

**United Nations Expert Group Meeting on  
International Standards for Civil Registration  
and Vital Statistics Systems  
27 - 30 June 2011, New York**

**Opening Statement**

by  
Paul Cheung, Director  
Statistics Division

Distinguished participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the Expert Group Meeting on International Standards for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems. First and foremost, I would like to express my appreciation to you for participating at this Expert Group Meeting – it is really a pleasure to have such a group of distinguished experts from all regions of the world.

As you may know it, one of the essential mandates of the United Nations Statistics Division is to develop and formulate international statistical standards and to prepare them for submission to the United Nations Statistical Commission for adoption. The United Nations Statistical Commission, the apex body of the international statistical system, has the sole authority to promulgate these standards and to monitor their implementation.

In that function, the United Nations Statistical Commission focused on vital statistics very early in its existence. Established in 1947, it took the Commission only two years to concentrate on the state of the art of vital statistics. It noted, in 1950, that civil registration was very limited in under-developed areas of the world and it requested that the United Nations Statistical Office, as our Division was called then, start urgently the development of alternative methods for producing vital statistics. This request was re-iterated again in 1951, a year later.

Two years later, in 1953, concerned that its message on the development of alternative methods for generating vital statistics may prevent countries from developing civil registration system, the Commission revisited this issue. It pointed out that sampling survey was a supplementary method and should not be considered as an alternative to a registration system. To re-iterate this message in the strongest possible terms, the Commission adopted the original *Principles for a Vital Statistics System: Recommendations for the Improvement and Standardization of Vital Statistics*.

So, what were these major general principles established almost sixty years ago? In essence, the original *Principles for a Vital Statistics System* made it clear that civil registration is a *sine qua non* of reliable, accurate and relevant vital statistics system. And, as for the role of vital statistics, let me quote the original text of the *Principles*: “In the view of the Statistical Commission, vital statistics should be a fundamental and integral part of the activities of each national statistical system.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

The first revision of these principles came in 1970. The major changes from the 1953 *Principles for a Vital Statistics System* were: (a) broadening of the definition of a vital statistics system - to include both the civil registration and other sources of data on vital events; (b) elaboration on the use of vital records and vital statistics; (c) greater emphasis on the need for integration of a vital statistics system with other fields of statistics; and (d) great emphasis on the need for evaluation of the completeness and accuracy of results. The essential principles remained unchanged; yet, there was a need to adjust to the development of statistical practices and users’ needs at that time.

The most recent and second revision of the *Principles for a Vital Statistics System* took place in 1999, more than a decade ago. This revision was prompted by several considerations – the principles needed to reflect (a) the improvement in civil registration over time, (b) the need to coordinate and communicate between the authorities responsible for civil registration and vital statistics, (c) the experience in using census and survey to measure fertility and mortality and (d) the need to respond more effectively to new and emerging user requirements. Recognizing the recent and rapid advances in information technology including electronic data storage, transmission, processing and dissemination, the revised *Principles and Recommendations* acknowledged that the use of new technologies could support the improvement of data collection and data capture and, therefore, increased the capacity of civil registration and vital statistics systems.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Why this current initiative to review, one more time, the principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system? It is certainly not to suggest a change of the original principle that the civil registration is the essential component of vital statistics system – quite the opposite, it would be only to reinforce it. Our goal is to bring this important document up-to-date, in light of the development in the past decade. We should take into consideration the emerging systems, such as population registers, and their reliability as a source of vital statistics. We need to discuss on the advantages and limitations of health services records as sources for vital statistics. What are the risks and benefits in taking advantage of new technologies to improve civil registration and vital statistics? It is also imperative to elaborate much more on the quality control for both civil registration and vital statistics. There are also a number of other topics that require further elaboration. They are all addressed in the agenda of this meeting.

In order to assess the appropriateness of our review initiative, I dispatched a letter to all national statistical authorities in last March, soliciting views on the need to revise the current set of principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system. I asked if there were issues that might need to be included or further elaborated and on whether the guidelines were still relevant today. Overwhelmingly – with only one exception out of thirty five replies - the answer to the need for a review was positive. Furthermore, we also benefited from a number of comprehensive and concrete proposals for the revision. All those valuable comments are summarized and presented to you as a background document for this meeting.

This meeting, dear colleagues, is designed around the proposed revised outline of the principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system. This outline will be presented by our staff and your comments and expert opinion will guide us in the preparation of the revised set of recommendations. We expect to benefit from your contributions, knowledge and experience in attaining the goals of this meeting.

Ultimately, we are looking for comprehensive guidelines that will assist national statistical authorities in developing a vital statistics system which generates accurate, timely, regular and detailed vital statistics, thus establishing an international standard against which the national statistical capacity would be assessed.

With this, I wish you a successful meeting and again thanking you for your participation and contribution.