ESCAP Statistics Communities of Practice: Design and Implementation Framework

Jessica Gardner, Consultant, ESCAP Statistics Division
Revised 31 March 2020

Background

ESCAP provides the Asia-Pacific statistical community with opportunities to meet and exchange ideas, and to develop standards and good practices across all fields of official statistics. In 2016, the ESCAP Committee on Statistics endorsed a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community[1] that

> *"… by 2030, national statistical systems are enabled and empowered to lead development of and to deliver innovative, trusted and timely products and services for urgently needed and evolving statistical requirements of Agenda 2030."*

The five agreed action areas are Action A: Engaging users and investing in statistics; Action B: Assuring quality and instilling trust in statistics; Action C: Integrated statistics for integrated analysis; Action D: Modernizing statistical business processes; and Action E: Having requisite skills set.

In 2018, the Committee on Statistics at its sixth Session supported a proposal by the Secretariat to form Communities of Practice to cover the four integration dimensions (including process, data, conceptual and disciplinary integration) under Action Area C. It recommended taking a stepwise approach with the establishment of a Community of Practice on conceptual integration as a possible first step.[2] Later, the Bureau of the Committee on Statistics in its meeting on 11 December 2019,

---

[1] ESCAP. 2016. Committee on Statistics. Advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community https://undocs.org/en/E/ESCAP/CST(5)/1/REV.1

[2] ESCAP. 2018. Committee on Statistics. Report of the Committee on Statistics on its sixth Session. https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ESCAP_CST_2018_6_Report_of_the_Committee_on_Statistics_sixth_session.pdf

agreed data integration rather than conceptual integration should be considered as the immediate priority.

In the meantime, the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics, which was established in 2017 to oversee the implementation of the Regional Strategy to Improve Population and Social Statistics in Asia and the Pacific[3], at its second meeting in 2019, guided by the decision of the Committee on Statistics, discussed changing the modality of its working groups into Communities of Practice.

    i. Aim to facilitate sharing of knowledge and experience;

    ii. Strengthen coordination and follow-up mechanisms;

    iii. Provide cost-effective get-togethers by use of electronic forums;

    iv. Facilitate South-South technical collaboration.

A summary of their decisions, which may be used to guide design and implementation of the Communities of Practice, is provided in Annex 1.

Findings from analysis of existing Communities of Practice

An assessment of existing Communities of Practice[4] conducted during December 2019 – January 2020 found that identifying a clear purpose is essential. A general space for 'information sharing' is more likely to fail than a space that is designed to support a specific objective.

The investment in setting up an online community will primarily be in staff time. This may be considerable, as shown by the ESCAP Community of Practice for SDGs that took three months to establish and requires a half day to a day per week to maintain. Software costs may be avoided by negotiating a not-for-profit license as has been done by UNECE. Administrative costs may go beyond the Statistics Division to include support from IT services or other parts of ESCAP that need to be involved.

An overarching framework that sets out a vision, objectives, roles and responsibilities, and a costed action plan, will help manage the implementation with limited resources. It should be designed in a way that allows the ESCAP Statistics Division to start small and scale up as lessons are learned.

Recommendations

1. Start small and experiment with different approaches

2. Select fit-for-purpose software

3. Have the Communities of Practice work on a product

4. Require frequent interactions

5. Clarify roles and responsibilities of leaders, facilitators, moderators, members

6. Select moderators with the right skill set

7. Use the Community of Practice platform to support preparation for meetings and workshops

---

[3] ESCAP. 2016. Committee on Statistics. Meeting the data and statistics needs for socially inclusive development for all: proposed implementation plan for the regional strategy to improve population and social statistics in Asia and the Pacific https://undocs.org/en/E/ESCAP/CST(5)/3

[4] UNECE Statistics Wiki (https://statswiki.unece.org/); United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) online spaces for the Inter-agency Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals (IAEG-SDGs) and other expert groups; and ESCAP SDG Community of Practice (https://sdg-cop.unescap.org).

Design and implementation framework

This paper presents a design and implementation framework for Communities of Practice in line with the decision of the Committee on Statistics, the Bureau of the Committee and the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics, considering other relevant regional mechanisms, including Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, and Expert Group on Disaster-related Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. It sets out the purpose of the Communities of Practice, intended benefits and the connection to the collective vision and framework for action on statistics and associated governance structures.

Considering the recommendation to start small and allow the Communities of Practice to grow organically, the framework provides a vision for the Communities of Practice that will be revisited and revised to reflect lessons learned. The first milestone will be a three-month pilot of one Community of Practice and an evaluation report to the Committee on Statistics in August 2020.

The ESCAP Committee on Statistics – the highest decision-making body for producers of official statistics in the United Nations member States of the Asia-Pacific region – has the following goals:

- *Ensure that by 2020 all countries in the region have the capability to provide a basic range of population, economic, social and environmental statistics;*

- *Create a more adaptive and cost-effective information management environment for national statistical offices through stronger collaboration.*

In 2020, ESCAP Statistics Division, in order to update the goal and align it with the Collective Vision and Framework for Action, is suggesting 76th Session of ESCAP Commission endorse following as the new goal of Committee of Statistics:

Enable and empower national statistical systems to lead development of and to deliver innovative, trusted and timely products and services for urgently needed and evolving statistical requirements of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by focusing on collaborative efforts in five action areas:

(i) Engaging users and investing in statistics;

(ii) Assuring quality and instilling trust in statistics;

(iii) Integrated statistics for integrated analysis;

(iv) Modernizing statistical business processes;

(v) Having requisite skills set.

Communities of Practice support this goal. They provide an accessible, online space for groups of experts to come together and exchange experiences and ideas about their work. They can also be a workspace for groups and projects under the Committee on Statistics to manage their communication and work collaboratively. Both provide a more adaptive and cost-effective way for national statistical offices to collaborate.

Purpose of ESCAP Statistics Communities of Practice

***"…it is vital these groups are not formed purely because it is easy to do so…"*[5]**

The objectives of the Communities of Practice are to identify and share good practices as well as to identify challenges and lessons learned in addressing those challenges. Findings from similar Communities of Practice used by the UNECE Statistics Division are that, despite requests from member countries and strong intentions to use an IT tool called Confluence as an information sharing platform, contributions are minimal to none unless the group has a clear product or purpose (e.g. a set of guidelines, workshop or meeting) that it is working towards.

It has been recommended that Communities of Practice have a clear purpose and one that will require frequent interaction between members. For that reason, the pilot Community of Practice must focus on developing a product to be given the best chance of success.
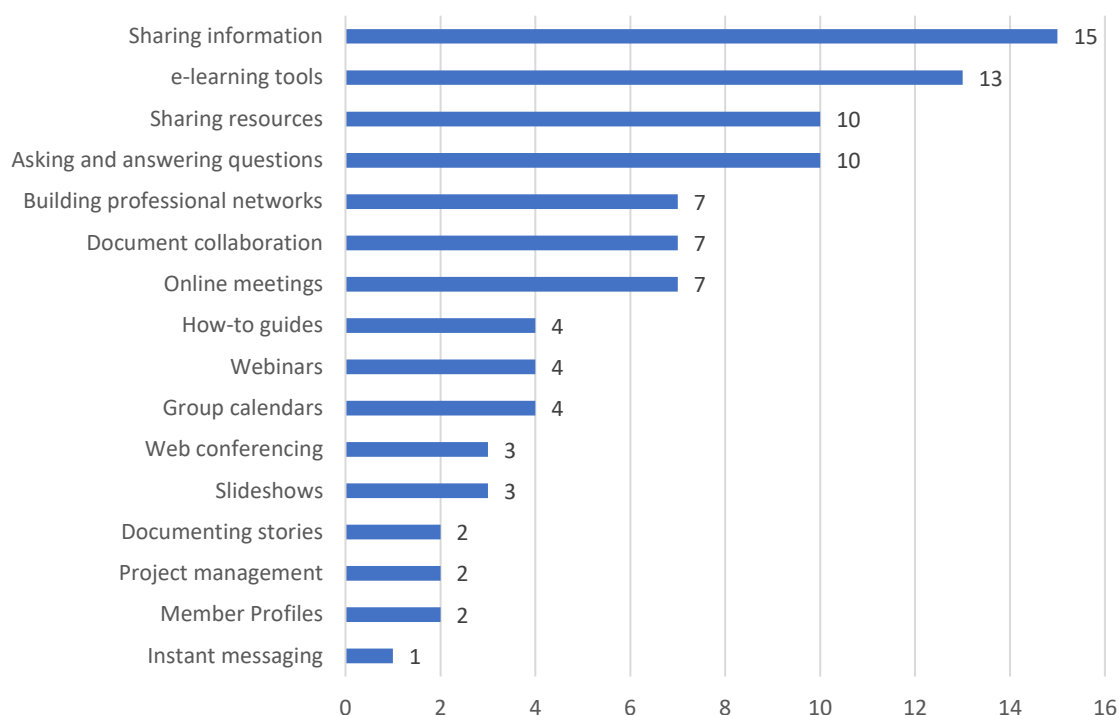
Both the Bureau of the Committee on Statistics and the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics identified data integration as the top priority, which is also a subject of interest to few other regional mechanisms such as Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, and Expert Group on Disaster-related Statistics in Asia and the Pacific.

It is recommended the first product should be generic guidelines on data integration relevant to the Asia-Pacific region, building on existing guidelines developed for Europe through the Conference of European Statisticians (of which many Asia-Pacific countries are also a member). Once the Asia-Pacific guidelines are developed, they will provide the basis for developing a training course on data integration, which can be a second product of the Community of Practice should it prove successful. The future establishment of other Communities of Practice will be informed by the lessons learned from this initial pilot exercise.

A brief survey of members of the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics on their experience and expectations of Communities of Practice received 19 responses (17 from National Statistical Offices and two from member agencies). Of them, less than one third are already using Communities of Practice, either ones within their organization, or used by other expert working groups (e.g. IMF, Titchfield City Group on Ageing). The features and functions that are of most interest to the respondents (categorized as top five priorities) in descending order are shown in Figure 1.

---

[5] SWOOP Analytics. 2018. Building Online Communities of Practice. www.swoopanalytics.com/building-online-communities-of-practice/

Figure 1: How would you like to use an ESCAP Community of Practice on statistics? (You may select more than one response option): Responses from 19 members, January 2020

Benefits of ESCAP Statistics Communities of Practice

Using the IT tool Confluence to establish a shared online space for Asia-Pacific will:

1. provide a basis for building a knowledge management system for official statistics in Asia and the Pacific
2. shift working group communication from email – where information is only available to the sender and recipient of the email – to a common space that provides a record of interaction and a place where every group member can contribute
3. improve the functionality of working groups, enhancing coordination, streamlining information sharing, and making their work more efficient
4. increase the transparency and cohesiveness of work done by the Asia-Pacific statistical community and its shared vision and work methods
5. provide a private space for sharing and working together that is appropriate for early discussions and product development, which, being closed, will be easier for the ESCAP Statistics Division as the Secretariat to manage
6. allow publication ready content to be moved across to the public domain when appropriate at the click of a button, allowing a combination of closed and open webpages
7. allow participants see the shared history of group work making it easier to welcome new members and manage turnover in expert working groups

Initial structure of the Data Integration Community of Practice

The Data Integration Community of Practice will be set up as a space in Confluence, either using the ESCAP instance of Confluence with the support of the ESCAP ICT unit, or under the UNSD or UNECE versions of Confluence. The initial structure will comprise minimal features and will expand to cater to the group as the work evolves.

Table 1: Initial structure of the Data Integration Community of Practice

Page	Purpose / content
Home page	Landing page for the Data Integration Community of Practice with ESCAP logo, a clear page title and a short description of the space and links to the terms of reference and list of group members
Terms of reference	Online version of the agreed terms of reference for the group
Group members	List of group members and their contact details (email, phone, Skype, WhatsApp)
Meeting minutes	Page for each virtual meeting of the group (teleconference / videoconference) with a summary of agenda items, decisions and action points
Guidelines outline	Annotated outline for the guidelines that can be developed collaboratively by the group members
Guidelines content	Once the outline is agreed, pages can be created for each chapter or section of the guidelines on which members can start drafting content
References	A page where members can upload useful references and materials of interest to the group (perhaps integrated with Dropbox)
Questions and answers	A discussion board or parking space for members to add questions and answers on things that arise relevant to their work

Steps in establishing the Data Integration Community of Practice

The three-month timeframe for piloting the Community of Practice – March-June 2020 –is relatively short to establish working methods and progress work on an actual product. The pilot can be used to (a) form the group of experts who will work together; and (b) progress the work as far as possible. The group should be allowed to continue its work after the initial pilot period while the evaluation and decisions are being made by the Committee on Statistics to support further work on developing Communities of Practice.

The recommended approach for designing and implementing pilot Community of Practice is outlined in the table below.

Table 2: Steps involved in establishing and evaluating a pilot Data Integration Community of Practice

Task	Timeframe	Responsibility	Expected outcome
1. **Draft terms of reference for a Community of Practice to develop Asia-Pacific data integration guidelines**	March	Jessica Gardner and Afsaneh Yazdani	Terms of reference to be shared with the Bureau for review and initial endorsement
2. **Seek endorsement for the approach from the Bureau of the Committee on Statistics**	Early April	Gemma Van Halderen	Mandate to proceed Support from high-level decision makers to allocate staff to join the group
3. **Identify the Community of Practice core members (suggest 10-20 members to start with)**	Early April	Afsaneh Yazdani	Group members are recruited to work on developing data integration guidelines
4. **Set up the Data Integration Community of Practice space, initial pages and create user accounts**	March-Early April	Jessica Gardner	Shared online space established in Confluence and ready for group members to start work
5. **Kick off meeting - Teleconference to welcome members and kick off the work**	Second half of April	Gemma Van Halderen	Introduction of all group members Agreement on terms of reference and working methods Understanding that the Community of Practice will be used as the mechanism for working collaboratively and that it is part of a pilot exercise Understanding that the product is the priority and group work will continue regardless of the success or failure of the Community of Practice

Task	Timeframe	Responsibility	Expected outcome
6. Email each member with their account asking them to log on and complete an initial survey	Second half of April	Jessica Gardner	Force first log in to the space to test responsiveness of the group and encourage use of the platform Gather baseline data for the evaluation
7. Fortnightly meetings to progress the work	May-June	Afsaneh Yazdani (to lead the meetings and coordinate the work) Jessica Gardner (to create Confluence pages and monitor, document and evaluate the process)	Work on the guidelines progresses with support by the ESCAP Statistics Division (for professionalism and sustainability) Lessons learned on the effectiveness of the Community of Practice are gathered and documented
8. Email members with end line survey for the Community of Practice pilot	June	Jessica Gardner	Gather end line data for the evaluation
9. In-depth interviews with stakeholders	June	Jessica Gardner	Gather data for the evaluation
10. Draft evaluation	June	Jessica Gardner	Evaluation of pilot and recommendations for future of ESCAP Statistics Communities of Practice

Evaluation

The pilot exercise will be evaluated based on information gathered throughout the process:

1. Participants in the Community of Practice will be asked to complete a short survey on their experience and expectations at the beginning and again at the end of the pilot exercise. This will provide baseline and endpoint data to assess their perceptions of the success of the exercise.
2. The process, lessons learned, and recommendations will be documented by the lead consultant throughout the pilot exercise.
3. In-depth interviews with key stakeholders - Gemma Van Halderen, Director of ESCAP Statistics Division, the Chairs of the relevant regional mechanisms, and some active and less active participants in Data Integration Community of Practice will provide more detailed information to evaluate the challenges, benefits and develop recommendations for the future.

Annex 1: Decisions by the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics on Communities of Practice

At its meeting in 2019, the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics discussed and made decisions on the purpose and direction their Communities of Practice should take.[6]

Four Communities of Practice were recommended to be established:

i. *Community of Practice A: Enable policy environment and maintain demand and support* (initial focus: application of EPIC tool)

ii. *Community of Practice B: Improve availability and quality of disaggregated statistics* (initial focus: data integration)

iii. *Community of Practice C: Enhance data accessibility, analysis, interpretation and use*

iv. *Community of Practice D: Population Census and Civil Registration and Vital Statistics innovations*

Purpose of Communities of Practice: *learning*, *sharing of knowledge and experience*, and *technical collaboration*

Objective: *identify and share good practices*, as well as *identify challenges and lessons learned in addressing challenges*

Community of Practice A: Enable policy environment and maintain demand and support	*Community of Practice B: Improve availability and quality of disaggregated statistics*	*Community of Practice C: Enhance data accessibility, analysis, interpretation and use*	*Community of Practice D: Population Census and Civil Registration and Vital Statistics innovations*
Developing case studies of countries applying EPIC	Develop generic guidelines on data integration / Develop a training course on data integration	Hands on training on data and indicators with users and producers / Develop easily accessible repository of metadata and guidelines on use and analysis of data	Stocktaking of innovative Population Census practices

---

Purpose: *learning*, *sharing of knowledge and experience*, and *technical collaboration* and not a forum for decision making and/or financial collaboration.

Objective: *identify and share good practices*, as well as *identify challenges and lessons learned in addressing challenges*.

There will be **one or more moderator per Community of Practice** who:

• should be a member of Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics and to the extent possible, be a country not a development partner.

---

[6] ESCAP. 2019. Second Meeting of Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. Bangkok, 17-19 July 2019. Meeting Report. https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/RSG-PSS%20meeting%20report.pdf

- should champion the Community of Practice among all Asia-Pacific countries and development partners, who will in turn encourage, recognise and support their staff to participate and contribute to the Community of Practice.

- provide strategic direction and identify opportunities (e.g. speakers, projects) for the Community of Practice.

- support members to promote the Community of Practice to other interested parties through electronic communication channels.

- participate in the Community of Practice activities, as appropriate.

Other guiding decisions:

a) Membership of the Community of Practice should be voluntary and open to all Asia-Pacific countries, development partners, and NGOs

b) at country level, the NSO is the focal point and is responsible for intra-country coordination

c) The technology should include:

  - interactive features (e.g. feedback), repository feature, and easy access

  - formal online meetings every six months in addition to regular interactions

  - use of existing platforms and tools (e.g. WIKI, and SLACK)