Second Meeting of Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

Bangkok, 17-19 July 2019

Concept Note

1. Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a comprehensive development framework where economic, social, environmental and institutional issues are closely integrated. Monitoring such an integrated framework can be very demanding for national statistical systems in terms of data production, its quality and integration of sources.

Facing such challenges, the Asia-Pacific statistical community endorsed a Collective Vision with a holistic approach towards strengthening statistical capacity to address the multifold requests stemming from the 2030 Agenda. To translate the vision in the area of Population and Social Statistics, the ESCAP Committee of Statistics endorsed in December 2016 the Implementation Plan of the Regional Strategy to Improve Population and Social Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, and agreed to establish a Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics (RSG-PSS) to oversee it. Subsequently, in 2018, Asia-Pacific statistical community endorsed Declaration on Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind with nine commitments by countries to strengthen national statistical systems.

In addition, several actors are active in supporting statistical activities in the population and social field such as specialized agencies, regional organizations and bilateral development partners. The Declaration calls for improved coordination of initiatives and activities at regional level.

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1 Advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community (https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/pre-ods/E.ESCAP_.CST(5).1.Rev_.1.Collective_Vision.English.pdf) which shares the vision that “... by 2030, national statistical systems 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” and to attain the collective vision, recommends that statistical community focus collaborative efforts on five action areas: A) Engaging users and investing in statistics, B) Assuring quality and instilling trust in statistics, C) Integrated statistics for integrated analysis, D) Modernizing statistical business processes, E) Having requisite skills set

2 Meeting the data and statistics needs for socially inclusive development for all: proposed implementation plan for the regional strategy to improve population and social statistics in Asia and the Pacific (https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/pre-ods/E.ESCAP_.CST(5).3.implementation_plan.English.pdf) which rephrases the collective vision action areas into three goals: 1) Enable policy environment and maintain demand and support, 2) Improve availability and quality of disaggregated statistics, 3) Enhance data accessibility, analysis, interpretation and use

3 The RSG-PSS is composed of senior statisticians and experts from 28 member countries and 10 international agencies.

2. Objective of the meeting

The 2030 Agenda requires several changes to national official statistics way of working and deliverables. Statistical production is required in new substantive areas and NSOs are increasingly engaged in developing and managing policy-monitoring frameworks, an activity that requires strong skills in communication and partnership building.

While several of these challenges can be addressed successfully at international and national level, for some of them the regional dimension can be relevant to support national statistical agencies. For example, to identify gaps or needs that can be addressed through capacity building activities at regional level, in promoting and exchanging good practices, in improving coordination of activities promoted by multinational entities and in developing communities of practice to foster dialogue among experts and practitioners.

Two years after its first meeting, the RSG-PSS is called to review its work and how it can best address the needs of member states of the region. In particular, the RSG-PSS meeting will discuss the specific role it can play to support statistical systems of the region to provide evidence for national development policies and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and what specific means of implementation the RSG-PSS can adopt in translating this role into reality.

The main objectives of the meeting are:
- To identify critical challenges where regional initiatives can support countries to develop an integrated system of population and social statistics and ensure they are properly used to monitor global and national SDGs
- To review organization, activities and outputs of the RSG-PSS to effectively meet the needs of national statistical systems and in line with the Collective Vision and Framework for Action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community

3. Format of the meeting

The meeting will be organized around selected themes and a final session to discuss architecture, goals and activities of the RSG-PSS. Under each theme, there will be trigger presentations and selected contributions from countries, international agencies and other experts. Discussions will be facilitated to lead to clear outputs/decisions.

4. Participants

The meeting will be attended by around 40 persons including:
- Members of Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics
- Representatives from international agencies, development partners and other experts

5. Main agenda topics

Topic 1. Developing a sustainable integrated system of population and social statistics in support of SDGs

While faced with limitations in human and financial resources, official statisticians are confronted with an increasing demand for quality and timely statistics to monitor SDG-related frameworks. Sometimes data production is not organized efficiently, individual data sources may be developed independently from each other or, in other cases, statistical agencies may have limited access to data produced by national ministries or other entities. A possible way forward is to foster integration of data systems to avoid duplications in procedures, increase data availability and enhance their standardization.
Topic 2. Data integration: key asset for sustainable statistical systems to leave no one behind
An additional cost-efficient way to improve data production is making integrated use of available data from existing data sources to produce statistics required for SDGs monitoring. Data sources could include traditional sources such as censuses and surveys, administrative data, big data, and other new sources. Integrating different sources can be extremely valuable to improve availability of disaggregated data while posing new challenges to official statisticians, including limited access to quality data, limited knowledge or skills, and incompatibility of the available sources.

Topic 3. Tools and opportunities to engage with policy makers and other users at country level
Official statisticians are often requested to engage with policymakers and other users to develop monitoring frameworks, for example in relation with SDG localization processes. This is a very positive development as it moves statistical evidence towards the center of policy interventions. The session will highlight opportunities and challenges of this critical interaction with policymakers while promoting independence and professionalism of official statistics and compliance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

Topic 4. Data accessibility and data communication: the ultimate mission of a responsive NSS
The mission of official statisticians is no more limited to producing tables and time series. Nowadays, official statisticians need to provide users with different data outputs, including micro-data, offer user-friendly websites, implement open-data principles, communicate efficiently with several users - including the media - and produce analytical reports. These tasks can be very challenging for official statisticians also in view of remaining compliant with principles of impartiality, confidentiality and professionalism. Besides, there can be technical difficulties in producing these outputs and challenges in enhancing users understanding and statistical literacy.

Topic 5. Selected SDG areas where data production is challenging in the Asia-Pacific region
Monitoring SDGs entails an increased demand for data and statistics in the social and demographic areas. Based on the latest Asia and the Pacific SDG progress report by ESCAP enough data is available only for 34 per cent of SDG indicators in the social field. This can be due to lack of skills or limited knowledge of specific statistical areas at national level. Therefore, it can be useful to examine selected substantive areas in order to identify and bridge knowledge gaps.

Based on main challenges emerged under the various agenda items and the main areas of interest highlighted by participants, members of the RSG-PSS will examine possible areas of future work and related activities. The RSG-PSS will also discuss specific forms of organization and possible outputs of future activities.

6. Expected output
- Recommendations for future organizational arrangements, activities and goals
- Draft workplan for the next future

5 The ESCAP progress report on SDG considers the 128 indicators under SDGs 1-5, 10, 11 and 16 as the ones pertaining to the social area.