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Committee on Statistics

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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

Achievements of the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific: highlighted results from the 2017 capacity screening activity and implications for the future implementation of the Programme**

Summary

The present document provides a summary of the key findings of the 2017 capacity screening which was conducted to assess the progress of implementation of the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. Based on the results, the document puts forward reflections on future Programme implementation and monitoring.

The capacity screening found gaps in statistical infrastructure and institutional aspects of national statistical systems present key obstacles to long-term improvement of economic statistics. The capacity screening also indicated while most countries produce a basic range of economic statistics, there is much room for quality improvements. Future Programme implementation and monitoring may therefore be further directed towards strengthening these issues.

The Committee is invited to make use of the information in the present document in its deliberations of the action items contained in documents ESCAP/CST/2018/1 and ESCAP/CST/2018/2.

* 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 was endorsed by the Committee at its second session in 2010.¹ The three-phase implementation plan completed its second phase at the end of 2017, leaving a third phase, 2018-2020, before its planned end of 2020. The implementation plan focuses on four outputs: advocacy, coordination, statistical infrastructure and skills.²

2. The Core Set of Economic Statistics reflects the scope and ambition of the Programme and functions as the reference for progress monitoring. The Core Set includes 31 items agreed to represent a basic range of economic statistics appropriate for focusing regional work and recommended as a framework and guide for the development of national economic statistics.³

3. The Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific oversees the implementation of the Programme. The Steering Group has, through Task Forces, guided Programme monitoring through designing and advising on the application and administration of a questionnaire, referred to as the “capacity screening tool”.

4. The capacity screening tool was applied to conduct a survey on capacity for national economic statistics in Asia and the Pacific in 2013 and 2017, the end year of the first and second implementation phase of the Programme.⁴ Fifty-one and 50 countries and areas responded to the questionnaire in 2013 and 2017, respectively. Forty-six countries and areas responded in both rounds and for these respondents, it is therefore possible to assess improvements from 2013 to 2017. The summary findings provided below refer unless otherwise stated to the responses provided by these 46 countries.⁵

II. Progress of the programme

A. Key findings from the capacity screening

5. The capacity screening results showed in 2017, countries produced on average 21.8 of the 31 Core Set items. This represents an increase of 1.2 Core Set items from 2013 to 2017. An increase, albeit of varying magnitude, was reported across all sub-regions and across all ESCAP country income groupings.⁶

6. The results show substantial differences among countries, with one country producing only 5 Core Set items and four countries producing all 31 Core Set items.

7. Regression analysis of the count of Core Set items against a number of

¹ See E/ESCAP/67/12, decision 2/6.

² E/ESCAP/CST(3)/CRP.1.

³ ESCAP resolution 67/10.

⁴ The 2013 and 2017 surveys were administered by the ESCAP secretariat, with extensive support by the Pacific Community (SPC).

⁵ The full reports on the 2013 and 2017 capacity screenings are available at <http://communities.unescap.org/asia-pacific-economic-statistics/national-summaries-capacity-screening-findings>.

⁶ See http://data.unescap.org/escap_stat/#methodDefinition for a listing of countries in the ESCAP sub-regions and income groupings.

explanatory variables (Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, population size, population groupings, income groupings, and subregions) identified population size to be the primary determinant for the difference between countries. While GDP per capita was also statistically significant, it was the cause of far less of the variance among countries than population. Once GDP per capita and population were considered, only the North and Central Asian subregion was statistically significant. In 2017, countries in this subregion produced on average 6.2 Core Set items more than what would be expected given their GDP and population size.

8. With two exceptions (Afghanistan and Papua New Guinea), countries with a population of over one million produced on average 27.7 Core Set items in 2017. For countries with less than a million people, the average was 13.9 Core Set items.

9. Looking at GDP per capita, the 11 middle-income countries in the region produced on average fewer Core Set items than the region's low income and lower middle-income countries (2017). This illustrates population size is more important than GDP as an explanatory variable.

10. The capacity screening also contained questions on statistical infrastructure and institutional aspects of the national statistical system. These included statistical law; standards and classifications; organizational structure; quality assurance; statistical registers, censuses and surveys; human resources; and statistical training.

11. All but one of the 50 respondents in 2017 reported having a statistical act in place. All these 49 statistical acts include provisions on the protection of confidentiality of respondents' information, 47 include provisions on transparency and 46 have provisions to protect the professional independence of official statistics.

12. Thirty-six of the 49 statistical acts were reported to include provisions allowing agencies in the national statistical system to acquire administrative data for statistical purposes. Twenty-five respondents indicated they planned to change the statistical act, with the most common reason being the current statistical act did not provide sufficient access to administrative data.

13. Responses on statistical infrastructure were challenging to interpret and compare due to the qualitative nature of the questions; nevertheless, a pattern emerges. Fifteen respondents to the 2017 questionnaire reported they did not have a statistical business register nor a recent economic census. A further eight respondents noted they did not conduct regular establishment surveys. Thus, for almost half of the respondents, further foundational work is needed for quality economic statistics to be produced on a regular basis. Information provided by Steering Group members and other country representatives during activities of the Regional Programme indicate this may be an issue for an even larger number of countries.

14. Responses to questions surrounding human resources and skills add to the same pattern, with more than half of the respondents indicating human resources and training are highly insufficient for sustaining the necessary staff and expertise for regular production of quality economic statistics.

B. Implications for future Programme implementation

15. The results of the capacity screening show nearly all countries with a population of more than one million people produce nearly all 31 Core Set

items. This means the Committee's goal of all countries producing a basic range of economic statistics by 2020 was close to being achieved already in 2017, with the notable exception of several countries and areas with small populations. This key finding is cause for reflection about the aim and focus of the Programme towards 2020, and beyond.

16. It is important to note quality (beyond availability and frequency) of the produced Core Set items was not assessed through the capacity screening. This was a deliberate choice made by the Steering Group, given the difficulty of measuring quality and the need to minimize respondent burden.

17. Producing high quality official economic statistics requires statistical infrastructure such as an effective statistical law, surveys, registers, and staff with the required abilities and skills. While the findings do not shed light on the quality of each Core Set item, responses to the infrastructure and institutional components of the questionnaire point to serious gaps in these fundamentals for production of quality statistics.

18. As such, the findings to some extent verify the approach of the Programme implementation plan with its focus on skills, statistical infrastructure, communication and advocacy. However, a deepened focus on skills and infrastructure could be considered for future Programme implementation. Efforts on communication and advocacy could possibly be taken up together with other initiatives of the Committee as part of joint implementation of the Collective Vision and Framework for Action.

19. The findings of the capacity screening are also cause for reflection on the relevance and usefulness of the Core Set as defining the ambition level and focusing activities within the Programme. Regional level Programme activities have, since its inception, focused mostly on strengthening underlying capacity constraints. Nonetheless, the Core Set continues to be used for communicating and advocating the Programme. Given the high visibility of the Sustainable Development Goals, it could be considered revising the Core Set to comprise statistical outputs that directly and visibly link to Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

20. The findings also indicate a differentiated strategy may be adopted for small and large countries. This was considered in the early Programme design phase but was departed from to allow flexibility at the national level. Population size has, however, come out as the key determinant for how many Core Set items a country produces. This raises questions about the usefulness of the Core Set as indicated above, but also indicates ambition levels may vary with country size. Given the returns to scale in statistics production, producing a smaller number of economic statistics can be a rational choice and may not be due to lack of ability in producing them.

21. Given the capacity screening findings, one component of the Programme may in future be developed for countries with less than one million inhabitants. The component could be developed with distinct goals, outcomes and with a strategy that takes into account that the majority of countries in the region with less than a million people are part of the Pacific subregion.

22. Looking forward, it is important monitoring information captures Programme achievements and can be used to direct future efforts by national statistical offices and development partners. Based on the experiences so far, this could entail better capturing gaps in statistical infrastructure and institutional aspects, and possibly paying less attention to quantitative results on the production of specific statistical outputs.

23. On the other hand, bearing in mind the need for monitoring information to also be useful for advocacy and fundraising purposes, information on availability and quality of priority economic statistics, such as for Agenda 2030 monitoring, is required and hugely important. This need could possibly be served through monitoring of the Collective Vision and Framework for Action, and taken up together with other initiatives of the Committee.
