

Opening Statement at the Statistical Commission
by
Mr. José Antonio Ocampo,
Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs

March 2, 2004

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to address the United Nations Statistical Commission for the first time in my capacity as Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs. On behalf of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and its Statistics Division, I would like to welcome you to the 35th Session of the Commission.

First of all I would like to congratulate the Commission on its impressive achievements. I have been a user of statistical data as an academic, as a government official and, over the past few years, as a United Nations official. I am thus well aware of the fact that over the past 50 years the Statistical Commission has been extremely successful in its work on harmonization of international statistical standards and methods and, more in general, in providing guidance to the international statistical system. And I want to thank you for coming here this week to continue these valuable efforts.

It is clear from the agenda and underlying documents that important developments are taking place in official statistics. First of all, statistics are generally recognized as one of the cornerstones of national and international policies. This is in itself a positive development, but it also provides a challenge on national and international statistical systems. This challenge can only be met if the resources that are put at the disposal of the statisticians are commensurate with the new tasks to be fulfilled. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. I have followed the outcome of the Marrakech Development Forum with interest and I applaud the intentions of the World Bank, UNDP, the Paris21 consortium and others to address the issue of raising adequate resources for statistical capacity building. Let me assure you that my Department and the Statistics Division, in particular, is ready to contribute to statistical capacity building to the best of its abilities.

Secondly, in terms of substantive work, there are various important new initiatives being undertaken in statistics: the preparations for the next round of Population and Housing Censuses, the design of a Handbook on Poverty Statistics, the new round of the International Comparison Program, the review of the SNA 93 as well as, concurrently, the Balance of Payments Manual, and the review of various classifications. In addition, the World Summit on the Information Society, held late last year in Geneva, has led to an initiative to start an ambitious global program of statistics on the information and communication sectors. Most of these developments are playing out over the next 5 to 10 years and I am well aware that achieving the objectives is a major effort, requiring the utmost from national statistical offices and from the international system. I wish you every success in meeting these challenges.

Before you start your work, let me specifically address three points, which I consider of great importance: (1) the full application of the fundamental principles of official statistics, (2) the importance of the Millennium Development Goals for statistical development, and (3) the continued dialogue between users and producers of statistics.

1. The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

The independence of statistics from political interference is enshrined in the “Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics”, which this Commission adopted 10 years ago. These Principles set out the contribution that official statistics make to a society and provide general guidelines for the functioning of national statistical systems. The Principles were developed during a period of dramatic change in a number of countries in the early 1990s, as political and economic systems were transformed and a substantial number of new nation-states emerged. As with many other functions of government, official statistics in those countries had to be re-invented. Public trust in official statistics had to be rebuilt and governments had to learn to understand the critical contribution that official statistics could make in a changed context. The Fundamental Principles, developed in the Conference of European Statisticians and endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission, supported these processes.

The implementation of the Fundamental Principles is an important factor in building statistical systems that produce quality information and a continuous challenge. At this session the Commission has before it the results of a global review of the implementation of the Principles so far, conducted by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, at the request of the Commission. At first sight, the results of this exercise in self-assessment, suggest that the Fundamental Principles appear to be quite well implemented at this stage. This is in and by itself a positive outcome. *Confidentiality* (Principle 6) and *Legislation* (Principle 7) seem to be the best implemented principles. Some other principles, such as *Prevention of Misuse* (Principle 4) and *National Coordination* (Principle 8) seem to be less widely applied.

However, the survey results, as they have been summarized for your discussion, are only the tip of the iceberg. There is an enormous amount of underlying details and country examples available that are very informative and should be shared. In addition, the factors that prevent full implementation of the Fundamental Principles should be further analyzed. A range of evidence indicates that the Fundamental Principles have been useful for statistical development and support of the statistical institutions within the government structures. Nevertheless, I would suggest that strong, continuing advocacy of the Principles is needed.

2. Importance of the Millennium Development Goals for Statistical Development

The development debate related to the Millennium Development Goals has made the need for high quality statistics for assessment and monitoring of progress blatantly obvious. There is certainly an increased awareness for the importance of good data for informed decision making, both at the national and international level. This provides the statistical community with a unique opportunity to make its voice heard.

In this context, I welcome the leadership of the Statistics Division in compiling and reporting on the agreed MDG indicators at the global level. And I particularly welcome the effective working partnership with agencies and the regional commissions that has been established through the Inter-agency and Expert Group on the MDG Indicators and wish to thank UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and ECE for their support and finance of country participation and involvement in the international work on MDG indicators.

The report before the Commission on MDG monitoring contains a careful analysis of further methodological development that is needed to improve the quality and reliability of the internationally-recommended indicators. For this type of statistical development, the continued leadership and involvement of the United Nations Statistical Commission is needed, so that we can expect good results in this area over the next few years. In particular, extra efforts will be needed for MDG reporting in 2005, when the first comprehensive milestone report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly will be debated. The Department for Economic and Social Affairs and the Statistics Division, in particular, need to play a key role in the compilation of this report.

The problems of statistical capacity to carry out the statistical programmes needed for MDG indicators and for other purposes in many of the developing countries are also well known. The Commission may give special attention to how the international community can best assist in mobilizing and delivering technical assistance resources to assist countries in statistical capacity building, including very importantly the compilation and dissemination components which are critical to monitoring progress toward the Millennium Development Goals.

3. Dialogue between producers and users

Over the past years the Statistical Commission and ECOSOC have been engaged in a close dialogue with regard to indicators. Representing the technical experts, the Statistical Commission has stated its concerns (i) that member states were overburdened with requests for data from international organizations, (ii) that many indicator sets for follow-up to specific international agreements (including the Millennium Declaration) had been formulated with insufficient consultation of national data experts and were thus flawed from a technical point of view, and (iii) that coordination and data sharing between international organizations needed to be improved.

Indicators have two main dimensions: the dimension of the technical statistical production of the basic information and the dimension of the political and analytical use of indicators. Users and producers of indicators have to work together effectively to develop a good system of information. It is not useful to draw up long wish lists of indicators, when the statistical services of many countries will not be able to produce the required data in a reliable and timely manner. This will only lead to questionable estimations and approximations, which cannot be used to guide good long-term policy decisions. On the other hand, statisticians cannot just go on to produce standard historical time series. They need to adapt their data production to be relevant for modern policy

questions. The challenge for users and producers of development information is to work together closely and to establish an effective dialogue. We are committed to facilitating such a dialogue.

Distinguished delegates

I am aware that you have a challenging programme of work over the coming days, as you will be discussing the many important issues that I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks: the preparations for the 2010 rounds of population and housing censuses; coordination of health statistics; the development of best practices for poverty statistics; the revision and updating of the System of National Accounts and related classifications; and many more. Be assured of the continuous support of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and my own personal commitment as head of the Department, to your work.

I wish you success in your deliberations.