

SUMMARY OF THE WORKSHOP

ON

Strengthening National Capacity to Produce and Use Statistical Information in East and North-East Asia

20-21 September 2012, Beijing, China

1. The Workshop *Inclusive and Sustainable Development in East and North-East Asia: Strengthening National Capacity to Produce and Use Statistical Information* was held in Beijing, China on 20/21 September 2012. The Workshop was co-organized by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of China and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) Sub-regional Office for East and North-East Asia (SRO-ENEA). The organizers highlighted that this was the first joint activity organized by NBS and UNESCAP SRO-ENEA and expressed the wish to build on its outcome and strengthen the collaboration to mutual benefit.

2. The Workshop was attended by 30 participants including senior governmental officials and representatives of academia, civil society organizations, media and think-tanks from China, Italy, Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and the United States, as well as representatives of the NBS-UNSD International Statistical Training Center, International Labour Office (ILO), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), UNESCAP, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and World Food Program. Participants acknowledged the generous hospitality of the NBS.

I. BACKGROUND

3. The international debate on the elements that contribute to defining and shaping the quality of life of citizens is gaining momentum. In 1972 Bhutan first tried to define the link between happiness, well-being and prosperity, while UNDP has analyzed human development for two decades now. Since then, many such initiatives have been conducted all around the world and at different spatial levels (whole countries, sub-national units, municipalities). Indeed, in a recent resolution, on 28 June 2012, the United Nations General Assembly adopted by consensus the International Day of Happiness, to be celebrated each year on 20 March.

4. A more holistic approach to development which puts the notion of well-being and sustainability is relevant for all countries around the world. In the outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, the Heads of State and Government and high-level representatives recognized the need for broader measures of progress to complement GDP in order to better inform policy decisions and instructed the international statistical community to launch a programme of work in this area, building on existing initiatives.

5. [*The Future We Want*](#) also indicated the need to develop new sustainable development goals that are action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries. It also referred to the specific contribution of UN regional commissions and their sub-regional offices in supporting developing countries, upon request, to achieve sustainable development and in promoting a balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

6. The 4th World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy will be held in Delhi on 16-19 October 2012, jointly organised by the Government of India and the OECD under the theme “Measuring Well-Being for Development and Policy Making”. The Forum was prepared through regional consultations, including the Asia-Pacific Conference on Measuring Well-Being and Fostering the Progress of Societies co-organized by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Economic and Social Research Institute of Japan (ESRI), the OECD, Statistics Korea (KOSTAT) and UNESCAP in December 2011. In Delhi, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCAP Dr Noeleen Heyzer will chair a dedicated plenary session on Beyond 2015 – The Future of Development Goals.

7. As one of the most dynamic regions of the world, East and North-East Asia is making an important contribution to this debate. The realities of East and North-East Asia make it necessary to measure the quality of life from an economic, social, cultural and environmental perspective that corresponds to and reflects the voices and aspirations of citizens.

II. OBJECTIVES

8. The Workshop was convened against this backdrop to further the discussion on the different aspects that make for a good life today and in the

future in East and North-East Asia, to strengthen mutual knowledge on well-being-related issues in the region and globally, to promote cooperation in this area and to explore possible future activities in the region and beyond.

9. The specific objectives of the Workshop were to:

- Discuss how economic growth can be socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. How would one balance economic growth objectives with social values or environmental considerations? Is one growth model appropriate on a global scale, given the integration of financial markets and supply chains on the one hand, and the different stages of development, varied resource endowments and specific socio-economic aspirations of different societies on the other?
- Exchange views on ways to measure well-being, quality of life and happiness and their adequate inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals to be formulated as a result of decisions taken at Rio+20. Are new statistical models required? What would be their characteristics?
- Compare how different East and North-East Asian countries and communities define the challenge. Which perspectives are held in common across countries, irrespective of different values and interests, and which ones diverge?
- Build a platform for sharing experiences and good practices in defining and measuring sustainable development.
- Promote communication and cooperation among decision makers in Asia.

III. SYNTHESIS OF THE DISCUSSIONS

10. From different perspectives, participants underscored that since the early 1980s economic and social disparities have widened around the world. Surveys in most countries, including China and Japan, confirm that public opinion perceives a deterioration of living standards, despite rising income levels and improving material conditions. This finding confirms that opportunities, rather than disposition, determine subjective well-being within national societies.

11. Several explanations were advanced. Economic growth, measured by GDP, corporate profits and equity market indices, has been given priority over social concerns; the state of the environment has worsened and natural disasters are more frequent and costly; social and family ties have loosened, also as a

result of demographic transformations such as ageing and urbanization; employment conditions are increasingly precarious and the number of the “working poors” has seemingly exploded. There was broad agreement that, especially in the wake of the global financial crisis that commenced in 2008, a new, “green” or “qualitative”, growth model is needed. The Rio+20 discussions and the results contained in the Future We Want on green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication directly respond to such concerns.

12. Participants took note of strategies and initiatives taken by national governments (New Growth Strategy of Japan, Low Carbon Green Growth in Korea, China’s Resource Efficient and Environment-Friendly Society) international organizations and various non-government entities. Irrespective of the specificities, all of them serve to depict the overall situation, allow time comparisons and the early identification of vulnerable groups (in particular women, migrants and old-age people) and geographical areas, inform policy decisions and facilitate *ex post* policy impact analysis. The common challenge is to turn data into action through rigorous data collection, standardization and dissemination.

13. Because of the non-linearity of many phenomena, it is inherently difficult (and possibly futile) to construct a composite indicator of collective well-being and happiness. This holds true *a fortiori* at the international level where economic, social and institutional conditions differ. Sub-national differences are also huge within East and North-East, as one participant showed in the case of the Russian Federation where some *oblasts* (provinces) have development indices comparable to Southern Europe, others to sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, the focus on measuring access to public services, while appropriate, may provide a partial picture insofar as their quality does not necessarily match coverage.

14. Despite the importance of context-specificities, all participants agreed on the value of sharing experiences and methodologies. As the OECD consultations ahead of the Delhi Global Forum made clear, well-being and happiness are universally-held aspirations and there is convergence regarding the elements that make for a better life (although with some regional nuances, in particular food security is relevant in the African context).

15. The Workshop noted the significant advances made at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in recognizing the seriousness of the situation. The presence and active participation of an unprecedented number of

Leaders representing industrial, emerging and developing economies, as well as the active participation of business, labor and civil society, provided the political stimulus to the plan of action. Rio + 20 produced an agreement on the contribution of South-South cooperation, science and technology and the green economy to the attainment of sustainable development and set the foundations for appropriate sustainable development goals after 2015, to be used in all countries of the world (unlike the MDGs that are specific to developing countries). In this regard, it was underscored that no consensus exists yet on the theoretical foundations for analyzing the environment as a non-physical assets and pricing its inter-generational use.

16. Proposals to establish a “universal intergovernmental high-level political forum” of the environment and the World Environmental Forum manifest the willingness to engage all stakeholders in debate and advocacy. Sustainable development can be pursued at various levels, with urbanization in emerging economies providing a further spur: the example of Xiamen as a eco-city was noted in this regard. Public-private partnerships can and must play an important role, as shown by the hundreds of voluntary commitments made in Rio.

17. Participants underscored the important role of official statistics in society. The connection between better data, better policies and better lives was highlighted by many participants. While government use is one very important purpose, there was consensus that open access to official statistics provides non-government organizations (NGOs), businesses, media and citizens with a window on the work and performance of government itself. Mongolia was presented as an example in this regard.

18. To this purpose, it was observed that access to microdata is important to ensure the replicability of analytical studies. This is seen as a core need by think-tanks, but also by aid delivery institutions such as development NGOs

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