

Data and statistics for the post-2015 development agenda: Strengthening regional collaboration in Asia and the Pacific¹

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I. Introduction

The post-2015 sustainable development agenda presents a number of challenges and opportunities for data and statistics. The proposal that the UN General Assembly's 30-member Open Working Group (OWG) forwarded to the United Nations Assembly on 19 July 2014 contains 17 goals with 169 targets covering a broad range of goals and targets of sustainable development, raising demands for data for monitoring far exceeding the existing capacity of many national statistical systems. At the same time, there has been emphasis on the importance of establishing rigorous monitoring and accountability system with national leadership and ownership, which also has implications for statistics development.

This paper discusses several key issues regarding statistics development in Asia and the Pacific to support the implementation of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. It starts by highlighting the information needs by a multitude of stakeholders as required by a well-functioning accountability system (Section II). It goes on to illustrate the data availability in Asia and the Pacific across the broad range of focal areas of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), emphasizing that strengthening national statistical capacity is the key to address gaps in data availability (Sections III and IV). The paper then turns to discussing opportunities for improving the efficient data production and use, including tapping into the potential of new types and sources of data (Section V), as well as the need for increasing investment in statistics development (Section VI). The paper concludes by providing an overview of the existing strategic approach of regional collaboration for statistics development and highlighting the need for strengthened partnership in order to achieve the transformative changes required for meeting the data needs.

II. Supporting monitoring and accountability: Meeting diverse user needs

Discussions on the means of implementation of a post-2015 sustainable development agenda have stressed the importance of robust monitoring and accountability at the global, regional and national levels. Emerging views state that such a framework should be guided by national ownership and leadership, engaging all stakeholders and going beyond the MDG frameworks to close existing gaps. In addition, the discussions highlight the benefits of a decentralized system of accountability for ensuring that all stakeholders take ownership and are incentivized to share, evaluate and adjust their policies (United Nations, 2014). Although the details of such a

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monitoring and accountability system are yet to be decided, at least two implications can be drawn on the uses of data and statistics.

Need for progress monitoring and detailed analyses

The first implication is the type of data that are produced and disseminated. National statistical offices as well as statistical departments of line ministries produce and publish indicator data on social, economic and environmental systems in printed or electronic formats. Such data, usually disaggregated by relevant population groups and level of jurisdictions, systematically portray the common and distinctive features, structures, and operations of economic or social systems and can provide information about improvements or declines in one sector or many sectors as well as population groups – thereby providing information for accountability purposes and/or for making reasoned comparative and evaluative judgements. When used for comparisons across countries, the analyses of these types of data can magnify particular aspects of a policy or programme that are problematic or usually excellent because they differ from other otherwise ‘similar’ countries.

In the case of the work on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), data on the indicator monitoring framework was the major source for progress assessment towards achieving the various goals and targets at the national, regional and international levels. The global database for the MDG indicators, produced by an Inter-Agency Expert Group (IAEG) and coordinated by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), has been a major source of data aggregated at the country level used for progress tracking at regional and global levels.

In addition to the indicator data, micro data that are collected through censuses, surveys and administrative records are also required to enforce accountability for the post-2015 development agenda. Accountability means, inter alia, being clear about who is taking what actions as well as the contribution of such actions to the achievement of the goals. This often requires the use of detailed data to study the effectiveness of various policy options, the relationships between the interventions, contexts and policy outcomes. For instance, statistical analyses using data from experimental design have influenced policy formulation in poverty reduction, education, etc.

Information needs for multitude of actors

The second, and related, implication is that producers of official statistics need to cater to the information needs of a wide range of stakeholders. Figure 1 is an illustration of the complex information needs by a multitude of actors in the education sector. The framework distinguishes actors at the micro-level (individual participants, e.g. students), meso-level (e.g. teachers and school administrators), and macro-level (e.g. ministries or departments of education) of an education system. Actors at each level require different types of information in order for them to make decisions. For instance, ministries or departments of educational systems need information not only on the overall performance of the systems, but also on system-wide institutions settings, resource allocations and policies in order to make necessary changes to improve the overall performance. On the other hand, classroom teachers need to the advantages of various pedagogical approaches and how they impact the quality of teaching.

The recognition of the multiple actors and their information needs is consistent with the need for

a decentralized accountability framework that was emphasized in the global and regional dialogues on strengthening implementation of the post-2015 development agenda. In general, use of data and statistics can also improve transparency and accountability of public policies by allowing citizens and civil society to see, understand and monitor better what their governments and the private sector are doing, challenging corruption or unaccountable activity, and finding opportunities to influence policy and practice. In addition, use of data and statistics can improve policies of inclusion and empowerment of marginalized groups by removing imbalances of power created through information asymmetry.

Figure 1 Multiple policy issues and multiple actors: Example of education

	1. Education and learning outputs and outcomes	2. Policy levers and contexts shaping educational outcomes	3. Antecedents or constraints that contextualise policy
I. Individual participants in education and learning	1.I. The quality and distribution of individual educational outcomes	2.I. Individual attitudes towards, engagement in, and behaviour in teaching and learning	3.I. Background characteristics of the individual learners and teachers
II. Instructional settings	1.II. The quality of instructional delivery	2.II. Pedagogy, learning practices and classroom climate	3.II. Student learning conditions and teacher working conditions
III. Providers of educational services	1.III. The output of educational institutions and institutional performance	2.III. School environment and organisation	3.III. Characteristics of the service providers and their communities
IV. The education system as a whole	1.IV. The overall performance of the education system	2.IV. System-wide institutional settings, resource allocations, and policies	3.IV. The national educational, social, economic, and demographic contexts

Source: OECD (2014), “Introduction: The Indicators and their Framework”, in *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-3-en>

Ensuring a virtuous cycle of demand and supply of statistics

A prerequisite for the production of high quality official statistics in any country is that the government places a high value on objective statistics. It should value these both for their own use in policy development, implementation and evaluation, and also for their use by the public more broadly, both nationally and internationally, in decision making and in building trust in the workings and directions of the government. In other words, a country should be “policy ready” for high quality official statistics.

A review in the health sector suggests that much of the evidence that is presented to policy makers is of little use (Davies 2011). The information needs of the policy makers are varied and unpredictable, ranging from issues of international importance to the local needs of their constituents. Often what policy makers’ need is not so much information about the present, but

predictions about the future for which they need to prepare. While forecasts and projections are the bread and butter of statistical techniques, they tend to come with many provisos and assumptions that make interpretation difficult and open to alternative views. Policy makers generally need information that differs significantly in terms of scope, level and timeframe from much of what is currently produced by researchers and statisticians.

The availability of data does not necessarily mean "good" policy or "desired" outcomes. While politicians may claim a preference for figures or quantitative information, in practice many political decisions are driven by the need to satisfy most of the people for most of the time and to minimize opposition (often referred to as 'blame avoidance strategies') (Ham & Coulter 2001). Politicians do not generally possess statistical expertise and find much of the evidence presented to them is too complex to be useful in decision-making. Even when easily accessible and understandable information is provided to politicians, they will often allow their own values and political ideologies to predominate in their decision making (Malik 2010). In the final analysis, politicians will tend to balance any scientifically-based evidence with other sources of information, including personal experiences, values, political ideologies and the media (Zwart-van Rijkom et al 2000; Ryyananen et al 1998).

Decision makers working at the institutional level in different sectors, with responsibilities for planning and managing specific programs, will likely require detailed technical information and be more open to scientific/statistical evidence. They need to be able to predict what is likely to occur if a new policy is introduced, to monitor its implementation and impact, and to manage unintended effects. Despite this, the use of evidence at the institutional and operational levels can be hindered by institutional inertia, vested interests in established ways of doing things, and reluctance to change.

Decision-making on the basis of strong evidence is preferable to that based on political ideologies and arbitrariness, however. In view of this, national statistical systems (NSS) can take a number of actions to further strengthen the emphasis on information needs so as to uptake of evidence in policy and practice (Sengone, 2004). These actions include:

Fostering ownership. If policy makers and practitioners are to use evidence, it is essential that their commitment and buy-in are harnessed at all levels. At the central government level this usually means getting ministers and senior policy officials to understand and own the available evidence. This implies that they commit to use not only of those findings that support received wisdoms, but also – and more critically – those that are contrary to expectations or shown to be ineffective. At the institutional and operational levels, it means that key decision makers champion the evidence that supports good practice (Davies 2004). This is most likely to take place, and most likely to be effective, in organizational structures which are non-hierarchic, open and democratic (Dowd 1994; Martin 1997).

Improving dialogue. To improve ownership, better dialogue and interactions between producers of statistics and policy makers is paramount (Nutley et al 2002). What is needed is not simply discussions between the two groups but ongoing and sustained interactivity throughout the process of data collection, compilation and analysis, policy development and implementation. Closer and more integrated working over prolonged periods is needed to foster cross-boundary

understanding and develop mutual trust. Doing so, however, is not cheap or organizationally straightforward, and it raises some concerns about independence and impartiality that need to be openly acknowledged and addressed.

Matching demand and supply. A distinction can be made between people who are users of research and evaluation and those who are doers of research and evaluation. Whilst it may be unrealistic for professional decision makers and practitioners to be competent researchers and evaluators, it is both reasonable and necessary that they be able to understand and use data, research results and evaluation findings in their professional practice. An increasingly necessary skill for professional policy makers and practitioners is to know about the different kinds of social, economic and policy statistics, research and evaluation which are available; how to gain access to them; and, how to critically appraise them (Segone 2004). Without such knowledge and understanding it is difficult to see how a strong demand for research and evaluation can be established and, hence, how to enhance the practical and policy application of research and evaluation. Joint training and professional development opportunities for policy makers and analysts may be one way of taking this forward and for a matching strong demand with a good supply of appropriate evidence (Segone 2004).

Differentiated approaches for different sectors or domains. A country may be “policy ready” in some sectors or domains of statistics, for example finance and economy, but not in others, for example governance. In domains that are not yet “policy ready”, leaders of the national statistical systems (NSS) may start by building high level bilateral relationships with key policy makers within such domains. This should enable building an NSS understanding of the policy priorities and objectives, even where these have not yet been articulated in a plan, and developing a joint understanding with the policy makers, of the information needs to support these priorities and objectives. From here the NSS can work to make available statistics accessible and usable within the domain, building an appreciation of the value of statistics. As the relationships between statistical leaders and policy makers in the domain grow, influence will increase and the scope for joint information development planning to meet policy needs will grow.

In “policy ready” domains, strong relationships between senior members of the statistical system in a country and senior stakeholders in planning and policy areas of government, are important in building an understanding of the value and use of statistics. Such relationships can lead to strategic information planning, involving both policy makers and statisticians, resulting in relevant, prioritized and valued sets of official statistics. Strong relationships can also lead more generally, to the provision and uptake of training to users of statistics, to improve their awareness of available statistical information, and their effectiveness in using it. This in turn will increase the value of statistics to the users and the country, and have a further strengthening effect on the quality of the relationships.

Effective relationships between the NSS and the media can also help build an understanding of the objective nature of official statistics and the value of high integrity statistics in keeping non-government organizations and the community well informed, with consequential pressure for governments to hold themselves accountable for policy outcomes, and to respond to emerging evidence.

In summary, the implementation of accountability for the post-2015 development agenda means a large variety of uses of detailed data and statistics, not just the use of aggregated data for monitoring of inputs, processes and outcomes of development targets and goals. Consequently, data producers and users need to be integrated within a wide range of actors, including national and local governments, the private sector, citizens, international organizations and donors to develop a shared understanding of data, statistics and information needs. Overall, the emphasis on national accountability is likely to improve dialogues between data users and producers and engender imperative for national statistical systems to produce and disseminate high quality statistics, thus establishing and maintaining a virtuous cycle of effective demand and provision of statistics.

Tentative questions for discussion:

- What are the most significant factors that will ensure data and statistics are used to inform policies and promote accountability?
- What institutional arrangements would most effectively support national monitoring and accountability of post-2015 development agenda?
- What can be done to promote the establishment and maintenance of a virtuous cycle of demand for and production of high quality statistics?

III. Gauging the magnitude of the challenges

The goals and targets of the proposal by the United Nations General Assembly's Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG) will be further elaborated through indicators focused on measurable outcomes. However, many commentators already question the feasibility for national statistical systems providing the wide range of data. To put the issue in perspective, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that started in 2000 and will expire in 2015 are much more modest in comparison having a total of 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators. Yet, it remains a challenge to produce timely and comparable data that comply with agreed standards and guidelines for all developing countries, despite improvements resulting from concerted efforts by national and international actors. Take two indicators for example: prevalence of underweight children and rate of skilled birth attendance, both high priorities in Asia and the Pacific. For the former, comparable data are only available for half of the developing member States of ESCAP up to 2008, and up to 2009 for the latter.

In addition, the post-2015 sustainable development agenda includes issues for which measurement standards are not very well developed or lacking all together, e.g. peace and security, governance, human rights, the empowerment of women, and inequality. The post-2015 development agenda aspires to leave no person or group behind. The required disaggregation of statistical indicators by age, gender, geography, income, disability etc. is currently not available for many statistical areas. Moreover, many of the proposed targets for the post-2015 agenda that address similar goals or issues as in the MGDs contain concepts or terminology that are not currently defined among guidelines for official statistics. Therefore, the post-2015 monitoring agenda requires more data available in more details and underpinned by international statistical standards, or the targets are aligned with what can be feasibly measured by national statistical

systems, or a combination of both.

A number of assessments have pointed to the data challenges that the SDGs have posed for national statistical systems. A seven-country assessment of national statistical capacity to deliver data for post-2015 development agenda concluded that little data were available for some key areas such as energy and infrastructure, governance, environment and global partnership in Bangladesh, the only country from Asia and the Pacific participating in the study. In addition, available data often lack accuracy and reliability, timeliness and punctuality, accessibility and clarity, and, coherence and comparability (Southern Voice, 2014). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013), Australia's statistical system has the capability to deliver high-quality economic data against the illustrated goals as proposed by the Secretary-General's High-Level-Panel of Eminent Persons; it also has the capability to deliver social and population data though with varying frequencies and with varying quality for disaggregations; it however lacked the capability to deliver environmental statistics.

Further evidence on the capacity of national statistical systems to deliver the data required for monitoring the post-2015 sustainable development agenda comes most recently from a survey initiated by the United Nations Statistical Commission Friends of the Chair Group on broader measures of progress, conducted after the release of the OWG recommendations of the goals and targets. The purpose of the survey was to inform national statistical offices of the expected possible new monitoring requirements and to identify data gaps and needs for capacity building. At the time of this report, 15 countries from Asia and the Pacific had replied to the survey, together with 26 from other parts of the world.

A preliminary analysis of the responses reveals that for all targets under goals 3, 5 and 7, at least 60 per cent of countries reported that they currently collect indicators to measure at least one indicator for the majority of the targets (see Table 1). These goals are about the following focal areas:

- Healthy lives and well-being for all at all ages
- Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls
- Access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy

At the same time, the majority of targets under goals 1, 2, 4, 6, 8 and 9 are currently measurable for more than 60 per cent of countries that responded to this survey. These goals concern the following focal areas

- Poverty
- Hunger, food security and improved nutrition, and sustainable agriculture
- Quality education
- Availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation
- Economic growth, employment and decent work
- Infrastructure, industrialization and innovation

On the other hand, indicators related to targets under the rest of the goals, as listed below, are much less measurable in these countries:

- Inequality within and among countries

- Cities and human settlements
- Sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Climate change and its impacts
- Conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources
- Terrestrial ecosystems, management of forests, desertification, and land degradation and biodiversity loss
- Peace, justice and institutions

Table 1 Data gaps remain large in many focal areas of SDGs

Percentage of 15 countries in Asia and the Pacific reporting to produce data for at least one indicator that could be used to measure the targets associated to the respective goal

Target #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Goal 1	77%	77%	67%	45%	55%					
Goal 2	92%	91%	75%	77%	9%					
Goal 3	100%	100%	90%	92%	70%	92%	80%	90%	73%	
Goal 4	100%	83%	100%	67%	100%	100%	42%			
Goal 5	91%	100%	90%	73%	100%	100%				
Goal 6	100%	79%	57%	64%	36%	50%				
Goal 7	69%	77%	77%							
Goal 8	75%	73%	50%	60%	100%	91%	70%	70%	44%	50%
Goal 9	55%	83%	27%	73%	67%					
Goal 10	83%	50%	92%	50%	10%	30%	50%			
Goal 11	69%	64%	30%	40%	64%	64%	50%			
Goal 12	17%	62%	8%	71%	71%	67%	18%	27%		
Goal 13	75%	50%	42%							
Goal 14	30%	50%	40%	64%	40%	11%	11%			
Goal 15	92%	75%	91%	30%	75%	36%	27%	36%	36%	
Goal 16	89%	33%	56%	11%	60%	44%	33%	11%	75%	75%

Data source: United Nations Statistical Division (2014).

These results are consistent with the self-assessments of the rest of the countries, although it must be pointed out that the self-assessment does not directly address the quality of the available data. In addition, the majority of the countries in Asia and the Pacific, including all of the region's small island developing states (SIDS) which face particular challenges in statistical capacity, are not represented in these results. Furthermore, a significant portion of the concepts and terminologies used in the current OWG proposal are misaligned with current international standards and guidelines used in official statistics. Therefore, monitoring many of the proposed targets will require updating the capacities of data providers even for the cases where data availability is relatively strong.

Tentative questions for discussion

- What data are required to establish the baseline for the post-2015 sustainable

development goals and where are the major data gaps?

- To what extent are such gaps common across the entire region, or different for different subregions or groups of countries? What capacity constraints do these data gaps point to in national statistical systems?
- SDGs demand integrated data and more disaggregated data. What can be done to produce integrated and disaggregated data?
- What options are there for national statistical systems to take advantage of the opportunities proffered by the emphasis on statistics development as illustrated in the OWG proposal?

IV. Strengthening national institutions is key

Gaps in statistics reflect gaps in national statistical capacity

The gaps in the coverage and quality of data for the SDGs reflect insufficiencies in the legal, institutional and technical capacity of national statistical systems. These insufficiencies usually include lack of robust legal framework governing the national statistical system, lack of effective coordination among various agencies that form the national statistical system (related to the previous point) and meaningful engagement with data users, weak data sources (particularly data from administrative sources that are compiled and maintained by other government agencies), weak application of existing statistical guidelines and standards, insufficient skills of staff members of the national statistical system, etc.

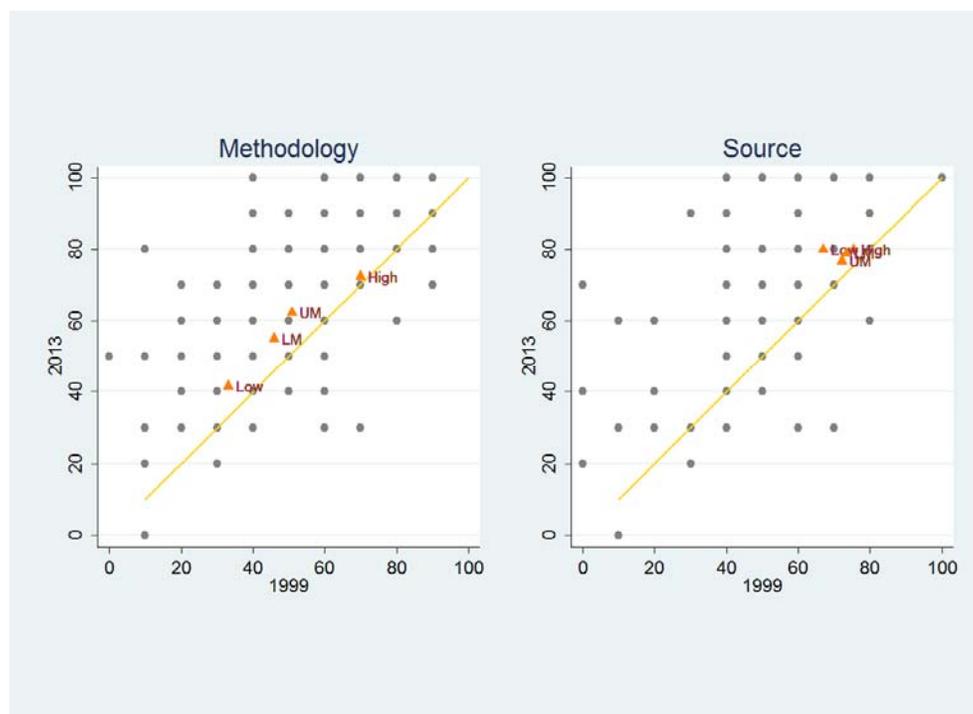
The limitations of the capacity of national statistical systems are illustrated by a report of the World Bank's Bulletin Board on Statistical Capacity, which rates each of 149 countries, including 41 from Asia and the Pacific, in three areas of official statistics: methodology, data sources, and periodicity and timeliness. The first is the adherence to internationally recommended standards and methods, which is measured by the extent of using guidelines and procedures to compile macroeconomic statistics, and social data reporting and estimation practices. The other is the extent to which a country conducts data collection activities in line with internationally recommended periodicity, as well as the extent to which data from administrative systems are available and reliable for statistical estimation purposes.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the majority of the countries are above the line connecting the bottom left corner of the graph to the top right corner, meaning that their ratings in these two areas improved between 1999 and 2013, reflecting the success of many national, regional and international efforts to enhance statistical capacity in these countries. On the other hand, quite a number of countries fall below the line, suggesting that their capacity in these two areas had in fact deteriorated over the period of time. This means that continued efforts are required to make improvements in statistical capacity and to solidify such improvements.

At the same time, a large number of countries scored below 60 in these two areas of statistical capacity in 2013, despite improvements over the years. In particular, the overall scores on

statistical methodology seemed to differ by income level of a country, suggesting that the scope for improving the quality of official statistics by strengthening the implementation of international recommendations was particularly large in poorer countries. On the other hand, there were no discernible differences in the indicator on data sources by income level, perhaps reflecting the expansion of new data collection activities in less developed countries over the years, partly thanks to support by key bilateral and multilateral development partners.

Figure 2 Statistical capacity has improved in many countries but not enough
Comparison of scores of statistical capacity between 1999 and 2013



Data source: World Bank, *Bulletin Board on Statistical Capacity*, available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/bulletin-board-on-statistical-capacity>. Accessed in December 2014.

A very important source of official statistics is administrative records, which policy and programme departments of the government maintain to allocate budgets to schools, plan the building of hospitals, regulate the flow of goods and people across borders, respond to the legal requirements of registering particular events such as births and deaths, and to administer benefits such as pensions or obligations such as taxation (for individuals or for businesses). When designed and implemented appropriately in adherence to appropriate statistical guidelines and standards, the administrative records are a continuous source of data and can be an alternative to direct data collection, which would avoid incurring additional costs and causing response burdens. While comprehensive information on the extent of use of administrative data in official statistics in Asia and the Pacific is yet to be available, almost half of the work programme at Statistics Canada is about administrative data.

Much remains to be done to improve the quality and use of administrative data in Asia and the Pacific. According to assessments of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in 47 countries in the region that was conducted between 2010 and 2012, only 11 systems were categorized as satisfactory, while 8 reported their systems to be dysfunctional, 14 as weak and 14 as functional but inadequate. In other words, the civil registration and vital statistics system in the majority of the countries was deemed inadequate. The rating was in general lower for Pacific island countries compared with countries in Asia (Mikkelsen, 2012). The biggest challenges identified by countries during these assessments were in relation to data quality assurance, cause-of-death certification and coding, and data management, analysis, dissemination and use.

Good statistics is an integral part of strong national institutions

The issues of statistical capacity mentioned above cannot be fully addressed in the absence of comprehensive strategy to strengthen key national institutions, including the statistical system. In fact, characteristics of a robust national statistical system that produces and disseminates high quality statistics are similar to those of effective national institutions and good governance. These characteristics include access to data to ensure accountability of decisions by governments, businesses as well as civil society organizations; a strong culture of evidence-based decision-making that is fostered through engagement between national statistical systems and policy-makers; adequate allocation and efficient use of resources to statistical agencies; as well as a competent and motivated workforce.

When citizens and other entities have low levels of trust in government and public institutions, they are less willing to cooperate and provide truthful information in data collection, which would affect survey response rates and thus increase the costs of reliable survey data collection (Nardone, 2013). On the other hand, high levels of trust in government agencies would mean that such procedures to solicit survey participation and remedy misinformation by respondents are not necessary and resources that are otherwise required to design and implement them can be saved.

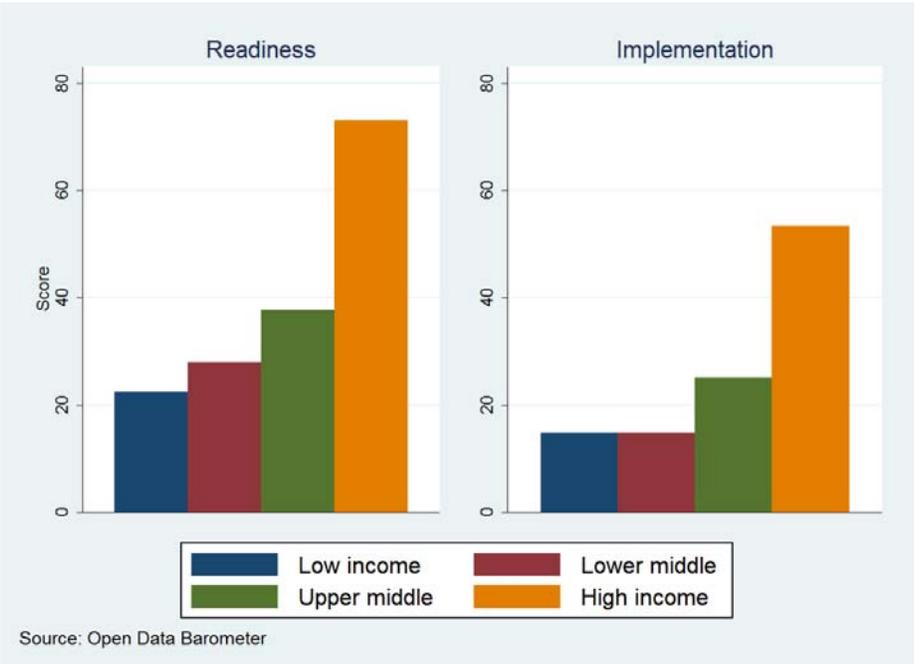
One way to increase public trust is open government policies that concentrate on citizen engagement and access to information. According to Open Data Barometer (see Figure 3), less developed countries tend to score low on several key aspects of open government information and data. This include having intermediaries who are able to take government data and turn it into platforms and products with social and economic value, and re-users equipped to access and work with data in different ways (Readiness). In addition, poorer countries also tend to be less likely to make government datasets available and accessible, although the study pointed out that national statistical agencies outdid other parts of the government in making their datasets available and accessible (Implementation).

These results mean that much can be gained by increasing open government data initiatives, in particular in lower income countries. Actions that can be taken include investing in building open data portal and encouraging re-use of data; creating and enforcing right to information laws to empower citizens in using open data to hold government to account; as well as providing training and support for intermediaries in order to mobilize data to generate economic and social benefits.

The emphasis on accountability for the post-2015 sustainable development agenda will also ensure that key stakeholders are engaged in statistical work and data are relevant. Thus, efforts to strengthen national statistical capacity in the long term would improve the quality of statistical outputs, reduce waste in scarce resources and boost the overall efficiency of government, again highlighting the importance of strengthening a virtuous cycle of demand and provision of high quality statistics.

Figure 3 Great potential to reap benefits from access to government data in less developed countries

Mean scores of three domains of Open Data Barometer indicators



Data source: Open Data Barometer: 2013 Global Report

Existing tools and processes are available for countries to review and develop the overall vision of the development of their national statistical system to address the national, regional, and international needs as part of the country development policy. These include the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics, the Adapted Global Assessment of the National Statistical System, etc. These tools and processes generally serve as a framework for international and bilateral assistance and involve all key parts of the data production units and address the issues related to the analysis and use of data, including the adoption and application of international standards, and building on all past and existing activities and experiences.

Tentative questions for discussion

- In what ways would an overall review of national statistical system be useful in helping countries to meet the statistical demands presented by the post-2015 development agenda?

- The full set of targets currently proposed for the post-2015 development agenda, goes beyond the framework of national statistical plans of most countries. What should be done to address the gaps for the full post-2015 agenda?
- What would be recommendations for national statistical systems to promote more effective usage of national statistical plans for monitoring the SDGs?

V. Opportunities for efficient data production and use

The official statistics industry is part of a more extensive information industry. Within this wider information industry, the pace of creation of new information products and new ways of combining and using information is increasing rapidly. Alternative sources of information allow new data producers to produce and update information in real time and make it available with fewer constraints and with greater detail than official statistics provided through the national statistical organisations. Statistical organizations are confronted with accelerating change in society and the way that data are produced and used within the information industry.

Addressing the challenge to modernize statistical production and services

Statistical organizations have to be transformed from traditional data producers, characterized by domain-specific silos, legacy information systems and the production process centred around paper forms and publications, to a modern ‘information service provider’, characterized by internet data capture, expanding and shared data sources, and innovative ways of communicating with users. The official statistics industry has recognized that they should work together to better face all of the opportunities and threats that accompany a data deluge.

The creation of a more adaptive and cost-effective information management environment was established by the Committee on Statistics on its second session as one of the overarching strategic goals to be achieved by 2020. The aim of such goal is to develop and implement new and better production processes and methods, which are capable of delivering statistical outputs at reduced cost and better quality.

The post-2015 development agenda poses demands for more efficient and effective data production from both existing and potential new sources. While it may be necessary to launch new data collections, much can be done to make use of existing data to reduce and eliminate the gaps in the availability and quality of data, as well as open access to the available data.

Big data and changing landscape of official statistics

The advent of technology has brought changes in the production and use of statistics, in particularly big data which are generated through electronic devices and are being used to inform issues of public concern, such as trends of epidemics and opinions of citizens. There have been attempts, including some from the Asian-Pacific region, to use Big Data to inform public policies, although they are limited to a few countries and most of the experiments are outside of the remit of national statistical offices. In addition, open data, geospatial information and

geographical information systems also present opportunities for cost-effective production of statistics. The statistical community has raised issues about the importance of meeting quality standards and requirements of official statistics in order for such new data sources to be used for effective policy-making.

The International Conference on Big Data for Official Statistics in October 2014 showed that the statistical community is open to innovations and that there are large opportunities for the use of big data for official statistics; however, there are a number of challenges relating to methodology, privacy and access to data, partnerships and skills that need to be addressed. The conference stressed the importance of maintaining and improving the efficiency of ongoing operations while engaging in innovation efforts towards the use of big data in official statistics, especially for less developed statistical systems that have the potential to leapfrog developed systems in this field, but in many cases they do not have the resources and capacity for implementing innovations. It was further suggested that the use of proxy indicators based on big data should be explored to provide more frequent information than surveys, and as such complement traditional systems, such as the “flash” estimates of GDP.

Harnessing the data revolution for the development of statistics in Asia-Pacific

The call for a “data revolution” captures the breadth and the depth of transformation required to meet the demand for data and statistics resulting from the post-2015 development agenda. Behind the call is the recognition of the urgent need to improve access to detailed and disaggregated data by governments, the business sector, the civil society and the research community and thereby promote shared accountability for progress and make sure to ‘leave no one behind’. Existing data sources and new data sources, such as big data, can be used more effectively to support development. New technology and new and alternative data sources offer an opportunity for the statistical community to produce and disseminate statistics more effectively and efficiently. However, they also pose challenges related to quality, confidentiality and privacy, skills and resource requirements.

Considering the fragility of the statistical systems in some of the least developed countries, some have argued that instead of drastic changes or a complete makeover as the term “revolution” implies, what is required is perhaps to build on existing systems and practices in these countries and seek gradual improvements, or evolution. It is, however, generally agreed that improvements in official statistics are urgently needed in order to meet the requirements for the designing effective policies, monitoring their implementation and evaluating their impact. This would include innovations in using existing development data in policymaking and in improving key administrative data sources—such as civil registration. It would also include making use of Big Data as well as survey data from the private sector that is playing a growing role in public policies.

The report “A World that Counts” of the Secretary-General’s Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development (IEAG), which was presented on 6 November 2014, attempts to synthesize the understanding of data revolution as “the opportunity to improve the data that is essential for decision-making, accountability and solving development challenges.” The Report suggests a comprehensive programme of action through developing a

global consensus on principles and standards, sharing technology and innovations for the common good, mobilizing new resources for capacity development, leading for coordination and mobilization, and exploiting some quick wins for the SDG data.

While bringing the issue of data to the forefront, the report calls in particular for investment in statistical capacity building to allow all countries to participate in the benefits of the data revolution and to provide the data required for the monitoring of the goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda.

Tentative questions for discussion

- What do statistical organizations need to do to stay relevant in view of increasing number of producers of statistics and increasingly limited budgets? How can modernization of statistical production and services improve the quality, reduce costs, and help with monitoring of the post-2015 development agenda?
- Data and statistics are a public good. Can open and transparent data become the standard practice in the region? How can we encourage other actors, from both public and private sector, to share their data with the wider public?
- How can NSOs in the region harness the potential of new data sources, such as big data, satellite imagery or even administrative data sources?
- Are surveys and censuses becoming obsolete? Can (or should) new data sources replace the ways of producing official statistics?
- How can new data sources be used for some "quick wins" on the SDGs to demonstrate the feasibility of different approaches, set baselines for indicators, or even develop a first wave of indicators?

VI. Need for greater investing in statistics development

Significant investments are necessary to bring the production and use of official statistics from the current level to what is required by a post-2015 development agenda. Increased resources are needed to improve the collection and dissemination of basic population, economic, social and environment statistics in a large number of countries, particularly those with relatively limited statistical capacity. At the same time, there is a need both to extend official statistics to new areas, such as governance, and to provide data on different relevant social groups (by income, gender, geography, disability and other categories) to make sure that no group is left behind. With the advent of the new sources of data, it is also necessary to invest in the development of concepts, measurement frameworks, classifications and standards. In contrast to the need for increased investment, resources for statistics have been declining in many countries, including in more advanced countries where governments undergo budgetary cutbacks.²

One estimate of the costs of data for the 169 targets of the OWG proposal stands at \$254 billion

² There are reports of funding cuts for official statistics in Australia, Finland, for instance.

for the period of 2015-2030, which is almost twice the annual global total spent on Official Development Assistance in any recent year (Jerven, 2014). Although the number seems big, governments and donors must recognize that the alternative to the investment is bad or no key statistics, which can mis-inform policies and programmes, resulting in a waste of economic, social, environmental and political resources.

It is necessary to understand the resource needs and availability for statistics development in Asia and the Pacific in order to prioritize actions and strategies for improvement. This is important especially in view of the diversity in the size, history, structure and the overall capacity of national statistical systems in the region, as well as the level of development and the broader cultural, economic and social contexts in which they operate. The identification of resources needs should take consideration of these factors.

Donor support has made important contributions to the improvements in the production of data for the MDGs, mainly through providing financial and technical assistance to international surveys. Such support has also raised awareness of new and emerging issues, as well as helped build the capacity of national counterparts. In contrast, progress has been little and slow in improvements in administrative data for MDG indicators, such as those from the registration of births and deaths (Chen et al, 2013). Overall, inadequate investment by national governments and inadequate assistance by donors to other data sources, along with the general underinvestment in data analysis at the country level, may have hampered the progress towards achieving the MDGs (Chen et al, 2013).

Tentative questions for discussion

- What is the needed investment for developing capacity to monitor the post-2015 development agenda?
- Will countries be able to dedicate the resources and investment required? What additional sources of funding and investment are needed?
- How will investment in the post-2015 development agenda affect investment in other national statistical development priorities?
- What is the opportunity cost of failing to invest in statistics development?

VII. Strengthened partnership for transformative changes

The report of the United Nations Secretary General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (United Nations, 2013a) called for a global partnership to instigate the transformative changes in statistics, or the data revolution. Such a partnership would include governments, businesses, the civil society as well as international organizations.

Concerted pursuit for statistics development in Asia and the Pacific

In Asia and the Pacific, the Committee on Statistics of ESCAP is the highest-level regional forum for leaders of national statistical systems to discuss matters of strategic importance and promote regional cooperation on statistics development. Recognizing the need to strengthen the institutions of national statistical systems in the region, the Committee on Statistics at its second

session in 2010 agreed on two overarching strategic goals: a) ensuring that all countries in the region, by 2020, have the capability to provide an agreed basic range of population, economic, social and environment statistics; and b) creating a more adaptive and cost-effective information management environment for national statistical offices through stronger collaboration.

In support of these goals, the Committee has formed a number of steering and technical advisory groups to provide recommendations on the formulation and implementation of capacity building strategies in sectors such as: economic statistics; population and social statistics; civil registration and vital statistics; agricultural and rural statistics; statistical training; and modernization of national statistical production and services which is also discussed in Section V. Regional programmes or strategies in these sectors of statistics are different stages in development or implementation.

Implementation of the strategy of the Committee has been supported by the Partners for Statistics Development in Asia-Pacific (the Partnership), an informal forum for statistical development partners to promote inter-agency coordination and cooperation on global, regional, sub-regional and bilateral statistical programmes and projects implemented in the Asian and the Pacific region. The Partnership enables a coordinated approach for the support of development of national statistical systems and improves aid effectiveness through enhanced synergy and complementarity among programmes and activities of Partner agencies.

Opportunities for integrated regional support

The overall approach that has been taken by the Committee needs to be reflected in view of the need for monitoring and accountability to support the implementation of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. The goals and targets proposed by the OWG integrate economic, social and environmental aspects and recognize their interlinkages in achieving sustainable development in all its dimensions.

While each sector of statistics has its own frameworks and data sources, many issues about statistical capacity are cross-cutting. For instance, the work in economic and population and social statistics has been guided by a core set of statistics that intends to capture the basic information needs for policy making in these two sectors. The two core sets overlap on issues such as poverty and employment.

The various sectoral programmes and strategies aim to tackle fundamental capacity issues, which often transcend sectoral boundaries. For instance, the implementation plan for the regional programme on economic statistics focuses on strengthening advocacy, coordination, infrastructure and skills as key outcomes (ESCAP, 2012). On the other hand, a regional strategy under development in the sector of population and social statistics has identified strengthening data sources, use of existing data, as well as leadership and management competencies as priorities. At the same time, the regional action framework on civil registration and vital statistics focuses on seven areas, namely, political commitment; public engagement, participation and generating demand; coordination; policies, legislation and implementation of regulations; infrastructure and resources; operational procedures, practices and innovations; and production, dissemination and use of vital statistics (ESCAP, 2014). Many issues cut across these and other

sectoral strategies and many benefits may be gained by taking a holistic and coordinated approach to supporting national statistical systems.

Integrating use and production of statistics

The leadership role of national statistical office in coordinating the overall statistical work in the national context needs particular attention. Discussions on the accountability for implementing the post-2015 SDGs have also emphasized the integration of internationally agreed goals and targets in national and national and sectoral development plans. The integration is expected to strengthen ownership of such plans by policy makers and other key stakeholders, with policy frameworks providing the context and rationale, and with goals and objectives against which governments and other actors are held accountable. The integration will also facilitate conversations about information plans and priorities for strengthening integrated economic, social and environmental statistics. Successful integration requires effective coordination among various parts of a national statistical system and the national statistical office is well-placed to lead the process.

Integration of monitoring and policy dialogue is required at the regional level as well. A regional consultation in August 2014 held at the seventieth session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific concluded that the regional commissions should develop regional monitoring and accountability mechanisms that support national and global frameworks, and provide a platform for a collective review of progress and sharing of experiences and best practices. To ensure consistency and coherence this platform must be integrated into existing sustainable development forums such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. The Regional Consultation recommended that the Committee on Statistics be strengthened to further enable national, subregional, regional and international partners to work together to bridge data gaps related to the SDGs (United Nations, 2014).

The Committee on Statistics may explore the opportunities proffered by the existing and emerging regional and global forums and leverage for support for regional priorities. In particular, it can consider the two forums that the United Nations Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group recommended establishing in order to strengthen governance and leadership for a data revolution. Envisaged as initiatives under a "Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data", one such forum is a biennial "World Forum on Sustainable Development Data", which together with associated regional and country level events and ongoing engagements, "would maintain momentum on data improvements, foster regular engagement between private, public and community level data collectors and users, showcase ongoing activities and initiatives, create a network of 'data champions' around the world, and provide practical spaces for innovation, knowledge sharing, advocacy and technology transfer. The other is a "Global Forum of SDG-Data Users", to ensure feedback loops between data producers, processors and users to improve the usefulness of data and information produced (Independent Expert Advisory Group Secretariat, 2014).

One option is for the Committee on Statistics to establish a regular regional forum that combines the two proposed global forums. In other words, such a regional forum would bring together both data users and producers from the various levels of the government, the private sector, academia

and civil society organizations. Linking with the global and national forums and events, the regional forum would showcase best practices in data production and use, promote knowledge sharing, and facilitate advocacy and technology transfer. Such a forum should also be very well aligned up with the deliberations of the Committee on Statistics.

Tentative questions for discussion

- How can we ensure that statistics development issues cutting across different domains, e.g. institutional, organizational and statistical infrastructure -- which are prerequisites for domain-specific development such as the implementation of the Core Sets -- are tackled efficiently at the regional level?
- How can we ensure coordination with value added -- that the cost and benefit of coordination are effectively understood and internalized by the countries and development partners?
- Can the regional programmes contribute to the monitoring of the SDG target 17.18 under Goal 17 Data, monitoring and accountability and how?
- How best to formulate a regional position on the requirements of the post-2015 development agenda for national statistical systems, including the role of the latter in the development of a regional monitoring and accountability framework?
- Whether the existing regional strategic goals should be adapted, especially in view of the new global development agenda and how?

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