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Welcome Address by
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TO THE HIGH LEVEL FORUM ON “STATISTICAL COMMISSION AND THE
GLOBAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM - THE WAY FORWARD” COMMEMORATING
THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION
New York, 26 February 2007

Madame Chair,
Distinguished Panellists,
Distinguished Delegates of the Statistical Commission,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this High Level Forum commemorating the 60th Anniversary of the United Nations Statistical Commission. What better way to celebrate the accomplishments of this body, than with a dialogue between “Users” and “Producers” of Statistics, with a reflection on the “Global Statistical System” and with a view forward to the challenges ahead?

The historic significance of the UN Statistical Commission lies clearly in its work on international statistical standards. In a way, the Statistical Commission has created the language for Statisticians worldwide to communicate. These standards have made it possible for nationally produced data to become comparable and to be meaningfully aggregated. This is a necessary condition to enable development policy makers and development analysts to use the data at both the national and international levels. The body of statistical standards created over the past 60 years, have, thus, made it possible to talk about a Global Statistical System in the first place.

My perspective is clearly one of a “User” – and I hope I may claim to be an “Educated User”—, particularly in areas that are dear to this Commission: national accounts, and industrial and trade statistics, as well as national household data. As a researcher, a policy maker at the national level, and a development manager at the international level, I have always been acutely aware of the importance of high quality statistics. Here at the United Nations, I have raised the visibility of the Statistical Programme by declaring that the “Support of the Global Statistical System” is one of the four core functions of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).

As the Senior Official in the UN responsible for Economic and Social Development, I would like to offer you today my reflections on how I see “Statistics” fitting into the overall context of the UN’s work in development and what challenges I see ahead for the Global Statistical Community.

On the first point, I would like to argue that the UN’s Statistical Programme is an integral part of the overall UN Development Agenda. The UN Conferences and Summits of the past 15

years, and in particular the Millennium Summit in 2000 and its follow-up Summit in 2005, have created an unprecedented consensus on a framework of internationally agreed development goals. The challenge before us, right now, is to intensify efforts to implement the commitments made. Therefore, a major priority in DESA's support to the UN intergovernmental process is to promote stronger accountability for the internationally agreed development goals. This implies that we develop improved tools of monitoring progress. And to the extent that the development objectives have been formulated in terms of quantifiable goals, there is an obvious important role to be played for the professional statistical community.

In the context of increased accountability and improved monitoring, I would like to take this opportunity to inform you about two new mechanisms being launched this year by the Economic and Social Council: the Annual Ministerial Review and the biennial Development Cooperation Forum. The **Annual Ministerial Review** will allow regular assessment at a high political level of substantive progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and other development goals, which will feed into domestic political debates in all UN Member States and into the UN debates on how countries are doing in meeting their commitments. The **Development Cooperation Forum** will provide the first global platform where all actors involved can engage in dialogue on the key policy issues affecting all forms of development cooperation (multilateral, North-South, South-South). And it will promote mutual accountability of donors and recipient countries for living up to international commitments on aid and aid effectiveness. Both the Review and the Forum will be held for the first time in July in Geneva, during the Council's substantive session.

I expect that the Statistical Commission will contribute with its technical expertise to these important review processes, by continuing its mandated work on the rationalization and harmonization of development indicators and by providing the best possible numerical evidence of progress, or lack thereof, towards established goals.

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In the second part of my address I would like to point out some of the main challenges for the future, as seen from my perspective. Let me mention four.

First, there is a need continuously to **broaden the scope and quality of global statistics**, especially beyond the realm of the classical formal economic sphere. National accounts and international merchandise trade statistics may be in need of some refinement, but they are basically well established around the world. Yet, there is a need for statisticians to develop and apply measurement tools, to help us better measure the growing service economy and, even more, the informal economy, the multiple dimensions of poverty, and the environmental dimensions of development.

Second, while the UN Statistical Commission operates within a political context and has to be aware and responsive to the overall UN Development Agenda, its working has to remain based on its strength: that is, on its **independent professionalism and technical knowledge**. I consider it part of my responsibility to assist you in assuring Member States that the international community is best served by an effective division of labour, by which policy issues are discussed in the appropriate UN fora, such as the General Assembly and ECOSOC, with the Statistical

Commission retaining its technical focus, assisting the global development community with its unique statistical expertise. This principle, that statistical systems need to focus on the production of relevant and high-quality information and must be free from political interference, is of course equally, if not more important at the national level. Indeed, it has been enshrined in the “Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics”, which this Commission adopted in 1994.

Third, **statistical capacity building** remains a major challenge for the global statistical system. Your analysis of the availability of key indicators at the country level showed that many countries still do not have sufficient capacity to satisfy even basic national and international data demands—and even less to produce such data with high quality standards. This issue of statistical capacity has been of considerable concern among the professional community for some time. You are aware that, unless a significant effort and investment is made soon to strengthen national statistical capacity, especially in developing countries, reliable data to monitor development, including the UN development goals, will simply not exist for many countries and for years to come. Last year ECOSOC listened to your concerns and adopted resolution 2006/6, which calls for efforts to strengthen statistical capacity at all levels. The resolution also gives the UN Statistics Division of DESA a strong mandate to improve the global MDG database, particularly with respect to its coverage and its presentation of data and metadata.

Fourth, **cooperation among UN system agencies**, especially in the area of data compilation and dissemination, needs to be improved, in order to reduce the country response burden, to make the international data flow more efficient and, most importantly, to reduce the danger of data inconsistencies, both between national and international data and among different international sources. The work of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on the Millennium Development Goals Indicators (IAEG), under the leadership of the UN Statistics Division, has led to an unprecedented and productive effort to coordinate data work among agencies. But more needs to be done. I am confident that initiatives such as the Statistics Division’s creation of a UN web portal, <data.un.org>, will help to forge better and stronger linkages among all UN databases.

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Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you for your dedicated professional work over the years. Please permit me to also thank at this occasion my own staff in the UN Statistics Division, under the leadership of its Director Paul Cheung. It is their anniversary too, and I believe that they have prepared a very interesting programme for this week, including an exhibition on the Global Statistical System, which I encourage all of you to visit. I wish you a most productive session over the next few days, and I look forward to its outcome.