

UNITED NATIONS  NATIONS UNIES

48TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION
Agenda item 5: Programme Questions (Statistics Division)
10 March 2017, New York

ORAL REPORT

Programme Statement

Stefan Schweinfest

Director, United Nations Statistics Division
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Thank you Madame Chair.

Good morning, everybody!

My staff and many people who know me know that I have a terrible tendency to go off script and that I do not like to read statements. I learnt reading when I was very little and I do that very well, so I thought, this time, I do not even prepare a script. So bear with me if I talk half-freely, I promise you I prepared my thoughts, and I apologize to the interpreters who do not have the full text in front of them.

So what I was going to do is this: I want to step back a little bit, look at the larger picture and at how the world looks like from my perspective; perhaps, invite you to this, and do this in three steps:

- Where are we in the larger picture?
What is the historical position in which we will find ourselves?
- What is the vision ahead of us?
- And how does this shape and affect the UNSD programme?

Let me start by sharing with you that I had a very emotional event a couple of weeks ago. My Commission this year started very, very early. I met with Mr. Rao. Mr. Rao was the Chair of the 19th Session of the Statistical Commission in 1976 in New Delhi; this is one of the few Commission sessions that were not held in New York. We have a picture of that Commission where even Indira Gandhi visited the Statistical Commission. The Statistical Commission was a room full of people - about 30 I think. I checked it. Mr. Rao was a few days away from his 97th birthday when I had the honor to meet him in India. That was inspiring and it was in certain sense also amusing because I read the report from 1976. I recommend you to do that. You will discover two things. There are a lot of similarities with

things that we are discussing today, which I like to interpret as a certain professional stability. But there are actually also some other elements in there, for instance, it mentions cartography in 1976 as something that the statisticians will need to pay attention to. So, sometimes it is really fun. So let me also take this moment to thank my history team, who put the 70th anniversary celebration together: the exhibit and the special brochure. This will hopefully put us in the right mood to do what we are doing today.

So, where are we in the arch of history? That actually sounds like something that my yellow-suited twin brother could have said. I think we have just completed the indicator framework. We have done our homework with respect to the General Assembly, and it is very rare - if you look back in the last 70 years - that the Statistical Commission is explicitly mentioned in a Parliamentary document of the General Assembly, so this was quite a historical task. As much as we may still be sweating from it, it is a major accomplishment if the Statistical Commission adopts the indicator framework and put something in motion that will last for at least a decade and a half. We need to move from the indicator debate forward to implementation. I always joke when somebody asks me which the three most important aspects of the data revolution are. I say it is capacity and capacity and capacity. So I think we really need to move forward now to look at the data and start collecting the information. There will be many reports under the SDG Agenda. This is already clear. There will be global reports, national reports, and regional reports; there will be local reports, and there will be sectoral reports. I think this is quite normal with an ambitious agenda like this one. Some reports will be more official and others less so. I think it is also good to have different reports because these reports all correspond to different decision making nodes. Somebody at national level needs a different set of information than the General Assembly at the global level that needs to re-orient perhaps resources to sectors and areas where the world as a whole is falling behind. Underneath all of these reports, we need to make the data coherent and solid. Actually the data can become the glue of the entire agenda, because if we manage to make the data underneath all of these reports coherent and solid and fit for purpose - for the purpose where they are - and there are different purposes obviously, then we can use and really harness the integrative power of the data that hold it all together. And that is the essence of the SDGs.

So what is the vision ahead?

Statistics and data will originate in a decentralized manner in many places of this world. Some outside the official statistical realm and that is perhaps okay because we need help. But we need the right help, and we need good help. So what we need to build is a complex data architecture. We are responsible for building the highways where the data that travels from a source is validated and evaluated for fitness for purpose, and where that data is flowing to the place where it is needed to make a decision or to conduct analysis. I think the national statistical offices at national level and this Statistical Commission at the global level have to lead this process of organizing these highways, of building this architecture. That implies a little shift in our professional mindset just from not only data producers but also data communicators, not only producing goods but also producing services mainly for instance quality advice whether a certain piece of information is actually good and can be used. This will bring us in touch with other professional communities, and I see three strategic interactions which we are also struggling with here.

One is the interactions with the policy realm. The policy makers have a voracious appetite. They are not interested in our technical difficulties. They do not like to read footnotes. But

they are the holders of the purse and the setters of the agenda. So we need to be in a balanced, continuous dialogue with our colleagues from the policy arena to remain relevant but to remain on the other side fiercely independent when it comes to our technical work.

The second strategic interaction is with the international agencies. I think we need to build a relationship of mutual respect and cooperation because to take the data from a village all the way into the General Assembly Hall, it will take both on that long journey: it will take the national statistical offices and it will take the international agencies. And I remain fiercely optimistic that we can work out a wonderful marriage relationship.

We need to interact, thirdly, with the civil society and the private sector. Some of us do that with some trepidation and apprehension because we do not know each other. But here, I have to make reference to our friend that we will shortly also honor with a short memorial reflection - Hans Rosling: "Statistics should always be about joyful cooperation." I think we can do that. I am very optimistic if we clearly agree on a division of labor that is based on comparative advantages. This is why we have created this powerful tool of the Cape Town Global Action Plan that should help us for everybody to subscribe to tasks; we as the official statistical community remain in charge of the overall process through this tool and can help everybody to find their place in the sun. I have talked a lot here about general things; you are asking me if this is a programme statement or what?

Let me talk about how all of this affects UNSD's programme.

My priorities are clearly supporting the inter-agency and expert group and keeping the indicator framework as fresh as it can be at any point in time in the next fifteen years. We need to do the global reporting. Whilst our reports to the General Assembly are only the tip of the iceberg of a long statistical production process, they are our business card in the United Nations General Assembly. This is when the General Assembly at the highest level are paying attention to data and statistics and keep their focus on data and evidence-based decision making. We have the global database that we have to work on which underlies the global report. We will work with the High Level Group, of course, to move assertively in the direction of the implementation of the Cape Town Global Action Plan. I feel very strongly about that and I will say a few more words about what UNSD is specifically doing in terms of capacity building in a minute. One entry point for me, which I think is very much needed, is the Handbook on Statistical Organization and Management to give countries options on how to actually go forward and organize themselves because I find many are asking exactly that question or are grappling with it.

I have launched an initiative of a training network because training is needed and there is a lot of training going on, and I believe that there are synergies that can be explored.

I will continue to work with the UN System and the CCSA. We are double Secretariat for the inter-governmental and the inter-agency processes so I think that my office has to play a key role to keep this all together. We are of course enthusiastically preparing already for the Second World Data Forum in Dubai, which is only 18 months away. We want to have an even greater outreach and reach the policy community and the private sector. We will work on the integration of statistics and geospatial information: GGIM 2.0. We have the new global statistical geospatial framework and now the proof is in the eating of the pudding. We need to take this to the country level, try to implement it and learn from these processes. That is true for many areas. I think we have done a lot of conceptual work, now my question

continuously is how does that actually really work at the country level? I ask the same for big data. The focus has to be on the deliverables now. We are reflecting on the global platform. Quality, again, we have a national quality assurance framework that has been applied, now is the moment to reflect on how that actually worked because it is critically important. And then, one other area I like to highlight is SDMX, where over the years I have become a believer because it is going to be helping us a lot in addressing many of the data flow issues. And I happen to be right now the chair of the executive committee of the SDMX initiative, the so-called Sponsors Group. So I am also responsible for taking this programme forward and I gladly do so. With all this focus on the sexy issues, we still have fundamental work to do and I remind us because if you look at the statistical commission agenda it is very balanced. We have the very highly relevant and visible policy issues but we have also all our fundamentals. I always say that the 2030 agenda is a tremendous opportunity but it shall never be a straitjacket because our perspectives professionally are always long term. So we are working on the implementation of the Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics (FDES), including a set of global climate change indicators. We have expanded, as we discussed, a programme on social statistics including gender statistics, disability and migration. The 2020 population and housing census round is just around the corner. This is a key statistical operation and of course we want to be at the side of countries as they prepare for that. The work on the implementation of 2008 SNA and 2012 SEEA Environmental Economic Accounting is ongoing and of course this will be and will continue to be the constant heartbeats of our work.

Now on capacity building.

We do have quite a lot of support and I would like to acknowledge a few donors. We have, from China, a capacity building trust fund in statistics and in geospatial information. We have, from Australia, a disability trust fund that allows us to strengthen our programme. And we had contributions to big data. We have, from the UK Department for International Development, a programme on monitoring the sustainable development goals. We have, from UN Women, an EDGE project on gender statistics. We have, from the European Commission, an extensive project on natural capital accounting and evaluation of ecosystem services. And we have grants from Eurostat on the transformative agenda and SEEA communication strategy. The World Bank is helping us with the 2020 world population and housing censuses and gender statistics. UNEP, the UN Environmental Programme, and the Secretariat on Conventional Biodiversity help with the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting. We also have our own resources from the UN Development Account, and we have of course the many in-kind support that we get from many countries who are sending us an expert for free to help as a resource person in workshops. This is very much acknowledged. How does this all add up? It is a multimillion dollar portfolio to manage for us. In 2016 we organized 43 workshops, meetings and seminars with 3065 professionals trained. In addition, we had 110 individual fellowships. All of this is starting to make a difference around the world.

I do have to include in this statement a couple of housekeeping announcements that have to do with our regular management. You have before you in a background document the 2018-19 list of outputs of the Division. This is our regular biennial programme in a budget cycle and you are invited to take notes of this programme. You see that we have over 500 outputs. We had the same or similar 500 outputs in 2016-17 and we try our best to do them all. We are looking pretty good. After the very first year we had very high implementation rate but at the last minute changes always have to be made and this programme that we are currently

working on for 2017 was formulated in 2014-15. So I will ask for your indulgence that the Bureau be allowed to allow modifications to the 2017 programme of my Division if this becomes necessary and that they can approve it on your behalf.

Cost, money: our favorite topic.

There is good news and bad news. We have got additional resources. We have even got additional staff. We are getting a lot of resources for capacity building and workshops, but that is almost a problem because if I get additional money for a number of workshops but I do not get additional staff, then I have a problem because somebody has to run those workshops. Sometimes we have to invite you or countries that are very advanced in a particular topic to help us with resource persons and so I am very grateful for this. In general, we will have to do more with less, so I am also planning to restructure UNSD, not in a major way not in a fundamental way - I am not going to turn good old UNSD upside down - but there are some adjustments that need to be made in order to take new programmes into account. We are having a serious problem with our publication programme because publications and print publications and even translations have become increasingly expensive, and the General Assembly has unfortunately quite drastically cut the budget of our conference support services. So we may have to reach out again to friends to help with the translation of technical documents. In my view this is perhaps even better because our documents are so technical that they must give every professional translator around the world really a headache. I am much happier that our documents will not sent to some general translators but they are actually given to professionals from our community to help to translate. So you may get letters from me knocking at your door. Also, our travel money has, unfortunately, been significantly cut which is very unfortunate because I would like to make strategic contributions. I would like to be at the table when Regional Commissions do important work. So sometimes we may have to ask you for possibility of funding our participation. We receive a lot of invitations and I would like to do nothing more than accept most of them, but that will not always be possible. We are also looking at strengthening our trust fund. We have one trust fund, a sort of general purpose trust fund that will give me a little bit more managerial flexibility and I am not so boxed in with all the budget lines of specific programmes and projects that allow me to spend money only for very specific things. So I may send out a letter to ask countries to make contributions to this trust fund. So do not be surprised if I go around with my hat. I know it may probably not be you, but perhaps you can help me to find the appropriate institutions in your country and help to make that pitch in the particular case.

One last housekeeping element is: we conducted an independent system-wide evaluation of how the UN system works together in statistics. It was shortly mentioned yesterday, in the document on capacity building. The evaluation has a number of recommendations. One of them, for instance, is to establish the position of a UN chief statistician, which does not exist. I intend to bring this to the attention of the High Level Group and have strategic discussions on the follow up and the implementation of this. So you will hear about this again.

I am coming to the end. Do not despair. What a Commission session it has been. We started in the General Assembly Hall. It was quite a moment. We had perhaps fewer participants than last year. We counted around 650 participants for the opening, plus the webcast. And we have people around the world who are watching this. I got last year a very charming e-mail from somebody in Myanmar who said that it was very interesting to watch the Commission

and I was making the calculations that that person must have watched it at 4 o'clock in the morning.

Number of countries here 130, international agencies 45, NGOs 15. Number of side events 84; that is a record. Number of official documents and backgrounds documents that you somehow digested - I do not know how - 64.

Thanks go to PARIS21, the World Bank, the DFID Project and the EDGE Project for funding people in this room, and many bilateral donors who pitched in and partner organizations who helped people to come to this place.

Thank you also to my team. I am very excited at 1:30pm today we will make our first ever UNSD photo with the whole family on it in the General Assembly Hall. So watch out for it. I am very much looking forward to this because it is really a lot of people that work in the background to make this all happen.

Final remark. 70 years forward is 2087. It brings us to the brink of the 22nd century. I know, it sounds almost a bit scary. What I want is that when these people look back at us they will say: this Commission steered the precious ship of the Statistical Commission through dangerous waters into new waters towards a new course.

I thank everybody in this room for being co-captain in this endeavor.

Thank you very much.