

Thirteenth Management Seminar for the Heads of National Statistical Offices in Asia and the Pacific

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Empowering and Strengthening National Statistical Systems for Monitoring SDG Indicators

Concept Note

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are designed to end poverty, hunger and inequality, take action on climate change and the environment, improve access to health and education, and build strong institutions and partnerships, and more. All of the goals contain important messages and challenges to all countries. However, for the goals to be reached, everyone needs to do their part. Governments, with the support and cooperation of private businesses, civil society organizations must achieve the targets set in the agreed time frame. International organization should effectively support this process.

Collective vision for National Statistical Systems

The role of statisticians has become especially important in the context a systematic follow-up and review framework at the global, regional and national levels. Role of official statisticians, specially of National Statistical Systems (NSS) has undergone a major change in this century specially after the responsibility entrusted in monitoring implementation of SDGs. Official statisticians earlier used to develop standards on statistical products and processes, and used to ensure that these are adhered to in production and dissemination of data and statistics. This has undergone a major change in terms of responsibility for development of new data and statistics to meet demand of a large number of indicators which are to be compiled to monitor progress of implementation of SDGs. Therefore, the new role of NSS has become, in addition to their traditional role, to be a coordinator in production of statistics from various administrative processes and use the micro data available from business sector. NSS in all the countries are expected to be accountable

and responsible for compilation of SDG indicators all over the world.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development crystalizes the imperative to transform NSS to meet the unprecedented requirements for a very broad range of statistics and data with appropriate level of disaggregation. Member states of ESCAP have embraced this imperative of transformation with a collective vision that: “...by 2030, NSS are enabled and empowered to lead development of and to deliver innovative, trusted and timely products and services for urgently needed and evolving statistical requirements of Agenda 2030.” Regional collaboration to support the attainment of this collective vision focuses on the development, promotion and application of regional resources, or such regional “public goods” as technical tools, guidelines and country experiences.¹

Ultimately, achieving the ambitious regional collective vision will rely on, first and foremost, national resolve and actions to strengthen their statistical systems. This is because the vision of transformation is articulated in system-level improvements, in national context, spanning the five areas, ranging from user engagements and investing in statistics, quality assurance and trust in statistics, integrated statistics, business processes and infrastructure, and development of appropriate skill base. Without concrete steps that national statistical systems and their partners initiate and maintain for transformation, none of the improvements are possible.

Successful regional collaboration must anchor in national processes and actions. After all, regional collaboration is to support, not to substitute, national actions of transformation to be led by chief statisticians to address national priority information needs arising from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In addition, active contribution of perspectives and experiences from tracking national issues is key to the development of relevant regional resources that would benefit the entire community.

National Mechanisms for Implementing the SDGs and role of National Statistical Offices

Countries in Asia and the Pacific are well on their way in implementing the ambitious 2030 Agenda. The specific processes and practices vary across countries. Many countries established national SDG coordination mechanisms

¹ ESCAP (2016) Advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community (E/ESCAP/CST(5)/1).

led by such major policy agency as the prime minister's office, ministries of planning, economy, environment, or foreign affairs. These mechanisms, together with the sectorial working groups, are responsible for integrating the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda into national development plans. The process has often been accompanied by specifying a monitoring framework and indicators. There has also been an effort on mapping of existing statistical production and dissemination to the indicators, assessment of data availability and data gaps. Some countries also began the work on updating the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) to incorporate data requirements for SDG, compiling baseline information on national SDG implementation, etc.²

On the other hand, a wide range of country practices also highlight some fundamental issues regarding the exact role of National Statistical Offices, as National Statistical Systems broadly, vis-à-vis their policy counterparts in developing, compiling and using national monitoring frameworks and indicators. In particular, questions are raised about the role of National Statistics Offices in formulating and implementing national plans to strengthen statistics and data to meet the requirements for national and global SDG monitoring. For instance, national SDG coordination bodies in some countries do not include National Statistical Offices. Similarly, discussions and formulation of indicators for national SDG implementation were conducted without participation of National Statistical Offices. Mapping of indicators against existing data sources in some cases was carried out by various members of the NSS in parallel, led and coordinated by another government agency rather than the National Statistical Office. While in a few countries, the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics have been revised to incorporate actions to strengthen SDG-focused data, in other countries discussions on efforts to improve SDG data are disconnected from the planning and implementation of NSDS. Similarly, the discussions on establishing data platforms for national SDG monitoring in many cases are independent of requirements for providing statistics and data to global entities for compiling global SDG indicators.

Outcome of Regional Conference on Collective Vision for NSS

Planning and implementation of transformative changes of NSS must address the interactions between the National Statistical Offices (and the

² ESCAP (2017). "Report of Asia-Pacific Conference: Taking Collective Action to Accelerate Transformation of Official Statistics for Agenda 2030".

broader NSS) and the rest of the government, and also the society. The emphasis on SDG implementation can be leveraged to step up efforts to operationalize existing instruments such as the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in the national contexts. An Asian-Pacific regional conference in March 2017 to advance the collective vision and framework for action made a list of recommendations on the process of developing and implementing national SDG monitoring and indicators, with very specific roles of National Statistical Offices vis-à-vis policy ministries and agencies. For instance, the conference recommended that national SDG coordination body or the relevant policy organization should initiate and lead the development and use of national indicator frameworks, with the national statistical offices providing technical advice in the proper formulation of the indicators, measurement frameworks and coordination across various data users and producers. Such arrangement would ensure the political, institutional and resource support for the development and implementation of the indicators as well as their technical rigor and coherence with the overall plan to improve statistics and data.³

Subsequent deliberations underscored the importance of added government commitment to strengthening national statistical systems to deliver on the 2030 Agenda. The Fourth Asia Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development (APFSD) hence “urged Governments to make statistics development a national development target embedded in national development plans with the highest importance.”⁴ The importance of obtaining political support for the planning and implementing efforts to strengthen national statistical capacity was also echoed in a recent inter-regional seminar on NSS review in Small Island Development States.⁵

Recommendation of Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Indeed, in endorsing the collective vision and framework for action, the Committee on Statistics setup by Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) recognized “the critical importance of high-level government

³ ESCAP (2017). “Report of Asia-Pacific Conference: Taking Collective Action to Accelerate Transformation of Official Statistics for Agenda 2030”.

⁴ ESCAP (2017) Report of the Fourth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (E/ESCAP/FSD(4)/3), Chair’s Summary, para. 24.

⁵ ESCAP (2017) “Inter-regional Expert Seminar on NSS Reviews in SIDS: Seminar Report”, Available from: http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/NSS_Reviews_in_SIDS_Seminar_Report_1-3Aug2017.pdf

commitment to the successful implementation of the framework of action” and the necessity “to secure political, institutional and resource support and to mobilize broad-based partnership in order to achieve the collective vision of transforming NSS in support of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”⁶ For this purpose, the Committee recommended that the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific further consider convening the 6th session of the Committee *at a higher decision-making level. The recommendation of the Committee on Statistics was endorsed by ESCAP in its 73rd session held in May, 2017.*

Seminar

Considering the progress made so far in compilation of SDG Indicators and the present status of NSS in the region, the seminar shall address two key issues of concern. These are needs for empowerment and strengthening of NSS in the region.

I. Empowering NSS

How do we empower NSS?

National Statistical Offices and Systems have been part and parcel of Governments with varying degrees of responsibility across the region in terms of data collection, compilation and processing and providing inputs to planning process and in evaluation of programmes undertaken by the Governments. Many countries have functional legislative instrument to empower statistical offices and system to collect information from various entities. In some countries, such instruments do not exist or have become dated or dysfunctional.

Another important aspect relating to empowerment of NSS is institutional positioning of the statistical units in various Ministries/ Departments of Governments. This involves a regular and dedicated structure in the Ministries to ensure regular flow of data and statistics for planning and policy making specially in the context of SDG implementation by the concerned Ministries. This requires support from the Chief executives of these Ministries to perform this function.

Implementation of SDGs is not the responsibility of only Governments. This requires public and private partnership with private businesses, civil society and people at large. Each of them will have to play key role in ensuring that the targets set in achieving the SDGs are fully achieved by 2030. Role of NSS also

⁶ E/ESCAP/73/24 Report of the Committee on Statistics on its fifth session, Recommendation 5/1

gets enhanced in view of need for interaction with multiple stakeholders. The question would be whether NSS are ready to take this responsibility and whether such systems have been put in place.

II. **Strengthening NSS**

How do we strengthen NSS?

NSS have been put to an unprecedented demand of large number of indicators. Do they have adequate resources to meet the challenge? These resources may be in the form human resources, financial resources or infrastructure. Chief statisticians will have to make a realistic assessment of the needs of the NSS based on a thorough exercise and development of National Strategy for Development of Statistics (NSDS) especially in the context of SDG indicator framework. Another important question is whether such requirements have been projected and made part of National Development Plans. In this context, it is also important to ensure that NSS use their resources more effectively and efficiently. Effectiveness of NSS could be achieved by effective use of information and communication technologies. Furthermore, it is necessary that sufficient resources quantitatively and qualitatively are provided by the Government to NSS. Capacity building of the staff engaged in production and dissemination of statistics is crucial factor in its effective performance. Although capacity building needs time and costs, it is the key to strengthen NSS.

Role of international organizations is of immense importance in developing and disseminating statistical standards and ensuring that these standards are fully and effectively implemented by the countries so that comparable data and statistics for SDG monitoring may be generated. There is greater responsibility of international organizations in development of capacity of statistical personnel to provide quality and timely data for compilation of SDG Indicators.

Expected output of the Seminar:

National actions are essential to realizing the aspiration for advancing official statistics to meet the demands for statistics and data for SDG implementation. The management seminar will:

- A. Outline the contours of a statistical system that delivers on the 2030 collective vision, i.e. *leads the development of and delivers innovative,*

trusted and timely products and services for urgently needed and evolving statistical requirements of Agenda 2030.

- B. Identify changes needed to arrive at national statistical systems that deliver on the 2030 vision.
- C. Recommend relevant and effective national actions and related commitments required by the national statistical office, the whole-of-Government and other key national and international stakeholders to achieve national statistical systems that deliver on the collective vision.

Building on these two key outputs, the Seminar will identify issues to be included in the draft outcome document for the 6th session of the Committee on Statistics.