relating to economic statistics to pick common indicators of national interest with respect to monitoring national development strategies.
- ii. The co-chairs, with the support of the secretariat, should take deliberate steps to raise awareness of the Programme, its successes, with respect to increased ability to produce the Core Set of Economic Statistics by countries through:
 1. Engagement with development partners and key stakeholders at various national/regional and international forums such as the Committee on Statistics and others;
 2. Lead the development, documentation and dissemination of Programme success stories through Taskforces and use them to reach out to users and key decision makers through different communication channels.
 - iii. The co-chairs initiate integration of the Programme with the Sustainable Development Goals in conjunction with the review of the Core Set of Economic Statistics in Phase III of the Programme and draw their attention to the Collective Vision and Framework for Action.
 - iv. The Secretariat facilitate inter-country capacity building and training by countries with strong expertise/resources using the results of the capacity screening as a tool to identify NSSs in great need of support and those with strong expertise/resources to offer.

IV. Issues for consideration by the 6th session of the committee

58. Upon considering discussions for the 6th and 7th meetings of the Steering Group, the following issues are raised for consideration by the 6th Session of the Committee on Statistics as follows:

- i. A proposal for the Committee to agree to the revision of the Core Set of Economic Statistics with respect to its relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals, its alignment with the Collective Vision and Framework for Action and its relevance considering results of the second capacity screening exercise;
- ii. Guidance on key priorities of the third phase of the Programme such as data quality improvements and monitoring Programme impacts;
- iii. Consideration of the results of the capacity screening to advocate for more support from governments and other partners for economic statistics.
- iv. Provide any other necessary reflections and guidance on the work of the Steering Group including its achievements.