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**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**  
Fifth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

Bangkok, 28–30 March 2018

Item 2 of the provisional agenda\*

**Regional perspectives on the follow-up to and review of  
the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

**Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Goal data  
availability report**

**Note by the secretariat**

*Summary*

The report conducts an analysis of Sustainable Development Goal data availability to inform key stakeholders of the specific goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for which progress assessment can be conducted currently at the regional and subregional levels using the global indicators; and to identify and prioritize statistical capacity development needs in the region so that the gaps in data availability and quality can be addressed. Some key highlights of the findings of the analysis are as follows:

- While over 50 per cent of the Sustainable Development Goal indicators have at least some data available, data availability across the 17 goals is uneven;
- Indicators related to the economic dimension of development have better data availability as compared to indicators related to the social or environmental dimensions;
- While Tier I indicators are on track, they are not in all cases fully up to speed;
- At the subregional level, variation in data availability for some goals is more prominent than for others;
- A country's income level and the corresponding applicability of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets explains some of the cross-country variation in data availability; and
- Overall, disaggregated data is sparse or not available at all.

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\* ESCAP/RFSD/2018/L.1.

## I. Why review data availability for the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators?

1. The United Nations General Assembly in July 2017 adopted an initial set of 244 global indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These indicators are to be refined annually and reviewed comprehensively by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 2020 and 2025.<sup>1</sup>

2. Having accurate, timely and comparable data for all the global indicators is essential for the functioning of the “robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated” follow-up and review framework. However, the reality is far from this. The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators highlighted that more than half of the indicators either have very limited data coverage across the countries around the world, or do not even have existing agreed definitions or measurement standards.<sup>2</sup> This is why, in endorsing the 2030 Agenda and the global indicator framework, governments have repeatedly emphasized the importance of strengthening statistics and data, including having two specific targets in the 2030 Agenda.<sup>3</sup>

3. Many countries have undertaken assessment of data availability and gap analyses in their national contexts as a key step in national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Such analyses have generally pointed to the large gaps in data collection, processing and dissemination against the global indicators at the national level, even in advanced statistical systems. These analyses also highlighted the need to mobilize financial and technical support for data and monitoring at the national level.<sup>4</sup>

4. It is also important to understand which indicators have sufficient data for assessing the status and progress in Sustainable Development Goal implementation at the regional level. The reason is that regional level follow-up and review form an integral part of the overall accountability framework for Sustainable Development Goal implementation. This means that policy priority-setting to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals should be informed by knowledge of goal and target areas where the Asia-Pacific region and subregions are progressing well in, where the progress has been slow or stagnant, or where things have been deteriorating.

5. The analysis of data availability conducted by the secretariat through an analytical report “Measuring Sustainable Development Goal progress in Asia and the Pacific: Is there enough data?” as part of the Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2017, provides a systematic and in-depth analysis of whether or not there is enough data to measure Sustainable Development Goals progress in the Asia-Pacific region. In order to answer this broad question, the report attempts to address questions such as the following:

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations (2017) “Work of the Statistical Commission pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (A/RES/71/313)

<sup>2</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification/>.

<sup>3</sup> General Assembly Resolution 70/1. Targets 17.18 and 17.19 focus on data, monitoring and accountability.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations (2016) “Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews 2016”; and (2017) “Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews 2017”.

- How many of the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators have sufficient data allowing for progress assessment of the goals and targets for the Asia-Pacific region and subregions?
- How does data coverage vary across subregions, income groups, as well as across the 17 goals?
- To what extent is disaggregated data available to address the issue of “leave-no-one-behind” for the 17 goals?

6. The analysis in the report is done for two primary purposes. The first is to inform key stakeholders of the specific goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for which progress assessment can be conducted currently at the regional and subregional levels using the global indicators. The second is to identify and prioritize statistical capacity development needs in the region so that the gaps in data availability and quality can be addressed.

## II. Defining data availability

7. Depending upon how the indicators are analysed to inform Sustainable Development Goal implementation, data availability of the indicators can be examined in several ways. The report considers two types of analyses of the indicators. One is the analysis of the status of a situation at one point in time. This can be, for instance, the prevalence of extreme income poverty as measured by international line, for the entire Asia-Pacific region, or for each of the subregions for a particular year. Such analysis requires data aggregated to the region or subregions for only one time point for the particular indicator.

8. The second type of analysis describes the change in the status of situation as measured by an indicator. In the case of poverty rate, this would be about whether the poverty rate for the region or each of the subregions rose, or declined, or stayed the same between two specific points in time. Obviously, the analysis of change requires two data points. The exact number of data points required for analysis of the pattern of change, or trend, depends upon many factors, including the issue at hand, the nature of change, etc. But having two data points is the minimum for detecting any change, or lack of it.

9. In line with the above, the analysis of data availability in this report was conducted for the following four scenarios:

- i. Trend analysis possible (Trend OK): if a particular indicator has two or more data points available for 50 per cent (or more) of the countries<sup>5</sup> in the Asia-Pacific region or relevant country grouping between the years 2000 and 2017.
- ii. Only status analysis possible (Status OK): if a particular indicator has only one data point available for 50 per cent (or more) of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region or relevant country grouping between the years 2000 and 2017.
- iii. Limited status analysis possible (Status Limited): if a particular indicator has at least one data point available but for less than 50 per cent of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region or relevant country grouping between the years 2000 and 2017.

<sup>5</sup> i.e. 29 or more countries, since the Asia-Pacific region has 58 countries. Fifty per cent of the countries is assumed as sufficient number for any meaningful analysis

- iv. No analysis possible (No Data): if no data points are available for any of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region or relevant country grouping between the years 2000 and 2017.

### III. Major findings

10. Across 244 global indicators:
- Trend analysis at the regional level is possible for only about one-fourth of all global Sustainable Development Goal indicators (i.e. 64 indicators), with two or more data points available for these indicators for 50 per cent or more countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Only 89 per cent of Tier I indicators (for which data are supposed to be regularly produced by countries) have some data (at least one data point).
11. Across the 17 goals and 169 targets:
- At the regional level, Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy), Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) are ahead of other goals, with trend analysis possible for more than half of the corresponding indicators. While Goal 7 represents the environmental dimension of development, Goals 8 and 9 represent the economic dimension.<sup>6</sup>
  - There is no data available at the regional level for several goals representing the social and environmental dimensions of development, i.e. 50 per cent or more of the indicators under Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 5 (Gender equality), Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation), Goal 10 (Reduce inequalities), Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production), Goal 13 (Climate action), Goal 14 (Life below water) and Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions).
  - Less than a third of the Sustainable Development Goal targets (i.e. only 50 of the 169 Sustainable Development Goal targets), are currently ready for progress assessment. These are targets that have at least one indicator with two or more data points available for 50 per cent or more countries in the Asia-Pacific region.
12. Across sub-regions and countries of different income levels:
- While most Asia-Pacific subregions are doing more or less equally well on Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy), Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth), Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and Goal 15 (Life on land), wider variations in subregional performance is seen on several other goals (e.g. Goal 1 (No poverty) and Goal 2 (Zero hunger)).
  - Countries in the high and upper-middle income categories as not necessarily doing better in terms of data availability as compared to countries in the lower-middle and low income categories. In fact trend analysis is possible for fewer indicators addressing the social

<sup>6</sup> Classification of Sustainable Development Goals under the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development is based on analysis as contained in the study commissioned by the German Council for Sustainable Development (2015) “Sustainable Development Goals and Integration: Achieving a better balance between the economic, social and environmental dimensions”.

dimension of development in high and upper-middle income categories.

13. Disaggregated data:
  - Disaggregated data are missing or sparse, with sex-disaggregated data available for as few as 22 Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

#### IV. The road ahead

14. The report paints a mixed picture about what is feasible for status and progress assessment in Sustainable Development Goal implementation at the regional and subregional levels and across income groups in Asia and the Pacific. There is sufficient data at present that would allow several indicators to be used to assess status or change for a number of goals. This is in particular the case with the two goals focusing on the economic pillar (Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure)). This is also the case for some of the goals representing the social pillar of the 2030 Agenda, in particular Goal 3 on Good health and well-being. But there are major data gaps for the global indicators across the 17 goals. This is even the case for the two goals representing the economic pillar. Data gaps are larger for indicators measuring the goals representing the social pillar, and the gaps are particularly large for goals representing environmental sustainability.

15. The analysis points to several broad directions for collective actions so that high quality, timely and reliable disaggregated data are available to support the follow-up and review at various levels. These include, among others: developing measurement standards, definitions and statistical guidelines for the compilation of indicators; strengthening statistical production and dissemination in accordance with agreed international standards and good practices so as to fill the gaps in availability and quality requirements; enhancing the policy-data nexus to address the requirements for data disaggregation; ensuring political, institutional and financial support for sustained production, dissemination and use of statistical products and services to inform decision-making.

##### **Improving data for Tier III indicators: developing measurement standards, definitions and statistical guidelines**

16. One of the top priority areas of work for addressing data gaps concerns indicators categorised as Tier III. As was emphasized, as many as 93 of the 244 global indicators, do not have internationally agreed methodologies and standards and are classified as Tier III. Some of the goals corresponding to the environmental pillar have a particularly large proportion of indicators classified as Tier III. This includes the goals on responsible consumption and production (Goal 12, has 11 Tier III indicators out of 13 in total), climate action (Goal 13 has 6 Tier III indicators out of 8), and life below water (Goal 14 has 8 Tier III indicators out of 10). But some of the goals on the social pillar also have large numbers of Tier III indicators, including the goals on eliminating poverty (6 out of 14), reducing inequality (6 out of 11), and sustainable cities and communities (7 out of 15).

17. The international statistical community has embraced the challenge and has been striving to establish the methodology and standards to guide the collection, processing and dissemination of statistics and data for compiling these indicators. This has particularly been the case with the global statistical agencies, which are tasked with leading the overall development of measurement frameworks for the Tier III indicators.

18. For instance, countries and development partners in Asia and the Pacific have spearheaded the development of the disaster-related statistics framework<sup>7</sup> and its guidelines for implementation. These include a basic range of disaster-related statistics, which will provide a key reference for harmonizing and improving the comparability of data for related monitoring and indicator frameworks (such as Sustainable Development Goals and Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction). Most of the indicators related to disaster risk reduction are Tier II or Tier III, and are part of Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 11 (Sustainable cities) and Goal 13 (Climate action). The main challenge for monitoring progress towards disaster risk reduction targets in the Sustainable Development Goals is poor availability of national statistics that are based on internationally consistent use of concepts, terminologies, and scope of measurement. The disaster-related statistics framework recommends how to measure populations in hazard-exposure areas, identify and produce statistics for vulnerable groups, record the economic impacts from disasters, and reduce investment risk. Before the disaster-related statistics framework is adopted and implemented, it is expected to undergo further review during 2018 to consolidate a set of good practices.

**Improving data for Tier I and II indicators: strengthening statistical production and dissemination in line with agreed international standards**

19. After all, more than 150, or almost two-thirds of 244, global indicators have established methodology and standards. These are the indicators classified as Tiers I and II. But even for these indicators, the analyses of this report highlighted several key gaps. This includes very limited data availability for almost 60 Tier I and Tier II indicators, i.e. there was only one data point between 2000 and 2017, allowing for no more than assessment of status of Sustainable Development Goal implementation at regional and subregional levels. For about 30 Tier I and Tier II indicators, there is no data at all at present.

20. In addition to issues of data availability, other aspects related to the quality of statistical information are also critical for Sustainable Development Goals progress monitoring. Sustainable Development Goal data should be relevant, accurate, reliable, timely, comprehensive, coherent and comparable as well as methodologically sound.

21. For instance, population and GDP estimates, which are published by most countries in the Asia-Pacific region, are used extensively as denominators for indicators across the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Quality issues for these key statistics are compounded when computing composite indicators. This negatively affects the accuracy and credibility of Sustainable Development Goal progress-tracking across various targets and indicators.

22. At the same time, population estimates in many cases are not released /collected frequently enough, are often incomplete and are not comparable. GDP estimates, on the other hand, often do not capture for example, the informal sector economy, which, in reality, forms a critical and large component of the economy in several countries of the region. This omission also greatly affects the comprehensiveness of the available data.

23. These facts point to the need to continuously apply internationally agreed statistical measurement frameworks, definitions, standards, processes and procedures in the collection, processing, dissemination and analysis of statistics and data to fill the gaps in both availability and quality.

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<sup>7</sup> Facilitated by ESCAP and based on a series of pilot studies in the region and in consultation with the Asia-Pacific Expert Group on Disaster-related Statistics.

24. In Asia and the Pacific, efforts have been well underway to support member States in producing and disseminating a basic range of population, economic, social and environmental statistics. These are evident from the various regional statistical development initiatives that have been formulated and implemented under the auspices of the regional inter-governmental forum on statistics development in Asia and the Pacific, the Committee on Statistics.<sup>8</sup> These initiatives span a wide range of statistical domains and focus on both methodological improvements and system-level capacity strengthening.

25. One example of such efforts is supporting countries in the region to strengthen environmental statistics through the application of existing statistical frameworks, such as the System of Environmental Economic Accounting.<sup>9</sup> The System of Environmental Economic Accounting is a statistical standard for measuring linkages between the economy and the environment. It can be utilized to guide data production for several Sustainable Development Goal indicators related to natural resources and biodiversity. Certain constraints hinder the development of these accounts. These include the lack of data or the existence of fragmented data from various sources; the lack of technical capacity in national statistical offices; and the lack of professional collaboration and data sharing arrangements between relevant national agencies. Addressing such challenges in the region requires building capacity to enhance basic statistical infrastructure (such as business and population registers, surveys, use of administrative data, statistical processes etc.). Additionally, specific assessments, technical assistance and work planning are necessary for prioritizing environmental statistics and the System of Environmental Economic Accounting accounts. Finally, by increasing collaborative efforts of statisticians and policy experts from national statistical offices, planning offices and environment departments, knowledge and expertise can be shared and regional learning can be enhanced. Regional support has focused on supporting countries in overcoming such constraints. As a result, more than half of the countries in Asia and the Pacific are either already producing the System of Environmental Economic Accounting accounts or are piloting or planning to produce such accounts.<sup>10</sup>

### **Improving disaggregated data by enhancing the policy-data nexus**

26. As mentioned earlier, the leave-no-one-behind tenet is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, which raises attention to the need for improving disaggregated data for a range of characteristics such as income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographical location etc. The data availability

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.unescap.org/committee/committee-on-statistics>.

<sup>9</sup> Since 1992, countries have used the System of Environmental Economic Accounting as a basis for compiling, assessing and reporting data on “themes” relating to natural assets, the supply of these assets to the economy, their use, the residuals their use entails and the expenditures made to manage and protect them. The System of Environmental Economic Accounting defines 33 inter-linked “accounts” such as water assets, water supply and use, and wastewater. The benefits of applying these guidelines is that they provide a “whole system” view (all assets, all suppliers, all users). They also link to economic statistics (e.g., water use by the manufacturing industry can be divided by the value added by that industry to derive efficiency measures), and they provide a platform to integrate data from different data providers.

<sup>10</sup> In the Asia-Pacific region, about 20 countries are producing the System of Environmental Economic Accounting accounts and another 15 are piloting or planning to produce accounts. The most common accounts in the region are land (relevant for Sustainable Development Goal 15), water (relevant for Sustainable Development Goal 6), energy (relevant for Sustainable Development Goal 7 and 13) and solid wastes (relevant for Sustainable Development Goal 12), reflecting national development priorities.

review revealed that while sex disaggregated data was better than disaggregated data for other characteristics, it was available for only a very limited number of indicators.

27. Increasing the availability of disaggregated data as well as improving the relevance and usability of data requires national statistical offices to engage with policy counterparts to identify key population groups and issues for target interventions. These targeted groups and issues must then be incorporated into national monitoring and indicator frameworks of relevant development strategies and plans. It is also critical that the strengths and weaknesses of the legal and institutional arrangements for national statistical systems be reviewed to increase Sustainable Development Goal readiness. This may warrant changes such as revising and/or updating National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) or national statistical master plans.

28. Technical solutions are needed to produce the disaggregated data required for Sustainable Development Goal progress assessment as well as to improve the reliability, timeliness and coherence of data. This will require: (a) assessing whether existing data and statistics are adequate for compiling relevant national development indicators for high priority policy goals, targeted areas (e.g. poverty reduction, gender equality, etc.) and/or population groups (e.g. persons with disabilities, migrants, rural women and girls, etc.); (b) identifying and piloting feasible solutions that focus on innovatively using data sources (e.g. household surveys, censuses, administrative data (e.g. civil registration and vital statistics), geospatial data and other big data sources) to address the gaps in data availability and quality; and (c) applying statistical methods (e.g. small area estimation, synthetic data generation, etc.) by integrating data from multiple sources.

29. The statistical community in Asia and the Pacific is collaborating to address some of these issues.<sup>11</sup> The collaboration aims to build statistical capacity by (1) establishing an enabling policy environment to create and sustain demand for statistics for inclusive development; (2) strengthening the production and dissemination of data; and (3) enhancing the accessibility and use of statistics to inform policy debates. In addition to building statistical capacity, a series of interventions under this framework will identify key national policy issues, develop related monitoring and indicator frameworks, foster political support and mobilize resources for statistics at the national and regional levels.

**Ensuring political, institutional and financial support for sustained production, dissemination and use of statistical products and services**

30. Political, institutional and financial support are essential for the successful advancement of the 2030 Agenda. A broad coalition of data for development experts estimated in a 2015 study that a total of US\$1 billion per annum will be required for 77 of the world’s lower-income countries<sup>12</sup> to “catch-up and put in place statistical systems capable of supporting and measuring the Sustainable Development Goals.”<sup>13</sup> This requires mobilisation of national

<sup>11</sup> For the Implementation Plan for the Regional Strategy to improve Population and Social Statistics in Asia and the Pacific see [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/pre-ods/E.ESCAP\\_CST\(5\).3.Implementation\\_plan.English.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/pre-ods/E.ESCAP_CST(5).3.Implementation_plan.English.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> These were countries that qualified for concessional borrowing through the International Development Association (IDA).

<sup>13</sup> Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) (2015) “Data for Development: A Needs Assessment for Sustainable Development Goal Monitoring and Statistical Capacity Development”.



budgets within the framework of national strategies for the development of statistics, as well as contributions from donors to the extent of approximately US\$300 million per annum in order to support country efforts. The study however, emphasises the need for countries and donors to harness the data revolution, to reduce the costs of traditional methods, though additional investments are required to adopt new methods and innovative technologies.

31. In Asia and the Pacific, the statistical community agreed on a collective vision which communicates the shared level of ambition to transform national statistical systems by the year 2030. They also agreed to a framework for action, which translates the vision into collaborative action to be taken at the national, subregional and regional levels.

32. The collective vision and framework for action thus serves as a guide for strengthening statistical capacity in support of the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific. Through this vision and framework, the programme of work for statistics over the next few years at the national and regional levels is expected to strengthen collaborative efforts to engage data users; enhance resources for statistics; assure quality and instill trust in statistics; and integrate statistics for analysis through methodological work, modernization of business processes and skills strengthening. This will require relevant stakeholders, including governments, civil society, private sector, academia as well as international organisations, to address limitations in statistical methodology, capacity and financial resources in order to improve the production, dissemination and use of statistics. It also needs national statistical systems to diversify data sources (including use of big data, geographical information and administrative data) and involve non-conventional data producers, owners and users. By expanding outreach to stakeholders of the broader national data ecosystem, the production and utilization of data in the Asia-Pacific region can be enhanced.

33. At the global level, the 2030 Agenda included two targets on “Data, monitoring and accountability.” This inclusion signals that statistics development is as important as development issues such as poverty elimination, universal access to quality education, environmental sustainability, etc. In other words, it has elevated the importance of statistics to the same level as other development goals.

34. At the regional level, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017 “urged Governments to make statistics development a national development target embedded in national development plans with the highest importance.”<sup>14</sup> This is a good start, and translating words into actions requires the vision and resolution of the leaders and the public in the region.

35. The complete report is available online at <http://www.unescap.org/publications/statistical-yearbook-asia-and-pacific-2017>.

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<sup>14</sup> ESCAP (2017) Report of the Fourth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (E/ESCAP/FSD(4)/3), Chair’s Summary, para. 24; See also resolution 72/6 adopted by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.