

**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**  
Committee on Statistics**Third session**

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Item 3(b) of the provisional agenda\*

**Regional initiatives: Social statistics****The strategic approach and plan of work of the Technical  
Advisory Group on Social Statistics****Note by the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics***Summary*

The present document provides an overview of the proposed strategic approach taken by the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics towards the improvement of population and social statistics in the ESCAP region. It also describes the work plan proposed, and steps taken by the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics towards implementing that strategy and presents the process of the initial consultations within member States and with partner international organizations on a proposed core set of population and social statistics.

The Committee may wish to review the work and the terms of reference of the Technical Advisory Group and decide on the continuation of the Technical Advisory Group. It may also wish to review and endorse the strategic approach of the Technical Advisory Group.

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

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## I. Background

1. The importance of statistics is increasing in Asia and the Pacific in line with the growing prominence of evidence-based policymaking. As a result, countries need to adapt their statistical systems as part of an effort to develop statistics that meet the requirements of policymakers throughout the region. This trend also requires policies to enable the collection of high quality and timely data as well as the dissemination and communication of data analysis. Both the availability and the dissemination of data are valuable tools for formulating policy decisions.

2. The Committee on Statistics has recognized that it is important for statistical producers within the region to produce a basic range of economic, population, social and environmental statistics. In this regard, the Committee at its second session in recommendation 2/1 expressed its full support for a proposed strategic direction in which one of its overarching goals was to ensure that all countries in the region by 2020 have the capability to provide an agreed basic range of population, economic, social and environmental statistics (E/ESCAP/CST(2)/9).

3. In reference to that goal, the Committee at its second session in decision 2/2 decided to establish a Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics and entrusted the Bureau of the Committee on Statistics to develop its terms of reference. With the approval of the members States, the Technical Advisory Group was given the overall role to advise the Committee on strategies for developing a regional programme to improve social statistics in Asia and the Pacific. More specifically, it was given the responsibility to provide: (a) recommendations to the Committee on the scope of social statistics that all countries in the region should be in a position to produce by 2020, taking into consideration the relevance of the statistics, policy priorities and the varying national statistical capacity of member States; (b) methodological and substantive guidelines on the formulation and implementation of the regional programme, including through the development of a core set of social statistics; and (c) guidance on the medium- and long-term plans of implementing the Regional Programme, including monitoring and evaluation. The time frame specified in the terms of reference indicated that the Committee at its third session would review the work and terms of reference and decide on the possible continuation of the Technical Advisory Group (for the complete version of the document, please refer to the annex).

4. By invitation of the Committee to all members and on the basis of expression of interest by member States and development partners, in May 2011, the Bureau endorsed the composition of the Technical Advisory Group and its two co-chairs, Ms. Susan Linacre (Australia) and Mr. Wynandin

Imawan (Indonesia). Ms. Linacre and Mr. Imawan have subsequently retired and were replaced by Ms. Gemma Van Halderen (Australia) and Mr. Sairi Hasbullah (Indonesia) as the co-chairs of the Technical Advisory Group, which is now comprised of 11 member States and five development partners.<sup>1</sup>

5. Since its establishment, the Technical Advisory Group has met two times, one time under the chairmanship of Ms Linacre and Mr. Imawan, and the other time under the chairmanship of Ms. Van Halderen and Mr. Hasbullah. In addition, it has met two times with the Bureau of the ESCAP Committee on Statistics through teleconference and electronic means.<sup>2</sup>

6. The purpose of the present paper is to provide an overview of the Technical Advisory Group's strategic approach and the work plan towards the development of a regional plan to improve the capacity of countries in the Asia and the Pacific region to produce and disseminate population and social statistics.

## II. Strategic approach

7. Using inputs from the Bureau, the Technical Advisory Group at its second meeting<sup>3</sup> developed a strategic approach for improving population and social statistics in Asia and the Pacific. The strategic approach, which is to be carried out in steps, consists of the following:

(a) Develop a core set of basic statistics that all ESCAP member States should be capable of producing by 2020;

(b) Use the core set to guide the review of national practices in population and social statistics and identify current existing gaps in national statistical systems;

(c) Develop a plan for addressing the identified gaps.

8. The starting point of setting the strategic approach entailed defining the scope and framework of social statistics. It was agreed that social statistics should capture all statistics that are related to people's lives and living conditions. Based on these parameters, social statistics overlaps with other major statistical areas, resulting in the need for cooperation among different areas of work for consistency and efficiency purposes. Taking into account this broad concept of social statistics, the Technical Advisory Group, in consultation with the Bureau, decided to take a targeted approach. The proposed core set captures priority areas of social concern and policy needs (the domains), and major core issues within each domain (the themes).

9. In the process of developing a core set of statistics, members of the Technical Advisory Group agreed to consult relevant policymakers from member States and international development partners to ensure that the most

<sup>1</sup> The full list of current members of the Technical Advisory Group is available from [www.unescap.org/stat/social-stat/TAG-SS](http://www.unescap.org/stat/social-stat/TAG-SS) (login required).

<sup>2</sup> Additional information on these meetings is available from [www.unescap.org/stat/social-stat/meeting-Sep2011/index.asp](http://www.unescap.org/stat/social-stat/meeting-Sep2011/index.asp) (first working meeting of the Technical Advisory Group, September 2011) and [www.unescap.org/stat/social-stat/meeting-Jun2012/index.asp](http://www.unescap.org/stat/social-stat/meeting-Jun2012/index.asp) (second working meeting of the Technical Advisory Group, June 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.unescap.org/stat/social-stat/meeting-Jun2012/index.asp](http://www.unescap.org/stat/social-stat/meeting-Jun2012/index.asp).

basic social concerns and social policy issues were identified and that no major gaps were left out.

10. The Technical Advisory Group also proposed to include a core set of population and social statistics as these areas are tightly linked to each other and are included in the 2020 strategic goals of the Committee. As a result, it uses the term "population and social statistics" instead of "social statistics" to accurately reflect its work.

11. After determining a core set of population and social statistics, the proposed strategic approach calls for a review of the practices and capacity of national statistical systems at a regional level in order to identify major gaps and needs. This review will be the basis for the development of a regional plan for addressing those gaps and needs. The plan will be developed in collaboration with various stakeholders at national, regional and international levels, both within countries and between development partners. Questions pertaining to existing international standards, such as definitions, classifications, methods, guidelines, principles and best practices, as well as relevant indicators and groups of interest, such as disaggregation of data by, for example, gender and age, will be considered along with the identification of statistical capacity gaps.

### **III. Work plan of the Technical Advisory Group**

12. Based on the strategic approach, the Technical Advisory Group developed a plan of work for the short and medium term, which includes, among other things, reporting to the Committee at its third and fourth sessions. This plan of work has already been initiated.

#### **A. Progress in development of a core set of population and social statistics\*\***

13. Once the terms of reference were established and the membership was agreed upon, the Technical Advisory Group set out to develop a draft core set of population and social statistics for consideration by the Committee on Statistics at its third session.

14. The starting point of this exercise was to identify relevant issues of social phenomena. This entailed reviewing past international experiences in formulating social measurement. One example was the Framework for Social and Demographic Statistics in 1975, which covered a broad range of topics. More recently, international discussion in this regard has focused more on specific and well-defined concerns that are universally pertinent and then directed its attention to emerging and complex social concerns that are of growing relevance to public policy.<sup>4</sup> In line with this international approach, while at the same time taking into account an Asia-Pacific perspective, the Technical Advisory Group decided to identify the basic statistics relevant to social phenomena. To do this, preference was given to prioritizing specific and well-defined population and social concerns that are regionally pertinent

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\*\* Up to the third Committee session.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the evolution of international debate on social measurement, please see "Past and current efforts towards a systematic development of social statistics", ESA/STAT/AC.161/1 (United Nations Secretariat, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, 2008); and the final report of the Expert Group Meeting on the Scope and Content of Social Statistics, ESA/STAT/AC.161/L.6 (United Nations Secretariat, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, 2008).

(domains) and within each one, to identify the emerging and complex social concerns that are growing in relevance to policy needs (themes). Within the domains and themes, emerging aspects have been included with the view that the associated statistics will evolve. As a result, the core set will still be relevant by 2020. This process was used to develop a zero-draft of the core set.

15. This initial attempt was further refined through several discussions by the Technical Advisory Group in consultation with the Bureau. As a result of these discussions, the first draft was drawn up at the second working meeting of the Technical Advisory Group. The draft was used as the basis for broader consultations with the population and social statistics community.

16. The broad consultations on the draft core set involved both member States in the region and partner international organizations working in relevant population and social areas. The main objective of these discussions was to seek feedback to determine whether the core set was capturing the most basic policy needs and could be used as a regional guideline for developing national statistical capacity. The consultations were not intended to make the core set an exhaustive list of domains and themes but, rather, to ensure that there were no major omissions. Thus, participants in the consultations were specifically asked to note any major gaps in the draft. With the support of the secretariat, these consultations were prepared and then held from July to September 2012. The next section presents further details on the process and the results of these consultations.

17. After analysing the results of these broader consultative processes and recognizing the positive feedback received on the core set in terms of its coverage of population and social concerns and policy needs, the Technical Advisory Group prepared the proposed core set and submitted it for endorsement of the Committee on Statistics at its third session (E/ESCAP/CST(3)/5/Add.1).

**B. Review of current practices and national capacity to produce the core set, and development of a regional strategy to address capacity gaps<sup>\*\*\*</sup>**

18. Following the endorsement, the Technical Advisory Group plans to prepare and conduct a review of current national practices and capacities on the production of the core set. The review will be used to identify major capacity gaps and needs, which can later be addressed by a regional plan.

19. The review will cover such issues as definitions, statistical standards, data quality, standard methodological issues, dissemination, metadata, data sources, and further analysis and use. During the review, the Technical Advisory Group intends to engage all major producers of population and social statistics within national contexts. The Technical Advisory Group members will serve as the pilot study group and the experiences thus gained can be used to strengthen the process of expanding the consultations to other ESCAP member States. At the same time, consultations with major international producers of population and social statistics will also be carried out, with the aim to identify potential partners in assisting national capacity development.

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Envisioned to be carried out between the third and fourth sessions of the Committee.

20. The Technical Advisory Group will use the results of the national reviews and the consultation with international producers as a basis for the development of a regional plan to address the identified gaps and build national capacity. The main aspects of the regional plan may consist of technical improvements, measures to develop administrative data sources and strengthening training in the application of existing guidelines and methodologies. Technical improvements may include the development of guidelines, definitions, methodologies, standards and classifications.

21. The work plan, including its main activities and time frame, is presented in the table below.

Table

**Activities and timing of the Technical Advisory Group work plan**

Activities	Timing
1. Study and first round of discussions towards developing a <i>zero-draft of the core set</i> of population and social statistics	October 2011 - 1 February 2012 (completed)
2. Dialogue with the Bureau and further discussions among Technical Advisory Group members, leading to the <i>first draft of the core set</i>	March 2012 - June 2012 (completed)
3. <i>National consultations</i> with all member States in the region <i>on the first draft core set</i> - preparation, administration and analysis of the results	July 2012 - Third session of the Committee (completed)
4. <i>Consultation with international partner organizations on the first draft core set</i> - preparation, administration and analysis of the results	July 2012 - Third session of the Committee (completed)
5. <i>Preparation of the review</i> of current national practices and capacity, using detailed comments from previous consultations	Early 2013
6. <i>Pilot of the review</i> of current national practices and capacity, in Technical Advisory Group member countries on the production and use of population and social statistics, and identification of major gaps and needs	2013
7. <i>Expanded review</i> of current national practices and capacity, covering all ESCAP member States on the production and use of population and social statistics, and identification of major gaps and needs	2013 - 2014
8. <i>Identification and engagement with international partners</i> for future capacity-building activities	2013 - 2014
9. Development of a <i>plan to address national capacity gaps</i>	2014

#### **IV. Consultations with member States and international organizations on the draft core set**

22. The initial consultations with national and international consultations were coordinated by the secretariat with guidance from the Technical Advisory Group. The aim of these discussions was to achieve an agreement on a core set of population and social statistics that can be used at a later stage to guide national capacity development.

##### **A. National consultations**

23. National consultations within member States were targeted to include major players in population and social statistics, with a special emphasis on policymakers. National statistical offices (NSOs) coordinated the effort as they

are in a better position to understand the institutional framework and they themselves are key stakeholders. At the same time, the Technical Advisory Group provided guidelines for the country consultations, namely in terms of the general objectives, concrete questionnaires and timeline and ways of addressing questions from national stakeholders.

24. A questionnaire, under cover of a letter from Mr. Brian Pink, Chair of the Committee on Statistics, was sent to the head of each NSO seeking feedback, on the basis of consultations, to determine whether the proposed core set of population and social statistics was capturing the most basic policy needs and had the potential to be used as a regional guideline for developing national capacity in the area of population and social statistics. Countries were given more than one month to allow for broader consultative processes with relevant national stakeholders.

## **B. International consultations**

25. Consultations with international organizations were carried out in a similar process, with the secretariat tailoring the material sent to member States to be relevant to the international organizations. In line with the strategic objectives of the Partners for Statistics Development in Asia-Pacific,<sup>5</sup> organizations were invited to provide feedback on the basis of their institutional mandate.

## **C. Main results**

26. From a total of 58 member States contacted, 31 provided feedback, and 2 expressed their intention to provide feedback but had not done so as of the drafting of the present document. Feedback was received from seven international organizations.

27. The results indicate that both member States and international organizations support the list of domains and themes identified by the Technical Advisory Group. No specific domain was considered to be missing in the current draft. The comments were generally related to additional details and specifics and will be incorporated in different stages of the work plan. The following are examples of some of the comments:

(a) The need to further refine the aspects, such as definitions, implied indicators, data sources and data quality aspects in line with existing standards and practices at international levels;

(b) The importance of prioritization. Some of the themes still lack statistical standards or compilation guidelines, which could affect comparability, relevance and interpretability of the statistics that could be generated through a dedicated work programme;<sup>6</sup>

(c) The importance and challenge of using a domain approach. The Technical Advisory Group noted that by identifying particular groups across the domains, such as women, youth, or the marginalized, their lives and living

<sup>5</sup> See [www.unescap.org/stat/partnership/index.asp](http://www.unescap.org/stat/partnership/index.asp).

<sup>6</sup> One possible way to achieve this would be through a phased approach. A specific comment received mentioned the possibility of using the categories used by the Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts which distinguish between: (a) “minimum requirement data sets”; (b) “statistics recommended for compilation by all countries”; and (c) “desired dataset, i.e., useful data that should be compiled if possible”.

conditions can be viewed holistically. The domain approach enables social issues and concerns to be considered for population groups and groupings. It also enables social issues and concerns to be considered within the discussions centred on national well-being and progress, which is an area that many member States and international partners are recognizing as being of growing importance. Some examples of this within the region are the following:

- (i) Australia has been producing measures of its progress since 2002 and is widely recognised as an international leader in this area;
- (ii) The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) organized its fourth World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy under the theme “Measuring well-being for development and policy making” in New Delhi from 16 to 19 October 2012. It was a major event for the Asia and Pacific region;
- (iii) In 2002, the Centre for Bhutan Studies Gross Happiness Index conceptualized national progress in terms of whether or not the citizens of Bhutan are flourishing. This approach was led by the country’s leaders in the 1970’s who were of the view that national progress goes beyond economic development and encompasses emotional, spiritual, cultural and environmental factors;
- (iv) In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Quality of Life Index was first developed by the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2003. It aims to track the well-being of people of Hong Kong, covering areas such as health, life satisfaction, stress, crime, housing and government performance.

28. The Technical Advisory Group has acknowledged the comments received. These comments will provide important contributions to the following stages of the work plan. It also has welcomed the interest shown by partners to this regional initiative as an essential basis to further develop collaborative efforts for the improvement of population and social statistics in the region.

29. Several countries also took the opportunity to point out several statistical gaps in their current national practices, reinforcing the importance of having a regional programme supporting capacity-building at the national level.

30. The consultative process was overall praised by participants as an opportunity for member States and international partners to engage in this initiative. Consequently, the Technical Advisory Group has concluded that this same approach should be applied in the future when seeking feedback on fundamental stages of the regional programme.

## **V. Conclusion**

31. Considerable progress has been made by the Technical Advisory Group in providing recommendations on a core set of population and social statistics that all countries in the ESCAP region should be in a position to provide by 2020, taking into consideration the relevance of the statistics, policy priorities and the varying national statistical capacity of member States. Member States have kindly given their time and imparted their knowledge towards helping to shape the scope of an agreed core set of population and social statistics.

32. Using this core set of population and social statistics as a basis, the future work of the Technical Advisory Group will consider the varying



national statistical capacities of member States, and develop methodological and substantive guidelines on the formulation and implementation of a regional programme on population and social statistics. Finally, the Technical Advisory Group will guide the long- and medium-term plans of implementing a regional plan to improve the production and use of population and social statistics, including monitoring and evaluation.

33. The Committee may wish to review the work and the terms of reference of the Technical Advisory Group and decide on the continuation of the Technical Advisory Group. It may also wish to review and endorse the strategic approach of the Technical Advisory Group.

## **Annex**

### **Terms of reference of the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics**

#### **I. Background**

1. At its second session, the ESCAP Committee on Statistics expressed its full support for the strategic direction proposed by its Bureau, which included two overarching strategic goals of (a) ensuring that all countries in the region by 2020 have the capability to provide an agreed basic range of population, economic, social and environmental statistics, and (b) creating a more adaptive and cost effective information management environment for national statistical offices through stronger collaboration (E/ESCAP/CST(2)/9).

2. The Committee at the same time decided to establish a Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics to provide recommendations on the strategic directions as well as substantive and methodological guidelines regarding the achievement of the goal to ensure that all countries in the region by 2020 have the capability to provide an agreed basic range of population, economic, social and environmental statistics.

#### **II. Role and responsibilities**

3. The overall role of the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics is to advise the Committee on Statistics on strategies for developing a regional programme to improve social statistics in Asia and the Pacific. More specifically, the Technical Advisory Group shall:

(a) Provide recommendations to the Committee on the scope of social statistics that all countries in the region should be in a position to produce by 2020, taking into consideration the relevance of the statistics, policy priorities and the varying national statistical capacity of member States;

(b) Provide methodological and substantive guidelines on the formulation and implementation of a regional programme for national capacity development in social statistics, including through the development of a core set(s) of social statistics;

(c) Provide guidance on the long- and medium-term plans of implementing the regional programme on social statistics, including monitoring and evaluation.

4. Within three months after its constitution, the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics shall produce a work plan for the first year.

#### **III. Selection of members**

5. The Bureau of the ESCAP Committee on Statistics shall issue invitations to all member States and development partners to express interest in representation on the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics. On the basis of expression of interest, the Bureau, with the support of the secretariat, shall decide on the membership of the Technical Advisory Group, taking into consideration the need for balanced representation in terms of geography, expertise and level of statistical development.

6. If a member vacates a position, the remaining members of the Technical Advisory Group shall recommend the most appropriate replacement to the Bureau, giving priority to a representative from the same member State or development partner.

7. The members of the Technical Advisory Group will not be paid by the United Nations and will not be considered staff members. Hence, they will not be entitled to the privileges and immunities accorded to staff members of the United Nations.

8. For specific tasks, the Technical Advisory Group may invite the participation of other national and international experts and/or form subgroups.

### **III. Functioning of the Technical Advisory Group**

9. Generally, the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics shall meet twice yearly either in person or using other means, including through teleconferencing. It is also envisaged that the Technical Advisory Group shall conduct discussions by means of electronic discussion.

10. The Bureau will appoint two co-chairs to guide the work of the Technical Advisory Group. More specifically, the co-chairs will: (a) decide on the draft agenda for each meeting of the Group in consultation with the Bureau and on the basis of decisions taken during the last meeting; (b) guide and summarize the discussions of the meetings; (c) report to the Committee on the outcomes of each meeting and other issues concerning its work; and (d) follow up on the implementation of decisions.

11. The co-chairs will serve for a period of one year, after which they will be eligible for reappointment.

12. The Statistics Division of ESCAP will serve as the secretariat to the Technical Advisory Group.

### **IV. Time frame**

13. The Committee at its third session will review the work and terms of reference and decide on the possible continuation of the Technical Advisory Group.

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