

ACC SUB-COMMITTEE ON STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES
Twenty-fourth session
Vienna 18-22 June 1990
Item 7 of the provisional agenda

SA/1990/10/Add.1
15 June 1990

CO-ORDINATION OF TECHNICAL CO-OPERATION IN STATISTICS

Current issues in technical co-operation focusing
on bilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations

Report prepared by the ESCAP secretariat

In the statistics programme of ESCAP, particularly in the statistics development sub-programme, there is a heavy emphasis on technical co-operation activities. A programme of technical workshops and seminars on various aspects of statistics is conducted, at present limited more by the small number of regular budget staff available to service them than by the availability of extrabudgetary funds. Additionally a number of training courses are held, notably an NHSCP-related household surveys training programme in New Delhi; however, the direct statistical training activities of the Statistics Division are of restricted scope because of the work of the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP), a regional institution located in Tokyo.

A particularly important mode of technical co-operation is the regional advisory service in statistics. Assistance is currently provided in the fields of energy statistics, national accounts, data processing, population statistics and, by arrangement with ILO, labour statistics and household surveys. Experts on a non-reimbursable basis provide limited advisory services in the fields of systems analysis and data base development and microcomputer applications for the public sector. Advisory missions in statistics currently run at around 50 per year, approaching half the total delivered by ESCAP as a whole.

From ESCAP's standpoint, the issues involved in technical co-operation relate mainly to the international statistical agencies, rather than to bilateral and non-governmental organizations; in fact ESCAP's contact with the last category has been minimal. While a number of bilateral agencies are active in certain countries of the ESCAP region, the volume of bilateral technical co-operation in the field of statistics seems rather limited compared to that in, say, Africa. Generally speaking, there is at the moment little interaction between those bilateral activities and the technical co-operation work of ESCAP.

Paradoxically, though, we consider ourselves reasonably well informed of bilateral statistical activities in the region, especially in the Pacific; this is because the peripatetic regional advisers, in particular, establish many contacts and gather a lot of information on an informal basis. But the information does not generally enter ESCAP's institutional memory. In fact one issue that could be identified is the lack of formal mechanisms for the communication of information about bilateral technical co-operation activities. A notable exception is the work undertaken by the International Statistical Programs Center (ISPC) of the US Bureau of the Census, since their monthly newsletter keeps us up-to-date with their resident and non-resident programmes in countries of the ESCAP region. In the Pacific, the Overseas Development Administration of the United Kingdom has been providing a small number of posts at the chief statistician level in selected Pacific countries. No particular co-ordination issues arise since these statisticians function fully within the respective national bureaucracies.

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There has, however, been one large-scale statistical undertaking where ESCAP has worked very closely with a bilateral agency - in this case, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). This opportunity arose during the formulation, which was assisted by ESCAP regional advisers, of project documents for the population census of Viet Nam, a process started in 1987. Although the technical assistance needs for that census were very substantial, it being the first "modern" census to be held in Viet Nam, the Government was initially reluctant to consider a resident adviser (eventually a data processing adviser was appointed for a year, and a census adviser for three months). A very prominent technical support role was thus envisaged for visiting short-term missions, but the volume of assistance sought was far beyond what ESCAP's advisers alone could provide, given that their services are in demand by many other developing countries of the region. It was therefore decided at a very early stage to approach the Australian Bureau of Statistics and enlist its support in providing Viet Nam, through ESCAP, with the longer-term technical co-operation requirements that ESCAP itself could not supply, either in terms of the number or required duration of certain missions or in terms of the precise expertise required for a particular assignment.

An agreement was concluded and between March 1988 and January 1989 statisticians from ABS conducted 9 missions covering some 7 work-months of assistance. This assistance was delivered in conjunction with several missions by ESCAP personnel, primarily the regional advisers. The census enumeration was successfully undertaken in April 1989 and the processing is proceeding reasonably smoothly. The census operations are now at the stage where advisory missions from DTCD and ESCAP are able to handle the workload.

The experience indicated that a large and complicated population census operation could be supported with a minimum of resident advisory assistance. The main conclusions to emerge were as follows:

a) It would have been impossible for ESCAP to undertake and co-ordinate more than one such operation at a time on a scale similar to that in Viet Nam. Even with very substantial ABS input, the work load, including that of administration and organization, on the limited staff of the Statistics Division was burdensome.

b) Since the Viet Nam census projects were executed from Headquarters (regional commissions can execute only regional projects), arrangements for payments and reimbursement to the ABS for the travel funds and daily subsistence allowance involved had to be processed through New York. There was initial uncertainty as to how this might be done, but eventually lump-sum allocations from the project funds were transferred from DTCD to ESCAP, and reimbursement effected from those. However, from the Australian viewpoint, there were long delays and in almost all cases ABS had to advance funds to its personnel and await reimbursement for many months. This stretched the patience of the Australian authorities almost to breaking point, and in addition placed ESCAP in an unenviable position. In any subsequent exercise, these administrative arrangements would have to be worked out and agreed on well in advance.

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For the reasons indicated, there would be few occasions when "multi-bi" exercises of the type and scale described above would be undertaken. Nevertheless, some of the potential for the developed countries of the ESCAP region (Australia, Japan and New Zealand), and increasingly for some of the more advanced of the developing countries, to provide technical co-operation in association with the ESCAP regional advisory service is being realized, and further expansion seems certain. While ESCAP would be able to retain overall responsibility for such work, a very wide pool of expertise within the region could be drawn on. The arrangement, if developing countries were to be involved in providing personnel, would be a form of TCDC. There is no doubt that many statisticians of the region would be keen to undertake such technical co-operation activities in conjunction with ESCAP, since (like the statisticians of the Australian Bureau of Statistics) they are likely to find the work personally and professionally rewarding. It would also help to internationalize further the outlook of the participating statistical offices in the region, and would prove a useful avenue for regional co-operation.

Another aspect of technical co-operation with bilateral agencies concerns the increasing trend, within the framework of ESCAP technical meetings, for inputs in the form of resource persons and technical papers from the developed countries of the region and again, increasingly, from the more statistically advanced developing countries. The services of such staff are in principle designed to be a contribution from the national statistical office concerned. This arrangement, which represents a very early stage of the position already reached by organizations such as ECE, would seem to have great potential for fully exploiting the human resources of the statistical agencies of the region in the context of providing technical co-operation on a regional basis. It is expected that it will be increasingly employed in future.