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**EMERGING ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENTS AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL:
STATISTICS**

(Item 6 (e) of the provisional agenda)

**REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON STATISTICS ON ITS
ELEVENTH SESSION**

SUMMARY

In November 1998, the Committee on Statistics held its eleventh session, the first in the three-day format stipulated in Commission resolution 53/1 of 30 April 1997. The Committee was attended by representatives of 33 members and associate members and 17 United Nations bodies, specialized agencies and other intergovernmental organizations.

The Committee arrived at a number of major conclusions and decisions which are enumerated in section I of the present report. It decided to review all its recommendations after a maximum of four years with a view to their revalidation, reformulation or suppression.

The Committee examined the reports of its Bureau, the Working Group of Statistical Experts, the secretariat and the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP) on various aspects of statistical activities in the region. It urged the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to continue to devote an advisory post in the Pacific entirely to population statistics, and asked ESCAP and SIAP to collaborate in organizing training activities for the year 2000 round of population censuses. The Committee commended SIAP for pursuing the new directions charted by its Governing Board and urged countries to consider increasing their contributions to the Institute. It also recommended that ESCAP should strengthen its cooperation with subregional organizations for the promotion of statistical development in the region.

In recognizing that one of its important functions was to generate consensus on policy-oriented issues which could also serve as input to international forums such as the United Nations Statistical Commission, the Committee asked the secretariat to strengthen its role as a conduit between the regional statistical community and such forums. At the current session, the Committee discussed three major topics which the Statistical Commission would be considering. It generally welcomed a draft set of guiding principles in technical cooperation in statistics, agreeing that they should be taken as a guide rather than a set of strict rules. It reaffirmed the importance of the fundamental principles of official statistics and generally agreed that case studies of good practices in official statistics were a useful way of illustrating how the principles might be operationalized. It also expressed interest in improving data on poverty measurement, especially at subnational levels.

The Committee noted that the demand for additional data arising out of the recent financial crisis, coupled with a decline in budgetary allocation to statistical services, posed special challenges to national statistical offices; it was considered important to strengthen cooperation among such offices through staff exchange programmes and networking. The Committee expressed caution about the benefit to be gained from the more stringent reporting standards proposed by the International Monetary Fund in the wake of the crisis.

In discussing information technology issues, the Committee called for close cooperation between donors and recipients, and for coordination among donors, to ensure that the technology matched the real needs and circumstances of statistical offices. The slow progress in tackling the year 2000 (Y2K) problem in computers prompted the Committee to urge government departments to maintain a high level of awareness and persist with remedial action.

The Committee concurred with the priorities identified by the secretariat for the programme of work, 2000-2001 and agreed on an order of priority among the five programme elements.

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**I. MATTERS CALLING FOR ACTION BY THE ECONOMIC AND
SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
OR BROUGHT TO ITS ATTENTION**

Major conclusions and decisions of which the Commission should take note

1. The Committee decided that all its recommendations should be reviewed after a maximum period of four years (that is, two Committee sessions) with a view to their revalidation, reformulation or suppression.
2. Given that one important function of the Committee was to generate consensus on policy-oriented issues which could also serve as input to such international forums as the United Nations Statistical Commission, the Committee asked the secretariat to strengthen its role as a conduit between the regional statistical community and such forums.
3. While acknowledging with appreciation that the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) had strengthened national census-taking capacity in previous census rounds, the Committee noted that UNFPA funding priorities had shifted and that interventions would need to be made at key forums if UNFPA were to increase its level of funding for the coming census decade.
4. The Committee urged UNFPA to continue to devote an advisory post in the UNFPA/Country Support Team (CST) in Suva entirely to population statistics.
5. Noting that a number of international statistical organizations were at various stages of developing their own databases, the Committee recommended that those activities should be coordinated, and that ESCAP should take advantage of those developments where possible.
6. The Committee recommended that ESCAP should strengthen further its cooperation with subregional organizations for the promotion of statistical development in the region.
7. The Committee commended the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP) for implementing its new directions as approved by the Governing Board and agreed that its programme of courses focused on the training needs of the region.
8. The Committee welcomed the increased collaboration initiated by SIAP with the national statistical offices and relevant international organizations and agencies in the implementation of its training activities.
9. The Committee emphasized that SIAP training courses should continue to be demand-driven and suggested that members and associate members should facilitate the process by providing information on their training requirements.

10. The Committee urged countries to review their contributions to SIAP, and to pay contributions which had been pledged. It also asked countries to consider increasing their contributions to the Institute, and urged countries which were not making the minimum contributions according to the guidelines set by the Commission to do so.

11. The Committee suggested, in the light of likely reduced technical assistance from traditional donors, that SIAP and the Statistics Division of ESCAP should collaborate to organize relevant training activities for the year 2000 round of population censuses, which was a very important activity for the national statistical offices.

12. Several representatives whose national statistical offices had established training facilities offered to collaborate with SIAP in the organization of training activities under the Institute's outreach programme.

13. The Committee generally welcomed the draft set of guiding principles in technical cooperation for statistics that was to be considered by the United Nations Statistical Commission. It agreed that the principles should be taken as a guide rather than as a set of strict rules.

14. The Committee emphasized that for the success of technical cooperation, political commitment was necessary, though not sufficient; relevant statistical programmes that ensured capacity-building and institutionalization of activities were also crucial.

15. The Committee reaffirmed the importance of the fundamental principles of official statistics and generally agreed that case studies of good practices in official statistics were a good way of illustrating how the principles might be operationalized.

16. The Committee expressed interest in improving data on poverty measurement, especially at subnational levels, and welcomed the organization of a workshop on poverty statistics by ESCAP in the first half of 1999.

17. The Committee noted that the demand for additional relevant data arising out of the recent financial crisis in Asia, coupled with a decline in budgetary allocation to statistical services, posed special challenges to national statistical offices. The Committee noted, however, that those challenges were not confined to the so-called "crisis countries".

18. While noting the value of statistical standards, the Committee expressed caution about the benefit to be gained from the more stringent reporting standards proposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the wake of the current Asian financial crisis, given the potential to divert statistical resources from other areas of national concern.

19. The Committee considered it important to strengthen cooperation among national statistical offices of countries in financial crisis, such as through staff exchange programmes and networking.

20. While developing countries were understandably willing to accept technology assistance in-kind and related advice on implementation, the Committee called for close cooperation between donors and recipients, on the one hand, and for coordination among donors on the other, to ensure that the technology matched the real needs and circumstances of statistical offices.

21. Noting that human resources development in the area of information technology was one of the keys for the effective adoption of such technology in national statistical offices, the Committee requested the secretariat and SIAP to investigate the possibility of organizing training on database development, in particular data modelling and data warehousing.

22. Although the Committee had no basis of estimating the overall year 2000 (Y2K) problem preparedness level in the region, the slow progress in many quarters prompted it to urge government departments to maintain a high level of awareness and to persist with remedial action throughout the remaining 13 months of the century.

23. The Committee concurred with the priorities for the programme of work, 2000-2001 identified by the secretariat in document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/15, and agreed with the order of priority assigned by the Bureau among the five programme elements.

24. The Committee discussed its experience with the three-day biennial duration stipulated under the new conference structure adopted by the Commission in 1997. It took note of the innovations introduced and efforts made to attempt to complete discussions satisfactorily within the time available, and of the preponderance of views expressed in favour of a somewhat longer duration. The Committee decided to evaluate the situation carefully at the conclusion of its twelfth session in 2000 and to report to the Commission accordingly if it felt the three-day format to be unworkable.

II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE

A. Implementation of the recommendations of the Committee at its ninth and tenth sessions

25. The Committee considered the item on the basis of document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/1, which had been examined in depth by the Bureau of the Committee at its fourth meeting on 23 November 1998. It noted that the document listed 47 recommendations made by the Committee at its previous two sessions, and the status of implementation of each.

26. The Committee agreed with the Bureau's categorization of the implementation status of the various recommendations into a number of groups, including those which had been implemented completely or substantially, those which had been overtaken by events, and those which remained relevant and were either to be left as they were or to be reformulated. It decided that all its recommendations should be reviewed after a maximum period of four years (that is, two Committee sessions) with a view to their revalidation, reformulation or suppression. Certain recommendations no longer under active consideration should nevertheless be reviewed from time to time for possible future

27. The Committee observed that many of the recommendations made at its previous two sessions were internally directed, demanding inputs from the secretariat. It recognized the need to focus greater attention on the direction and development of statistical issues of international and contemporary concern which had larger implications for national statistical services.

B. Report of the Bureau

28. The Committee considered the item based on the oral report of the Chairman. It noted that the Bureau had met twice in Bangkok since the tenth session: on 10 November 1997, prior to the tenth session of the Working Group of Statistical Experts, and on 23 November 1998, immediately preceding the eleventh session of the Committee.

29. The Committee noted that the bureau system introduced at the ninth session was working reasonably well, despite some difficulties faced by some of the heads of statistical offices in participating in the 1998 meeting owing to budgetary constraints. It observed that the Bureau had been playing a useful role in advising the secretariat on matters concerning the agenda and organization of the sessions of the Committee and the Working Group of Statistical Experts, and on the orientation and priorities of the biennial programme of work. Another major task was the review of the reports prepared every six months by the secretariat on the implementation of the recommendations of the Committee.

30. The Bureau also discussed at its meetings the respective roles of the Bureau, the Committee, the Working Group of Statistical Experts and the secretariat. Recognizing that its own sessions provided excellent opportunities for the sharing of information and discussions on policy-oriented issues, the Committee emphasized that greater attention should also be paid to interaction between the sessions, either through the secretariat or bilaterally. One important function of the Committee was to generate consensus on policy-oriented issues which could also serve as input to such international forums as the United Nations Statistical Commission. In order for those forums to take due note of the needs and concerns of the Asian and Pacific region, it was considered important that the inputs should be well-articulated and based on adequately prepared presentations. The Committee asked the secretariat to strengthen its role as a conduit between the regional statistical community and the international statistical forums.

C. Report of the Working Group of Statistical Experts

31. The Committee reviewed document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/3, the report of the Working Group of Statistical Experts on its tenth session, and generally endorsed the recommendations and observations contained in the report. In particular, the Committee agreed that the Working Group should concentrate on strategic issues, make definitive decisions on the direction of change and development, commission work on key areas of concern, and highlight regional concerns at global forums on important statistical issues.

32. The Committee noted the several reasons why the Y2K problem posed special challenges, and was appreciative of the action taken to follow up on the recommendations of the Working Group, including the joint organization by SIAP and the secretariat of the Workshop on the Year 2000 Problem in Computers and Strategic Issues for National Statistical Offices in June 1998. It took note of the need for national statistical offices and other organizations to continue to address the problem actively.

33. While appreciating the fact that the Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS) and General Data Dissemination System (GDSS) were in line with the fundamental principles of official statistics, the Committee was apprehensive that emphasis on adhering to the standards might cause resources to be diverted away from other statistical areas. It was also concerned that the scope of data proposed for inclusion in the SDDS was being extended to include items the definitions of which might deviate from the commonly accepted ones. It suggested that circumspection in the promulgation of statistical standards which might not be amenable to data collection or meet with national requirements was important.

34. The Committee observed that population and housing censuses were expensive statistical undertakings, and that it was important to ensure efficiency in all aspects of census activities. While acknowledging with appreciation that UNFPA had strengthened national census-taking capacity in previous census rounds, the Committee noted that the funding priorities of UNFPA had shifted and that interventions would need to be made at key forums if it were to increase its level of funding for the coming census decade.

35. The Committee noted with appreciation various types of assistance provided by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), IMF, SIAP and other multilateral and bilateral agencies towards strengthening national capacity in the compilation of national accounts and in the implementation of the 1993 System of National Accounts (SNA). It welcomed the secretariat's advisory services in national accounts. It noted that some countries needed to compile subnational accounts and required assistance in that regard.

36. The Committee noted that countries experiencing high inflation had special analytical problems caused by rapidly changing consumption patterns. It noted with appreciation that the paper presented at the Working Group of Statistical Experts by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on the consumer price index (CPI) and other price statistics developments in Australia had been found very useful by other countries in the region.

D. Review of statistical activities in the region

37. The Committee had before it the secretariat document entitled "Secretariat activities since the tenth session of the Committee on Statistics" (E/ESCAP/STAT.11/4). It also took note of the document entitled "Recommendations and statement of regional priorities of the Eleventh Regional Meeting of Heads of Statistics" (E/ESCAP/STAT.11/5) prepared by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). The Committee noted that the Sixteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians organized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in October 1998 had adopted, *inter alia*, a set of guidelines on dissemination practices for labour statistics.

38. The Committee noted that the national statistical offices of the region had been invited to contribute country papers, but owing to time constraints their formal presentation could not be made. Those documents were nevertheless considered a valuable resource, providing a wealth of information; they served as an excellent medium for the sharing of information on technical matters, issues and innovations in the field of statistics. The Committee noted with appreciation that papers by national statistical offices and organizations which were available in electronic form would be placed on the Web site of the Statistics Division of ESCAP.

39. The Committee heard that the personnel resource situation in the Statistics Division had remained serious over the period since the Committee had last met, with an average vacancy rate for the regular budget Professional positions of 33.7 per cent. It noted the difficulties faced by the secretariat in filling the vacant positions, which resulted largely from the recruitment procedures of the Organization, but welcomed the assurance that all posts were expected to be filled within six months.

40. The Committee noted the increase in international statistical activities within and outside the United Nations, and recalled that it had advised the secretariat to increase its involvement in those activities. The secretariat had accordingly devoted a significant proportion of its resources to maintaining collaboration with other organizations.

41. The Committee expressed appreciation of the assistance that UNFPA had been providing to the region for activities related to population censuses. However, it noted with concern the impending scenario whereby in the Asian and Pacific region only one UNFPA-funded adviser on population statistics (located in Kathmandu) might remain. It emphasized that advisory services for the planning, execution, processing and analysis of censuses and surveys were in high demand and that even the services available from the existing two advisers did not meet the needs of the whole region. In view of that situation, the Committee urged UNFPA to continue to devote an advisory post in UNFPA/CST in Suva entirely to population statistics. The Committee noted that the secretariat had taken steps to request funds for the provision of advisory services on social and demographic statistics under the United Nations regular programme of technical cooperation.

42. The Committee asked the secretariat to pay full attention to the timely production and distribution of the *Statistical Newsletter*, and to enrich its content, so that it served its purpose properly.

43. The Committee noted the continuing difficulties the secretariat faced in making the ESCAP Statistical Information System (ESIS) operational, and questioned whether continued investment in the project was a sensible use of resources. Noting that a number of international statistical organizations were at various stages of developing their own databases, the Committee recommended that those activities should be coordinated and that ESCAP should take advantage of those facilities where possible. The Committee was informed that there were good prospects for establishing linkages among database development activities, especially where they used common standards.

44. In considering document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/5, the Committee noted the priority recommendations of the Eleventh Regional Meeting of Heads of Statistics organized by SPC. Those covered statistical training, technical advisory services, information services, statistical coordination and electronic communication. The Committee was informed of the latest developments in statistical training, such as virtual seminars and workshops and distance training. It noted, however, that while those developments were promising, basic practical training, involving direct interaction between the trainees and the trainer, still remained more appropriate for most developing countries in the region.

45. The Committee heard with appreciation that the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which was participating in the Committee session for the first time, had established a directorate of economic research and statistics. The Committee recommended that ESCAP should strengthen further its cooperation with ECO and other subregional organizations for the promotion of statistical development in the region.

E. Issues relating to the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific, including the reports of the Governing Board

46. The Committee had before it two documents: E/ESCAP/STAT.11/6, the report of the Governing Board of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific on its third session, held in Tokyo on 15 and 16 October 1997, and E/ESCAP/STAT.11/7, the report of the Director of SIAP relating to the activities of the Institute for the two-year period since the tenth session of the Committee.

47. The Committee was informed that the Tokyo-based courses had been restructured to meet the demands of the national statistical offices and to include new topics, including those suggested by the Committee on Statistics and those raised at the global summit conferences of the 1990s.

48. The Committee recognized that the Institute's outreach programme had expanded to provide training in a wider spectrum of statistical subjects to complement the Tokyo-based courses, in the form of short-duration activities focusing on specialized fields for specific groups of countries.

49. The Committee noted with appreciation that in spite of the difficult task of addressing a wide range of areas of importance to statistical training, SIAP activities had struck a good balance between (i) basic and specialized subjects, (ii) the Tokyo-based and outreach programmes, and (iii) conventional fields and emerging areas.

50. The representative of ECO referred to discussions with SIAP in the Islamic Republic of Iran on statistical training, and welcomed the proposed training activities for ECO member countries, including the Central Asian States.

51. The Committee considered that a consolidated two-year calendar of statistical training activities in the region by all international and bilateral agencies would be useful to developing countries and suggested that SIAP and the Statistics Division of ESCAP should prepare it jointly. The Committee was informed that SIAP would prepare an assessment of the emerging regional developments in statistical training for the fifth session of the Governing Board of the Institute.

52. In discussing training for the 2000 round of population censuses, the Committee was informed that SIAP training courses addressed several aspects such as sampling, population analysis, and use of the Integrated Microcomputer Processing System (IMPS) software package for the processing of census data, and that in 1999 they would include analyses of population census results. It was suggested that what some countries currently required was not so much formal training in those fields, but rather advisory services in such areas as population data analysis and data collection. In that regard, the Committee reiterated the importance of fielding regional/subregional advisory services in population statistics through the UNFPA country support teams or other means. The representative of the Statistics Division of the United Nations Secretariat informed the Committee that it was able to offer advisory services in population statistics, including the full range of census activities. Those services were being provided through funding from UNFPA and through the regular budget resources of that Division; the services were intended to cover the entire world. The advisory services were made available without charge to the receiving governments. It might be necessary, however, to offset the cost of travel and daily subsistence allowance for some projects.

53. Regarding the SIAP/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project on data collection/compilation and statistical analysis required in the preparation of national human development reports, the Committee was informed that an important emphasis in the project would be to influence collection of the appropriate data by the national statistical offices through the use of standard statistical methodology. The continued programme support of UNDP to SIAP was noted with appreciation by the Committee.

54. The Committee was informed that in line with its priority designation by the Statistical Commission, the 1993 SNA was an important area for future training and related activities sponsored by the United Nations Statistics Division under the regular programme of technical cooperation. Notwithstanding the importance placed by several delegations on technical assistance in connection with the 2000 round of population censuses, the Committee felt that the 1993 SNA should remain the preferred choice, as any diversion of funds at that stage would be of limited utility.

55. The Committee's attention was drawn to the issue of the quality of statistics available in the region. It was suggested that full use be made for that purpose of the technical cooperation offered in

connection with the SDDS and GDDS.

F. Review of statistical matters arising from and inputs to major global and regional meetings

1. The Committee had before it secretariat documents E/ESCAP/STAT.11/8, entitled "Matters arising from and inputs to sessions of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Statistical Commission and major global and regional meetings", E/ESCAP/STAT.11/9, entitled "Good practices in technical cooperation for statistics", and E/ESCAP/STAT.11/10, prepared by the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong, China, at the invitation of the secretariat, entitled "Developing a set of documentation for good practices in official statistics". Many participants expressed their appreciation of the quality of the papers provided.
2. Document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/9 included a draft set of guiding principles in technical cooperation for statistics, covering the different modalities of technical cooperation, including seminars, advisory services, training and technical assistance projects. The Committee generally welcomed the draft guiding principles and found them to be fairly comprehensive, although it identified a number of additional factors which they might usefully cover. Though the Committee felt that harmony of goals was a desirable situation, it acknowledged that donors and recipients might have different objectives; nevertheless, the Committee believed that the guiding principles were equally applicable to both parties.
3. The Committee agreed that in the light of the diversity of statistical environments among the countries in the region, the principles should be taken as a guide rather than as a set of strict rules to be observed in technical cooperation for statistics.
4. The Committee noted that data and development were linked and that the need of donors for data to be generated through technical cooperation activities was linked to improving the efficacy of information for policy and should help to bring about good governance. Balancing the capacity-building of the recipients and the interests of the donor required serious consideration in needs assessments for technical cooperation.
5. The Committee observed that statistics had to compete with other disciplines in obtaining resources available for technical cooperation programmes. Agencies which were able to implement technical cooperation activities successfully had better opportunities for receiving additional resources. For the success of technical cooperation, political commitment was necessary, though not sufficient. Relevant statistical programmes that ensured capacity-building and institutionalization of activities were also crucial. The Committee emphasized that technical cooperation should allow for flexibility in implementation to respond to changing conditions and opportunities in the country. While technical cooperation should be an integral part of national statistical programmes, ad hoc requirements of immediate concern to the country should also be considered.
6. The Committee agreed that exchange/study visits and in-service training of statistical workers in

statistical agencies of other countries had proved to be highly beneficial to recipients. Depending upon the type of expertise required and the level of the participants, study visits could be effective either to statistically advanced countries or to those only slightly more advanced than the beneficiary country.

7. In discussing the issue of "Developing a set of documentation for good practices in official statistics" the Committee reaffirmed the importance of the fundamental principles of official statistics which several countries had already found helpful in strengthening credibility in national statistical systems. The fundamental principles provided a degree of protection and internationally sanctioned authority for statistical offices adhering to them. It generally agreed that case studies of good practices in official statistics were a good way of illustrating how the principles might be operationalized. The Committee indicated that the process of discussing the issue of developing documentation on the principles should not be overly long and should not result in a prescriptive product. Countries were invited to participate actively in the exercise of developing case studies.

8. The Committee appreciated the list of policies and practices appearing in annex II to document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/10, but also expressed the need to fill some gaps in the list and to cross-reference the policies and practices more clearly to one or more of the principles. It was agreed that further work had to be done on describing the list of policies and practices as they related to the principles. The proposed inclusion of case studies reflecting a wide variety of country experiences and approaches was welcomed, the aim being comprehensive coverage in as concise a format as possible. In that connection, some concern was expressed at the size of the task and the usefulness of too ambitious an exercise. The Committee noted that the secretariat could play a useful role in collecting case studies from countries in the region. It heard with interest that a meeting would be held in Singapore in January 1999 to discuss the question further.

9. Views were also expressed on the contents of the principles themselves. In particular, concerns were expressed on prior assumptions underlying the principles, on the interpretation of citizens' entitlement to statistical information, and on the use of administrative records in producing statistical data. It was, however, pointed out that the principles had been agreed unanimously by the Statistical Commission in 1994, after a consultative process involving each of the regional commissions. The question of the extent to which the principles applied to international agencies was also raised.

10. In discussing document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/8, the need was expressed to devote more time for discussion on issues related to the SDDS and GDDS of IMF at future international meetings, including, if possible, the thirtieth session of the Statistical Commission.

11. The issue of poverty statistics received considerable attention from the Committee, which expressed concern that international standards on the definition of poverty might be adopted at the next session of the United Nations Statistical Commission. It was clarified that the Commission would be considering only work done on the measurement of poverty, primarily by the Rio Group. The Committee invited countries in the region to consult the United Nations Statistics Division Web site, on

which the relevant documentation for the Statistical Commission would shortly be posted, and relay their views on the issue of poverty statistics to the secretariat. The organization of a workshop on poverty statistics by the secretariat in the first half of 1999 was welcomed as a further occasion for discussing poverty statistics in the region; the Committee recommended that the Rio Group report, along with other material on poverty measurement, should be considered by that workshop. The report of the regional workshop should be tabled at the 1999 session of the Working Group of Statistical Experts.

12. The need was expressed to produce statistical data on poverty at subnational levels, and it was suggested that information should be gathered on appropriate technologies and methodologies.

13. The Committee expressed concern about various aspects of the International Comparison Programme (ICP), including the uses of the exercise, the methodology, and delays in publishing some of the results, including those for the ESCAP region. It noted that ICP would also be discussed at the forthcoming session of the United Nations Statistical Commission.

G. Statistical development challenges at the turn of the century: effects of the financial crisis on statistical services

14. The Committee considered the agenda item on the basis of document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/11, entitled "Statistical development challenges at the turn of the century: effects of the financial crisis on statistical services", which was prepared and presented by the representative of the Central Bureau of Statistics, Indonesia. The draft report of the Meeting of Heads of Statistics Offices in Asian Economies in Financial Crisis, organized by the World Bank and ADB and held at Manila in October 1998, was available to participants as a background document.

15. The Committee commended the quality of document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/11. The paper made reference to the experiences of the national statistical organizations of many countries affected by the crisis. It noted that the demand for additional relevant data arising out of the crisis, coupled with a decline in budgetary allocation to statistical services, posed special challenges to national statistical offices. The Committee noted, however, that those challenges were not confined to the so-called crisis countries.

16. The Committee recognized that though the availability of appropriate statistical data might not have prevented the current crisis, they were nevertheless useful for monitoring the effects of the crisis and for providing the basis for corrective action that could help prevent a potentially critical situation from deteriorating. The Committee recalled its earlier discussions on the impact of resource requirements on national statistical services in adhering to the SDDS and GDDS. Several delegations expressed caution about the benefit to be gained from the more stringent standards proposed by IMF in the wake of the current Asian crisis, given the potential to further divert statistical resources from other areas of national concern.

17. The Committee noted that the crisis had generated increasing demand for data in new areas of concern and for statistics of recognized quality in many respects. The crisis nevertheless offered an

opportunity to national statistical organizations to restructure their institutions and to demonstrate their relevance and contribution to informed decision-making. That would also enable the national statistical offices to generate a more favourable perception on the part of users.

18. The Committee noted that national statistical offices were adopting various approaches in adjusting their activities to respond to the crisis. That included postponing less urgent activities, improving survey design, increasing the use of administrative data, and streamlining survey- supporting activities. The Committee considered it important to strengthen cooperation among the offices of countries in crisis, such as through staff exchange programmes and networking.

19. The Committee noted that the trend towards a greater need for information and the advent of information technology provided an environment supportive of the development of statistical services. The first generated a demand for statistical services and the second helped in meeting that demand. The Committee recognized that national statistical offices should be proactive to prevent their role from being marginalized by other government institutions or the private sector. Accordingly, they should strive to earn professional and technical recognition and in that process obtain appropriate budgetary provision from the government.

H. Information resources and technology: (a) information resource management: successes and challenges, and (b) information technology applications in the national statistical service and in the public sector

75. The Committee based its discussion on information technology on four documents: a case study on information resource management (E/ESCAP/STAT.11/12), contributed by the Bureau of Statistics, Fiji, [Information technology applications in national statistical services] (E/ESCAP/STAT.11/13), [Results of the ESCAP survey on applications of information technology to population data] (E/ESCAP/STAT.11/13/Add.1), and [Issues in computerization in the public sector] (E/ESCAP/STAT.11/14), prepared by the secretariat.

76. The Committee noted that information technology was a tool for producing statistics and managing statistical offices, and not an end in itself. While admitting that even significant improvements sometimes went unnoticed by increasingly demanding users, the Committee saw no alternative for national statistical offices but to continue to improve their data processing systems by adopting new information technology. It emphasized that the development of information technology should be based on a holistic approach that took into account organizational goals and non-computerized data operations.

77. The Committee noted that the short lifespan of software and hardware releases had generated a perception that new versions were necessary for maintaining high-level performance. The Committee felt that frequent upgrades created heterogeneous software and hardware environments and increased costs unduly. It advised national statistical offices to ensure that new software versions were technically stable and would bring true productivity increases, before making major organization-wide upgrades.

The Committee recognized that technological leapfrogging was a feasible alternative to continuous upgrades.

78. The Committee recommended that national statistical offices should keep track of their information technology development costs. It felt that standard depreciation methods in allocating funding for future investments were applicable also to the development of information technology. The Committee recognized that the standardization of software and hardware throughout the organization, the maintenance of a relatively small number of information technology tools, and the centralized control of their update were useful means of reducing the cost of such technology. It noted that technology upgrades were sometimes best scheduled to take place simultaneously with fundamental changes in statistical operations, such as the initiation of a new statistical classification. It heard with interest that the Australian Bureau of Statistics had moved away from conventional fixed information technology budgeting and that its departmental spending on the technology could vary by time and by the priorities set by managers.

79. While developing countries were understandably willing to accept technology assistance in-kind and related advice on implementation, the Committee called for close cooperation between donors and recipients, on the one hand, and for coordination among donors, on the other, to ensure that the technology matched the real needs and circumstances of statistical offices.

80. The Committee emphasized that today's statistical information technology systems could not be developed in isolation. They had to take into account electronic and conceptual linkages to the systems of data providers. Key administrative records such as those maintained by tax and customs departments formed a significant source for economic statistics in many countries. The dependence on external electronic data interfaces also meant that statistical systems were vulnerable to malfunctions elsewhere. The year 2000 problem, for example, required that national statistical offices needed contingency plans in case their external data supply or electronic dissemination channels failed.

81. The Committee appreciated the information technology survey that had been undertaken by the secretariat at the initiative and under the guidance of the Working Party on the Application of New Technology to Population Data. It observed that the gap between developing and developed countries in using the technology continued to be wide, although it could not always be judged by the mere availability of various software titles in the organization. The Committee noted that, especially in small statistical offices, it was desirable to rely on off-the-shelf software as much as possible, since in-house application development was resource-intensive and had a high chance of failure.

82. The Committee noted the factors which had contributed to successful exploitation of information technology for statistical offices, as summarized in paragraph 2 of document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/13. In addition, it emphasized the need for securing the information technology environment with adequate back-up schemes, devices and procedures ensuring uninterrupted services. The Committee noted the importance of integrating metadata into statistical information systems, and

recommended that systematic records about data quality should be included in the metadata.

83. Noting that human resources development in the area of information technology was one of the keys to the effective adoption of the technology in national statistical offices, the Committee requested the secretariat and SIAP to investigate the possibility of organizing training on database development, in particular in data modelling and data warehousing.

84. The Committee appreciated the work that ESCAP had undertaken in creating awareness about the year 2000 problem in computers. It noted that governments appeared to have gained better understanding about the problem. They had proceeded to request Y2K-compliance information and guidance on available solutions from equipment and software suppliers; they had also made inventories about building automation systems and had contacted suppliers for necessary replacements. Although the Committee had no basis for estimating the overall Y2K preparedness level in the region, the slow progress in many quarters prompted it to urge government departments to maintain a high level of awareness and to persist with remedial action throughout the remaining 13 months of the century.

I. Programme of work in statistics, 1998-1999 and 2000-2001, including the development of an integrated presentation of work programmes

1. The Committee had before it two documents prepared by the secretariat: "Programmes of work in statistics, 1998-1999 and 2000-2001" (E/ESCAP/STAT.11/15); and "Integrated presentation of statistical work programmes in the ESCAP region, 1998-1999" (E/ESCAP/STAT.11/16 and Corr.1).

2. The Committee noted and concurred with the observation made by the Working Group of Statistical Experts at its tenth session that the format for presenting the programme of work adopted in document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/15 lacked specific details concerning the nature of the work proposed to be done, its time-frame and success criteria. The Committee requested that the objectives for the outputs be clearly stated, with identified measurable indicators. It requested the secretariat to prepare a table incorporating those details for consideration by the Bureau.

3. The Committee was informed that a proposal by the Secretary-General of the United Nations concerning results-based budgeting was under consideration by the General Assembly. In contrast to the current format utilized by the secretariat, that framework would involve the preparation of a programme of work with identified linkages among objectives, expected results, outputs and inputs. It recognized that though the outcome of activities provided a better measure of success than input indicators did, there were problems in disaggregating the various elements contributing to the success of an outcome. Appropriate measurement indicators would need to be developed for that purpose.

4. The Committee noted the reasons why the proposed programme of work was expressed in generic terms and the constraints faced by the secretariat in delineating outputs and activities of the programme of work in greater detail two or three years in advance, especially among those for which extrabudgetary resources were to be sought. That was true particularly for operational activities under the statistical development component, which were virtually all dependent on extrabudgetary resources

which might or might not be secured. The Committee also felt that it should refrain from involving itself in the details of the planning and implementation of the programme of work to an extent that would amount to micro-management.

5. The Committee concurred with the priorities identified in paragraph 11 of document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/15. Commending the secretariat's efforts in reviewing the application of new technology to population data in the region, it encouraged the secretariat to conduct further reviews in such priority areas as the implementation of the 1993 SNA. Attention should also be paid to group activities on strategic planning and management of national statistical services, collection of statistics on information technology, new and emerging issues relating to balance of payments and SNA, including foreign direct investment, international investment position, and international trade in services statistics.

6. The Committee considered the relative priority of the five programme elements in the proposed programme of work on statistics for 2000-2001. In agreeing with the order of priority assigned by the Bureau, it nevertheless recognized that it might be more meaningful to assign priorities to the outputs and activities within each element, rather than to compare the overall priority of one programme element against another, as the secretariat was required to do. The Committee concurred that the development and maintenance of ESIS should have the lowest priority.

J. Other matters

91. The Committee reviewed document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/17, the draft provisional agenda for the twelfth session of the Committee on Statistics, which reflected the recommendations of the Bureau meeting of 23 November 1998. It concurred that the emphasis for the twelfth session should be placed on substantive statistical issues, with appropriate, high-quality documentation. It recognized that the provisional agenda, as amended, was still tentative and would be suitably refined and finalized by the Bureau before the next Committee session. The amended provisional agenda reads as follows:

1. Opening of the session.
2. Adoption of the agenda.
3. Reports for the attention of the Committee:
 - (a) Report of the Bureau, including implementation of the recommendations of the Committee at its tenth and eleventh sessions;
 - (b) Report of the Working Group of Statistical Experts;
 - (c) Report on major statistical activities of regional and international institutions;
 - (d) Reports concerning the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific, including the reports of the Governing Board.
4. Matters arising from and inputs to major global and regional meetings.
5. Monitoring achievements on key economic and social issues.
6. Environment statistics.
7. [emerging issues]
8. Issues relating to information technology applications.
9. Programme matters:
 - (a) Orientation of the medium-term plan, 2002-2005;
 - (b) Changes to the programme of work, 2000-2001;
 - (c) Outline of the programme of work, 2002-2003.
10. Other matters.
11. Election of the Bureau.
12. Adoption of the report.

92. The Committee decided that a session of the Working Group of the Statistical Experts should be organized in 1999 and recalled that it would review the report of the workshop on poverty statistics to be convened by the secretariat. The Working Group should also review the outcome and recommendations of the ESCAP Working Party on the Application of New Technology to Population Data, which should be available by then.

93. The Committee reviewed its experience on the conduct of the session with regard to the time available for discussion in the new three-day format which had been stipulated under the new conference structure adopted by the Commission in 1997. There was a widespread view that, despite the innovations introduced and efforts made, the meeting had been obliged to curtail discussion on some topics. Some representatives felt that three days were sufficient for the Committee to conduct its business, provided the agenda was sufficiently focused on a few substantive topics, with items of a reporting or programmatic nature cut to the minimum. Several other representatives, however, felt that an additional day would have eased the tight schedule, and at the same time would have afforded more opportunities for exchange of experience. The point was also made that a longer session was desirable to make travel to the Committee worthwhile from the Pacific or other distant countries. The Committee decided to attempt to improve on the organization of the Committee at its twelfth session in 2000, to evaluate at that time the number of days required to conduct its business effectively, and to report to the Commission if it felt the three-day format to be unworkable.

K. Election of the Bureau

94. The Committee considered the item on the basis of document E/ESCAP/STAT.11/18 and conference room paper STAT.11/CRP.2. In discussing Bureau election procedures, it confirmed that the term of a Bureau member was four years, and decided that the term of service of the chairperson and of the rapporteur should be two years. As regards re-election, the Committee decided that:

(a) A member of the Bureau can be re-elected, but can serve only for a maximum of two terms, of four years each, in succession;

(b) For the positions of chairperson and rapporteur, service should not exceed four years, that is, two successive terms of two years;

(c) After a break in service, re-election as member, chairperson or rapporteur would be permitted.

95. As regards the actual procedure of election, the Committee decided that:

(a) The first stage of election was for the Committee to elect the six Bureau members;

(b) The second stage of election was for the Committee to elect a chairperson from among the eligible Bureau members; the rest of the Bureau members would then be vice-chairpersons;

(c) The Bureau members would subsequently conduct an election among themselves whereby one of the eligible vice-chairpersons would additionally take up the position of rapporteur.

96. The Committee then unanimously elected the following bureau:

Chairperson: Paul Cheung (Singapore)¹

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¹ Term of office on the Bureau expiring in 2000.

Vice-Chairpersons: Tim Skinner (Australia)²
Timoci Bainimarama (Fiji)²
Frederick W.H. Ho (Hong Kong, China)²
M.D. Asthana (India)¹
Ch. Davaasuren (Mongolia)¹

III. ORGANIZATION OF THE SESSION

A. Opening and duration of the session

97. The Committee on Statistics held its eleventh session at Bangkok from 24 to 26 November 1998.
98. The session was opened by His Excellency Air Chief Marshal Somboon Rahong, Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, Government of Thailand.
99. The Executive Secretary of ESCAP and the Minister addressed the Committee.
100. On 26 November, the Committee held an open forum covering questions and answers on country papers, pricing strategies for statistical data, and an exchange of experiences and views on the SDDS and GDDS.
101. At the closure of the session, the participants expressed their gratitude to the Government of Thailand, especially the National Statistical Office, for the warm hospitality accorded to them.

B. Attendance

102. The session was attended by representatives of the following 33 members and associate members of ESCAP: Australia; Bangladesh; Brunei Darussalam; China; Fiji; France; India; Indonesia; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Japan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Malaysia; Micronesia (Federated States of); Mongolia; Nepal; New Zealand; Pakistan; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Russian Federation; Singapore; Sri Lanka; Thailand; Turkey; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; United States of America; Vanuatu; Viet Nam; French Polynesia; Hong Kong, China; Macau; and New Caledonia.
103. The following members of the United Nations attended in a consultative capacity under rule 3 of the rules of procedure of the Commission: Hungary, Peru and Sweden.
104. The session was also attended by an official of the United Nations Secretariat, representing the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

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² Term of office on the Bureau expiring in 2002.

105. Representatives of the following United Nations bodies attended: United Nations Development Fund for Women, United Nations Environment Programme and United Nations Population Fund.
106. Representatives of the following United Nations specialized agencies attended: International Labour Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, World Health Organization, World Bank and United Nations Industrial Development Organization.
107. Representatives of the Asian Development Bank, the Economic Cooperation Organization, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Pacific Community also attended.
108. Representatives of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific also attended.

C. Officers

109. The Committee was presided over by the following officers:

Chairperson: Frederick W.H. Ho (Hong Kong, China)

Vice-Chairpersons: Mashfee Binte Shams (Bangladesh)
Timoci Bainimarama (Fiji)
M.D. Asthana (India)
Ch. Davaasuren (Mongolia)³
Paul Cheung (Singapore)

Rapporteur: Alejandrino A. Vicente (Philippines)

110. At its meeting on 26 November 1998, the Committee elected by acclamation the following officers to serve as its incoming bureau:

Chairperson: Paul Cheung (Singapore)⁴

Vice-Chairpersons: Tim Skinner (Australia)⁵
Timoci Bainimarama (Fiji)⁵
Frederick W.H. Ho (Hong Kong, China)⁵
M.D. Asthana (India)⁴
Ch. Davaasuren (Mongolia)⁴

The Committee noted that the Bureau would elect one of its vice-chairpersons to act in addition as rapporteur.

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³ Also served as adjunct rapporteur.

⁴ Term of office expiring in 2000.

⁵ Term of office expiring in 2002.

D. Agenda and organization of work

111. The Committee adopted the following agenda:
1. Opening of the session.
 2. Adoption of the agenda.
 3. Implementation of the recommendations of the Committee at its ninth and tenth sessions.
 4. Report of the Bureau.
 5. Report of the Working Group of Statistical Experts.
 6. Review of statistical activities in the region.
 7. Issues relating to the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific, including the reports of the Governing Board.
 8. Matters arising from and inputs to sessions of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Statistical Commission and major global and regional meetings.
 9. Statistical development challenges at the turn of the century: effects of the financial crisis on statistical services.
 10. Information resources and technology:
 - (a) Information resource management: successes and challenges;
 - (b) Information technology applications in the national statistical service and in the public sector.
 11. Programmes of work in statistics, 1998-1999 and 2000-2001, including the development of an integrated presentation of work programmes.
 12. Other matters.
 13. Election of the Bureau.
 14. Adoption of the report.

E. Documentation

112. The documents that were before the Committee at its eleventh session are listed in the annex to the present report.

F. Adoption of the report

113. The Committee adopted the report on its eleventh session on 26 November 1998.

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Symbol	Title
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/L.1	Provisional agenda
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/L.2	Annotated provisional agenda
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/1	Implementation of the recommendations of the Committee at its ninth and tenth sessions
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/3	Report of the Working Group of Statistical Experts on its tenth session
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/4	Secretariat activities since the tenth session of the Committee on Statistics
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/5	Recommendations and statement of regional priorities of the Eleventh Regional Meeting of Heads of Statistics
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/6	Report of the Governing Board of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific on its third session
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/7	Report of the Director of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/8	Matters arising from and inputs to sessions of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Statistical Commission and major global and regional meetings
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/9	Good practices in technical cooperation for statistics
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/10	Developing a set of documentation for good practices in official statistics
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/11	Statistical development challenges at the turn of the century: effects of the financial crisis on statistical services
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/12	Information resources and technology: Information resource management: successes and challenges - Case study: Bureau of Statistics, Fiji
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/13	Information technology applications in national statistical services
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/13/Add.1	Results of the ESCAP survey on applications of information technology to population data
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/14	Issues in computerization in the public sector
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/15	Programmes of work in statistics, 1998-1999 and 2000-2001

E/ESCAP/STAT.11/16 and Corr.1	Integrated presentation of statistical work programmes in the ESCAP region, 1998-1999
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/17	Draft provisional agenda for the twelfth session of the Committee on Statistics
E/ESCAP/STAT.11/18	Election of the bureau
STAT.11/CRP.1	Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Informal Sector Statistics on its second session
STAT.11/CRP.2	Recommended bureau election procedures

Country/area papers

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|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Australia | 14. Mongolia |
| 2. Brunei Darussalam | 15. New Caledonia |
| 3. China | 16. New Zealand |
| 4. French Polynesia | 17. Pakistan |
| 5. Hong Kong, China | 18. Papua New Guinea |
| 6. India | 19. Philippines |
| 7. Indonesia | 20. Republic of Korea |
| 8. Iran (Islamic Republic of) | 21. Russian Federation |
| 9. Japan | 22. Singapore |
| 10. Lao People's Democratic Republic | 23. Sri Lanka |
| 11. Macau | 24. Thailand |
| 12. Malaysia | 25. Viet Nam |
| 13. Micronesia (Federated States of) | |

Organization papers

1. Asian Development Bank
2. Commonwealth of Independent States
3. Economic Cooperation Organization
4. International Labour Organization

