



UNITED NATIONS
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
STATISTICS DIVISION

**Workshop on New Alternatives for Population and Housing Census
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Opening Statement

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Perspectives of United Nations Statistics Division on New Alternatives for Censuses

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to attend this meeting and to address you this morning. It is my pleasure to be able to address a group of distinguished colleagues on the very important topic of New Alternatives for Censuses. This is a particularly timely meeting as we are in the very early stages of the 2010 World Programme of Population and Housing Censuses.

The intention of this Workshop is to foster an open and collaborative exchange of ideas so as to strengthen regional cooperation and to enhance the quality of statistical information for the Region. I would like to thank the organizers, el *Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática* and el *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografía e Estatística* for making this workshop possible. There is no doubt that the countries in Latin America have demonstrated a high level of regional collaboration and cooperation in their statistical endeavours.

In the context of the Census, a most prominent example of Regional collaboration is the arrangement between the countries of MERCOSUR and their colleagues from Bolivia and Chile for the 2000 Round. This project was initiated by the countries themselves and was based on the organisation of seminars, discussion forums and joint operational tasks. It seems clear that such cooperative efforts will improve the overall international comparability of information through building in harmonisation from the very start of the process. I understand that when the project started in 1997, it initially was seeking to harmonize concepts and definitions across countries for the 2000 Round leading to a set of common variables to be disseminated simultaneously. By working together from the Joint Pilot Test in 1998, all the countries involved in the project have benefited. Clearly this was a synergistic process in that the total gain in knowledge and usefulness of the process has been greater than the component parts. It is interesting that

the experts involved in this process have dispelled the fear that adopting a harmonised approach would lose a large part of the significance of the differences between countries. Rather they have concluded that the approach employed preserves the particularities of the individual countries. The standardisation of definitions and operations provided a basis for highlighting and analysing differences.

Our presence here today is evidence that other countries are willing to follow the example. I intend to take this model of intra-regional cooperation forward and will be encouraging other country groupings – both in this and other Regions - to adopt a similar model.

Let me move on to the matter of “New Alternatives for Censuses”. I will begin by quoting the definition of a population census as stated in the “Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses”, published by the Statistics Division in 1998:

“A population census is the total process of collecting, compiling, evaluating, analysing and publishing or otherwise disseminating demographic, economic and social data pertaining, at a specified time, to all persons in a country or in a well-delimited part of a country.”

The Principles and Recommendations also recognise four essential features of a Census. Let me quote them:

- **Individual enumeration.** The term “a census” implies that each individual and each set of living quarters is enumerated separately and that the characteristics thereof are separately recorded. Only by this procedure can the data on the various characteristics be cross-classified.
- **Universality within a defined territory:** The census should cover a precisely defined territory (for example, the entire country or a well-delimited part of it). The population census should include every person

present and/or residing within its scope, depending upon the type of population count required.

- **Simultaneity** Each person and each set of living quarters should be enumerated as nearly as possible in respect of the same well-defined point of time and the data collected should refer to a well-defined reference period.
- **Defined periodicity.** Censuses should be taken at regular intervals so that comparable information is made available in a fixed sequence. A series of censuses makes it possible to appraise the past, accurately describe the present and estimate the future.

The definition, and essential features, of a census will be discussed at the forthcoming UNSD Expert Group Meeting in New York, involving 40 or more experts from all Regions as well as International agencies. However I do not believe this discussion should result in great changes to the core of these matters: the intention of the set of essential features should remain the same.

I am not saying that nothing should change. For example the words used in the definition of a Census talk about the processes followed in taking the Census. This could be seen as a rather old-fashioned view and perhaps needs updating to follow management practices in looking at ends (or outcomes) rather than means (processes). However we must be careful when considering changes of this nature. We do not want to move too far from the very wide and deep acceptance of the current definition. To borrow a message from marketing, we must be careful to keep up the “image and values of the brand” and I put it to you that the image of a census is defined by the four essential features of a Census.

While maintaining these essential features, censuses are often the vehicle for introducing new techniques and new technologies into statistical systems. Indeed the use of sampling for a subset of characteristics is specifically endorsed in the Principles and Recommendations (and has been used by many countries for many years). In this

publication, there is nothing against the application of mathematical models to the output data to provide information that cannot, for one reason or another, be collected within the operational methods of the Census. That makes very sound statistical sense and again is used in many countries.

But it is important to realize that even when using mathematical models, we can not move away from two of the key outputs a census operation needs to generate:

- First, the information needs to be available down to very small spatial units (or for very small social groups) – often containing a few hundred people. These very small units are extremely useful since they are highly flexible and can be recombined to make up customised units on ad-hoc boundaries.
- Second, the results of the full enumeration need to be available as benchmark to be used for designing Survey frames, and as the base for population estimates used for the allocation of very large amounts of public funding to local Governments and for the design of electoral boundaries.

I would have great difficulty in accepting, within the definition of a Census, a technique which moves away from the current set of essential features especially where it becomes impossible to generate the small area and benchmark data. That is not to say that the information produced by such new methods might not be a very useful part of a National Statistical System; indeed they are. But we must take note that a census can only be a census if the defining characteristics are met.

I look forward to a successful meeting.