

# **ASIA-PACIFIC POPIN – KNOWLEDGE BASE DEVELOPMENT, DISSEMINATION AND NETWORKING FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND POPULATION\***

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## **1. Background**

Recognizing the importance of information in making informed decisions for population and development policies, the population information programme has been one of the components of the Asia-Pacific Regional Population Programme since its inception in early 1969.

In the early days, ESCAP established and maintained a large Population Reference Centre to serve the population information needs of the region. However, to cater to the information needs of the countries and territories in the region in a more cost-effective and efficient manner, a decentralized approach was later taken for its information activities through programmes to build national capacity for population information collection, processing and dissemination. Capacity building was achieved through preparing and executing UNFPA-funded national population information projects in each of various countries in the region. The project activities included establishment of a national population information centre and human resources development through training on various topics either at the ESCAP secretariat in Bangkok or at institutes of higher education in developed countries.

As national population information centres became more self-reliant, there was a need to link them in order to exchange information and experience. Therefore, a network comprising these national information centres, namely, Asia-Pacific Population Information Network (Asia-Pacific POPIN), was formed in the early 1980s at the ESCAP secretariat, with the global POPIN Coordinating Unit being located at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The role of the Asia-Pacific POPIN secretariat was to coordinate the activities of the network and to provide guidance for new and better techniques and technologies for handling and

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disseminating population information. Because countries in the different subregions in Asia and the Pacific share similar population characteristics and socio-economic development status, the network was further decentralized in the 1990s starting with the establishment of Pacific POPIN in 1995. Currently there are three subregional POPINs, namely, Pacific POPIN, South Asia POPIN and East and South-East Asia POPIN.

## **2. Activities**

The activities of the network are centred around: a) providing training, guidelines and technical assistance; b) organizing in-country meetings to sensitize policy and decision makers on population issues including the use of emerging information technology for population information processing and dissemination; c) providing grants to support the generation and dissemination of various information products; d) disseminating population information through publications in print and electronic formats; e) providing information services; and f) coordinating with countries in the production of various national and regional databases.

As for training, ESCAP is promoting the TCDC (Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries) approach -- a concept based on the idea that developing countries can benefit and learn from each other more efficiently through the sharing of costs for the exchange of experiences and expertise. The ESCAP secretariat is trying to introduce as much as possible the TCDC component in all its training programmes.

One of the activities of the regional POPIN worth mentioning here is the grant programme. It started out as a "translation grants" programme to help the countries to translate population information in English into their local languages for wider dissemination of the information. The programme has developed over time so that grants for different types of population information activities, such as translation of information in local languages into English, the organization of workshops and the development/updating of databases. An example of such database development is the directory database series. ESCAP, as a regional network secretariat, chose a standard software package, set the database format and organized training courses on the software and the format for national network members working on the creation of national directory series. This type of decentralized database creation and management has proven to be much more efficient than centralized approaches both in terms of the data collection process and in keeping the database up to date.

In order to provide current and relevant information from a wide range of information available to decision makers, policy makers and planners so as to

increase their awareness of population issues, the secretariat produces various publications including repackaged information products. Examples of these publications include *Population Headliners*, *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, and *Asia-Pacific POPIN Bulletin*.

### **3. Change of information environment**

#### **1. Development of information technology**

During the last few decades, there have been tremendous developments in information technology; these advances have provided opportunities to spread information more widely than could have been ever imagined previously. The most notable development is the convergence of different technologies, namely, telecommunications, computer and audiovisual technologies, which were previously separated by techniques, legislation and modes of distribution. The convergence of these technologies made the "information superhighway", or the Internet feasible. It connects personal computers through telecommunication lines and through these multimedia information can be disseminated and accessed globally and interactively.

The Internet has spread on a remarkable scale during the last few years. It has become a core medium for communication, information dissemination, commerce and entertainment. One of the advantages of the Internet is that the data that can be obtained through it are not only in the form of text, but also graphics, sound, video, numeric data and animation, which are known collectively as "multimedia".

According to the World Communication Report, in 1997 almost 200 countries were connected to the Internet, approximately 75 million people were equipped with an electronic mail-box, and almost 100,000 commercial service sites were listed. In terms of the number of Internet hosts, there were 16 million hosts worldwide in 1997 with 10 per cent of the territorial domain names being located in the Asian and Pacific region.

Another remarkable development is in the area of information storage technology. Optical technology is a revolutionary technology which can store large amounts of text, graphics, pictures, video and sound information on a small disc. Optical media can be grouped into three major categories: read-only; write-once and read-many; and erasable. Because of its large storage capacity, i.e. around 650 megabytes of information on a single disk, CD-ROM technology has become popular among database producers. The new Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) can store even more data, i.e. 4.7 gigabytes of information. Also, because of its capability for handling multimedia information, this technology has been widely

used for producing promotional materials or multimedia books, replacing video technology or traditional publication respectively.

In view of its large capacity and durability compared with magnetic media, CD-ROM technology is a potential candidate for storing archival information in full text. Also, since CD-ROMs can be used as a stand-alone (off-line) device, information posted on the Internet can be down-loaded on a CD-ROM and distributed to those users located where the telecommunications infrastructure is weak, which would make it difficult otherwise to make an online Internet connection. The United Nations is using this optical disc technology to store all its parliamentary documents. The searchable database is available through the Internet in full text form and in all United Nations official languages.

## 2. Identifying changing needs for information

Because population dynamics are closely related to other social and economic development factors, population policies and programmes should change over time to adjust to changing population trends. Global and regional population conferences are being held at regular intervals to examine current and prospective population trends and problems in light of economic and social development and to provide a better understanding of the role that population plays in achieving development targets. The latest such regional conference, the Fourth Asia-Pacific Population Conference, was held in Bali, Indonesia in 1992 and a global conference, International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), was held at Cairo in 1994. The theme of the latter was "population, sustained economic growth and sustainable development"

The ICPD adopted a Programme of Action that will guide national and international action in the area of population and development during the next 20 years. The Programme of Action addresses issues related to population, the environment and consumption patterns; the family; internal and international migration; prevention and control of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS); technology, research and development; and partnership with the non-governmental sector. As the goal of information services is to provide relevant information to the right target group, information professionals should be aware of emerging issues in population.

## 4. Knowledge base development and dissemination

With the development of EBIS (ESCAP Bibliographic Information System) in the early 1980s, Asia-Pacific POPIN participated in its development by providing inputs to the system from its specialized collection. Originally based on a main

frame computer, the system has been transferred to a PC-based server using CDS-ISIS software.

Asia-Pacific POPIN has been maintaining a close relationship with POPLINE, an extensive bibliographic database in the field of population that is being produced by the Center for Communication Programs of the Johns Hopkins University. In the early days, magnetic data tapes were used to provide POPLINE database search services for users in the Asian and Pacific region. However, with the introduction of the POPLINE CD-ROM, Asia-Pacific POPIN negotiated with POPLINE to provide its members a CD-ROM version of the database free of charge while providing SDI (Selective Dissemination of Information) services from monthly tapes to registered users. The SDI service has ceased with the wide availability of the Internet in the region. The monthly data became accessible through the Internet .

Asia-Pacific POPIN is moving from hard-copy distribution towards Web-based distribution, and from bibliographic to full-text information. In addition to the hard-copy, full-text versions of *the Asia-Pacific Population Journal* (<http://www.unescap.org/pop/journal/index.htm>), *Asia-Pacific Population Datasheet* ([http://www.unescap.org/pop/data\\_sheet/data99.htm](http://www.unescap.org/pop/data_sheet/data99.htm)), documents prepared for the ESCAP region's five-year follow-up of the Fourth Asia-Pacific Population Conference and a preparatory meeting for ICPD+5 (<http://www.unescap.org/pop/icpd/index.htm>), *Asia-Pacific POPIN Bulletin* (<http://www.unescap.org/pop/popin/bulletin.htm>) are available on the Web. Also, the directory database series (namely Directory of Population Institutions, Directory of Population Experts and Directory of Current Population Research) containing a search engine will be uploaded soon.

To support the activities in the thematic areas identified by ICPD, Asia-Pacific POPIN launched a pilot project to create thematic databases: full-text database of population laws and regulations and a database of reproductive health indicators. Like the case of the directory database series, a decentralized approach was taken to create databases by providing a standard format for each database.

In view of the fact that the telecommunication infrastructure is not strong in many countries of the region, Asia-Pacific POPIN is considering various options for information dissemination, including an electronic mail based listserv and the production of CD-ROMs.

## **5. Asia-Pacific POPIN -- challenges for the future**

We are living at an exciting time in terms of technology development. Whether we like it or not, the digital era is here, making more information available in

digital form than ever before. The development of information technology, especially the rapid development and wide availability of the Internet, has completely changed the way we acquire, process and disseminate information. Considering that information technology is advancing at such a rapid pace that what is new today will soon be outdated, the challenge that the information revolution imposes on information professionals is great. To provide effective information services, it is important for information professionals to have knowledge and skills in information technology.

The Programme of Action adopted at the ICPD provides guidelines for population programmes, including population information programmes, for the next five years. Regarding information, it states that "the tremendous potential of print, audiovisual and electronic media, including databases and networks such as the United Nations Population Information Network (POPIN), should be harnessed to disseminate technical information and to promote and strengthen understanding of the relationships between population, consumption, production and sustainable development". Recognizing the real and potential contributions of non-governmental organizations to population and development activities, the Programme of Action also encourages partnership with the non-governmental sector in population and development activities.

In line with the ICPD Programme of Action and the development of information technology, the programme activities of Asia-Pacific POPIN will be focused on: a) training in new information technology; b) dissemination of population information through electronic media; c) development of thematic databases on topics identified at the ICPD through collaboration with national POPINs; and d) strengthening and expanding the network with other information networks and NGOs.

## **6. Conclusion**

During the last 20 years, Asia-Pacific POPIN has been working on national capacity building in the generation, acquisition, processing and dissemination of population information in countries of the region. With the establishment of national centres, the function of the regional network secretariat has changed from a clearing-house function to mainly a coordinating function for human resources development and for developing collaborative information products. With the development of computers and communications technologies which make information accessible to users anywhere and anytime, and with the changing characteristics of information demands of users, the function of Asia-Pacific POPIN and the national POPIN centres may be expected to change further in the future.

Information professionals working in the digital information age should be able to adapt to such change, and be proactive in terms of both their approach to work and their own professional development. Equally important is a working environment which provides flexible structures to improve effectiveness and which is responsive to rapid change. These are some of the challenges that we all will face in the next century.

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