



Opening Remarks by the Chair of the 40th Session of the United Nations Statistical Commission

Pali Lehohla, Statistician-General South Africa

We, statisticians from National Statistical Offices (NSOs), multilateral and supranational agencies together with development partners, gather here in New York, bracing this cold winter, during one of the toughest periods in the world. What the world is witnessing today has not been experienced in the last 129 years. In Africa, a saying goes: “when it rains on the mountains, those who live on the foot of the hill and in the valleys further afield drown”. We are faced with the worst form of the tragedy of the commons. The financial crisis, which started with the financial meltdown in developed economies has spilled over to the real economy of even the developing countries. Commodity prices have dropped, production has slumped to lower levels and unemployment is soaring as household income stifles progressive realization towards a better life for many in the world. Democracy is threatened at the time when it should bask in the glory of Emmanuel’s Kant enlightenment ‘sapere aude’. An era of information society has turned to be a nightmare for the globe, we are experiencing globalization gone wrong.

As statisticians, we need to engage in debates that relate to transparency of our data sources and methods. We need to galvanise the terrain of all information, beyond just what is official statistics. Spinner addressing European statisticians admonished the practitioners on forms of knowledge and the distinct form of knowledge in which statistics plays. The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics advocate for transparency. What sort of transference do we talk about financial institutions still do not trust each other, of course for valid reasons of competition? Even bulls engaged in a bitter battle for supremacy, when a predator approaches, they disengage their fight and together face the predator. A multilateral world does not only react to an onslaught of a predator, but generates capabilities of keeping predators at bay, but a unipolar one creates conditions for plunder and regrets. As is in the financial markets, nobody knows who is holding what liabilities in their books. The statistical system will need a great deal of transparency especially at the multilateral level. Global strategic interventions are needed in the field of statistics. We, as statisticians will need to pause and ask ourselves if the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics guarantee us such a transparency. NSOs and regions across the world continue to churn data that is supposed to assist policy makers. The big question today is whether the data that we produce is still relevant in the face of all this. The long-term impact of this crisis will largely depend on what measures governments of developed nations are taking. Such measures cannot be separated from statistical leadership and intervention.

Often times when faced with conditions of peril of this magnitude, philosophy tends to provide the answers. In his presentation, the head of Eurostat, Walter reminded us of the science we practice and invoked the spirit of Karl Popper on the fundamental property of science as refutable, least we turn it into dogma. As we start searching for questions and answers yonder what we have come to learn of as the objectivity of the scientific method, what new problems will arise? We are increasingly encouraged to look into the qualitative information and data to seek questions and answers. Are we ready to venture and take such a plunge? Kuhn teaches us of paradigms, and many of the world are speculating on what the paradigm of the post financial and economic crisis will be. It appears that it will be quite different from the one that predates it. The question is whether statistics will engage this new paradigm with agility, confidence and robustness of methods. If we are not there post the crisis, we may not be there and can be rendered irrelevant. It is encouraging then that deliberations on these matters have begun.

Regions across the globe continue to strengthen themselves to work together in statistical development. We note progress that is being registered in Asia and Africa, as these regions are representative of the developing world. We have been duly informed of a recent meeting of the Asian region of the UN to resuscitate and strengthen themselves in dealing with matters statistical development. African countries, under the auspices of the Africa Symposium on Statistical Development met recently in Luanda, Angola, to discuss especially matters related to data processing in the 2010 Round of Population and Housing Census. As a world, we pride ourselves with all this progress.

Many African countries are struggling with data processing. The biggest challenge is that countries venture into the use of untested technology, which is also changing at a faster pace. Quite notable in this regard were inadequate piloting of the technologies as well as unavailability of the machines and consumables within the countries. In most cases, the machines and the consumables have to be imported and this delayed data capturing. Most countries still use manual data capturing, but the logistics of dealing large volumes of paper in environments of under-developed infrastructure pose further challenges. The continued dependency on manual capturing is exacerbated by the inability to harness information technology because of the costs of scanning technologies against the availability of the resources as well as the capacity to manage the new technology.

African countries observed emerging issues in relation to data processing. These issues need to be given attention or else they could have long-term implications on census undertakings by countries. These issues include, among other things, effective advocacy for the census at political level and in society, need for good preparation for all phases of the census, better testing of all census phases, timely release of census results, harnessing IT for the census including latest technologies such as scanning technology, need for total solution if scanning technology is adopted, care in choice of IT, better training in the use of IT as well as Africa Census Support Peer Mechanism.

Furthermore, African countries continue to solicit support for countries experiencing crisis and those emerging out of conflict. It is absolutely critical that, as a world, we harness our energies to assist our colleagues in Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo,

Sudan, Liberia, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan. We should take note of the progress that has been registered by Sudan regarding statistical development, especially on census-taking.