

**Opening Remarks of Katherine K. Wallman**  
**High Level Forum on**  
**“Statistical Commission and the Global Statistical System –**  
**The Way Forward”**  
**February 26, 2007**

Mr. Under-Secretary General,  
Distinguished panelists,  
Delegates to the Statistical Commission  
Dear colleagues and friends,

Welcome to this High Level Forum entitled “The Statistical Commission and the Global Statistical System – The Way Forward”. Getting the greetings right in this “august” environment of the United Nations is always a challenge. Thinking about this occasion, I realized that the rather informal 'dear colleagues and friends' actually best expresses my sentiments toward this community, which signals something fundamentally important about the character of the United Nations Statistical Commission and why, in my view, this body works as well as it does. Many of us are looking forward to the UN Statistical Commission sessions, where we not only do important work to advance the global statistical system, but where we also meet longtime colleagues and friends - professional partners, yes, but even more, close personal partners in our common endeavor of taking the most accurate possible “numerical picture” of the increasingly complex realities around us. I have often referred to us as a “statistical family;” at the end of the day -- despite our cultural and political differences, and the amazing variety of our backgrounds – our family shares a strong sense of community, rooted in our shared professional ethics and belief in the integrity of statistical work.

It is, therefore, a particular honor for me today to welcome you all and chair this High Level Forum, in which we continue our celebration of 60 years of international statistical work. I know I am not the most longstanding member of the Commission in the room; in fact, based on some cursory research, I believe that claim belongs to Mikhail Korolev. But I can claim 15 years of experience with the Commission -- 15 exciting years, in which I graduated from the “Lady Statistician” heading the US delegation, to Commission vice chair and later on chair, causing some disarray in UN protocol concerning what nameplates would be appropriate - chairman, chairwoman, chairperson or the simple 'chair'. And then there has been the charming “lady chairperson.” Glancing around this room, I rejoice in seeing so many “lady statisticians.”

On a somewhat more “professional” level, I must note that the relevance of our work in the Commission has truly been an eye opening experience. It is all too easy to think that in more developed countries we are “beyond” the challenges that confront our neighbors in emerging economies. But the simple fact is that

the fundamental principles at times bear repeating in our own nations – and that we too need consensus on common standards and survey protocols that will enable us to speak a common language when we collect, analyze, and disseminate our data. All of us benefit from our collaboration on this world stage.

Now, I would like to take a few minutes to glance back on the history and the accomplishments of the Statistical Commission, which I hope will set an appropriate stage for the then more forward-looking debate reflected in the theme of this High Level Forum. I would note that this Forum could have easily been labeled “High Caliber Forum,” given the level of participants we have here at the podium, representing both users and producers of official statistics. So, I am confident we can all look forward to a very exciting debate on "The Way Forward" for the UN Statistical Commission.

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In his book *The Parliament of Man*, Paul Kennedy highlights the significance of the UN Statistical Commission for the whole United Nations. I quote:

*“Given the disruptions of the Second World War, the UN’s founders felt they were groping in the dark, so it is not surprising that as early as February 1946, the ECOSOC set up a Statistical Commission. Assembling statistics, studying how to define what is an equitable ‘standard of living’, measuring population growth and fertility rate, and studying plant loss or climate change may seem arcane scientific procedures. But they would ultimately provide the data that would accompany major international actions and legislation, particularly as regards the developing world.”*

The first regular session of the Statistical Commission was held in Lake Success (New York) from 27 January – 7 February, 1947. The new Statistical Commission focused its attention on promoting the development of national statistics and improving comparability, coordinating with specialized agencies, developing the new UN Statistical Office, and generally improving statistics and statistical methods. In a nutshell, these remain the essence of our work today. Even though ECOSOC did not accept an early recommendation to set up the Statistical Commission as a body of appointed individual experts, the practice -- that country delegations have throughout the years been headed by senior experienced official statisticians -- reflects a continuous concern for the Commission to preserve its professional integrity, objectivity and political independence. In this context, one of the key milestones to celebrate today is, of course, the adoption of the “Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics” in 1994.

While there has been a continuity of focus and a perhaps amazing stability in the work of the Commission over all those years, there have also been many

changes: The Commission expanded from an initial 12 to a later 24 members; participation soared from a few delegations to over 100 delegations today. Indeed, I am told there will be more than 130 countries represented this year! Since 1999, the Commission has been meeting annually rather than every two years and, perhaps most significantly, the Commission has created a wide network of expert groups, inter-secretariat working groups, and our own famous “city groups,” which operate under the guidance of the Commission year-round to advance the global statistical agenda in many substantive statistical fields.

The major tangible accomplishment of the Statistical Commission is, of course, the body of statistical standards, frameworks, conceptual definitions, and methodological guidelines that it has created over time. The International Classifications, the System of National Accounts (1953-1968-1993-2008), the Census Recommendations, to name just a few, have become the backbone of the global statistical system. Milestones abound in this context; in fact, looking over the history of the Statistical Commission, it can be said that there was at least one, if not sometimes two or more, methodological standards or guidelines that were adopted by the Commission at each and every session, covering a broad spectrum of statistical fields. While in the early years the focus was more on the classical development issues, such as national income measurement, trade and population, over time new policy concerns called for the enlargement of the statistical ‘tool-box’ to cover areas such as social indicators and environment statistics in the 1980s and 90s, and more recently data exchange standards in the current decade. So, as the world grew increasingly global, the Statistical Commission has provided the frameworks and tools to compile, aggregate, and compare national data. Today, we owe the existence of large global statistical databases -- both at the UN Statistics Division and in other international organizations -- to the conceptual and methodological groundwork of the Statistical Commission – and of course to the advent of high-power computers and the Internet.

While there has been considerable progress in the development of methodological tools, there has been continuing concern about the practical implementation of many of the new – or even not so new – statistical frameworks. The building of national statistical capacity has been a key issue on the agenda of the Commission since its early days. The Commission played a leading role in the wake of the decolonization of the 60s and early 70s, calling for large-scale technical assistance to newly independent states. The World Population and Housing Census Programs recommended by the Commission for the first time in 1965, and then later the establishment of the National Household Survey Capability Program in 1976, assisted many countries around the world to build basic national statistical systems. Strengthening Statistical Capacity is still the major item on our agenda, as evidenced by the 2006 resolution on this topic.

This latest round of discussion of national statistical capacity had actually been prompted by the concerns around the Millennium Development Indicators. The

major UN conferences of the 80s and 90s had culminated in the 2000 Millennium Summit, which formulated the Millennium Development Goals, reflecting an unprecedented level of agreement on where development efforts at the global level ought to be focused. As many of the goals contained specific numerical targets, the statistical community in general, and the Statistical Commission in particular, was thrown into the center of an often highly politicized debate on monitoring the follow-up to the conferences. The Statistical Commission responded to the challenge and increased visibility by doing what it does best: applying its professional/technical expertise. Through the proven practical mechanism of a “Friends of the Chair” expert group, the Commission identified the areas where additional technical work is needed to improve data used in measuring progress, and successfully shifted the focus from an “indicator debate” to a “capacity building debate.”

The debate about the Millennium Development Indicators has brought another continuing concern of the Statistical Commission to the fore, effective coordination and cooperation among the international statistical players. The network of international statistical offices has grown increasingly complex, including specialized agencies, supra-national, regional and international organizations. While this situation doubtless offers great opportunities in terms of specialization and division of labor, it also poses new challenges and requires the Statistical Commission to play an effective role as the only global and universal statistical body that has indeed a mandate for coordination.

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With these last remarks I have already left the realm of the brief historical review and started to guide our attention to the future, as is appropriate for this High Level Forum. Let me therefore now assume my more traditional role as the moderator for this afternoon’s event, by saying a few words about the objective of this Forum, the selection of today’s panelists, and of course the “rules of the game.”

This High Level Forum is of course not a decision making body, but by placing it just before the start of the 38<sup>th</sup> session of the Statistical Commission, we hope that this afternoon’s exchanges within the wider historical context will inspire the debate during the formal session. We would like to generate a debate on the challenges ahead, that is, on questions such as “what needs to be done,” “what needs to be done better,” and “what can be done” to move the global statistical agenda forward. I challenge you to envisage the Global Statistical System of tomorrow – and in particular the role of the UN Statistical Commission therein. I think if we can have a frank exchange on these topics, and if there can be some convergence of the various visions that will invariably emerge, then this event could be characterized as successful.

The United Nations Statistics Division, as the main organizer, has done an outstanding job of assembling a very “potent mix” of panelists. I will briefly introduce them one by one in due time, but at this point let me just say that we have distinguished representatives from the user community, from both the public policy and the private sector domains; we have a representative who is exceptionally well placed to talk about the new dimensions of supra-national/regional statistics between the two poles of national statistics on the one side and global statistics on the other; and last, but of course not least, we have most eloquent advocates of our own statistics-producing profession, contributing from their distinct perspectives and experiences representing countries at very different levels of development. So, there is no question that we are about to embark on a very interesting and enjoyable debate.

After the welcome by Mr. Ocampo, I will invite each panelist, in the order as printed on the program, to make an initial statement of about ten minutes, before opening the floor to what I hope will be several rounds of very lively discussions.

And now I give the floor to Mr. Jose Antonio Ocampo, the United Nations Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs, for his welcome address.