UNITED NATIONS
ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

S TATS B RIEF

June 2017 | Issue No. 14

STATISTICS DIVISION

Taking stock of capacity for producing economic statistics in Asia and the Pacific

Capacity Screening 2017

With the adoption of Agenda 2030, countries in the region are facing increasing demands for producing and disseminating statistics for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals. Related demands are heavy on economic statistics, with close to half of the 169 SDG targets requiring economic statistics for the calculation of related indicators. It has thus become even more urgent to address related capacity constraints in the national statistical systems of Asia and the Pacific. This Statistical Brief introduces the Capacity Screening 2017, an exercise that is designed to identify key capacity constraints related to the production and dissemination of economic statistics in the region, and discusses the potential uses of the results of the exercise.

The Capacity Screening 2017 is an integral part of the Regional Programme on Economic Statistics; a Programme that was developed and endorsed by the ESCAP Committee on Statistics to strengthen capacity of countries in the region to produce and disseminate economic statistics. The so-called Core Set of Economic Statistics defines the substantive boundaries of the programme.[1] Programme activities are, under the oversight of the Steering Group for the Regional Programme on Economic Statistics (SGRPES), designed in reference to the Core Set and guided by a baseline capacity screening which was conducted in 2013. After four years, it is now time to take stock of progress.

The purpose of the Capacity Screening 2017 is twofold:

- to review progress made by countries in Asia and the Pacific in the production and dissemination of the Core Set of Economic Statistics since 2013; and

- to identify key obstacles to producing and disseminating the Core Set of Economic Statistics.

The baseline

The Capacity Screening 2013 gathered information on the capacity of 51 countries in Asia and the Pacific to produce and disseminate economic statistics as defined by the Core Set of Economic Statistics.

The questionnaire used for the screening had five main parts: technical cooperation, institutional setting, IT and human resources, statistical infrastructure, and the Core Set. The first four parts reflect the need to go beyond the production of specific statistics in order to identify underlying capacity constraints such as those related to institutional resources and infrastructure.

Summary findings from 2013 include:

- **Key capacity constraints:** Among capacity constraints identified by responding countries, the greatest challenges related to information technology and human resources. Only a third of respondents (17 countries) indicated that the human resources allocated to the production and dissemination of economic statistics were adequate;

- **Core Set:** While many Core Set components were regularly produced, a majority of countries failed to produce several of them with the recommended frequency;

- **Planning for statistics development:** The need for long-term planning to strengthen official statistics was universally recognized. National Strategies for the Development of Statistics were in place in all countries but six, irrespective of income level or other national characteristics;

- **Coordination:** The structure of national statistical systems varies greatly in the region, implying that approaches to data coordination must be tailored to specific national circumstances. In terms of level of centralization, national statistical systems characterize themselves as centralized (39 per cent), semi centralized (35 per cent), or decentralized (26 per cent), with relatively equal distribution among those categories;

- **Regional collaboration:** The appetite for regional collaboration to strengthen economic statistics was high: 48 of the 51 participating countries indicated interest in providing or receiving technical assistance on economic statistics.

---

[1] http://communities.unescap.org/economic-statistics/regional-programme-economic-statistics-asia-and-pacific

The Capacity Screening 2013 was the first of its kind in the region and generated useful insights on current production of Core Set statistics and related capacity of the national statistical systems (in most cases, the central bank, the ministry of finance as well as the national statistical office are involved in producing economic statistics). A series of knowledge products, including a regional summary [2] and country sheets [3] were produced to support the dissemination and use of the findings.

The Capacity Screening 2013 was used to prioritize and design activities within the Regional Programme on Economic Statistics as well as to raise funds for their implementation. Its results now constitute the baseline for determining progress in economic statistics capacity through the Capacity Screening 2017.

The capacity screening tool

In preparation for the Capacity Screening 2017, the SGRPES established a task force comprising Steering Group members from New Zealand, Singapore, Pakistan, and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). Subsequent to the approval by the SGRPES of their recommendations, [4] a new team, comprising Steering Group members from China, Japan, Singapore, Turkey and SPC, with Singapore as the chair, was tasked to develop the tool for the Capacity Screening 2017.

The tool takes the format of a questionnaire, which all countries are asked to complete. To ensure comparability between the screenings of 2013 and 2017 the task force used the 2013 tool as the starting point and took a cautious approach to introducing changes. Some changes were however made, with a view to minimizing response burden and ensuring the relevance and usefulness of the collected information. Additions fall into the following categories:

- **Regional Programme on Economic Statistics:** Questions have been added to seek feed-back on the effectiveness of the Regional Programme in strengthening national statistical capacity;

- **Institutional setting:** Emphasis has been added on capacity for disseminating statistics and for catering more directly to the needs of the users of statistics;

- **Training:** Questions have been added to capture the capacity of countries to build and maintain the skills of statisticians working in their national statistical systems;

- **Statistical Infrastructure:** Questions have been added to capture some qualitative aspects of Statistical Business Registers;

- **Core Set:** The part of the screening questionnaire that relate to the Core Set of Economic Statistics has been revamped to capture more qualitative information on reasons for unavailability of Core Set statistics and plans to overcome related constraints.

Ensuring high response rates

The success of the Capacity Screening 2017 critically depends on the rate and comprehensiveness of responses received from countries in the region. The survey is therefore being administered with the help of focal points in the economic statistics departments of national statistical offices. It is the task of each focal point to coordinate the response to the questionnaire with colleagues in their own office as well as with other parts of their Government such as the central bank and ministry of finance.

To ease the burden of response, the screening questionnaire is pre-filled by the ESCAP secretariat using the responses from the 2013 screening exercise. In responding, each country will therefore be able to focus attention on answering the newly added questions and updating the pre-filled answers to questions that are repeated from the 2013 exercise.

The ESCAP secretariat will work closely with the national focal points in the process of completing the questionnaire and verifying the responses. Subsequently, the secretariat will process and analyse the responses and on that basis produce a series of knowledge products with guidance from the Steering Group task force.

Making maximum use of the results

The value of the Capacity Screening 2017 will be measured through the extent to which its results are used to direct attention and resources towards bridging the capacity gaps it will reveal. Care must therefore be taken to process the findings into relevant knowledge products and to share those products with people and institutions that are in a position to make a positive change.

As a starting point, the results will be processed into (1) national fact sheets that outline strengths and weaknesses of each participating country, and (2) regional and sub-regional summary reports that highlight similarities and differences.

A special session on the Capacity Screening 2017 was organized on 22 May 2017 in Bangkok, Thailand, during the 2017 Asia-Pacific Economic Statistics Week, with the objective of generating ideas and suggestions for the optimal use of the findings from the exercise.

It was noted that the results of the 2017 screening will provide information on progress, or lack of same as compared with the 2013 baseline. The results may therefore shed light on capacity constraints that persistently hamper the production and dissemination of the Core Set of Economic Statistics, and on capacity constraints that have successfully been addressed and overcome.

---

[2] The results of the Capacity Screening 2013 are available at http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/2.The%20results%20of%20the%20Capacity%20Screening%20Exercise_ESCAP.pdf

[3] Country sheets are available at http://communities.unescap.org/economic-statistics/knowledge-base/national-summaries-capacity-screening

[4] The report of the task force is available at: http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Capacity_Screening_review_report.pdf

The session identified two major aims with the dissemination of the results of the screening:

- to create awareness of the need for improved economic statistics for SDG monitoring
- to improve agency and partner coordination for accelerated progress

In reference to these aims, the session suggested the development of advocacy material tailored to non-technical audiences as well as dashboards or other user-friendly graphical representations of the results. It was also pointed out that forums at national, regional and global forums suitable for the presentation and discussion of the results should be identified.

The results of the Capacity screening are expected to be available by October 2017. Results and related knowledge products will be posted at http://communities.unescap.org/economic-statistics/ as they become available.

For more information regarding ESCAP's work in statistics development please visit: http://www.unescap.org/our-work/statistics

Contact us: stat.unescap@un.org