



Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

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Review of issues pertinent to the subsidiary structure of the Commission, including the work of the regional institutions: statistics

Statistics for the development agenda beyond 2015 in Asia and the Pacific: leveraging the data revolution

Note by the secretariat**

Summary

Statistics are a vital ingredient of informed decision-making on development issues. The development agenda beyond 2015 is expected to increase the demand for high-quality statistics by different stakeholders. This comes at a time when technology is having a significant impact on how data are being captured, produced and used.

The present note by the secretariat provides an overview of the collective efforts by Governments and development partners in Asia and the Pacific to advance statistics development in the region so as to meet the data and statistical needs of the development agenda beyond 2015. The note highlights the importance of engaging a wide range of stakeholders beyond the statistical community in order to harness the opportunities presented by the data revolution and build the enduring capacity of national statistical systems to produce and disseminate core economic, social and environmental statistics for informed decision-making, including that related to sustainable development goals.

The Commission is requested to provide guidance on opportunities and modalities to promote regional dialogue between data users and producers to further regional cooperation for statistics development.

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** The present note has been submitted late owing to the need to include the decisions adopted at the fourth session of the Committee on Statistics.

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I. Statistical capacity is a development imperative

1. Statistics are a vital ingredient of informed decision-making on development issues. Without them it is impossible to gauge the performance of the economy, the quality of people's lives, the state of the environment, and where the poorest of the poor live and disparities exist, so that programmes for those most in need of support can be prioritized. Frequent, comprehensive, accessible and comprehensible statistics are crucial for fostering “a culture of shared responsibility, one based on agreed universal norms, global commitments, shared rules and evidence, collective action and benchmarking for progress”.¹ The development agenda beyond 2015 is expected to increase and focus the demand for high-quality statistics from member States.

2. The importance of strengthening the capabilities of national statistical systems is key to achieving development. The significance of long-term capacity development has been echoed in discussions on the development agenda beyond 2015 by calls to include an effective official statistical system as a development target in its own right (see box 1). The two targets recommended by the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals under the heading “Data, monitoring and accountability” reflect the recognition that an essential component of the means of implementation for the sustainable development goals is relevant, timely and accurate statistics that are disaggregated by population groups, underpinning a robust process of review and follow-up.

Box 1

Sustainable development goal targets on statistics development

The recommendations^a of the Open Working Group contain the following two targets under “Data, monitoring and accountability”, which appears under Goal 17, “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”:

(a) Target 17.18: by 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts;

(b) Target 17.19: by 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product (GDP), and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries.

^a See A/68/970.

¹ A/69/700, para. 146.

3. This comes at a time when technology is having a significant impact on how data are being captured, produced and used. The international community is tasked with finding ways to harness the “data revolution” and capitalize on new sources and methods to meet the ambitions of the development agenda beyond 2015. The call for a data revolution highlights the urgency and scale of transformative changes in the way statistical work is conducted and the roles and functions of national statistical systems to meet the demands for statistical information and take advantage of technological advancements.

4. The present note provides an overview of the collective efforts by Governments and development partners in Asia and the Pacific to advance statistics development in the region to meet the data and statistical needs for the sustainable development agenda beyond 2015. The note highlights the focus of the Committee on Statistics to embrace the opportunities presented by the data revolution and build the enduring capacity of national statistical systems to produce and disseminate core economic, social and environmental statistics for informed decision-making, including that related to the sustainable development goals. The note concludes with a request for the Commission to provide guidance on a proposal to strengthen regional support for statistics development by enhancing research on statistical policies and practices, establishing a regional platform to promote dialogue between data users and producers, and advancing regional collaboration, including South-South cooperation.

II. Collaborative efforts for statistics development in Asia and the Pacific

5. Member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), with the coordinated support of a wide range of multilateral and bilateral partners, have been striving to strengthen the capacity of their national statistical systems by focusing on the two strategic goals that they established through the Committee on Statistics in 2010, namely: (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. The Commission has endorsed the work of the Committee by adopting a number of resolutions, demonstrating that carrying out the work requires not just the commitment of the statistical community, but rather that of the whole of Government.² At its fourth session in March 2015, the Committee reaffirmed the relevance of these two strategic goals in the context of the development agenda beyond 2015 and the data revolution.

6. In achieving these two goals, the Committee has established a number of strategic, steering and technical groups consisting of senior experts from the statistics and policy communities to set the scope of statistics development and identify priority issues, develop strategies for improvements and implement regional initiatives in a number of key areas of statistics, including economic statistics, civil registration and vital statistics, agricultural and rural statistics,

² These resolutions include key issues on: strengthening statistical capacity in Asia and the Pacific (67/11); a core set of economic statistics to guide the improvement of basic economic statistics in Asia and the Pacific (67/10); the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific (67/12); implementing the outcome of the High-level Meeting on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific (69/15); a core set of population and social statistics to guide national capacity development in Asia and the Pacific (69/16).

population and social statistics, modernization of statistical products and services, as well as statistical training. The Partners for Statistics Development in Asia-Pacific, consisting of multilateral and bilateral agencies, including subregional entities with work programmes on statistics, provide coordinated support to countries through a variety of modalities, including advocacy, technical assistance, resource mobilization and training.

A. Existing challenges and growing expectations

7. As the development agenda beyond 2015 is taking shape, the sense of urgency to strengthen statistical systems to cope with growing demands is building. The Asia-Pacific region has some of the most advanced statistical systems, as well as some of the weakest. There have been considerable improvements over recent decades, but many developing countries in the region still lack timely, accurate and reliable data on economic, social and environmental issues. Measuring the goals and targets under the new agenda will pose “a significant challenge for even the most advanced statistical systems”, and will surely exceed the current capacity of many in the Asia-Pacific region.³

8. Despite improvements over recent decades, many developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region still do not have the capacity to produce accurate and reliable core sets of statistics in a timely manner — for example, the key indicators relating to both child nutrition and maternal health, both of which remain major development issues in the region. Comparable data on the prevalence of underweight children and the rate of skilled birth attendance are available for only half of the developing ESCAP member States, and that information is becoming dated, the most recent being from 2008 and 2009, respectively. This lack of evidence on where to target health services, and whether or not child and maternal health programmes are reaching those most in need, could be a major impediment to progress. Lack of availability of data for the Millennium Development Goal indicators is particularly widespread for the Pacific small island developing States.

9. The development agenda beyond 2015 requires a wide range of data and statistics, disaggregated by relevant population groups and accessible to all key stakeholders. Fifteen countries in the region participated in an assessment of whether they are likely to be able to report on the progress achieved in meeting the recommended new goals and targets (see table 1) Data availability is weak across a number of domains, in particular those related to water and sanitation (Goal 6), economic growth and work (Goal 8), inequality (Goal 10), urbanization (Goal 11), sustainable consumption and production (Goal 12), marine resources (Goal 14), forests and land degradation (Goal 15) and peace and justice (Goal 16).

10. In a separate study, researchers in Bangladesh concluded that the country’s statistical system currently produces little data in some key areas of the sustainable development agenda, such as energy and infrastructure, governance, environment and global partnership. In addition, available data often suffer from a lack of accuracy and reliability, timeliness and punctuality, accessibility and clarity, and coherence and comparability.

11. The challenges faced in meeting the data needs of the new development agenda are not unique to developing countries. A self-assessment by the Australian Bureau of Statistics concluded that although the country’s statistical

³ See E/CN.3/2015/2, para. 20.

system has the capability to deliver the economic data for the illustrative goals proposed by Secretary-General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, it lacks the capability to deliver environmental data. Although Australia is also able to deliver social and population data, they vary in frequency and quality. Topics such as disaster risk reduction, environmental management, asset ownership and entrepreneurship are emerging areas of statistics for which concepts and methods are still relatively new or under development. Other capacity issues aside, the newness of some areas of statistics will limit the region's ability to report on them.

Table 1

Percentage of the 15 Asia-Pacific countries assessed that can produce data for at least one indicator that could be used to measure progress towards the recommended sustainable development goals

	Target									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Goal 1	77	77	67	45	55					
Goal 2	92	91	75	77	9					
Goal 3	100	100	90	92	70	92	80	90	73	
Goal 4	100	83	100	67	100	100	42			
Goal 5	91	100	90	73	100	100				
Goal 6	100	79	57	64	36	50				
Goal 7	69	77	77							
Goal 8	75	73	50	60	100	91	70	70	44	50
Goal 9	55	83	27	73	67					
Goal 10	83	50	92	50	10	30	50			
Goal 11	69	64	30	40	64	64	50			
Goal 12	17	62	8	71	71	67	18	27		
Goal 13	75	50	42							
Goal 14	30	50	40	64	40	11	11			
Goal 15	92	75	91	30	75	36	27	36	36	
Goal 16	89	33	56	11	60	44	33	11	75	75

Source: United Nations Statistical Division, December 2014.

B. Strengthening national statistical capacity is key

12. Inadequacies as regards the coverage and quality of data reflect insufficiencies in various aspects of the capacity of national statistical systems; they include both institutional and methodological factors. A well-functioning national statistical system must be underpinned by a strong and effective legal framework that legislates clearly and enforces the mandates of the national statistical office and other government or non-government agencies that are responsible for official statistics. Such a framework should provide the basis for policies on access to data, enshrining the "right to information" and ensuring that data are not only available but also useable and cost-effective. In particular, it should serve as a guarantee for the effective coordination of the various parts of the national statistical system and the professional independence and integrity of official statistics. Essential elements of a well-functioning statistical system include frequent and meaningful engagement between data producers and users, robust and sustained data sources (in particular, data from administrative sources that are compiled and maintained

by other government agencies), application of existing statistical guidelines and standards, as well as skilled and motivated staff members.

13. Internationally agreed statistical standards underpin data quality (see box 2). Many countries, including those from Asia and the Pacific, that reported relatively high levels of independence of their national statistical systems also agreed that their implementation of existing technical standards and guidelines was less than satisfactory.⁴

Box 2

Fundamental principles of official statistics

Developed by the international statistical community, the 10 fundamental principles of official statistics embody what is required to produce high-quality official statistics. They provide a framework for developing statistical capacity and for judging the strength of national statistical systems. In summary, the principles promote:

- (a) Relevance, impartiality and equal access;
- (b) Professional standards and ethics;
- (c) Accountability and transparency;
- (d) Prevention of misuse;
- (e) Sources of official statistics;
- (f) Confidentiality;
- (g) Legislation;
- (h) National coordination;
- (i) Use of international standards;
- (j) International cooperation.

For more information, see the United Nations Statistics Division website: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx>.

14. The above conclusion is supported by another assessment of statistical capacity, in which about half of the Asia-Pacific region's 40 developing countries regularly implement existing standards in a maximum of 6 out of 10 areas. While regularly conducted population censuses and surveys on household income and expenditure as well as complete vital registration are essential for a country to produce its key official statistics, half of these countries in the region had only 3 or fewer of the 5 data sources that were assessed. And one quarter of the 40 countries regularly implement internationally recommended guidelines and procedures in only 4 or fewer of the 10 areas.⁵

15. In an assessment of the capacity to produce the core set of economic statistics in 49 member States, basic data sources, such as economic censuses and centralized business registries, were absent in more than half of the countries, with almost half not using quality frameworks for their economic statistics products and only one third having adequate human resources to compile the core set. The assessment also revealed that producing and disseminating timely and frequent economic statistics was a challenge in many of the countries (see table 2).

⁴ United Nations Statistics Division, "Implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics", United Nations Statistical Commission, forty-fourth session.

⁵ World Bank, "Data on statistical capacity". Available from <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/statisticalcapacity/>.

Table 2
Capacity constraints in producing a core set of economic statistics with quality standards — responses from 49 ESCAP member States, 2013

	Number of States	Percentage of total
<i>Capacity and data sources</i>		
Reported to have adequate human resources to produce and disseminate the core set	16	33
Do not use a quality assessment framework to monitor the quality of economic statistics outputs	23	47
Do not have a centralized business registry	15	31
Carry out an economic census	24	49
<i>Timeliness of statistical products</i>		
Produce quarterly GDP figures	20	41
Produce monthly commodity price indices	10	20
Produce annual productivity measures	15	31
Produce annual integrated national accounts	28	57
Are able to produce annual indicators related to natural resources	7	14

Source: ESCAP Statistics Division.

16. Assessments conducted by the World Bank show that the capacity of national statistical systems in the region has gradually improved over the last decade. However, there is enormous variation within Asia and the Pacific (see table 3). Overall, in 2014, statistical capacity was rated at 67 out of a possible 100, putting the region ahead of the Middle East and North Africa, but behind Latin America and the Caribbean. Capacity was above the regional average in all subregions, except for the Pacific, which, due to the unique challenges associated with geographically isolated small island developing States, faces significant barriers to building statistical capacity across all social, environmental and economic domains.

Table 3
Average scores of statistical capacity of developing countries, by region and subregion

	2005	2010	2014
Asia and the Pacific	64	65	67
South-East Asia	71	72	73
South and South-West Asia	70	72	74
North and Central Asia	76	78	74
Pacific	42	42	47
Europe	77	80	85
Latin America and the Caribbean	70	71	71
Middle East and North Africa	62	61	59
Sub-Saharan Africa	57	59	59

Source: Country data from the World Bank Statistical Capacity Indicators database.

Note: The statistical capacity indicator is a composite measure based on a diagnostic framework that assesses methodology, data sources, and periodicity and timeliness. The score can range from 0 (low capacity) to 100 (high capacity). The average scores for Asia and the Pacific and its subregions are calculated by ESCAP for 40 countries.

17. There is a clear need to not only continue developing statistical capacity, but to be systematic in measuring how effectively this is being done. The assessments conducted by the World Bank examine only a few key aspects of statistical production; whereas the quality of official statistics, and the capacity to produce and use them, is based on a much wider range of dimensions.⁶ Assuring data quality involves effective management of the statistical system as a whole, and the institutional environments within it. This includes adequate resourcing, fostering collaboration between the data producers and users across the system, and ensuring the professional independence of statistical institutions. Furthermore, data quality relies on effective management of statistical processes and outputs. This includes the use of sound methodologies, capitalizing on new technologies, minimizing the burden on respondents, and assuring the relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, clarity and comparability of the statistics that are being produced.

18. The African Statistical Development Index looks at the organization of the national system as a whole, infrastructure, data dissemination, human resource capacity and funding. In this sense, it may address some of the limitations of the World Bank index.⁷ Other attempts to measure statistical capacity have also been made by the United States Agency for International Development and the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century.⁸ There are no assessment frameworks tailored to regional requirements and, currently, none of the regional commissions are coordinating regular comprehensive reviews of capacity gaps and concerns.

19. The Committee on Statistics has discussed the need for developing a monitoring framework to regularly assess statistical capacity in Asia and the Pacific. To do this effectively, it needs to go beyond its mandate of coordination among statistical leaders. At present, principles for the framework have been agreed by the Committee and point to the need for assessment of both institutional and organizational situations, as well as simultaneously monitoring the capacity requirements of the new agenda.⁹ These efforts need to extend beyond assessing the capabilities of national statistical systems and to examine the degree to which policymakers and decision makers are using statistics effectively.

III. Furthering collaboration to realize the data revolution

20. The group of experts convened by the Secretary-General to propose ways to improve data for achieving and monitoring sustainable development to address global data challenges made a number of recommendations for the efforts led by the United Nations to mobilize a data revolution for sustainable development. These recommendations emphasize the active engagement of a wide range of national and international stakeholders in order to close data gaps, strengthen national capacities and tap into new opportunities to revolutionize data for sustainable development.

⁶ See National Quality Assurance Frameworks. Available from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/QualityNQAF/nqaf.aspx>.

⁷ F. Ngaruko, "The World Bank's Framework for Statistical Capacity Measurement: strengths, weaknesses and options for improvement", *African Statistical Journal*, vol. 7, November 2008.

⁸ Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century, "Overview of evaluations of large-scale statistical capacity building initiatives" (2008).

⁹ ESCAP, "Strengthening data and statistics for the development agenda beyond 2015 in Asia and the Pacific", note by the Bureau, fourth session of the Committee on Statistics, 25-27 March 2015, Bangkok. Available from www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/pre-ods/CST4_CRP2_StrategicDirection_English.pdf.

21. The development and implementation of the regional initiatives of the Committee on Statistics have sought broad-based partnerships, not just within statistical communities but also with other key players, including data users and the private sector. Ensuring statistical systems are trustworthy, credible and professional, securing appropriate resources, encouraging active involvement of a broader group of stakeholders, strengthening data sources and production, and improving access, interpretability and the use of statistics are all key priorities. Policymakers and decision makers will need to show strong leadership in order to establish the required legislative environment and ensure that government officials are statistically literate and accountable for using data in the design and implementation of policies and programmes. These and other priorities for developing statistical capacity will inform the articulation of the monitoring framework.

A. Building trust, credibility and professionalism

22. To be credible and trustworthy, the production of official statistics, and their release, must be free from political interference. The independence of statistics is enshrined in the 10 fundamental principles of official statistics adopted by the international statistical community in 1994, and endorsed by the General Assembly in 2014 (see box 2).¹⁰ Independence and professionalism are pillars for building trust and credibility in the data being produced to monitor development goals. Official statistics are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate and so it is not easy for detractors to prove the inaccuracy of data. This far from guarantees trust in official statistics. The complexity of what is being measured, and confusion about how that is done, can be the basis for discounting the information as inaccurate, particularly if the findings are not in line with what was expected, hoped for or seen as politically incorrect.

23. A survey of 82 developing and 44 developed countries revealed that a high level of independence currently exists. Legislation that provides for independence, being able to choose statistical methodology and determine the content and timing of data releases without interference, were reported by almost all countries as a key component of maintaining independence. However, this is an ongoing issue for statistical systems, and institutional safeguards must be in place. For example, in the Philippines, threats to statistical independence were picked up and addressed through the strong leadership and decision-making of its National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB).¹¹

24. Independence and professionalism are pillars for building trust and credibility in the data being produced to monitor development goals. For example, the official statistics of China are often viewed with scepticism by outsiders. It is clear that the size and socioeconomic fabric of the country present major challenges for collecting accurate information from local governments and enterprises. However, a study of the accuracy of the GDP of China, a key indicator impacting national and international economic policies, found that the figures produced conformed to tests of statistical accuracy.¹² This demonstrates the type of scrutiny producers of official statistics should face, and the value of openness and transparency in building a reputation for unbiased statistical reporting.

¹⁰ General Assembly resolution 68/261.

¹¹ Romulo A. Virola, "The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: threats in the Philippine statistical system", 12th National Conference on Statistics, Philippines, 2013.

¹² Carsten A. Holz, "The quality of China's GDP statistics" (Stanford Center for International Development, Stanford University, 2013).

25. The credibility of statistics extends beyond those produced by the national statistical office. Many of the key development indicators are measured by other data-producing agencies, such as the ministries of education or health. The quality of these data are impacted not only by capacity issues, but also by the fact that the resulting data often determine budget allocation, and this can be an incentive to overstate progress.¹³ This heightens the importance of independence and coordination across the national statistical system.

26. To build trust and credibility, data producers need to be accountable for implementing international standards and codes of professionalism. One requirement is that they publish information, or metadata, that outlines precisely how the statistics have been produced. This is becoming common practice for surveys and censuses conducted by many statistical offices across the region, but less so for data based on administrative records.

27. Through advocacy, technical assistance, training and the sharing of good practices, all regional initiatives of the Committee on Statistics aim at strengthening the legal and regulatory frameworks of national statistical systems to ensure public trust in official statistics, as well as the credibility and professionalism of statistical products and services.

B. Securing appropriate resources and funding

28. Significant investments are necessary to bring the production and use of official statistics up to the level required by the development agenda beyond 2015. One estimate is that, globally, \$254 billion will need to be spent on strengthening statistics between 2015 and 2030; almost twice the annual total spent on Official Development Assistance (ODA) in any recent year.¹⁴ Although the amount seems large, Governments and development partners must recognize that the alternative to the investment is bad, namely no key statistics, which can lead to misinformed policies and programmes, resulting in a waste of resources.

29. Development partners have devoted significant resources to supporting efforts to achieve the two strategic goals by ESCAP member States, in particular countries with special needs. This includes support to the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific as well as the regional initiatives of the Committee on Statistics. It also includes the continuing and growing support by a multitude of multilateral and bilateral partners to other regional initiatives, such as the regional programme on economic statistics and the work on civil registration and vital statistics.

30. Increased funds are urgently needed to improve the collection and dissemination of basic statistics in a large number of countries. Developing capabilities in new areas, and providing better data on different social groups, requires more effort to agree on concepts, measurement frameworks, classifications and standards, as well making sure they are implemented. As part of the proposed monitoring framework, it is suggested that guidelines be developed for establishing the resource requirements of national statistical

¹³ Center for Global Development, "The Political Economy of Bad Data: Evidence from African Survey and Administrative Statistics", Working Paper, No. 373 (2014).

¹⁴ Morten Jerven, "Benefits and costs of the data for development targets for the post-2015 development agenda: data for development assessment paper" (Copenhagen Consensus Center, 2014).

systems.¹⁵ These can be used to inform institutional arrangements and advocate for sufficient funding.

31. In most developing countries, the production of official statistics is funded through a combination of domestic and external sources. External support has increased significantly over the last decade, but remains a small fraction of the total aid budget. In 2012, only 0.16 per cent of ODA was directed towards strengthening statistics, half of the figure in 2011 (0.32 per cent). Africa has typically received the largest share of statistical capacity development funding; but in 2013, the Asia-Pacific region received the bulk of global support (65 per cent). This was mainly due to a major project in Bangladesh and continued support for Afghanistan. There is, however, the need to mobilize more funding for the region. For example, small island developing States receive significant support per capita, with Niue and Tuvalu ranked first and second, but this does not translate into large sums. Globally, only six small island developing States received more than \$1 million in external funding between 2011 and 2013; but none of these were in the Pacific region.¹⁶

32. One of the recommendations emerging from discussions on the development agenda beyond 2015 is the need for new sources of funding to develop statistical capacity. Since 2008, the bulk of support for statistics in the Asia-Pacific region comes from five donors: the World Bank, the European Commission/Eurostat, the United Kingdom, the United Nations Population Fund and Japan. Whether to increase funding available through existing channels, or diversify sources, are options that need to be weighed up. Keeping funding models simple and streamlined should reduce the financial management and reporting burden on recipient countries and improve the coherence of projects.

C. Encouraging leadership by policymakers and decision makers

33. All of the regional initiatives of the Committee emphasize the importance of the engagement and support of key stakeholders in order to produce and disseminate the basic range of statistics in a sustained manner. Active engagement of a wide range of data users is critical for a virtuous cycle of effective demand and supply of official statistics. Data users, particularly government decision makers, have a key role to play. By practicing evidence-based decision-making, they generate and maintain demand for high-quality statistics, which is likely to lead to more domestic budgetary support for the national statistical programme.

34. Ideally, government decision makers should place a high value on data, both for their own use, and also for use by the public. In developing countries, data tend to be enormously underutilized by policymakers and decision makers, and more initiative should be taken to access statistical information and provide feedback on its quality. By discussing their interpretation and application of statistics with the data producers, users will contribute to the improvement of statistical quality, leading to better informed decisions and outcomes for target groups.

¹⁵ ESCAP Committee on Statistics, “Strengthening data and statistics for the development agenda beyond 2015 in Asia and the Pacific” (E/ESCAP/CST(4)/CRP.2). Available from www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/pre-ods/CST4_CRP2_StrategicDirection%20_English%20.pdf

¹⁶ Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century, “Partner report on support to statistics: PRESS 2013 — report highlights”.

35. A key priority will be improving statistical literacy, something that requires considerable and ongoing investment. Learning about data must begin at an early age, during school and university, so that people enter the workforce with an appreciation for the importance of data and know the principles of good data production and management. Government officials, civil society and private sector partners all need to know about the official statistics most relevant to their respective fields. Broad understanding of how statistics are compiled, their strengths and limitations, where to access and how to interpret and apply them needs to be part of the basic skill set of all development practitioners.

36. Strengthening national statistical systems requires more emphasis on building user-producer relationships and understanding. The opportunities to increase interaction between users and producers are plentiful. National planning and policy dialogue should involve statisticians, just as the establishment of national strategies for the development of statistics must be informed by inputs from end users. In addition to efforts at national level, regional initiatives are key to increasing user-producer cooperation.

37. Recognizing the importance of enhancing user-producer dialogue at the regional level, the Committee on Statistics considered and agreed to a proposal to use the annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development to strengthen the responsiveness of national statistical systems to policy needs, including those regarding sustainable development goals.¹⁷ Discussions on the issue at the Forum should strengthen the engagement of data users at the national level and their support for statistics development; it should also support forums at the global level, such as those proposed by the Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development. The Group proposed a world forum on sustainable development data to bring together the whole data ecosystem to share ideas and experiences for data improvements, innovation, advocacy and technology transfer. It also proposed a global users forum for data for sustainable development goals to ensure feedback loops between data producers and users, and to help the international community to set priorities and assess results.

D. Strengthening data sources and production

38. The new development agenda provides a broader and more ambitious framework than that established by the Millennium Development Goals. It is a crucial opportunity to approach the issue of data quality and gaps from a different perspective, and comes at a time when the world is experiencing a revolution in the way that data are being created, accessed and used. The regional programmes on economic statistics and on population and social statistics focus in particular on strengthening key data sources for official statistics. An expert group that has been established by the Commission is developing a core set of disaster-related statistics in order to set the scope for capacity strengthening.

39. Widespread use of the Internet, satellite imagery, smartphones and electronic modes of payment are leading to tremendous amounts of information being automatically recorded and stored. The growth in such information — often referred to as “big data” — is changing the landscape of data management, analysis and application. It is leading to a paradigm shift from data collection to the provision of information services and their application. In particular, geospatial information technologies are becoming

¹⁷ ESCAP Committee on Statistics, “Strengthening data and statistics for the development agenda beyond 2015 in Asia and the Pacific”, Proposal 15.

critical tools to support national development, economic growth, improved decision-making and policy formulation, and have real potential for supporting the development of data labs or other new monitoring initiatives on sustainable development at the national, regional and global levels.

40. Big data has a lot to offer the development agenda beyond 2015. New technologies are increasing the possibility to capture and exchange information. At the regional level, the work to explore opportunities to use new sources of data, including big data, is being steered by the Strategic Advisory Body for the Modernization of Statistical Production and Services in Asia and the Pacific. This includes raising awareness of the opportunities through advocacy and identifying good practices and innovative solutions. It also includes mobilizing resources to support modernization programmes to transform traditional silo-based structures so that data can flow seamlessly between different collections and steps of the statistical production process, making them more efficient and cost-effective.

41. Governments are recognizing the potential that new data sources provide for gaining timely insights in order to guide policies and there are ongoing efforts to explore “quick wins” in this area. For example, analysis of social media exchanges can provide early warning of issues and facilitate a better response to crisis situations. The strength of big data is likely to be in providing contextual trends and highlighting potential issues that warrant further investigation. And when used in conjunction with traditional data and statistics, big data can uncover hidden patterns and correlations that can be used to better target development programmes.¹⁸

42. Traditional sources of official statistics remain highly relevant to the development agenda beyond 2015, but they can be compiled and disseminated in new ways. Administrative data — the by-product of administrative processes involved in the delivery of public services — are vastly underutilized and can often be a practical solution to addressing data gaps. Unfortunately, effective production of administrative data is often hindered by poor processes, inadequate technology, a lack of skilled staff and limited coordination.

43. For example, complete registration of vital events, such as births and deaths — essential for monitoring health outcomes and population dynamics — should be amongst the best administrative data available. But, according to assessments of civil registration and vital statistics systems conducted in 47 Asia-Pacific countries between 2010 and 2012, only 11 were categorized as satisfactory, while 36 were found to be dysfunctional, weak or inadequate.¹⁹ The region has ramped up efforts to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems, which involves addressing barriers to reporting births and deaths, cooperation between key agencies, and shortfalls in how the data are recorded and managed. The task is complex, expensive and will take significant time and effort to resolve.

44. Even though more can be, and is being, done to maximize the potential of administrative data, surveys and censuses will remain essential for producing official statistics into the foreseeable future. Household surveys based on international standards provide the opportunity to fill important data

¹⁸ United Nations Global Pulse, *Big Data for Development: A Primer*. Available at www.unglobalpulse.org/bigdataprimer.

¹⁹ Lene Mikkelsen, “Improving civil registration and vital statistics systems: lessons learnt from the application of health information tools in Asia and the Pacific”, Working Paper, No. 24 (Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub, 2012). Available from www.uq.edu.au/hishub/docs/WP24/HISHUB-WP%2024_7%2012%2012.pdf.

gaps and inform national policies, and are the basis for international comparison. They are often the only method for estimating the prevalence and impact of socioeconomic concerns, including information on attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. They were a major source of data for many of the Millennium Development Goal indicators and will remain critical for monitoring development beyond 2015.

45. In reaffirming the relevance of the two strategic goals for statistics development, the Committee on Statistics highlighted the importance for all countries of having an enduring capacity to produce a basic range of economic, social and environmental statistics to support policymaking, including those related to the sustainable development goals. An ultimate test of the success of the data revolution is the enhanced capacity of national systems to produce key statistics on all three dimensions of sustainable development. Regional cooperation is central to continuing to develop coherent statistical standards and methods for surveys, censuses and administrative data, and to support countries in implementing international recommendations.

E. Improving access, interpretability and use of available data

46. The biggest users of statistical information in developing countries tend to be those in the international community. Potential domestic users are often unaware of the extent of data that exists, or they are sceptical of their quality. Even when they are aware that data are available, the way in which they are presented often provides little encouragement to make the effort needed to understand or use them. Complex tables that are difficult to understand by those unfamiliar with statistics remain a standard method of dissemination for many countries. Action from both the producers and the users of data are needed to address these issues. Data producers need to make existing data more readily available in easy-to-interpret ways. Users need to engage in the production of statistics so that the resulting products are informed by their needs.

47. The timing of release, publication channels and methods of presentation determine the extent to which official statistics are eventually used. Developed countries have long recognized the importance of investing in the timely dissemination and communication of statistics. Many now employ communication professionals, such as journalists, graphic designers and marketing experts, to work within the national statistical office to develop and promote more usable statistical products. Enhancing the communication skills of statisticians is also paramount to reaching data users with meaningful information. As the ones who know the statistics, statisticians are best placed to explain their meaning. However, the skills to produce statistics are not necessarily the same as those needed to communicate them. Therefore, training statisticians in how to present the information they produce is key to unlocking the value therein.

48. Numerous statistical systems have a website and do publish data online, increasing the accessibility of official statistics. However, this is often in print forms, such as on-screen tables, PDFs or other static presentations of data. Many developing countries have not yet embraced online databases or other electronic formats, which provide users with the flexibility to design their own queries and extract the data they need, or at least publish data in a form so it does not have to be retyped. In some cases, microdata from surveys and censuses are made available for public use, providing valuable sources for analysis and research. However, if a user fee is charged, it can be prohibitive to access. Furthermore, if the release of such microdata does not include information on the process of data collection, as well as the variables

contained, it will be difficult for the user to navigate through the data files and properly analyse and interpret the results. In many countries, microdata from surveys are yet to be made widely available to users outside of Government, restricting the utility of information, which should be a public good.

IV. Way forward

49. Within the two strategic goals of the Committee on Statistics, the various regional initiatives seek to improve the responsiveness of statistical outputs to policy needs, including those related to sustainable development goals. Furthermore, at its fourth session, the Committee on Statistics endorsed a set of proposals to build on the existing regional initiatives and enhance regional collaboration. The following three broad areas of work are key in supporting the implementation of the strategic direction that the Committee has decided on.

A. Strengthening research to inform regional statistics development

50. Efforts to achieve the strategic goals of the Committee on Statistics should be informed by understanding current statistical capacity issues and whether interventions are having an impact. This knowledge should be the basis for advocacy for increased investment in statistics, identifying priorities and allocating resources. Solid research on technical methodological issues is also key to setting norms, and developing standards and technical guidelines to support national and regional actions.

51. An integral part of a research programme on developing regional statistics should be the development of tools and indicators to monitor the progress in improving national statistical capacity, including institutional aspects of national systems, which the Committee on Statistics has taken up. The results of such monitoring, and related research on statistical policies and practices could be an input for a regular publication to inform intergovernmental deliberations. For instance, the input could be a contribution to a regional monitoring report on sustainable development goals. The formulation and implementation of such a research programme will need to draw on the multidisciplinary knowledge and expertise in legal, economic, sociological and statistical fields from the region and elsewhere around the world, including the expert groups leading the regional initiatives to prepare materials for such a publication.

B. Enhancing user-producer dialogue

52. In successfully addressing the challenges of statistics development, collaborative efforts by a wide range of stakeholders are needed. Hence, a regional platform could be established to engage policymakers and other data users to provide critical feedback to the statistical community through dialogue. The regional platform should also bring together subregional entities (for example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community) and other United Nations agencies, the research community, the private sector as well as civil society organizations to encourage innovation and promote good practices. The platform could complement the Committee on Statistics and foster collaboration not only among various parts of the national statistical systems, but also among countries and subregions. The annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development may provide such a platform by including an agenda item on statistics development.

C. Turning diversity into an opportunity for regional collaboration

53. More can be done to enhance the ongoing and vibrant collaboration between and among countries in the region to strengthen statistics development. The region has some of the world's most advanced national statistical systems. In addition, the diversity in the economic, social and cultural contexts in which national statistical systems operate affords the region a rich array of practices and solutions to the challenges in national contexts. Opportunities for more South-South collaboration could be explored as countries with relatively weaker statistical capacity may benefit from the sharing of successful practices and solutions in common challenges. This could include collaboration at both regional and subregional levels. A clearing house on statistical solutions and good practices could be established under the auspices of ESCAP to facilitate such regional and subregional collaboration.

V. Issues for consideration by the Commission

54. Bearing in mind the above, the Commission is invited to consider the following:

(a) Opportunities for promoting regional dialogue to strengthen the engagement of data users and other key stakeholders in advancing statistics development in Asia and the Pacific by making use of existing mechanisms such as sector-specific committees within the conference structure of the Commission, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development or sessions of the Commission;

(b) Modalities for ensuring that such regional dialogue brings together subregional entities (for example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community) and other United Nations agencies, the research community, the private sector as well as civil society organizations to encourage innovation and promote good practices;

(c) Modalities, such as a regional clearing house under the auspices of ESCAP, to enhance regional cooperation to support statistical capacity-building, including the sharing of good practices for solutions to common challenges.
