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

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EMERGING ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENTS IN STATISTICS

Note by the secretariat

SUMMARY

The present document brings to the Commission's attention selected current statistical issues, many of which have policy implications for Governments. These include poverty statistics, national accounts, the International Comparison Programme, measuring the knowledge-based economy and information society, and development indicators. These issues were for the most part discussed by the Working Group of Statistical Experts at its twelfth session, at Bangkok in November 2001 and many were also taken up at the thirty-third session of the United Nations Statistical Commission, in New York in March 2002. Programme matters are also covered. The action requested of the Commission is summarized in paragraph 33.

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Introduction

1. The role of statistics for informed decision-making has long been accepted. The financial and economic crises of the 1990s, in Asia and elsewhere, underlined the importance of relevant, reliable and timely official statistics. The demand for relevant statistics of assured quality has been growing as the globalization of economic activities proceeds. Global conferences held under United Nations auspices, and not least the Millennium Summit, held in New York in September 2000, have generated a very significant demand for data to take stock of current situations and monitor the outcomes of concerted efforts by the international community and national Governments to alleviate matters of concern. Although the secretariat has chosen to consolidate its efforts into three thematic areas, namely, poverty reduction, managing globalization and emerging social issues, it is cognizant of the fact that statistics are needed for a broad range of activities and that national statistical capacity must be strengthened, especially in developing countries. The Economic and Social Council is prominent among the bodies which have explicitly recognized the vital role of statistical capacity-building.

2. Against this background, the present document attempts to summarize the main statistical issues which the secretariat feels should be brought to the Commission's attention. It covers poverty statistics, national accounts, the International Comparison Programme (ICP), price statistics, the knowledge-based economy and development indicators, along with other significant global and regional issues in statistics. The topics discussed draw to a considerable extent on the deliberations of the Working Group of Statistical Experts at its twelfth session, which was held at Bangkok from 27 to 30 November 2001.

I. POVERTY STATISTICS

3. Although there is remarkable homogeneity in the ESCAP region in the conceptualization of poverty as a state of deprivation, the basis for poverty measurement differs from country to country. The secretariat organized the Seminar on Poverty Statistics at Bangkok in June 1999 with a view to promoting national statistical capacity-building in that field. The Seminar recommended, inter alia, that while efforts should be made to choose indicators of poverty on a broadly comparable basis, countries should make the choice that best suited their national needs.

4. At its twelfth session, the Working Group of Statistical Experts acknowledged that international organizations had a role to play in ensuring that there was a common understanding of what was meant by poverty across countries. It observed that if intercountry or interregional comparisons of poverty were the prime purpose, then developing common definitions of poverty and creating comparable poverty data would be a priority. However, if the main purpose was to assist individual countries in their poverty reduction efforts and to gauge their own progress in poverty reduction, then national capacity-building and improving the accuracy of national measures would take precedence. The Commission may wish to emphasize, in line with the stance consistently taken

by the Committee on Statistics, that developing data capacity for national policy-making and use is of paramount importance and should hence be given priority.

5. The Working Group noted that the multidimensional nature of the poverty phenomenon made poverty measurement particularly difficult, both for national policy purposes and for international comparability. Even in measuring income poverty, complications arose, such as adjusting national prices according to the purchasing power parities (PPP) of national currencies. The Working Group noted that the broad concept of poverty encompassed health and education, inter alia, and also had to be measured. It emphasized that in addition to improving the technical accuracy of the data, it was important to create linkages between the data on poverty and the design of appropriate policies for its reduction.

6. The Working Group recognized that comparable intracountry poverty estimates were relatively easier to achieve and could lead to more efficient poverty alleviation programmes. The demand for small-area poverty statistics was growing to enable more targeted poverty alleviation at the province or village level. In that regard, the Working Group noted that countries would increasingly require technical assistance in designing an integrated information system based on sample surveys, census and administrative reports, as well as in producing poverty maps utilizing small-area statistics derived from combining those three data sources. The Commission may wish to endorse the view of the Working Group that the secretariat should organize a forum for technical discussions where country experiences in compiling poverty statistics could be shared and to urge the secretariat to make available advisory services on poverty statistics as requested by many countries in the region.

7. The United Nations Statistical Commission, at its thirty-third session, held in New York in March 2002, endorsed the work programme of the Rio Group on Poverty Statistics in measuring poverty and encouraged the Group to produce a compendium on poverty measurement after engaging in wider consultations with countries. The Statistical Commission also advised that efforts should be made to include wide regional representation in the Rio Group in order to broaden the exchange of experiences and promote possibilities for international comparison. In that regard, the ESCAP secretariat is considering hosting the next session of the Rio Group; the Commission may wish to endorse this initiative.

II. NATIONAL ACCOUNTS

8. At its twelfth session, the Working Group of Statistical Experts reviewed the activities undertaken in the region on national accounts and related topics which were designed to help countries in the implementation of the 1993 System of National Accounts (SNA). It also examined the status of implementation of the 1993 SNA by the countries in the region. The Working Group took note of the problems and issues in that connection and fully supported the strategies and activities of an action

plan proposed by the secretariat aimed at helping the countries in the compilation and dissemination of timely, accurate, reliable and internationally comparable national accounts statistics relevant to national needs and consistent with the recommendations of the 1993 SNA. It cited in particular the need to organize a user-producer workshop on national accounts to generate user understanding, acceptance and support of the changes introduced into the 1993 SNA. It also recommended that maximum use be made of administrative-based data to facilitate its implementation. In creating appreciation and support for the implementation of national accounts, effective communication with policy makers and high-level officials was necessary. For that, the Working Group considered that a simplified and well-written resource kit on the 1993 SNA would be helpful.

9. The Working Group also considered other activities relevant to the action plan, which contained a number of expected outcomes relating to groups of countries in the region. Those activities included further elaboration of the manual prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division on non-financial sector accounts, training of national accounts staff in handling databases and use of software for national accounts compilation. The Working Group further supported the suggestion to form an association of national accounts compilers to provide a forum for continuing discussions on the implementation of the 1993 SNA. Apart from the technical issues, the Working Group noted problems encountered by countries when estimates produced by multilateral agencies differed from the officially compiled data.

10. The Working Group expressed its appreciation for the cooperation of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in the secretariat's activities and welcomed their offer as well as that of the ASEAN secretariat to support the implementation of the proposed action plan. The secretariat has formulated a project proposal for the Development Account of the United Nations which would help to meet some of the outcomes in the action plan. The Working Group also expressed concern over the possible discontinuation of advisory services on national accounts, which remained in very heavy demand from members and associate members. The Commission may therefore wish to urge multilateral and bilateral agencies to support the proposed action plan, including financing regional advisory services on national accounts.

III. INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON PROGRAMME

11. ICP has the objective of developing international comparisons of gross domestic product and its components using PPPs rather than currency exchange rates. PPPs are accepted as the best means for intercountry comparisons of living standards and are widely used by international agencies and others. Owing to several issues of a methodological and practical nature, the quality of ICP data has been a matter of concern, particularly in developing countries. The United Nations Statistical Commission, at its thirty-first session, called for a reinvigoration of ICP, with the World Bank working in close cooperation with other agencies. The World Bank presented a paper to the Working

Group of Statistical Experts at its twelfth session outlining the strategy for discussion and action. The strategy encompasses building a coalition of stakeholders, mobilizing a sustained funding base, establishing a sound governance structure, strengthening national capacity, maximizing the synergy between ICP and national statistical programmes, integrating poverty-specific PPPs into the mainstream of ICP, providing incentives for countries to participate and promoting wider use of ICP data. The Working Group noted that ICP had the potential to provide an information base for some of the millennium development goals by providing timely and reliable data, helping to improve the allocation of resources for poverty reduction and building understanding of the process of economic change and growth.

12. The Working Group noted that a number of research studies on survey methods had been commissioned by the World Bank, especially to address methodologically difficult or policy-relevant aspects of ICP. Among the topics proposed in the studies, two have been implemented by the ESCAP secretariat: the construction of PPPs for the study of poverty and integration of work on ICP and the consumer price index. Both topics were discussed at a meeting of country experts in February-March 2002 and subsequently at the International Conference on the International Comparison Programme, held at Washington from 11 to 14 March 2002. The Working Group of Statistical Experts recommended a number of strategies for improving the quality of ICP data, including: (a) improving the quality of the consumer price index; (b) relying on a bottom-up approach where countries influenced the selection of items; (c) making comparisons on a subregional basis; and (d) using recent mathematical developments such as minimum spanning trees.

13. The Working Group also recommended that efforts should be made to secure adequate funding to ensure that the Programme was successful; those efforts should include additional attempts to mobilize resources at the regional level. The Working Group welcomed the intention of ADB to support the next round of ICP in the region through regional technical assistance. The Commission may wish to urge donor countries and agencies to provide further support to the Programme. The Working Group felt that while not all the elements were in place to produce perfect ICP data in the next round, the quality of data would gradually improve as it had in other fields of statistics. Since ICP depends on cooperative efforts from participating countries to provide the necessary data, the Commission may wish to encourage its members to participate in the Programme and utilize ICP data fully at the national and subnational levels. The Commission may also wish to take note of the Working Group's conclusion that the alternative to doing nothing was continued extrapolation of the poor-quality PPPs from the 1993 round and/or reliance on inappropriate exchange-rate-based comparisons.

14. The United Nations Statistical Commission, at its thirty-third session, welcomed the progress made under the leadership of the World Bank in developing an overall approach and strategy for the implementation of a global ICP. It also supported the proposed arrangements for regional

management at ESCAP and stressed the capacity-building potential of ICP in developing countries. The Statistical Commission supported moving ahead as soon as possible, but in a time frame that allowed the production of high-quality and credible results.

15. The Conference on the International Comparison Programme, which also met in March 2002, agreed on a governance structure for the Programme which includes strong regional components in the form of coordinating offices and committees. Those would ensure that each region took ownership of design and implementation issues compatible with global guidelines and had a forum where the country representatives could maintain involvement in the programme. The Conference decided that high priority needed to be given to the installation of regional coordinators, with funding for that purpose made available as quickly as possible. It also decided that a technical advisory group should be formed as early as possible in order to bring early closure to the various key methodological issues under discussion. The Conference further agreed that an executive board should be established and convened by September 2002; it would review progress and decide whether the reference year for the comparison would remain 2003, as currently planned, or would need to be postponed to 2004. The Commission may wish to note these developments and underline the importance of strong regional governance mechanisms and participation for the success of the global ICP.

IV. MEASURING THE KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY AND INFORMATION SOCIETY

16. The Working Group of Statistical Experts reviewed recent global and regional developments in statistical standards for measuring the information society and “the knowledge-based economy”, a term coined by OECD in 1996. It noted that the ability to measure the rapid evolution in information and communications technologies (ICT) and the impact they caused on society posed a major challenge to official statistical systems. It recommended that statistical offices should use a pragmatic and incremental approach in that work, commensurate with their resources. The Working Group noted that the development of national capacity was not limited to the compilation of indicators on the information society; it also covered consideration of the impact of ICT on conventional statistics, including national accounts and leading economic indicators.

17. The Working Group considered that moving from measuring the information society to measuring the knowledge-based economy added complexity and subjectivity to the process. It noted that the subject matter was an emerging area of statistics which required further conceptual, methodological and empirical work from the global statistical community. It expressed the wish that the United Nations assume a more visible role in the development of statistical standards for the measurement of the information society and the knowledge-based economy.

18. The Working Group noted that for many countries statistics on the information society were only starting to assume priority. It welcomed the secretariat’s initiatives to obtain resources for

building national capacities on the measurement of the information society in developing countries, for example, through the sharing and studying of experiences of other countries. The Commission may wish to endorse the secretariat's capacity-building efforts in this field and concur with the Working Group's advice that assistance by any donor should be geared towards the development of sustainable data collection methods.

V. DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

19. The Working Group discussed the final report of the Friends of the Chair of the Statistical Commission, an expert group formed by that Commission to address problems related to development indicators. Those problems had been identified by the Economic and Social Council, which had called for harmonization and rationalization of the indicators needed to measure progress towards the achievement of the goals set at international conferences. The Working Group strongly supported the efforts at rationalization and reduction of development indicators made by the Friends of the Chair and expressed appreciation for the adoption of the three tiers for identifying the priority of indicators. As indicators in the first tier were not so numerous and assuming that adequate funding support was available, countries might be able to use multi-scope surveys, with sample sizes adequate for small-area estimates, in order to produce those indicators.

20. Of all the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair, the Working Group agreed particularly on the need to continue and further strengthen the programmes aimed at building up the capacity of national statistical offices in developing countries in order to generate and improve the basic statistics that underpinned development indicators. However, it raised doubts about the relevance and validity of an indicator to measure the statistical capacity of countries and could not support that recommendation of the Friends of the Chair. The United Nations Statistical Commission, at its thirty-third session, agreed that further work on statistical capacity indicators was needed. It welcomed the report of the Friends of the Chair and endorsed its recommendations, in particular on the establishment of a standing committee on indicators. Such a committee would enable the Statistical Commission as well as regional and national statistical systems to remain engaged in a dialogue with international, regional and national policy makers and, in particular, to be involved at an early stage in the development of new indicators.

21. The Statistical Commission also expressed the opinion that further harmonization and rationalization of indicators was needed. In particular, it raised concerns that there had been insufficient country involvement in the development of the Millennium Declaration indicator set, which was a parallel process not coordinated with the efforts of the Statistical Commission to follow up on the indicator-related resolutions of the Economic and Social Council. The Commission may wish to note and comment on the progress in coordinating development indicators at the regional and global levels.

22. In discussing development indicators, the Working Group of Statistical Experts noted that the quality of statistics disseminated at the international level depended mainly on that available at the national level. It also noted that countries often needed support from international organizations in setting up national statistical coordination mechanisms that could help to improve quality, avoid duplication and eliminate inconsistencies among national sources. The Working Group noted some cases when, although national statistical offices usually had the responsibility of dealing with international organizations in the provision of statistical data, they were not supported by other government agencies in that task. That caused a problem to national statistical agencies either when only limited human resources could be assigned to the task or when in decentralized statistical systems data were not available to national statistical offices but only to other agencies.

23. While the Working Group appreciated that the discussion on development indicators was taking place within the United Nations Statistical Commission, it was concerned that in other areas the Statistical Commission could lose its prime role of being the principal forum where statistical issues were discussed at the global level. The concern originated from the observation that several discussions on statistical issues had shifted from the Statistical Commission to other forums. In particular, it was noted that several donor-driven initiatives, such as the World Development Indicators of the World Bank, the Human Development Index of UNDP and the latest Data Quality Assessment Framework of the International Monetary Fund, were becoming authoritative sources or guidelines in official statistics. The Commission may wish to affirm that the United Nations Statistical Commission should remain the apex body for global discussions and setting norms in official statistics.

24. Additional concern was expressed about the increased use by donor agencies of the so-called participatory poverty assessments, generally conducted through interviews of focus groups. The Working Group noted that such a survey was cheap and quick to implement, and thus had become very popular, especially for programme managers of donor agencies. However, it was also noted that such surveys were neither replicable nor statistically valid. The Working Group therefore suggested that the data from those surveys should be taken, at best, as supplementary to those produced through traditional surveys; they should not replace them. The Commission may wish to endorse this stance and reiterate the importance of capacity-building for sustainable and technically sound assessments of poverty.

VI. OTHER GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ISSUES IN OFFICIAL STATISTICS

25. The Working Group noted that no agency currently had the task of collecting statistics on international trade in services or the authority to do so; as a result, some agencies used outdated information. Moreover, because of differences between national definitions and classifications and those in the manual on statistics of international trade in services, statistics were not comparable across

countries. The Commission may wish to highlight the importance of having an international agency assume responsibility for data collection in this field.

26. The Working Group heard with interest of the experiences of countries in developing their tourism satellite accounts. Although it was acknowledged that estimates were possible, the Working Group noted that sound tourism satellite accounts were resource-consuming and depended heavily on detailed input-output tables, which were available only with a substantial time lag. It was also noted that some developing countries with a strong tourism sector were developing tourism satellite accounts before having implemented a solid set of national accounts. For the same reasons, it was thought premature to propose the Labour Accounting System for Tourism for most countries of the region. The Commission may wish to endorse the Working Group's views and concerns on this matter.

VII. PROGRAMME MATTERS

27. In discussing programme matters, the Working Group of Statistical Experts expressed satisfaction that in the period 2000-2001 the number of workshops and seminars organized or co-organized by the secretariat had been at the highest level ever. It noted that the rate of delivery of advisory services on national accounts had been higher than on other statistical topics. It further acknowledged that advisory services on national accounts continued to be in high demand. Advisory services on poverty statistics were also in demand by countries of the region.

28. The Working Group considered the planned programme of work in statistics, 2002-2003. It agreed to some changes that have since been reflected in the overall programme of work for consideration by the Commission. In reviewing the medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005 it reaffirmed that the objective was to improve the statistical capabilities of the countries/areas of the region for informed decision-making, to promote their use of information technology in the public sector and to make comparable statistical information on the region widely and promptly available. The Working Group agreed that the six priority areas designated by the Committee on Statistics and endorsed by the Commission at its fifty-seventh session, in April 2001, namely, the 1993 SNA, poverty statistics, gender statistics, environment statistics, statistics on the informal sector, and ICT and the knowledge-based economy, were still valid and reflected the current needs of the region. It agreed that there was currently a fair balance of internally- and externally-oriented activities in the statistics subprogramme. It recommended that ESCAP should continue to seek extrabudgetary resources required for building national statistical capacities.

29. The Working Group noted with interest that resources for operational activities in statistics, such as advisory services, were also available to the countries from section 21 of the programme budget (the regular programme of technical cooperation). It concurred that the practice whereby some substantive units received a periodic allocation of section 21 resources facilitated the prioritization and early planning of operational activities on a predictable basis. Given the views expressed by countries

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in the secretariat's recent survey of advisory service disciplines, the Working Group recommended that section 21 resources be utilized to recruit an adviser on poverty statistics in addition to the current adviser on national accounts, especially since section 17 posts could not be used for full-time advisory work. However, given competing priorities for limited section 21 funds, it is unlikely that the statistics subprogramme would be accorded two regional advisers. The Commission may wish to urge that other sources of financing be mobilized for the provision of advisory services in national accounts.

30. The Working Group realized that the proposed themes (poverty reduction, managing globalization and emerging social issues) could be valuable in the strategic programming of the Commission, but felt that confining its statistical work to any single one of the themes would be detrimental to regional capacity-building and coordination, which remained the main thrust of the Statistics subprogramme. The subprogramme should continue to be broad in scope, ranging over all three themes that had been identified, and should maintain statistical support to a wide range of areas in informed decision-making, policy formulation, research and international comparison of development. Subsequently, reflecting the views of the Working Group, the secretariat included in the subprogramme on statistics a focus area on statistical capacity-building in addition to that on poverty indicators. The views of the Working Group of Statistical Experts have also been echoed in the discussions leading up to the Intergovernmental Meeting to Review the Conference Structure of the Commission, including Its Thematic Priorities and Subsidiary Structure, held at Bangkok from 26 to 28 March 2002. While the proposed Subcommittee on Statistics would report to the proposed Committee on Poverty Reduction, the Intergovernmental Meeting indicated that its discussions would be broad-ranging and that its recommendations could be brought to the attention of the other thematic committees as appropriate. In anticipation of the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Meeting, the secretariat has revised the relevant text on the objective of the medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005 to read as follows: "The objective of this subprogramme is to support ESCAP members and associate members in improving their statistical capabilities for informed decision-making in a wide range of areas, with a special focus on strengthening capacities to generate poverty data and measure progress towards the millennium development goals."

31. At its thirty-third session, the United Nations Statistical Commission decided to put on its agenda an item entitled "The situation of statistics in the regional commissions". The Statistical Commission took note of important developments in some regions and:

(a) Noted the affirmation in Economic and Social Council resolution 2000/27 of the importance of national efforts to build statistical capacity in all countries, including through statistical training, and of effective international statistical support in that context for developing countries, and considered that regional programmes of statistics should have a strong element of capacity-building;

(b) Considered that regional programmes of statistics should focus on particular priority areas tailored to the circumstances and needs of the countries in the region, but at the same time considered that a broad range of functions was necessary;

(c) Emphasized that there should be recognition at the regional level of the links with global statistical programmes so that regional and global programmes complemented each other in pursuing the priority concerns of member countries;

(d) Considered that governance arrangements at the regional level should be prominent within the respective regional conference structures, should cover a comprehensive range of statistics and should allow for the formulation of regional views on global statistical issues.

The Commission may wish to take note of the views of the United Nations Statistical Commission on this matter.

32. The Commission is requested to note that Governments need to continue to allocate sufficient resources to their national statistical services to enable them to produce relevant, timely and good-quality statistics. To supplement these resources, the demand for technical assistance in statistics from ESCAP members and associate members continued to be very strong over the past year. To meet that demand, the Statistics Division organized advisory services to 12 countries for a total of 180 days and hosted 11 workshops covering the following statistical areas: environment, national accounts, population, economic statistics, trade and tourism statistics. Several of the projects which the Statistics Division carried out during the year were undertaken in collaboration with other organizations active in the region, notably ADB, the World Tourism Organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, OECD, the United Nations Statistics Division and UNDP. This cooperation is actively sought by the secretariat to ensure coordination, to avoid duplication of work and to benefit from synergies in work areas also covered by other agencies. It should also be brought to the attention of the Commission that a great deal of that work could not have been carried out without the financial support of donor agencies and countries such as ADB, OECD, the United Nations Population Fund, the Netherlands and the Republic of Korea. The Commission may wish to impress upon donors that continued support is fundamental to advance rapidly the statistical capacity-building efforts of the secretariat.

VIII. ACTION REQUESTED OF THE COMMISSION

33. To recapitulate, the Commission may wish to take the following action:

(a) Emphasize, in line with the stance consistently taken by the Committee on Statistics, that developing data capacity in poverty measurement for national policy-making and use is of paramount importance and should be given priority (see paragraph 4);

(b) Endorse the view of the Working Group that the secretariat should organize a forum for technical discussions where country experiences in compiling poverty statistics could be shared and urge the secretariat to make available advisory services on poverty statistics as requested by many countries in the region (see paragraph 6);

(c) Endorse the secretariat's plan to host the next session of the Rio Group on Poverty Statistics (see paragraph 7);

(d) Endorse the proposed action plan developed by the secretariat aimed at helping countries to implement the 1993 SNA and urge multilateral and bilateral agencies to support the plan, including financing the continuation of regional advisory services on national accounts (see paragraphs 10 and 29);

(e) Urge donor countries and agencies to provide support to ICP and encourage Governments to participate actively in the Programme and utilize ICP data fully at the national and subnational levels, including for calculating poverty lines (see paragraph 13);

(f) Note the developments in the governance structure of ICP, support the early installation of a regional coordinator for the Asian and Pacific region and underline the importance of a strong regional governance mechanism and participation in the global ICP project (see paragraph 15);

(g) Endorse the secretariat's capacity-building efforts in measuring the information society and knowledge-based economy and concur that assistance by any donor should be geared towards the development of sustainable data collection methods (see paragraph 18);

(h) Note and comment on the progress on the coordination of development indicators at the global and regional levels (see paragraph 21);

(i) Affirm that the United Nations Statistical Commission should remain the apex body for global discussions and setting norms in official statistics (see paragraph 23);

(j) Endorse the concern of the Working Group of Statistical Experts regarding participatory poverty assessments and reiterate the importance of capacity-building for sustainable and technically sound assessments of poverty (see paragraph 24);

(k) Highlight the importance of having an international agency to be responsible for ensuring the availability of comparable statistics on trade in services (see paragraph 25);

(l) Note the Working Group's concerns regarding the development of tourism satellite accounts in some developing countries (see paragraph 26);

(m) Take note of the views of the United Nations Statistical Commission on the situation of statistics in the regional commissions, including the commissions' role in capacity-building (see paragraph 31);

(n) Impress upon Governments the need to allocate sufficient resources to their national statistical services to enable them to produce relevant, timely and good-quality statistics and urge donors to continue to support ESCAP's statistical capacity-building efforts (see paragraph 32).

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