

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

World Statistics Day Conference
Geneva, 20 October 2010

Report of the Conference **Measuring a Globalized World: The Geneva Contribution**

Report of the Chair **to the United Nations General Assembly**

Introduction

1. In response to General Assembly resolution 64/267 and as part of the first celebration of World Statistics Day, statistical divisions and offices of Geneva-based United Nations organizations, specialized agencies and international organizations held a joint conference on 20 October 2010, in Geneva, Switzerland, in collaboration with the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the World Trade Organization and the European Free Trade Association, and the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. The nine co-organizers were the International Labour Organization, the International Telecommunication Union, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Health Organization, the World Intellectual Property Organization, the World Meteorological Organization and the World Trade Organization. The conference brought together 170 participants. These included representatives from the permanent missions to the United Nations and to other international, regional and specialized organizations based in Geneva, as well as representatives from non-governmental organizations, academia and the media, and statisticians and economists from Geneva-based international organizations. Participants had at their disposal a brochure highlighting the wide range of statistical activities undertaken by international organizations in Geneva.

I. Attendance

2. The conference was attended by delegates from Andorra, Angola, Argentina, China, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Madagascar, Nepal, Norway, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, Thailand, and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

3. The United Nations agencies and international organizations represented were the International Labour Organization, the International Telecommunication Union, the International Trade Centre, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Health Organization, the World Intellectual Property Organization, the World Meteorological Organization and the World Trade Organization.

4. The regional and specialized organizations represented were the African Union, the Council of Europe, and the International Road Federation.

5. Participants from academia and the media were also present.

II. Opening of the meeting and adoption of the agenda

6. Mr. Henri Laurencin of UNCTAD opened and chaired the conference.

A. Welcome addresses

7. A message from Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, was delivered. A welcome address to the participants was made by Mr. Petko Draganov, Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD.

IV. Geneva at the crossroads of world statistics

8. The first part of the conference focused on the role of Geneva-based organizations in the field of international statistics, and on a worldwide collaboration of national statistical offices and the statistical departments of international organizations.

9. Mr. Henri Laurencin (Head, Development Statistics and Information Branch, UNCTAD, and Co-Chairman, Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities) made a presentation on the international coordination mechanisms in the area of statistics, their benefits, and the challenges lying ahead. He explained that global partnerships between international organizations to help build the capacities of national statistical systems had brought about big improvements in data availability and comparability. This cooperation had led to the adoption and application of standard concepts and definitions. He emphasized the important coordinating role of the United Nations Statistical Commission. The exchange of information among international organizations was essential in order to avoid duplication of work. Ensuring availability of the necessary data while imposing the least possible burden on countries was one of the main goals and achievements of the international collaboration. In addition, given that many countries did not have sufficient human or financial resources to produce the necessary statistics, the cooperation mechanisms helped in better spreading the benefits of the limited technical assistance funds. Mr. Laurencin also emphasized the importance of metadata, as they were crucial for the correct interpretation of statistics.

10. Ms. Ruth Meier (Deputy Director, Swiss Federal Statistical Office) discussed the significance of international organizations to countries' statistical offices, and listed

some issues of concern to national statisticians regarding both in-country and international requirements. Questions were raised about the National Accounts concepts, which appeared inadequate as business activities were increasingly globalized. Developing universal statistical standards to measure economic and social trends was very helpful for countries, especially in the context of globalization. However, flexibility was vital, as national statisticians also needed to respond to the requirements that were specific to their country. In the context of home requirements, there were growing political pressures to quickly produce short-term indicators. Discussion would be needed about extending the boundaries of national statistical offices' work to include forecasts and models. Should the role of national statistical offices instead be limited to producing data on directly measurable phenomena, with forecasting tasks falling outside the scope of national statistical offices' activities?

V. Statistics addressing global challenges

A. Economics and social development

11. The conference discussed the role of statistics in the area of economic and social development, based on three presentations.

12. Ms. Susan Teltscher (Head, Market Information and Statistics Division, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)) gave a presentation of work carried out and of challenges involved in monitoring the networked world that had come about as a result of the revolution in information and communications technologies. While the availability of data was generally improving, there was still a lack of time-series data at the country level. Ms. Teltscher highlighted a range of statistical evidence showing that future economic and social developments would be dependent on broadband infrastructure. Some States had already adopted legal measures to include broadband internet access among the basic services to be provided to all citizens, thus placing broadband internet access at the level of importance of national road or electricity networks. The significant digital divide between developed economies and lower-income economies should be addressed at international, regional and national levels in order to avoid a further widening of development gaps. To ensure equal and ubiquitous access to broadband internet, ITU and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had launched the high-level Broadband Commission for Digital Development. Ms. Teltscher pointed out that new information and communications technologies also changed the way people lived. While their positive economic effects could reasonably be assessed, the social and environmental impacts, which were likely to be significant, were more complex and challenging to measure.

13. Mr. Andreas Maurer (Chief, International Trade Statistics Section, World Trade Organization) made a presentation entitled "Measuring trade in the twenty-first century", in which he addressed the emerging challenges that trade statisticians had been facing in the aftermath of the recent economic crisis as they were asked to rapidly come up with reliable, up-to-date, short-term indicators on trade volumes and prices. He pointed out that in addition, statisticians would need to assess global value chains. Global production processes had reduced the relevance of the notion of a country of origin, as the "country of origin" may just be the one last step in the value chain (i.e. assembly), with the control of the global value chain, and in particular the

conceptualization of the product (including licences and property rights), remaining in the importing country (e.g. demand-driven supply chains). Therefore, linking firms' production to international trade to measure the import content of exports was of utmost importance to policymaking. In addition, economic analysis would benefit from separately reported intra-firm trade. New manuals on both merchandise trade and trade in services had recently been adopted. They provided guidelines on how to produce statistics more in line with the trade analysis needs in a globalized world economy. Implementing the recommendations as soon as possible would benefit all countries.

14. Mr. Rafael Diez de Medina (Director and Chief Statistician, Department of Statistics, International Labour Organization (ILO)) discussed the role of statistics on decent work at the time of a crisis in employment. Although other economic indicators may be pointing to a recovery after the recent crisis, employment was continuing to suffer. And yet, in a modern society, it was not enough just to measure employment in a traditional manner. The aim was to assess "decent work", which included the right to work, effective social dialogue, and social protection. To enable monitoring of those topics, ILO was working with national statistical offices, ministries of labour, other relevant national agencies, and development banks, to foster cooperation between them, which was vital in order to conceptualize and measure new labour indicators. In many countries, the publishing of data was weighed up against political concerns over releasing sensitive statistics. In addition, the differences between labour markets in various regions were striking, thus making it harder to adopt standards that would allow better comparability of data among countries.

B. Human development and the environment

15. Consideration was then given to statistics on human development and the environment, based on three presentations.

16. Dr. Colin Mathers (Coordinator; Mortality and Burden of Disease; Innovation, Information, Evidence and Research Cluster; World Health Organization (WHO)) made a presentation entitled "Global health statistics: Living longer, living better, reducing inequalities". He described the statistical activities of WHO, which included coordination, cooperation and capacity-building, in data compilation at the country level. At headquarters, statistics were brought under a common framework and analysed. Owing to data gaps at the country level, many figures needed to be estimated in order to obtain significant regional aggregates. Core indicators illustrating the described approaches included child and adult mortality levels, maternal mortality ratios, and estimates of deaths by cause, age and sex, at country and regional levels. Challenges for WHO statisticians included assisting member States to build sound information systems that could generate high-frequency data for time-trend analysis, and implementing and improving vital registration systems. In addition, new methods to collect mortality and cause-of-death information without vital registration were being studied, as well as improvements in dealing with incomplete and biased data to derive comparable estimates.

17. Mr. Jean-François Durieux, (Director, Division of Programme Support and Management, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) introduced UNHCR's statistical work by confirming that the official statistics of most countries did not include refugees and stateless persons. This made UNHCR the only source of information on numbers, characteristics, protection needs and gaps, and specificities of refugee populations. Mr. Durieux explained that where countries were not able to provide accurate statistics on refugees, UNHCR filled in the data gaps with estimates based on individual registration, population censuses, surveys, and participatory assessment methods. Some important patterns and topics in relation to refugee protection and profiles could only be seen via statistics. These included unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum, the growing number of urban and protracted refugee situations, and the phenomenon of child soldiers. UNHCR had proposed including an item on displaced persons in the Millennium Development Goals, since displaced persons represented a significant share of the de facto population of some countries and in many cases were the most vulnerable group. Statistics on refugees and internally displaced persons were useful for a variety of purposes, including advocacy, raising public awareness, and fund-raising. Statistics were also used as the basis for UNHCR activities such as planning, finding solutions, meeting the needs of certain groups, and setting priorities on interventions.

18. Mr. Christian Blondin (Senior External Relations Officer, World Meteorological Organization (WMO)) and Mr. Omar Baddour (Chief, Data Management Application Division, WMO) gave an overview of the evidence provided by statistics and modelling in the areas of climate variability, change and impacts. WMO was playing a leading role in setting guidelines for the collection of 50 Essential Climate Variables for climate system monitoring, which included atmospheric, oceanic and terrestrial measures. The activities of WMO and its member States in climatology included (a) monitoring of climate variability; (b) assessments of the climate system showing unequivocal trends on some key indicators such as the mean surface temperature, average sea level, and global snow/ice cover and thickness; and (c) analysis on greenhouse gases. Given the changing climate, there were more risks, and statistics from past data were no longer a reference for the future. Improved climate monitoring and prediction was needed in order to achieve better risk management. Building infrastructure and maintaining national climate observation networks in developing countries would be essential.

VI. Statistics in academia

19. The challenges faced by the academic world in using statistics were discussed based on a presentation entitled "Statistics in academia: use, misuse and non-use" which was given by Mr. Paul H. Dembinski (Director, Observatoire de la Finance, and Professor, University of Fribourg).

20. Most social sciences operated with abstractions, and submitted the concepts and corresponding theories to "reality checks". Statistics were used in this context as a tool or instrument for possible validation of a theory or concept. Statistical figures were taken only as data (inputs) for further econometric treatment. In the process, they often lost much of their metadata, which led to misinterpretation of statistics. Weaknesses in academics' level of descriptive statistics training necessitated a closer collaboration between the producers of data and those using the data with a

pedagogical purpose. Two major limitations on the statistical work of international organizations were (a) that all the organizations had scant – if any – resources to contribute to a joint effort with other institutions; and (b) a lack of guidance to assist users in reading statistics more correctly. In general, due to time pressure, users were prone to accepting the first available set of statistics that appeared relevant, instead of searching more widely to find the best-quality statistics.

21. Accumulating quantities of new data while failing to put the correct emphasis on quality and on the ways in which data were used was unlikely to help users to forecast better or to plan for the future. A new approach was needed to overcome these problems. A new kind of a statistical centre could be envisaged, which should work closely with international organizations and be located at the heart of the statistical cluster within the United Nations family. Its focus should be on improvements in the comparability of global statistics on various subjects, and on providing guidance on concepts, definitions, estimates, confidence levels and measurement problems. Such a centre would teach users how to understand world statistics and how to handle them properly.

VII. Concluding remarks

22. The Chair thanked the panellists, those who had contributed to the discussions, and all of the participants at the conference. He expressed appreciation to those who had helped to place World Statistics Day high on the international agenda in Geneva and all over the world, as this conference was yet another indication of the interest in statistics, and of the importance of statistics in understanding the wide range of topics indispensable to development.