

High Level Seminar on the Future of Economic Statistics
Outcomes Document
3-5 June 2019
Shanghai, China

Summary

10th Anniversary Celebrations

From 3-5 June 2019, twelve countries¹, two development partners² and two donors³ met in Shanghai, China to acknowledge the 10th Anniversary of a UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics Division and National Bureau of Statistics, China Trust Fund for statistical capacity building and witness the signing of a new Memorandum of Understanding for the next five years, 2019-2023 by Commissioner Mr. Ning Jihze of NBS China and USG Mr. Liu Zhemin of UN DESA.

The Chief Statistician of Malaysia, Dr Uzir, and the Officer-in-Charge of the Philippines Statistical Authority, Ms Josie Perez thanked the National Bureau of Statistics China for their support to statistical capacity building in Asia and the Pacific.

In addition to the signing of the collaborative agreement between the UN and NBS China on statistical capacity building, also a signing ceremony was held for the UN-China Centre on Big Data in Hangzhou China. Mr. Ning Jihze and USG Liu Zhemin both signed a Memorandum of Understanding which marks a collaborative agreement on the research and capacity building in the use of Big Data for official statistics.

Future of Economic Statistics

Following the celebrations, participants partook in a discussion on the future of economic statistics.

After listening to a range of presentations including a [global economic outlook for Asia and the Pacific](#), the [research agenda for the System of National Accounts](#), institutional settings and statistical standard setting, and developments with a [United Nations Global \(data\) Platform](#) and [big data sources](#) including [night time lights](#), countries summarized their priorities for the future as follows:

1. **Beyond contemporary economic statistics.** Many countries spoke of the need to move beyond contemporary areas of economic statistics into new areas such as digital economy, sustainable tourism and new economy. At the more advanced end of the spectrum, the US Bureau of Economic Analysis shared details of a new [Health Care Satellite Account](#) which presented statistics on the cost of healthcare by type of disease which required non-standard product classifications (type of disease) and new partnerships with the scientific community who are more expert in understanding diseases than economic statisticians.

¹ Representatives from the National Statistical Offices of Bangladesh, Cambodia, Canada, China, Fiji, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, United States of America and Viet Nam

² Representatives from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Economic Statistics Division and the Statistics Division and Macroeconomic Production and Financing Division of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

³ Asian Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Development Bank

2. **Beyond macro-economic statistics.** Countries also spoke of the need to move beyond macro-economic statistics per se. Countries heard about the [World Inequality Lab](#) and distributional income national accounts, which would illustrate the distribution of growth across population groups, and by the UN DESA Statistics Division about the [System of Environmental-Economic Accounts](#), which focus on physical as well as monetary measurement. The increasing demand for disaggregated income and spatial/location statistics was acknowledged.
3. **Beyond statistics.** Countries also spoke about the evolving environment in which they operate. Inspired by presentations from [Statistics Canada](#) and the US [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#) about data steward roles and responsibilities, countries shared experiences about how the National Statistics Office in their countries were being asked to take on new roles (e.g. implementation of legal identity) and discussed a future where statistics were not the only mandate of a National Statistics Office.
4. **Beyond data collection.** Countries recognized conducting surveys and censuses could no longer be the mainstay of their National Statistical Offices. Data collected by both public and private data collectors, such as mobile phone data from telecommunication companies and geospatial data from satellites, were becoming important data sources for official statistics. The presentation on the UN Global Platform on Big Data for Official Statistics and the creation of a regional UN-China hub in Hangzhou as part of the federated system clarified that countries in the Asia Pacific region have obtained access to the infrastructure, data and services of the UN Platform for research and capacity building purposes. In the case of public data sources, administrative data sources were moving well beyond taxation and customs data into new areas such as credit rating agency data and health insurance data.
5. **Beyond data compilation.** Countries also recognized the growing importance of non-traditional data techniques such as data blending techniques which combine traditional data sources, such as survey data sources, with non-traditional data sources, such as social media data. Participants heard such techniques had the potential to improve accuracy (as measured by revisions to National Accounts) and timeliness, with evidence coming from both the [US Bureau of Economic Analysis](#) and [Statistics Canada](#).
6. **Beyond publications.** There was recognition amongst all countries about the importance of data visualization, story telling, social media and new products and services. Countries discussed new product offerings, such as satellite accounts, and new service offerings, such as national accounts at the city and regional level, and microdata products, including microdata products combining business, household, personal and environmental data. Increasingly, users are wanting to know economic conditions for geographic regions smaller than the nation-state and for population groups other than the household sector.

The diversity of participants, from advanced statistical systems such as Canada and the USA, to developing nations such as Laos and Cambodia, from big countries such as China and Bangladesh to small island states such as Fiji, was on display. Several Asian and Pacific countries spoke about **leaving no one behind**.

1. **Resources are not limitless.** Resources are decided upon by policy makers – the future of economic statistics need to be guided by policy priorities, not statistical priorities. New priorities may mean reducing or stopping existing priorities. The Future of Economic Statistics initiative led by the Friends of the Chair Group on Economic Statistics has been mandated by the

Statistical Commission to advise on the priorities for the update of the system of economic statistics through extensive regional consultations.

2. **Capacities are already stretched**, especially in developing countries and small island states. The global statistical system needs to recognize the issue is often one of diverting existing capacity from one priority (e.g. rebasing) to another (e.g. conducting Population Census or Agricultural Census). For some countries, the size of the entire national statistical office is three!
3. **Many countries are still trying to 'catch up'** to where others already exist e.g. implementing SNA, establishing a statistical business register, introducing CAPI into the Population Census or geo-tagging in the Agricultural Census. The future of economic statistics doesn't necessarily have to be about doing more – it could be about letting all countries catch up to a base minimum (e.g. the future of economic statistics may be one where every country has a statistical business register, conducts a labor force survey, and produces a set of annual national accounts using 2008 SNA).

Friends of the Chair Group

Participants were advised of the establishment of a Friends of the Chair Group for the Future of Economic Statistics. The Friends of the Chair Group was established at the 50th Session of the UN Statistical Commission (March 2019) on the understanding it would be focused and look to reduce duplication in the existing global statistical system.

The inaugural Friends of the Chair Group met the week before the High level Seminar (24-26th May 2019) and agreed to undertake regional consultation activities on the future of economic statistics. Whilst the mechanism for consultations with countries has not yet been established, participants were advised the Future of Economic Statistics was the agreed theme of the 2019 Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP) Management Seminar, to be held 10-13th (check) December 2019.

Next steps

The UN Statistical Commission Friends of the Chair Group on the Future of Economic Statistics will undertake regional consultations with all countries and present the conclusions of their consultations at the 51st Session of the UN Statistical Commission in March 2020.