

The power of data

The APO focuses on productivity in the context of economic growth and development in the Asia-Pacific region. Readers should take a moment to consider what exactly productivity is. “As a generalization, productivity is the ratio of output quantity versus the quantity of labor input,” clarified Yasuko Asano, Secretariat Research and Planning Program Officer. “The key is to note that economic growth is derived heavily from labor productivity enhancement.”

The APO Secretariat Research and Planning Department functions as a think tank, conducting research on the emerging needs of member countries as the basis for follow-up and in determining appropriate assistance. Utilizing her background as a United Nations program officer and belief in continuous learning, Asano is committed to organizing relevant productivity measurement research projects that will benefit APO member countries. “I feel that it is our duty and responsibility as an international organization to create a credible database that will help member countries improve their levels of productivity. It is therefore essential to determine these levels, based on official data from their respective national accounts.”



Secretariat Research & Planning Officer Yasuko Asano checks the latest update of the Asian Quarterly Growth Map on her computer screen 19 May 2010.

“Every country has a different system of national accounts, data definitions, and coverage, and thus adjustments need to be made before the raw data can be used. It is necessary to create harmonized, scientifically sound methodology. After that, the quality of data has to be improved. We support our members in improving their national data and provide the APO methodology to develop productivity statistics that are comparable to those from other countries. It is a matter of accountability for the APO to comply with and provide international comparisons of productivity levels for our member countries.”

“Data are powerful. This is the basis of our productivity measurement projects. Both regional and global comparisons are necessary, and you can see the wide range of data coverage provided in our Asian Quarterly Growth Map (<http://www.apo-tokyo.org/AQGM.html>), which goes beyond the Asia-Pacific. There cannot be much meaning to data unless they are compared on a global scale, including benchmark economies such as the USA and EU members. Productivity data have substantial value, allowing us to understand the changing status of the economy and to formulate sound, pro-growth economic policies. Data form a core public asset for any organization or nation.”

Asano devotes her energies to the Research and Planning Department’s pillar projects: the previously mentioned database; the Asian Quarterly Growth Map, which forms part of the database; and the annual *APO Productivity Databook* (<http://www.apo-tokyo.org/PDB.html#apodbseries>).

“With the database project, we developed the methodology, in the form of APO questionnaires. Under the databook project, we identified experts in each country who could gather the relevant national data in accordance with our detailed questionnaires on key indicators. The growth map is updated each month. We obtain statistics released by government

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statistics offices in real time to ensure timely economic growth comparisons. The map covers 88 countries throughout the world, including Europe and the Americas, and we are working to expand to the Gulf States and oil-producing countries. By taking a look at quarterly movements, short-term economic growth fluctuations can be seen on a wide array of variables.”

The R&P officer hopes that more people will make use of the resources offered. “Our information, of course, should be of value to national productivity organizations. The growth map can also help people looking for business and investment opportunities to examine the rapidly changing status of various Asian economies. The map is also useful for individual analyses. It can help policymakers to determine the true state of their economies in comparison with neighboring countries and the rest of the world.”

Data are powerful, Asano reiterated. “I believe that we have been able to achieve tangible research outputs, based on solid methodology. These efforts could not have been realized without our collaboration framework with Keio University.” Productivity specialist Prof. Koji Nomura at the Keio Economic Observatory, Keio University, has been a key player in the projects, providing invaluable contributions and support.

“On a cold March day three and a half years ago, I knocked on the door of

Professor Koji Nomura’s office in Tokyo and we ended up discussing the future APO productivity measurement project for six hours,” recalled Asano. Prof. Nomura is a widely recognized expert in the fields of economic measurement and productivity analysis, with numerous publications and other accomplishments to his credit, including his tenure as Senior Research Fellow at the Economic and Social Research Institute, a “forum for knowledge” set up under former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

“I went to Professor Nomura with a desire to create a truly useful productivity measurement database that was scientifically sound and credible and that would become an asset for the APO and all of the Asia-Pacific region. Official statistics are, after all, part of the basic intellectual infrastructure of a country; I want to help transform the intangible infrastructure of our member countries into a key to further economic development. I told Prof. Nomura that while I was not an expert in the field, I was eager to learn and would handle all the coordination necessary for the collaboration between the APO Secretariat and Keio Economic Observatory. I needed his help and partnership to create the database as an important infrastructure for Asia.”

The results and ongoing progress of the Research and Planning Department efforts can be seen on the APO Web site (http://www.apo-tokyo.org/PDB.html#apodb_data). 