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

### Third session

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Item 2(b) of the provisional agenda\*

### Strategic direction and functioning of the Committee on Statistics: Review of the functioning of the Committee

## Review of the functioning of the Committee on Statistics\*\*

### Note by the Bureau

#### Summary

The present document reviews the functioning of the Committee since its inaugural session, in 2009. It highlights three major issues: (a) the growing demand for timely decisions; (b) the need to improve integration and coordination within national statistical systems to address common challenges; and (c) the reporting line of the Governing Council of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific.

The Committee may wish to discuss and decide on issues related to its functioning, and the outcome of the discussions can feed into the deliberations of the Commission at its sixty-ninth session.

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\* E/ESCAP/CST(3)/L.1/Rev.1.

\*\* Late submission due to the timing of expert consultations.

## I. Introduction

1. The Committee on Statistics of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific was established by virtue of Commission resolution 64/1 of 30 April 2008.<sup>1</sup> The Committee on Statistics is one of eight subsidiary committees that form part of the revised conference structure of the Commission, which also includes the Governing Council of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP). Resolution 64/1 also requires a review of the revised conference structure, including its subsidiary structure, at the sixty-ninth session of the Commission, in 2013, on the basis of the analysis of the functioning of the conference structure. In discussing the findings of a mid-term review of the functioning of the revised conference structure at its sixty-seventh session, in 2011, the Commission requested the Executive Secretary to carry out further study and analysis of several issues regarding the functioning of the conference structure and submit recommendations for improvements at the sixth-ninth session. These issues include “the governance structure of the regional institutions, including the respective roles and relevant mandates of the Commission, the committees and the governing councils” (see E/ESCAP/67/15).

2. The present document reviews the functioning of the Committee on Statistics since its inaugural session, in 2009. It highlights three major issues: (a) the growing demand for timely decisions; (b) the need to improve integration and coordination within national statistical systems to address common challenges; and (c) the reporting line of the Governing Council of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific. This is done by providing an overview of the attendance at the two Committee sessions as well as the focus of the decisions and recommendations and their implementation. The outcomes of the discussion can feed into the deliberations of the Commission at its sixty-ninth session.

## II. The first and second Committee sessions

### A. Mandates of the Committee

3. As the intergovernmental forum on statistics development in Asia and the Pacific, the Committee on Statistics is preceded by the Regional Conference of Statisticians of Asia and the Far East (1951-1956), the Conference of Asian Statisticians (1957-1973), the Committee on Statistics (1974-1978; 1992-2002), the Committee on Development Planning and Statistics (1989), and the Committee on Poverty Reduction (2003-2007).

4. Commission resolution 64/1 assigns a broad range of mandates to the eight sectoral committees of the Commission. The common tasks range from reviewing and analysing regional trends to promoting regional dialogues and exchanging experiences on policies and programmes, as well as promoting a collaborative approach to addressing the development challenges of the region, where appropriate, between Governments and civil society, the private sector and United Nations and other international institutions at the regional and subregional levels.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2008, Supplement 19* (E/2008/39-E/ESCAP/64/39), chap. IV, sect. A.

5. In addition, the Committee on Statistics received the following specific mandates: (a) tracking key socioeconomic and environmental trends in the ESCAP region, especially progress towards the Millennium Development Goals; (b) identifying data requirements for economic, social and environmental analysis in accordance with internationally agreed standards and good practices; and (c) capacity-building for national statistical offices (NSOs) in the ESCAP region to produce, disseminate and analyse data in accordance with internationally agreed standards and good practices. The Committee is also required to provide the secretariat, including its regional institutions, with guidance in reviewing the proposed strategic framework and programme of work.<sup>2</sup>

6. The Committee meets once per biennium, with the outcomes of each session reported to the Commission for consideration. Recommendations and decisions of the Committee would become binding on member States and the secretariat once endorsed by the Commission through a decision or a resolution.

7. The Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP) is one of five regional institutions that are part of the revised conference structure of the Commission. While also part of the statistics subprogramme of ESCAP, SIAP has a Governing Council that meets annually to review the administration and financial status of the Institute and the implementation of the programme of work. The Governing Council reports directly to the Commission. Membership of the Governing Council consists of Japan (host country) and eight other members and associate members of ESCAP elected by the Commission. The Governing Council meets once a year and is attended by representatives of the member countries who, in most cases, are officers designated by the heads of the NSOs of member countries.

## **B. Attendance**

8. The Committee has thus far held two sessions since its establishment (4 to 6 February 2009 and 12 to 14 December 2012) with more than half of the 62 members and associate members of the Commission attending. Attendance levels have been generally high for members from South-East Asia (all attended the first session and 82 per cent attended the second), East and North-East Asia (86 per cent for both sessions) and South and South-West Asia (90 per cent for the first session and 70 per cent for the second). In contrast, attendance levels have been much lower for member States from the North and Central Asia (33 per cent for the first session and 44 per cent for the second). Attendance was particularly low among the 21 Pacific member States — four of them attended the first session and eight the second session (see table). Aside from the member States, representatives from subregional, regional as well as global organizations that work in official statistics also attended both sessions.

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<sup>2</sup> For the terms of reference of the Committee, see E/ESCAP/CST/1.

Table  
**Attendance at the first and second Committee sessions**  
 (Number of regional members by subregion)

	Total number	First session		Second session	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
East and North-East Asia	7	6	86	6	86
North and Central Asia	9	3	33	4	44
Pacific	21	4	19	8	38
South-East Asia	11	11	100	9	82
South and South-West Asia	10	9	90	7	70
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>59</b>

*Note:* ESCAP membership also includes four countries that are outside the Asia-Pacific region: France; Netherlands; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; and United States of America.

9. The level of attendance may reflect the effects of a combination of factors, including the travel budget available for national delegations, involvement of member States in the other activities of the Committee, as well as the participation of the member States in other regional or subregional intergovernmental forums. For instance, travel expenses from the Pacific to Bangkok, the venue of the two Committee sessions, tend to be more costly, which might be a particular burden for many of the smaller member States in the subregion. At the same time, the Pacific island nations are also members of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, which is quite active in the development of official statistics in the subregion. Similarly, countries in the North and Central Asian subregion are also members of the Economic Commission for Europe, as well as the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States. On the other hand, attendance at the two Committee sessions was high among member States from South-East Asia, many of which participate in other activities of the Committee, despite the fact that these countries are also members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which has its own statistics programme.

10. The delegations of the member States to the Committee sessions are generally headed by the chief statistician, the head of the government ministry overseeing the NSO or the most senior statistician in the NSO, and consist of staff members of the NSO. Typically, the head of the delegation has the authority and expertise to present the position of the national statistical system and plays an important role in coordinating the diverse institutions involved in producing official statistics at the national level. It is also appropriate for heads of statistical services of international agencies and senior representatives of other intergovernmental entities engaged in the development and funding of official statistics to inform the Committee about their work and to heed its concerns. Following participation in a Committee session, the head of the delegation is responsible for reporting to the appropriate national authorities and for helping disseminate, at the country level, the outcomes of the Committee session to the institutions concerned with statistics.

11. The Committee elects a Bureau at each formal session to carry out the functions of the Committee during the intersessional period, a unique feature within the conference structure of ESCAP. The Bureau oversees the activities of the Statistics Division of the ESCAP secretariat related to the implementation of the decisions of the Committee, guides the development of the provisional agenda of each Committee session, makes recommendations to the Committee to establish working groups, task forces or any other instruments deemed necessary for furthering the functions of the Committee and implementing its decisions through the secretariat. The Bureau membership comprises the Chair (usually the Chair of the Committee), three Vice-Chairs and up to three other members, one of whom acts as the Rapporteur of the Committee during the formal session. In electing the Bureau, due consideration is given to geographic representation.<sup>3</sup>

### C. Work programme to shape regional statistics development

12. At its inaugural session, the Committee reviewed major issues related to statistics in the Asia-Pacific region, including: statistical development, regional cooperation and capacity-building; gender statistics; economic statistics; vital statistics; statistics on measuring the progress of societies; and programme planning for the Statistics Division of ESCAP. The Committee decided to adopt a coordinating governance structure and to establish a technical advisory group to provide guidance on issues related to the development of economic statistics in the Asia-Pacific region. The Committee recommended actions in the following areas: statistical development, regional technical cooperation and capacity-building; vital statistics; measuring progress of societies; and programme planning.<sup>4</sup>

13. The Bureau, established at the first session, guided the setting of the agenda for the second session, which also underwent consultation with member States. Deliberations on substantive issues were structured as follows: (a) strategic direction of the Committee on Statistics, including its future work; (b) regional initiatives; (c) global initiatives; (d) coordination of statistical capacity-building activities; (e) reviewing progress in sectoral statistics; (f) report on the work of the Bureau and report of the Governing Council of SIAP; (g) future focus of the subprogramme; and (h) consideration of possible draft resolutions and decisions for submission to the Commission at its next session. This structure was also used to develop the agenda for the third Committee session, which was done under the guidance of the Bureau and in consultation with member States.

14. At its second session, the Committee built on the outcomes of the first in terms of expanding the overall scope of the Committee's work programme by setting two strategic goals: (a) ensuring that by 2020 all countries in the region would have the capacity to generate a basic range of population, economic, social and environmental statistics; and (b) creating a more adaptive and cost-effective information management environment for NSOs through stronger collaboration.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Committee has taken up work in population and social statistics as well as environment statistics. The achievement of these two goals would shape much of the Committee's work over the next decade.

<sup>3</sup> For the terms of reference of the Bureau, see E/ESCAP/CST/10, chap. I, sect. B, decision 1/1.

<sup>4</sup> For the report of the Committee on its first session, see E/ESCAP/CST/10.

<sup>5</sup> For the report of the Committee on its second session, see E/ESCAP/CST(2)/9.

15. The decisions and recommendations emanating from the second session of the Committee also deepened existing major areas of work. For instance, while the Committee at its first session decided to develop a regional programme to improve economic statistics, at the second session it endorsed a proposed core set as well as a regional programme as a formal strategy for improving economic statistics in the region. Similarly, the Committee at its first session decided to take exploratory measures to form a regional approach towards strengthening vital statistics in the region; at its second session, the Committee decided to develop a regional programme in this area. Initiatives in both of these areas were subsequently endorsed by the Commission through two resolutions.

16. The Committee at its second session decided to establish a number of steering and advisory groups to implement its decisions and recommendations, with the support of the secretariat. The Bureau has thus reviewed and approved the terms of reference and the composition of these groups. The groups have sought guidance and advice from the Bureau in formulating and carrying out their work plans. The inputs from the Bureau are reflected in the progress of the work of the group that is reported at the current session.

### **III. Potential for improving the functioning of the Committee**

#### **A. Growing demand for timely decisions**

17. With the decisions and recommendations emanating from its two sessions, the Committee has embarked on an ambitious programme of work to address the needs for improved availability and quality of statistics in an extensive range of areas. These needs arise from the rapid and dynamic changes in the social and economic context at the national, subregional and regional levels. They also reflect the policy demands arising from the development agenda at the global level, particularly with the target ending year of the Millennium Development Goals approaching and ongoing discussions on the formulation of a development agenda beyond 2015. All such changes imply that demands on national statistical systems are likely to continue to increase in both depth and breadth. In addition, inputs from countries and the region will be essential to the global process of developing a set of sustainable development goals and the related monitoring framework as a follow-up to the outcomes of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.<sup>6</sup>

18. The Committee has an increasingly important role to play in developing and promoting regional positions on global statistical issues, in particular but not exclusively in respect of the items on the agenda of the annual sessions of the Statistical Commission. Meeting biennially, the Committee cannot discharge this role effectively.

19. The need to examine the frequency of Committee sessions also arose from discussions on how better to integrate the work of SIAP with that of the Statistics Division of the ESCAP secretariat. If, as is suggested in section C below, it might be appropriate to consider having the Governing Council report to the Committee on Statistics rather than the Commission, as is the case at present, then, again, the disparity between the annual session of the Governing Council and the biennial session of the Committee needs to be recognized and a satisfactory solution proposed.

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<sup>6</sup> See General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex.

20. In the above context, the Bureau expressed the view, at its meeting in February 2012, that, in order for the Committee to carry out its mandate and responsibilities in a timely fashion, more frequent deliberations are warranted than the current biennial sessions of the Committee on Statistics allow (see E/ESCAP/CST(3)/14, para. 29).

21. Increased frequency has implications for the Committee members, including financial costs and staff time. As can be seen, there exists room to improve the levels of attendance by member States in some subregions at the current biennial sessions. In addition, annual sessions of the Committee would substantially increase the workload of the secretariat. Therefore, it is necessary for the Committee to carefully evaluate the benefits of meeting more frequently as well as the impact on the budgetary and other resource commitments required of both member States and the secretariat.

## **B. Improving integration and coordination to address common challenges**

22. Successfully implementing the regional programme of the Committee on Statistics requires integrated and coordinated efforts from various components of the national statistical system, consisting of government departments of varying status that collectively have the mandate to compile, interpret and make public official statistics. This includes the national statistical office (NSO) and statistics programmes in other government agencies. For instance, a core set of economic statistics (E/ESCAP/CST(2)/4) developed by the Committee is used as a guideline for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. Much of the data underlying the core set are regularly collected by organizations other than the NSOs, including the Central Bank and the statistics department of line ministries. Similarly, key to the regional implementation of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics<sup>7</sup> is the integration agricultural and rural statistics into the national statistical system, which, in most cases, is the responsibility of the ministry of agriculture. Such collaboration is also a prerequisite for the success of the regional initiative to improve civil registration and vital statistics as well as population and social statistics.

23. Despite the different sectoral focus, the major regional programmes and initiatives face common capacity constraints in national statistical systems. Lack of a culture of evidence-based decision-making, for instance, is often identified as a root cause of low levels of political support for and consequently inadequate allocation of financial and human resources to statistical work, which explain the weak outputs of national statistical systems. This challenge is likely to be rooted in the overall functioning of the government, though there might be variation across different government departments and levels. Similarly, all regional initiatives have identified integration as a major goal in strengthening national statistical capacity in the specific sectors. This requires harmonizing the legal framework and technical standards as well as planning and programming among the stakeholders involved. The commonality in the challenges might mean potential for achieving synergies. In addition, comprehensive approaches across sectors are likely to produce results that reinforce each other and last longer than if the various regional initiatives tackled the challenges on their own.

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<sup>7</sup> See E/ESCAP/CST(2)/9, chap. I, decision 2/7.

24. The cross-sectoral nature of the Committee's programme of work implies that the deliberations of the Committee will benefit from the involvement of a broader range of stakeholders from national statistical services that include NSOs, other government agencies that compile and interpret sectoral statistics, and users of statistics. In other words, there is a need to strengthen the role of NSOs in coordinating the national statistical system by integrating various sectors of statistics, harmonizing definitions, standardizing methodologies, and promoting international standards and good practices.

25. The Committee thus may consider promoting measures to strengthen the role of NSOs in coordinating the national statistical system. One such measure could be for the Committee to give high priority, in its deliberations and decisions, to the issue of improving integration and coordination within national statistical systems. At the same time, national delegations to the Committee sessions could be encouraged to include high-level data users and technical specialists from relevant substantive sectors. The Committee may also consider opening up membership to a wider range of national institutions and individuals.

### **C. Reporting line of the Governing Council of SIAP**

26. Statistical training is at the heart of statistical capacity development, the main driver of the major regional initiatives of the Committee as well as the overall work of the statistics subprogramme of ESCAP. The achievements in statistics development thus far in the region could not have taken place without the important contributions of SIAP and other training providers.<sup>8</sup> The importance of training is particularly obvious in the regional implementation of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics,<sup>9</sup> of which training is one of three components (the other two are technical assistance and research) and the main responsibility for the implementation falls on SIAP. Given the central role of training in statistical capacity development, SIAP has been closely involved in developing the strategies and implementation plans of the regional initiatives as part of the statistics subprogramme.

27. SIAP has also been active in implementing the Committee's decision to improve regional coordination of statistical training.<sup>10</sup> It has been servicing the working group established by the Committee with the mandate to improve the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of statistical training in the region through enhanced coordination (see E/ESCAP/CST(3)/12).

28. SIAP thus has the potential to make an even greater contribution to statistics development in the region and beyond by both continuing to be a training provider and playing a leading role in strengthening overall training capacity in the region through improved coordination among multiple training providers. SIAP might be better supported in carrying out this enlarged role if its Governing Council reported directly to the Committee on Statistics rather than the Commission. The deliberations at the Commission are often

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2010, Supplement No. 19* (E/2010/39-E/ESCAP/66/27), paras. 145-159, and *ibid.*, 2011, *Supplement No. 19* (E/2011/39-E/ESCAP/67/23), paras. 220-221.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2011). Available from: [www.fao.org/docrep/015/am082e/am082e00.pdf](http://www.fao.org/docrep/015/am082e/am082e00.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> See E/ESCAP/CST(2)/9, chap. I, decision 2/8.



dominated by policy issues at the political level. This is evident in the composition of delegations to the Commission, of which the inclusion of statisticians tends to be the exception rather than the norm. In contrast, the deliberations at the Committee concentrate on issues of strategic importance to statistics development in the region. The report of the Governing Council of SIAP is likely to have higher prominence in the deliberations of the Committee and would receive substantive inputs. In other words, streamlining the reporting line would place SIAP in an even more advantageous position to have an impact on the strategic direction of statistics development in the region.

#### **IV. Issues for consideration**

29. In the light of the three issues highlighted above, the Committee may wish to formulate its position as inputs to the final review of the conference structure at the sixth-ninth session of the Commission, in 2013. More specifically, the Committee may wish to consider and decide on the following:

(a) What options are there for the Committee to ensure that emerging needs for statistics are identified in a timely manner and discussed and decided on?

- (i) What are the alternatives to more frequent Committee sessions?
- (ii) What are the advantages and constraints of each of these options?

(b) What can the Committee do to help NSOs to strengthen its role in coordinating the work of national statistical systems?

- (i) What opportunities are there?
- (ii) What are the potential constraints or barriers?
- (iii) What can be done to overcome such constraints or barriers in the short term?
- (iv) What can be achieved in the medium and long term?

(c) What can be done to better integrate training in statistical capacity development efforts?

- (i) Will changing the reporting line of the SIAP Governing Council address the issue? What additional measures need to be taken in order to achieve the goal?
  - (ii) What additional options are there to achieve the goal of better integration?
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