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Agenda item 5: programme questions (United Nations Statistics Division)

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Oral statement

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Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your able leadership this week. I think with your firm yet very charming hand, you guided us through the difficult waters of the resolution negotiation. As we are already in overtime, I have shortened my programme statement. Normally I include four things with my programme statement:

- statistics of the current session, how many people attended etc;
- thanks to all the donors and those who helped us also with our extra budgetary contributions to implement our programme;
- a few words about our past accomplishments and the main priorities for the year ahead; and
- generic issues.

The programme statement is also a management discussion. You are the managers of your national statistical offices, and I manage UNSD, the “global statistical office”. So, I seek your advice, and together, we identify, things we want to look at.

Let me provide a summary of points one, two and three in a letter. You have heard a lot about what we are already doing through many substantive sessions. I am very proud of our programme and of our team. I am always proud that we strive to keep the right balance between the supporting the fundamental statistical themes where we work in the traditional areas (like on census programme implementation and national accounts), which are really the pillars of our professional activities. But we also started many new initiatives in response to the new challenges we face, like our Data4Now initiative for more timely data, and our work on integrating statistical and geospatial information, and so on and so forth.

Let me **raise a number of issues** that I have on my mind and in my heart at this moment while we conclude this year's Commission session.

First of all, we may want to **work towards a revised mandate or support from you to perhaps reflect how we can organize the Commission session better**. There is a time management issue. It is wonderful that we hear from so many of you. We have balanced rich global experiences, but we also have an executive duty to address some fundamental global issues. I believe with some discussions in the Bureau and perhaps with our friends in the regional commissions we can better manage the time. Regional commission are helping by having regional pre-meetings where positions in the regions are consolidated, and it is helpful for the session when somebody makes a statement on behalf of a whole group of countries. So, I think we need to perhaps reflect on this.

And, there have never been so many discussion items as we had this year. We got to item number 3(x), and as far as I remember we never reached 3(x) before. When I saw that letter, it almost scared me. Of course, this also gives you a very voluminous report afterwards as we have many decisions to review. So that's my first point. I think we need to collectively look into this, and of course, everybody is invited to share with us ideas from other meetings and experience from somewhere else around the world on how to handle the number of agenda items. We are happy to learn about these experiences. If you have any suggestions, please share them with me and my team.

The second topic in the spirit of looking at the future is data stewardship. I was really very happy with the High-Level Forum on Official Statistics that took place on Monday. The topic of **data stewardship** is about what is our role as a professional community that goes beyond the classic role of production of our statistics. This is also an issue I face at the United Nations, which is why I want to share this with you as a management issue. The United Nations, as you may have heard, is working towards a UN data strategy. The document is quite broad and looks at official statistics, so we of course have a seat at the table. But the strategy also looks at UN corporate data, personnel and financial information, and so on so forth. For me the question is also what role do I play in that larger UN data space and where can I learn from your experiences and perhaps also get your support? This is an issue I would like to flag looking forward, and I will pay attention to on two levels: The data stewardship is on the agenda for next Commission session, so we will work on this with respect to the national perspective. In addition, I also have to keep the UN system perspective in my mind as a manager here.

The third point that I want to raise with you today, and I have to do it as a manager, is to say a few words regarding the **current financial crisis at the United Nations**. As you may have heard, we did not have significant budget cuts. The Division lost two positions and went from 123 positions to 121 positions. These were, what we call general service positions, and not professional ones. The Division still maintains 71 statistical professional positions that are the basis with which we support the global work. But, currently, we do have a problem with filling vacancies. Because of the cashflow crisis we were instructed to keep a 10% vacancy rate. Even though our budget for 2020 was approved, our controller is very cautious

when it comes to expenditures - and of course personnel expenditures are the most significant one - because in the past not all Member States actually paid their contribution in full and on time. Now I have to keep a 10% vacancy rate, which is quite challenging and does start to affect our programmes. I just want to share this with you in case there may be travel demands or invitations that we cannot follow. We are being monitored quite strictly at this moment, and we have had extensive debate among senior management on how we set priorities for this year.

Of course, there are highly visible things like the production of the SDG report or the UN World Data Forum which will of course go ahead. But on other issues we may have to delay some of the implementation. My staff and my resources have actually remained relatively consistent over the last, like the overall UN budget, let's say 5 - 7 years, but, on the other side of the equation the demands have increased quite tremendously. We have now for instance four staff members dedicated to the geospatial information programme. These were statistical positions before that I had to convert into geospatial and cartographic positions.

Last year, migration statistics was an important political priority, so we have a programme on migration statistics now and we keep accommodating new demands. I know you know this also from home, where you have to make the appropriate adjustments. We are getting to a point, combined with the 10% vacancy rate, where I do not feel comfortable any longer just to internally make some adjustments or to postpone something. We may have to really think in terms of priorities, programmes or publications that we discontinue, and I will discuss this with the Bureau and seek your advice. Also, if there are major cuts or adjustments, of course, we will bring them to the Statistical Commission.

I have two more points left. One is **thank you for your trust with the resolution on coordination**. It does put quite a bit of onus on my office, our office, the UN Statistics Division to take this responsibility. The resolution recognizes the need for coordination. It recognizes the need for resources because this is an activity that requires adequate funding. Of course, coordination is not a very popular activity. Nobody likes to be coordinated. But often my job is to hold it all together; and in particular, I care about the whole UN statistical system. So, I promise you I will do that in the spirit of facilitation and better coordination in the UN system. As you remember the last paragraph of the resolution mentions possible voluntary contributions, so with this tool that you have given me I am now in a position to try to raise funding for dedicated resources for this activity. I will of course keep you informed on this.

It was an interesting week. We had a few rounds of negotiations, which involved statisticians and UN experts, ECOSOC colleagues, policy colleagues and budget people. It is always interesting to see language differences, but I think in the end we came together. I am very happy about this, so I want to thank you for that. I also want to thank my UN colleagues because of course this coordination will not work just because we have a resolution, four pages of paper. Coordination only works if everyone is dedicated to the common good. And while I know my colleagues in the UN system have their own priorities from their own

institutions, there is an underlying feeling of commonality and professionalism that binds us together. I will certainly rely and build on that.

Last point: The most important thing is that we have to keep trying to get **more funding for capacity building**. Of course, we know what we need to do; the programme is very explicit. The indicator framework is there, and we have all of our methodologies, but it is very clear many countries are still struggling to strengthen their capacity. Mostly, if not exclusively, it is an issue of funding, and we are discussing with our partners, PARIS21, the World Bank, and others. I am still hopeful we can launch some form of a funding mechanism at the UN World Data Forum in October; that is my highest priority for this year.

I will stop here. I look forward to seeing you again at the UN World Data Forum in the middle of October. This year we actually have the UN World Data Forum and the World Statistics Day in the same week. The World Statistics Day is celebrated every five years and the UN World Data Forum is organized every two years, so this coincidence, this alignment only happens once every 10 years, every decade. It will be interesting to reflect on the connection between statistics and data because the World Statistics Day and the UN World Data Forum are of course different. I invite each and every one to help on that reflection and that exchange. The UN World Data Forum was precisely invented to use the UN's convening power to invite all that care about data and information to come together in a free dialog whether you are official statistician, private sector, academia, civil society, media, communication, or users of data. Of course, with our Swiss colleagues, we have phenomenal support hosting this event in Bern. I am really looking forward to the event and to seeing many of you there again.

Thank you for coming. This was also a difficult week. We may well be the last Commission that meets this year because the two Commissions after us have already been cancelled. We were a little bit lucky, but I know many of you had to face individual decisions whether or not to come, when to travel and so on so forth. I am really very grateful we had a full house, and I think we had a very good week. I would not be a good boss and manager if I did not finish by thanking all the people that are standing behind me and making this all possible. You saw a lot of new faces on the podium this year, and I think that was very good because it makes me feel very confident that the next generation is just waiting to take over, and they are ready to take over. That is a good thing. I thank my own team. They are phenomenal at all levels. I saw some people standing out there in the sun and in the rain guiding you, so that always makes me feel very special and very proud. Thank you to everybody from my side and thank you to you.