

Opening Remarks by the Chair of the 39th Session of the United Nations Statistical Commission

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Distinguished delegates, I have two tasks for which I will ask you for your indulgence. The first is to thank you for putting the trust in me to chair this professional commission. My understanding is that trust is heavy and it cannot rest on the shoulders of one person, I am convinced therefore that we will share the burden of trust. As regards the second task, I will disclose it when I declare the session closed on Friday. For this I will also beg your indulgence.

Let me share my thoughts with you upon being elected to chair the Commission. I am humbled by the trust you have bestowed Africa, South Africa and myself. I will therefore do my best not to disappoint you as chair and I also trust that my fellow Africans will not disappoint in rolling out the programme of Statistical Development in Africa. A feature of this is the African Symposia for Statistical Development (ASSD) launched by Minister Manuel in Cape Town in January 2006. This is a 53 year journey that will see Africa rise out of the abyss of innumeracy to a continent whose time has come. An endeavour that shall see Africa use information as the basis for policy.

I believe that the decision to elect me in the chair is a deserved encouragement to the continent of Africa to speed up statistical development especially in the face of the development challenges of globalization, global warming and apparent threat of the world being revisited by macro-economic instability. By all counts the consequences of this would be worst felt by Africa compared to any region of the world. Given this scenario, allow me to ask my African colleagues and myself on our collective behalf to declare that the challenges and significance of measurement is increasingly immense and we as Africans are and should be equal this challenge. In this regard I will also encourage you to read the paper I was asked to prepare as background material for our discussion on “Statistical development in Africa.”

In just four decades the systems of statistics in Africa went through three seismic waves. The first of these occurred immediately in the aftermath of decolonisation. During this time, Africa experienced a decade of dramatic rise in the development of its systems of national statistics. This was characterized particularly by the implementation of population censuses and household surveys. This was so short lived, that none of us remember its sweet memories. Two decades later, by the 80's and the 90's, Africa was dogged by dramatic declines and diminished levels of competence in its systems of statistics. Consequently, the proportion of countries that undertook a census in the 1980, 1990 and 2000 Rounds of Housing and Population Censuses in Africa, compared to those in the other regions of the world, was significantly lower. Africa undermined the cornerstone for statistical development at a critical moment of its development and currently is still reeling from the painful acts of bad judgment and decisions. Household

survey programmes were a shadow of what they were planned to have been. Political dictatorships had occupied the space of fetal post-colonial semblances of independence. It was a period of grave despair. From West Africa to the East of Africa, images of despair in Ethiopia and Somalia still dominate our faculties. From the North to the South, the atrocities of colonialism and apartheid are still too fresh nightmares to forget. The Great Lakes of Africa was the melting pot of the worst record of human tragedies in what is believed to be a civilized world. Rwanda lives on in our memories. Under such political and economic turmoil of political dictatorship and economic and social dissonance, it is near impossible to contemplate statistical development and statistical competence. The remnants of this legacy of plunder that was managed by Africa and Africans themselves and was cosponsored and cheer led by some powerful men and women from outside Africa and their countries including multinational and multilateral institutions, shamelessly linger on in our midst and in our horizon and at the slightest opportunity will pounce upon us and obliterate whatever gains we purport to have made or attempt and endeavour to make. What is important therefore is to be vigilant and be mindful of the excruciating pain and anguish of the 80's and the 90's. From this pain we should draw strength and resolve to take matters in our own hands and shape our destiny in the arena of statistical leadership and competence. The palliatives that arrive with the 21st century should bring restlessness and worry for; the statistical abyss of the 80's and 90's could easily revisit us with more devastating force.

As we have witnessed, towards the end of the decade of the 90's, statistical systems of a reasonable number of African countries experienced rapid revival as democracy drove a new lease of life and respite on the continent. These countries include South Africa, which was a pariah of the world with its violent state sponsored political system. By 2005 all countries on the continent were conscious of the need for a system of statistics for their sovereign, including the commitment to conduct a census. The question is whether this third wave, consisting of revival in statistics, heralds new beginnings and sustained statistical systems in Africa or like its predecessor cycle of the 70's, Africa will witness yet a decline in the near future. I would like to suggest that for Africa to understand statistical development and influence their further development, Africa should appreciate the interplay amongst economic performance, political stability, democracy and prospects for statistical development. In this regard we need to draw from history and observe how this interplay in the past worked out to the detriment of statistics and how the same interplay currently and in the future seems to work to the benefit of statistics. By posing the leadership question in the arena of statistical development, culture and practice, I would bring to the fore the need for African statisticians to identify opportunities and co-invest in statistical value creation so that the official statistics institution is enabled to harvest value appropriately and in perpetuity, thereby minimise the risk of its obliteration.

But for this to be achieved, Africa still requires to do first things first. This, in the main means that Africa should focus on the content and by this I mean technical and professional content of official statistics rather than matters of form which we have become notoriously famous for. Under the new energy we have mustard amongst ourselves of the ASSD, the new Africa Centre for Statistics at the ECA, the ICP and

guidance of the United Nations Statistics Commission, there is sufficient promise that Africa is going to turn the corner and have its systems of statistics play a critical contribution in the global system of statistics, especially when we actively and continuously attend and participate in this Commission and use our own objective statistical challenges as core of the content of our knowledge.

The unique political, economic and social circumstances under which Africa finds its statistical expression should be the basis for our own capacity and solutions. Africa should invest in statistical institutions, such as technical personnel and infrastructure, training institutions, regional presence as revived at the ECA now, and participation in international fora. We should believe and practice the maxim that if and when it is important we will be the first to know, because we shall finance it.

Africa is awash with financial and natural resources, but they are badly managed and indeed mismanaged and fortunately or unfortunately we have no governance statistics to address these key issues. Statistics of governance and performance should in the first instance sharpen the quality of our fragile democracies and empower citizenry to shape their own destinies. Where there is political strife and war on the continent, even with the little data we collate, there is ample anecdotal evidence that it is where natural resources are in abundance, so what is this make-believe mantra that we as Africans regurgitate mindlessly and religiously that Africa is poor. Take apartheid South Africa, Angola, Liberia, Sudan, Chad and the DRC for example. These are countries that are awash with natural resources including oil in some of the list. The emergence of peace in these countries continue to provide the basis for democracy and statistical prowess and we should seize the moment and without any apology say in the next ten years Angola should plan to provide statistical leadership in the area of oil and diamond industry for the continent and will finance it, so it goes for Sudan, Chad and the DRC. We should draw from the gallant lessons of Tanzania and Zambia who bore the greater brunt of brutality of colonialism and apartheid for Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa to be free. It has been done on the political front, the battle lines have shifted to the measurement front and there too the battle should be won.

We should as a matter of practice collaborate and fund ourselves for our own good and fund some of our own who are struggling. International Comparisons Programme Africa has put evidence before us that South Africa, Nigeria and Egypt have to start playing their role in this regard and follow the example of countries in other regions of the world that have created prosperity by taking responsibility for their neighbors. South Africa declined assistance from this programme and participated with its own resources because we know, if it is important we will be the first to know. We will fund it. As part of our obligation in this regard, South Africa has pledged to in part finance the African Symposium for Statistical Development, and in the near future we shall argue for a progressive levy that African host-countries will have to pay as part of their commitment to this development. If it is important, we should be the first to know, because we will have paid for it. The Minister of Finance of South Africa in his budget speech set aside in excess of US\$ 40 million to fund pan African programmes and projects, because this is important to Africa and South Africa, so we shall fund it.

In Africa and as is in some parts of Asia, we recognize the gallant commitments towards democratization and the critical role that a census of the population plays towards these endeavours. In this regard Sudan has decreed to run a census in April from the 15th to 30th this year, a mere twenty days from today. We would like to urge the Commission to support the Sudan in this historic and important undertaking. African countries have already pledged personnel Uganda, Mozambique, Kenya and South Africa and I expect many others to heed this call, because this is important to us. Kenya and South Africa have already deployed staff. We also hail Afghanistan to its commitment to run a census in August this year. Countries emerging out of conflict will demand special attention from this, our professional collective. I will urge the Commission to do the needful.

We are pleased and grateful that you as the Commission honoured us as Africans to host the International Statistics Institute in Africa, in South Africa, in Durban next year. We request your support in this endeavour, which we pledge should be the best ever and will leave a legacy of not only the desire to be numerate and statistically competent but of demonstrable financing of institutions of statistics. In two years from today South Africa will open its doors of learning to Africa and the world to participate at the Statistics Institute where we shall provide tuition in official statistics and related disciplines.

May I also express my appreciation for the seminars that precede the Commission. These are very important as they bring up dimensions of our work that the business of the Commission may not address immediately at its sitting. May I therefore congratulate the UNSD for this initiative and encourage them to continue with it.

May I as I ascend to take the chairpersonship of the Commission from my brother Gilberto, thank him on our collective behalf for stewardship and guidance. My predecessor and brother and counterpart under your stewardship, at its 37th Session in 2006 the Commission took a historic resolution on Capacity Building. South Africa was motivated and that is why in two years we shall have this institute and that is why we are convinced that this gesture you handed over to Africa as your successor heralds a better Africa in the area of measurement, a participating Africa and a professional Africa, so the seeds have begun to germinate.

Thank you