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Regional initiatives: population and social statistics

Developing a regional strategy to improve population and social statistics in Asia and the Pacific

A report by the Technical Advisory Group on Population and Social Statistics**

Summary

At its second session, the Committee on Statistics established a Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics, which 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 capacities 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 a regional strategy, including monitoring and evaluation.

The Committee at its third session agreed to the inclusion of population statistics in the scope of the work of the Technical Advisory Group. At its meeting on 24 February 2013, the Bureau approved revised terms of reference for the newly named Technical Advisory Group on Population and Social Statistics. The change of name was intended to reflect the Technical Advisory Group's broader scope of activities.

The present report describes the process followed by the Technical Advisory Group in developing a regional strategy to improve population and social statistics as specified by the Committee.

The full strategy is presented in a conference room paper and is put forward for consideration and possible endorsement by the Committee.

* E/ESCAP/CST(4)/L.1.

** The present document was submitted late owing to the need to include the issues raised during the latest discussions on the development agenda beyond 2015; in particular, the recommendations of the Expert Group Meeting on Statistics and Data for the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development.

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I. Developing a regional strategy for population and social statistics

1. The desire to develop a regional strategy for population and social statistics stems from the overarching strategic goal that was endorsed at the second session of the Committee on Statistics, namely that "all countries in the region by 2020 have the capability to provide an agreed basic range of population, economic, social and environmental statistics".[1]

2. That goal was subsequently endorsed by the Commission in its resolution 67/11, which underlined the importance of official statistics as a whole-of-government issue, without which designing, monitoring and evaluating effective policies would be almost impossible.

3. At its second session, the Committee, in its decision 2/2, established the Technical Advisory Group on Social Statistics to implement that goal as regards social statistics.

4. The Technical Advisory Group has developed three elements that form the foundations of a regional capacity-building strategy:

(a) The core set of population and social statistics, which defines the scope and ambition of capacity-building for population and social statistics;

(b) A capacity framework that defines the requirements and characteristics of a national statistical system in order for it to produce population and social statistics in a sustainable and flexible manner;

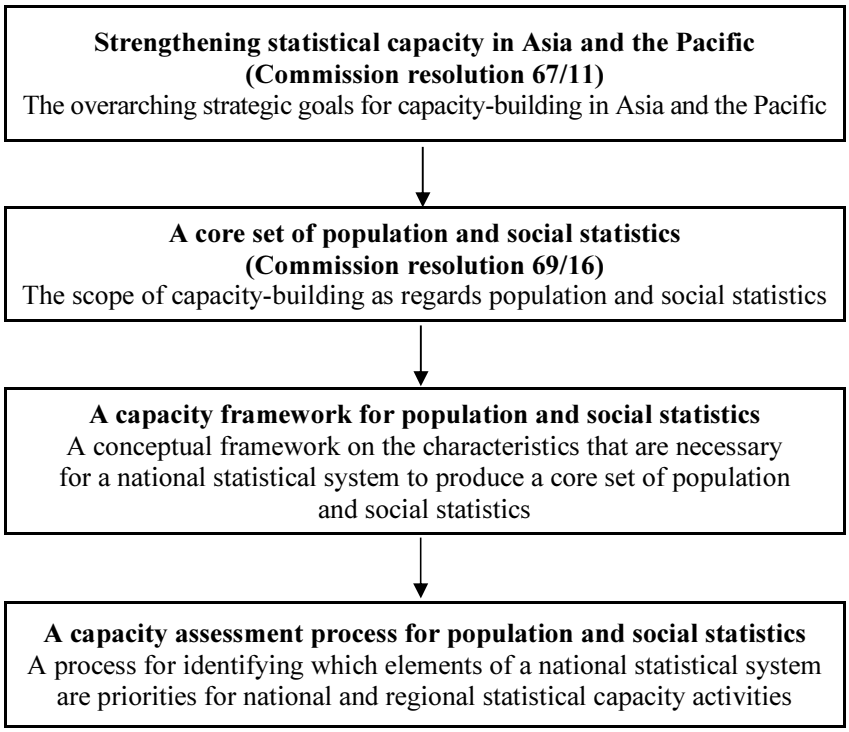
(c) An assessment process for identifying priorities for building capacity.

5. Consultation on the regional strategy, which developed from these three elements, is still ongoing; its results will be presented to the fourth session of the Committee in a conference room paper.[2]

[1] E/ESCAP/CST(2)/9, recommendation 2/1.

[2] The full text of the regional strategy for population and social statistics is available, in English only, as a conference room paper (E/ESCAP/CST(4)/CRP.1).

Figure 1
Elements of a capacity-building strategy for population and social statistics as developed by the Committee and the Technical Advisory Group



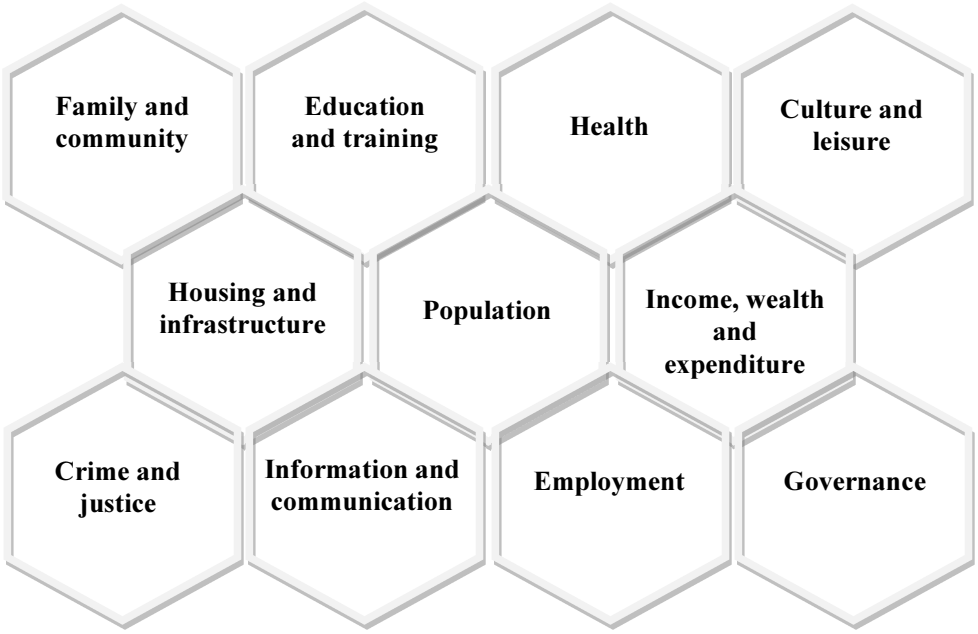
II. A core set of population and social statistics

6. One of the first tasks of the Technical Advisory Group was to establish a range of population and social statistics in order to support the formulation of government policies affecting people's lives and living conditions. That core set comprises 11 priority areas of social concern and policy needs (the domains), and 75 major core issues across those domains (the statistical themes). The Technical Advisory Group defined the core set in terms of statistical themes but did not specify a set of prescriptive indicators. The idea was to provide the flexibility for countries to identify the indicators that are most relevant to their own policy priorities.

7. Notably, the core set also includes a series of possible characteristics for each statistical theme. Those highlight, for example, the need for the statistical theme "births" to be disaggregated by age of mother, location and gender of child. That feature of the core set is particularly relevant to the requirement for more disaggregated data emerging from the development agenda beyond 2015.

8. Following a consultation with member States and international development partners, the core set was submitted to the Committee on Statistics at its third session, which, in recommendation 3/1, called for its use as a regional framework for capacity development. The Commission subsequently endorsed the recommendation of the Committee in resolution 69/16, further highlighting the importance of population and social statistics to Governments in the region.

Figure 2
The domains of population and social statistics



9. The core set of population and social statistics is particularly relevant to the development agenda beyond 2015. All 110 targets[3] proposed by the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals require accurate and timely population data, and 63 depend directly on statistics covered by the core set.

III. The capacity framework for population and social statistics

10. The core set articulates the shared aspiration of the countries of Asia and the Pacific to develop the ability to produce population and social statistics. It does not, however, answer questions such as: Are the population and social statistics currently being produced fit for purpose? How can capacity to produce and publish the core set be developed? What are the necessary characteristics of a national statistical system in order for it to support sustainable production of the core set? What are the indicators of a robust national statistical system?

11. The breadth of ambition articulated in the core set, the lack of a unifying framework or measure that would help integrate the elements it contains, and the lack of imperatives to adopt international standards in its compilation make answering these questions particularly challenging.

12. Given the lack of a theoretical basis to guide capacity-building as regards population and social statistics, the Technical Advisory Group decided, at its third meeting from 6 to 8 March 2013, to develop a capacity framework that would:

(a) Expand the policy context, data sources and existing classifications and technical guidelines that are relevant to each domain of the core set;

[3] Excluding the 59 targets related to the means of implementation.

(b) Provide a basis for assessing the quality of population and social statistics;

(c) Define the essential characteristics of a national statistical system capable of producing statistics based on the core set.

13. The framework was finalized by the Technical Advisory Group at its fourth meeting, which was held from 25 to 27 November 2013[4] and which is briefly summarized below.

A. Capacity framework part one: the policy context for the 11 domains of the core set

14. The first component of the capacity framework provides the regional policy context for each of the 11 domains that underpin the core set. For each country in the region to identify its priorities as regards population and social statistics, it is important that it examine its own policy context, and the related important questions and issues that the core statistics need to address. The regional policy context provides both an illustrative framework that countries can use, and a checklist against which the country's priorities can be compared, enhanced and grown.

B. Capacity framework part two: the characteristics that define quality official statistics

15. The second component of the capacity framework looks at the characteristics that define an effective set of population and social statistics. The aim is to assist a country in reviewing its statistics in two ways. Firstly, by helping to clarify the quality requirements of a set of statistics, for example: how to disaggregate the statistics — by which population groups — if the key questions of interest are to be answered? When information needs to be made available? What access is needed? Secondly, by helping a country assess whether the currently available statistics meet key user requirements, and whether improvements may be necessary.

16. The above will enable a country to develop a good understanding of where new statistics are needed and where analysis and dissemination of current statistics need to be enhanced in order to meet a country's information requirements.

C. Capacity framework part three: the elements of an effective national statistical system

17. The third component of the capacity framework specifies the necessary characteristics of the individuals and institutions that together produce and disseminate official statistics on behalf of the national Government — the national statistical system — in order that such an undertaking be relevant, reliable, objective and sustainable.

18. Those characteristics are grouped according to six key requirements, which provide the basis for assessing the existing characteristics of the national statistical system, and for determining the most pressing systemic issues that need to be addressed.

[4] www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ESCAP-CapacityFramework.pdf.

19. Those six key requirements encompass two broad categories of characteristics. Firstly, common or fundamental characteristics that are equally relevant to the Committee's capacity-building strategies and programmes for economic or environmental statistics, such as the need for stronger and more effective statistical legislation that guarantees the impartiality of official statistics.

20. Secondly, characteristics that are specific to population and social statistics, such as the need for disaggregated data to measure the outcomes and causes of inequality, to identify vulnerable subsets of populations and to design targeted interventions so as to ensure that "no one is left behind"; the lack of internationally recognized standards or frameworks to guide collection, analysis and reporting in emerging areas, such as governance statistics; the difficulty of targeting "invisible" groups, such as those working in the informal sector or the victims of violent sexual assaults; and the need for more detailed data and information about the quality of education that children receive and the quality of employment opportunities that are available once they leave school.

21. The six key requirements to enable a national statistical system to support the production of the core set are summarized below.

1. Strong engagement

22. A basic requirement of a strong statistical system is that the Government places a high value on objective statistics. It should value statistics both for their own use in developing, implementing and evaluating policy, and also for their use by the public more broadly, both nationally and internationally, in decision-making and in building trust in the workings and directions of the Government.

2. Impartial and professional institutions

23. A significant determinant of the current and future capability of a national statistical system is how robustly it has been set up to collect, compile and disseminate a high-quality set of objective official statistics. That includes the legal mandates governing the professional production of data and official statistics and their impartial dissemination.

3. Adequate funds

24. The capability of a national statistical system, including human, financial, information and communications technology and other resources, largely depends on its level of funding, the nature of those funding sources and the autonomy of those responsible for allocating such funding. A poorly funded national statistical system will be unable to produce relevant population and social statistics to support policy development and evaluation, and to inform Governments, non-governmental organizations and the community on issues of social concern.

4. Data sources

25. The key data sources required for population and social statistics include the census of population and housing, household surveys, such as the labour force survey, and administrative data such as those compiled in the delivery of government services, such as health, education and justice.

5. Skills

26. Developing, managing and disseminating high-quality official statistics require access to a strong pool of professionally skilled people. Those skills cover different aspects of statistical, technical, leadership and management roles, and are needed at varying levels from "some understanding" through to "expert".

6. Technological and methodological statistical infrastructure

27. Statistical infrastructure refers to the tools that support the operation of a statistical system. Those tools can help to organize the statistical system, improve efficiency, create new outputs or simply perform tasks within the system.

IV. A capacity assessment process for the core set of population and social statistics

28. The capacity framework defines the characteristics of a national statistical system that are necessary for the sustained production of the core set. The third component of building capacity that has been developed by the Technical Advisory Group is a process for identifying which of those characteristics requires priority national action, and where regional support can be most effective.

29. At its third meeting, the Technical Advisory Group agreed that this process must engage the full range of senior stakeholders from across the 11 domains of the core set of population and social statistics, including both producers and users.

30. That broad engagement is critical for securing political support, improving coordination and ensuring adequate resources. Mobilizing high-level involvement from the outset of capacity-building will also raise the visibility and understanding of population and social statistics.

31. As the statistical system that exists in one domain of population and social statistics — say, for example, health — may well differ from those that exist in another — for example, justice — the issues in individual domains of the core set may need to be worked through one by one.

32. Reviews that are led by the National Statistician and the senior statistician and policymaker in each domain of the core set will also contribute directly to capacity-building by highlighting the important role of national statistics offices and improving coordination across the national statistical system.

33. The domain-specific assessments of capacity issues can then be used as the basis for specifying a national population and social statistics development strategy, and to identify areas where regional support is needed.

34. At its fourth meeting, the Technical Advisory Group further developed the assessment process, which, in December 2013 and March 2014, was piloted in Bhutan and the Philippines respectively. The main conclusions from those pilots studies are summarized below:

(a) Senior stakeholders need to be clearer about the benefits and modalities of regional support for national capacity-building on population and social statistics;

(b) Senior stakeholders need to be clearer about the benefits and the importance of their active participation in an assessment process;

(c) All participants, and especially senior stakeholders, must be given at least four weeks' advance notice of the assessment process;

(d) The assessment process must be flexible enough for use across diverse national statistical systems in the region. In some countries, the chief statistician will not have the power to coordinate an assessment across the whole of Government, and many of these countries will be in most need of capacity-building;

(e) The success of the process depends on commitment from chief statisticians and the availability of resources;

(f) The questionnaire developed to support the assessment is too long and complex.

35. Those pilot studies also provided the opportunity to ensure that the capacity development priorities for population and social statistics were integrated within broader national statistics development plans: in the case of Bhutan, the eleventh five-year plan, 2013-2018; and for the Philippines, as part of the mid-point review of the Philippine Statistical Development Programme for 2011-2017.

V. Issues for consideration

36. The Committee on Statistics is invited, at its fourth session:

(a) To endorse the regional strategy presented in the conference room paper (E/ESCAP/CST(4)/CRP.1);

(b) To encourage member States and partners to implement the strategy and to undertake assessments of their capacity to produce the core set and identify priority issues.