

## Preface

The monitoring of social, economic and environmental development requires the use of data that is comparable across countries and over time. This is realized in the 2007 edition of the *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific*. For the first time in its 50-year history, the *Yearbook* presents data compiled from global sources maintained by United Nations agencies and other international organizations. The use of “international” rather than “national” data allows for three major innovations, which together have resulted in a completely revised ESCAP flagship publication: the organization of the *Yearbook* in chapters that address social, economic and environmental topics, the presentation of indicator values aggregated to regions and other groups of countries of interest, and the use of charts and analytical text to facilitate the interpretation of indicator values and trends therein.

The ESCAP secretariat hopes that the use of internationally comparable data and methodological transparency will trigger discussions on the benefits of following international statistical standards and methodologies at the national level. Data on neighbours and other countries with similar circumstances and levels of development provide irreplaceable benchmarks for evidence-based policy planning. At the same time, comparable indicators provide yardsticks for citizens to hold their decision makers to account, and promote good governance and prudent management of public resources.

The new *Yearbook* would not have been possible without the considerable efforts of international agencies in collecting the data and ensuring that the figures are as comparable between the countries and over time as possible. Nor would it have become a reality if it were not for the efforts of national statistical systems to produce the original data. By taking data from international agencies, the ESCAP secretariat does its part to reduce the response burden on national statistical systems, contributing to the freeing of resources for better use.

For nearly as important as what is covered in this *Yearbook* is what could not be. A mere glance reveals the extent of data gaps in some tables. What

is more, a large number of useful indicators could not be included in any form because the data availability criterion could not be met. In other words, the indicator selection was often guided by the availability of data rather than the requirements of the development topic addressed.

Small statistical offices do not have resources to conduct the extensive programme of regular surveys that would be needed to obtain all these data. In one of its core areas of work, ESCAP provides training and facilitates, in partnership with a number of donors and development agencies, the strengthening of official national statistical systems. Another theme of the statistics subprogramme of ESCAP, in the production of the *Yearbook* and capacity-building initiatives alike, is to make better use of and widen the audience for data that have already been collected, usually at a considerable cost.

The *Yearbook* includes in a consistent manner the definitions and aggregation methods for all indicators. The original data sources are reflected with the precision available to ESCAP. The notes on statistical methods at the end of the *Yearbook* provide details on how the aggregates were derived and any imputation was performed in their calculation by ESCAP. The notes at the end of each chapter provide, for each indicator, the definition and the aggregation method, including weighting and imputation where applicable, as well as the source(s) of data. The importance of this kind of information about data, which statisticians call metadata, cannot be overemphasized in a comparative inter-country study such as this.

This *Yearbook* is available online at the ESCAP website, <http://www.unescap.org/stat/data/>, where its data and other ESCAP data are downloadable in a user-friendly format. *Yearbook* readers are encouraged to use the online form available on the site to send feedback in order for the secretariat to be able to make the next *Yearbook* and other statistical information services even better. Comments on the overall usefulness of the revamped publication and the areas covered in it are particularly welcome.

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