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للأمم المتحدة

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pour  
l'alimentation  
et  
l'agriculture

Organización  
de las  
Naciones  
Unidas  
para la  
Agricultura  
y la  
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## Agenda Item 7

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### ESCAP's Role in Statistics Development in Asia and the Pacific

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#### Abstract

The present document contains an overview of the role that the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is playing in the development of statistics in the region. It briefly delineates the overall role, aim and services of ESCAP. It describes the structure of ESCAP's statistics sub-programme and highlights its statistics development component. It defines the comparative advantages that ESCAP has in promoting statistical capacity-building in the region and describes ongoing and recently concluded work in promoting the development and implementation of international statistical standards supporting the strengthening of national statistical institutions and systems. It also discusses the ongoing and planned work on the improvement of economic statistics in the region.

## I. ESCAP's role, aim and services

1. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is the regional development arm of the United Nations for the Asia-Pacific region. ESCAP was established in 1947 and is headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand. With a membership of 62 Governments, 58 of which are in the region, and a geographical scope that stretches from Turkey in the west to the Pacific island nation of Kiribati in the east, and from the Russian Federation in the north to New Zealand in the south, ESCAP is the most comprehensive of the United Nations five regional commissions. It is also the largest United Nations body serving the Asia-Pacific region with over 600 staff.

2. The overall objective of ESCAP is to promote inclusive and sustainable economic and social development in the Asia-Pacific region, with priority accorded to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. ESCAP pursues this objective by carrying out work, in close cooperation with other United Nations entities and intergovernmental organizations in the region, in the following areas:

- Macroeconomic Policy and Development
- Trade and Investment
- Transport
- Environment and Development
- Information and Communications Technology and Disaster Risk Reduction
- Social Development
- Statistics
- Sub-regional activities for development

3. ESCAP focuses on issues that are most effectively addressed through regional cooperation, including:

- Issues that all or a group of countries in the region face, for which it is necessary to learn from each other
- Issues that benefit from regional or multi-country involvement
- Issues that are trans-boundary in nature, or that would benefit from collaborative inter-country approaches
- Issues that are of a sensitive or emerging nature and require further advocacy and negotiation

4. Institutional change at all levels is required to ensure more efficient and effective delivery of essential services to the region's growing population, increasing the demand for adequate food, clothing, housing, water, energy and transport infrastructure, together with other basic needs. Hence, ESCAP's products and services support its member States in building national capacities in:

- Strengthening and implementing equitable and sustainable economic and social development policies and programmes, including regulatory and institutional frameworks

- Preparing for, participating in and benefiting from multilateral and regional trade, transport, information and communication technology, energy and environmental partnerships and agreements
  - Building effective partnerships with civil society entities and the private sector
  - Reviewing progress in achieving the internationally agreed development goals and targets adopted at global and regional conferences
5. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific is the main legislative organ of ESCAP and reports to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Commission meets annually to provide a forum for all governments of the region to review and discuss economic and social issues and to strengthen regional cooperation. The Commission has established eight committees that meet biennially, one of which is the Committee on Statistics.
6. Each of the areas in which ESCAP works is the primary responsibility of one of seven substantive divisions, one of which is the Statistics Division.
7. Given the vast coverage and diversity of the region, ESCAP is in the process of establishing three new sub-regional offices respectively for East and North-East Asia, North and Central Asia — which will be a joint office with the Economic Commission for Europe — and South and South-West Asia are being established to strengthen the presence and interventions at the sub-regional level in order to better target and deliver programmes that address specific key priorities. Such an office for the Pacific, the ESCAP Pacific Operations Centre (EPOC), already exists. The activities for South-East Asia will be coordinated by ESCAP's headquarters for the time being.
8. ESCAP's substantive work is supported by five regional institutions, one of which is the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP) based in Chiba, Japan.

## **II. ESCAP's statistics sub-programme**

9. ESCAP, through its statistics sub-programme, is striving to become (a) a strong regional actor in promoting the development and implementation of international statistical standards and supporting the strengthening of national statistical institutions; (b) a key producer of user-friendly regional statistical information and products that meet regional needs and the internal needs of ESCAP; and (c) a regional centre of excellence in the statistical analysis of social, economic and environmental development issues.
10. This ambition reflects the objectives of the three strategic components of the ESCAP statistics sub-programme: technical cooperation in statistics development, data support and dissemination, and statistical analyses. The overall goal of the sub-programme is to increase the use of statistics for evidence-based decision-making and to foster the development and dissemination of key demographic, social, economic and environmental statistics in the ESCAP region that adhere to internationally agreed standards.
11. The statistics sub-programme is under the responsibility of the ESCAP Statistics Division and supported by SIAP. The work programme of the Statistics Division is largely guided by discussions at the annual sessions of the Commission and at the biennial sessions of its Committee on Statistics, which brings together the heads of national statistical offices from all members and associate members of the Commission and from sub-regional, re-

gional and international statistical agencies. The Committee had functioned until 2002 and was re-established by the Commission at its sixty-fourth session, in April 2008.

12. As a training institution, SIAP provides training to official statisticians in developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region and facilitates the development of national statistical training capacities. Since its establishment in 1970, the Institute had operated on a project basis until it became a subsidiary body of ESCAP in 1995. The work programme of SIAP has been integrated into the strategic framework of ESCAP as a component of the statistics sub-programme since 2006. The Committee on Statistics provides the secretariat with guidance in reviewing the proposed strategic framework and programme of work of SIAP.

13. The Statistics Division has two sections: (a) the Statistical Development and Analysis Section; and (b) the Statistical Information Services Section. This structure reflects a shift in the Division's strategic focus to meet the increasing demand for results-oriented services. For example, instead of producing statistical publications based on unverified data collected from member States, the current Statistical Information Services Section will (a) compile, validate and disseminate data for both external users (e.g. the public and private sectors, civil society and the media) and for internal ESCAP users (e.g. substantive divisions); (b) provide a data management platform for the diverse data holdings of various divisions in the ESCAP secretariat and work towards full harmonization so that ESCAP will become the key regional repository of internationally comparable development data on social, economic and environmental issues; and (c) provide technical assistance to member States in the dissemination of national statistics.

### **III. ESCAP strategy for technical cooperation in statistics development**

14. ESCAP's comparative advantages in statistics development include the following:

- **Broad mandate:** The ESCAP statistics sub-programme has a broad mandate to promote statistical capacity-building in a wide range of areas. Unlike specialized agencies, ESCAP can pursue or support global, regional or sub-regional initiatives in different areas of statistics with great flexibility.
- **Regional forum for high-level strategic engagement:** As an intergovernmental body, ESCAP has the authority to convene regional meetings and is respected for its impartiality. It can engage senior Government officials and managers of national statistical offices to advocate international standards, encourage strategic discussions on issues of region-wide importance and identify country needs and statistics development priorities at various regional forums.
- **Normative work on priority policy issues:** As a regional commission, ESCAP is giving priority to strengthening normative work and promoting standards and policy analyses, with a special focus on trans-boundary issues and issues that are common to sub-groups of countries or emerging issues that have yet to become national political priorities. Given that the substantive work of ESCAP covers various policy areas, the statistics development programme targets statistical standards development in priority policy areas that are being promoted by ESCAP as a direct response to urgent and emerging national policy demands for better measurement and improved statistics.
- **Addressing common country needs:** Without country presence, ESCAP needs to focus on standards applicable to many countries and/or emerging policy issues of re-

gion-wide importance. Country experiences have shown that global initiatives are most effective in building sustainable statistical capacity where setting standards and providing tools are concerned.

- Building on regional diversity: As ESCAP serves a region with huge disparities in national statistical capacity, it can actively promote good practices through knowledge-sharing and facilitate triangular cooperation and South-South cooperation, particularly by establishing regional networks of national experts in various fields of statistical practice. At the same time, the Asia-Pacific region, with such large diversity, can often serve as the best testing ground for the development of better statistical measurements.

15. Following from these comparative advantages, ESCAP's work on statistics development focuses on two broad areas:

- Promoting the development and implementation of international statistical standards
- Supporting the strengthening of national statistical institutions / systems

16. Ongoing and recently concluded work on promoting the development and implementation of international statistical standards includes:

- A United Nations Development Account-funded project, Interregional Cooperation on the Measurement of the Informal Sector and Informal Employment, which was implemented in 2007-2009. The project aims to improve the measurement of the informal sector and informal employment with specific objectives to: (a) increase the availability of data on the informal sector and informal employment; and (b) improve the analysis of these data to calculate the contribution of the informal sector to employment and to GDP. The project uses and adapts existing data collection methodologies (i.e. Labour Force Surveys) in an effort to reduce costs and to allow the integration of informal sector and informal employment measurement into the regular data collection programmes of countries. The project hoped to increase the number of countries which regularly collect and disseminate informal employment and informal sector data and integrate them into estimates of employment and national accounts.
- Building on the outcome of the previous disability project conducted by ESCAP and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2004-2006, the Statistics Division is implementing a United Nations Development Account-funded project, Improvement of Disability Measurement and Statistics in Support of the Biwako Millennium Framework and Regional Census Programme in 2007-2009. The project supports advocacy for the emerging new approach to disability issues based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health and links the global measurement development initiative to regional policy programmes and to the need of countries to receive appropriate support.

17. The ongoing work on supporting the strengthening of national statistical institutions and systems reflects a recent reorientation to a longer term programmatic approach that is being implemented ESCAP-wide. Initiatives in this regard include:

- The development of a regional programme for the improvement of economic statistics, which is further discussed in section IV below
- The development of a regional programme for the improvement of vital statistics through the strengthening of civil registration systems

18. In order to achieve a significant impact in statistics development, ESCAP needs to link up with global initiatives and seek synergy with other important global, regional and sub-regional partners. Partnerships can facilitate coordination, create common ground and accelerate progress by combining resources and efforts in a particular statistical area. Partnerships with sub-regional organizations are particularly important given that regional diversity often requires a distinct sub-regional approach to measurement development and implementation. ESCAP not only takes the initiative to pursue targeted projects in partnership with others; it will also continue to support efforts by other major international partners to promote standards development and implementation in specific statistical areas in the Asia-Pacific region.

19. In carrying out recent project activities, ESCAP has continued to work closely with national statistical offices, while also involving experts from other statistical offices (e.g. ministries of health, in the case of the disability project). Given the varying institutional structures of national statistical systems among countries in the region and recognizing the central role of national statistical offices in many countries, the ESCAP is seeking to streamline the process so as to adequately engage country participation in projects while supporting the in-country coordination of national statistical systems.

20. In implementing various projects in recent years, the ESCAP secretariat has recognized the important role of United Nations country teams in directly supporting national statistics development and has made deliberate efforts to establish direct contact with them in project countries in order to coordinate activities and seek substantive inputs and support. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge for ESCAP to achieve congruence with the country programme priorities of United Nations country teams and to improve coordination with them when developing and implementing its own technical cooperation programme.

21. The longer-term work on promoting the development and implementation of international statistical standards and supporting the strengthening of national statistical systems is complemented by that of a Regional Adviser on Statistics, who is available to carry out short-term advisory missions upon request of and at no charge to governments. The available advisory services cover a wide range of social and economic statistics, including:

- Tracking progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally-agreed development goals
- Reviewing and providing advice on the development of basic sources of data, (censuses, sample surveys and administrative reporting systems) and their utilization
- Adoption of international best practices in survey, including sampling and questionnaire, design and the collection, editing, analysis, documentation and archiving and safe dissemination of data
- Implementation of internationally recommended statistical concepts, definitions, classifications and frameworks
- Constructing and reviewing social and economic (including short-term) indicators and indices
- Measuring gender disparities, the contribution of women to the economy and the differential impacts of policies on women and men
- Measuring other priority areas in which there is an urgent policy demand for better statistics and where international standards have yet to be fully developed or implemented, such as disability and informal employment and the informal sector

- Strategic planning for and the institutional and organizational development of national statistical systems

#### **IV. Regional programme for the improvement of economic statistics**

22. The first session of the ESCAP Committee on Statistics in February 2009 recognized the urgent need for the improvement of economic statistics in the Asian and Pacific region.

23. In light of: (a) the limited compliance with the minimum requirement dataset (MRDS) for the System of National Accounts (SNA) in the region, (b) the renewed demand for better economic statistics because of the global economic crisis, (c) the realization that ongoing and past capacity building efforts for economic statistics had been less than optimal because of — among others — a lack of sharing information and cooperation between development partners these considerations, and (d) the role that the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on National Accounts (ISWGNA) was foreseeing for regional commissions to play in the implementation of the 2008 SNA, the Committee tasked the ESCAP secretariat with the development of a Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific (hereunder referred to as the “Regional Programme”), to be guided by a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) consisting of representatives from national, sub-regional, regional and global partners. The TAG was established in August 2009; the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) is represented in the TAG.

24. The Regional Programme is aimed at being an effort of all these partners to increase national capacities to produce basic economic statistics in accordance with international standards and good practices. Cornerstones of the Regional Programme are (a) a core set of economic statistics — required for short and long-term economic analyses and decision-making by both government and non-government agencies and organizations — of appropriate quality that each country (to the extent relevant for the size and structure of the economy) in the region should be able to produce by 2020, (b) a comprehensive, region-wide assessment of countries’ current capacity to produce economic statistics, and (c) an informal mechanism to coordinate activities to build capacity in economic statistics.

25. As of March 2010, the TAG has developed a proposed core set of economic statistics, which was extensively discussed with countries in the region at a workshop held in Bangkok in December 2009. Work is being undertaken to align the core set, to the extent possible, with various global initiatives, including:

- The global strategy for the implementation of the 2008 SNA and the supporting statistics programme under the auspices of the ISWGNA
- The development of a global set of early warning and business cycle indicators led by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and Eurostat
- The Principal Global Indicators for the Group of 20 (G20) to facilitate the monitoring of economic and financial developments for systemically important economies maintained by Inter-Agency Group on Economic and Financial Statistics (<http://www.principalglobalindicators.org/>)

26. The Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc10/BG-AgriStats.pdf>) presented at the recent (forty-first) session of the Statistical Commission recognizes, among others:

- That "...agriculture is fundamentally an economic activity ...” (paragraph 21, 26)
- “The starting point to determine the scope of agricultural statistics is the system of national accounts ...” (paragraph 49, p. 26)

27. The strategy, in addition, identifies a minimum set of core data as well as statistical capacity building needs that would at least in part related to the core set of economic statistics and the Regional Programme that is being developed at the initiative of ESCAP. It would therefore be of crucial importance to align any work in the region on the implementation of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics with ESCAP’s work on the improvement of economic statistics.

28. The region-wide assessment of the capacity of national statistical systems in the region to produce basic economic statistics serves as the main instrument to identify the most urgent capacity-building needs, in terms of countries, but also in terms of human resources, statistical infrastructure and source data. The framework for the assessment is expected to evolve into an instrument that would allow for the continuous monitoring over time of the impact of the Regional Programme.

29. The informal mechanism to coordinate activities to build capacity in economic statistics is foreseen to obtain information on ongoing and planned activities from all partners at all levels: national, sub-regional, regional and global. The mechanism will make use of existing mechanisms to the highest extent possible. Such mechanisms may include:

- At the global level, the Partner Report on Support to Statistics (PRESS) produced by the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (PARIS21)
- At the sub-regional level, relevant information available at statistics units of sub-regional organizations, including the Secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC)
- At the national level, National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) and similar strategic / master plans for statistics development

30. The Regional Programme is expected to be finalized in mid-2010 with the completion of the assessment and the establishment of the informal coordination mechanism, to be followed by the identification of, for each country, remaining gaps in the capacity to produce economic statistics and priorities for filling the gaps. Subsequently, national work plans to address these priorities will be developed, including through the integration of capacity building requirements for economic statistics in NSDSs and the mobilization of national and internationally resources. The Regional Programme is expected to run until 2020.

31. The proposed core set of economic statistics and the draft Regional Programme will be submitted for the consideration and endorsement of the Committee on Statistics at its second session scheduled to be held on 15-17 December 2010.