

Statement by
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On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the United Nations Statistical Commission
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Chairperson of the Statistics Commission Ms Bivar

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Excellencies, fellow national statisticians

Ladies and gentlemen

Statistics is a conduit of trust. It is the most publicly transacted 'currency' and for that very reason has to imbue the utmost trust. Statistics, if only for this reason, have to be produced by those that, in the eyes and the lived experience of the community of practice who live (and die) by it, must be trusted unquestioningly!

Yet as we now know, evidently, trust falls like manna from heaven only rarely, if ever, dare I say. Only the trusted are its stewards and custodians.

On this the 70th Anniversary of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC), I will assert that statistics is a conduit of trust. I locate the UNSC in four other related commissions. Established in 1947, the UNSC joined an architectural design focusing the troubled global community towards world progress, peace and prosperity consistent with our gregarious being and egalitarian status which reveals the imperative for human beings being human. In 1946 one year ahead of the UNSC, the Commissions of Social Development, Status of Women, and Population and Development were established.

The Commission on Sustainable Development was born in December 1992. No other Commission has been as catalytic and trouble steering. No other has been effort-uniting across the dispersed statistical and information community. Its creation led to the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda and puts paid that statistics is too important to be left to statisticians.

What then has South Africa learnt from the Statistics Commission?

To date statistical practice in South Africa boasts 102 years of formality and served different epochs. The Statistics Act was promulgated on 14 July 1914. However this century-long history was tumultuous. Its repugnant aroma is 300 years of pernicious colonial rule and forty eight years of brutal apartheid. In 1974 South Africa was thrown out of the United Nations because it undermined these four Commissions.

In 1994 a new society was born. Where then could we ask for help on matters statistics to reconstruct our future? The global statistics system. The UNSC provided us the stewardship in technical, methodological and statistical frameworks for development of our statistics system. The United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics became our lodestar for framing our modern statistics law enacted in 1999. The adoption of the IMF Special Data Dissemination Standards (SDDS) helped to transform our statistical landscape and fiscal discipline. The UNSC was a resource for ideas. Bilateral relations with countries were possible, and we established development cooperation with Statistics Sweden and the Australian Bureau of Statistics from 1995 and with Statistics Canada from 2002. The Handbook on Official Statistics shaped our organisational structure and practice.

The UNSC City Group structures were invaluable. The camaraderie unforgettable. The peer learning enjoyable. The robust, frank and at times gloves off discourse in the High Level Seminars and in the UNSC assist to steer our needle of accountability. Only a conduit of trust allows such possibilities because as an institution we care so deeply in uniting our profession.

Locally our statistics system is juvenile and building critical skills. It holds promise to succeed long into the future because of its youthful professional workforce. We play a leading role on our continent of Africa and we contribute generously globally. The birth of African Symposium for Statistical Development (ASSD) is in Statistics South Africa. Through your

subsidiary Commission structures you entrusted us with hosting the 57th Session of the International Statistics Institute (ISI) in 2009. You entrusted us to pioneer this very first United Nations World Data Forum in January this year. We stand ready for more and in October this year we host the 28th Session of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP). South Africa hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 which birthed the Sustainable Development Goals. We did all these in appreciation of you joining us in a relentless war of setting ourselves free from ignorance and poverty inspired by the demon of colonialism and driven by the monster of apartheid. Today we march in tandem with you powered by a conduit of trust: statistics. We march with you not because we sniff for more work but because we owe this burden of responsibility to this magnificent body, the UNSC.

Looking ahead there are difficulties. Not many would have foreseen big data 20 years ago and this uncertain future is going to be dominated by the internet of things with bigger information, which is quicker and variable. Certainly useful but also full of challenges of fake news, alternative facts and post truths. Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data is our rallying cry for measuring sustainable development goals.

Fisher's frequentists, the bulwark of current crop of official statisticians have to make peace with Bayesian statisticians to resolve big data challenges. We have to reinvent ourselves to lead, remain relevant and be trusted stewards and custodians of this conduit of trust. To be the trusted metaphorical medicine persons who deliver high quality statistical and information systems, we have to integrate locational attributes and be expert in managing technology. Understanding politics is a grave and strategic asset that should enable us to communicate statistics to policy. The future lies in partnerships and not in a monopoly-like ivory tower of knowledge.

Let us follow the example of the late Professor Hans Rosling who implores us to reveal the beauty and intrinsic value of statistics: trust. He implores us to measure the effectiveness of our communication on the SDGs. Failure to do so he says will fail the world. It is in our hands not to be forgotten, but to be remembered as stewards, custodians and transformers of statistics seventy years from now.

In closing I leave you with a quotation which should make us aware that “You can change without growing, but you can’t grow without changing.” We should grow the trust levels in society and only through statistical facts, a conduit of trust, shall this be achieved. May the UNSC, the steward and custodian of the conduit of trust continue to trustworthily serve the people and planet for peace and prosperity.

I thank you for your kind listening.