



UNITED NATIONS
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
STATISTICS DIVISION

Statement on Programme Issues by Mr. Paul Cheung, Director of the United Nations Statistics Division to the 38th Session of the Statistical Commission
New York, 2 March 2007

Agenda item 5: Programme Questions

Mr. Chairperson, Distinguished delegates and colleagues,

It is customary for me to present to you at this point the work programme of the UN Statistics Division for the current year and the near future. However, before doing so, I would like to share with you some reflections and conclusions which I have drawn from this week's session of the Commission.

Programme aspects related to the Statistical Commission

60th Anniversary of the Statistical Commission

This week we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Statistical Commission. I am happy to report that a total of 134 countries represented by their national statistical offices and 32 international agencies participated in this week's events and the sessions of the Commission. I would like to put on record my appreciation to all national statistical offices and international agencies which have helped in the preparation. Special thanks go to China, Korea, Mexico, and Mongolia for the souvenirs that they have provided for this special occasion. Special thanks should also go to the 45 countries that have provided publicity material for the exhibition, which was an overwhelming success. I am also thankful for the facilitation provided by France, Sweden, United Kingdom, Paris21, ECOWAS Secretariat, and UNFPA to some countries for their participation.

This Commission has considered 25 substantive papers, of which 14 were for discussion and 11 for information. The papers were posted on the web on time in all languages. The feedback I received was that the Commission is satisfied with the current methods of work, the documentation of the papers, and the split between discussion and information papers. The secretariat will work with the Bureau to further review the methods of work and make appropriate changes if necessary, especially into the direction of an even greater focus on selected key themes.

We have had a number of special events to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Commission. Of special interest was the Seminar on the Evolution of Statistical Systems last Friday. We heard about the very substantial changes in national statistical systems over the last 60 years. Technological and methodological developments were major drivers but the work of the Statistical Commission had also a very powerful influence.

National Statistical Offices (NSOs) will continue to enjoy a very special role in our societies. There will be expectations of an improved service in all countries from the general public, civil society, government agencies and business sector alike. To assist the NSOs, we are actively developing a knowledge base on official statistics in both management and professional aspects. This effort will be led by an Advisory Committee comprising experienced managers of national statistical systems. I am pleased to announce that the Korean National Statistical Office has offered to host an International Conference on the development of national statistical systems later this year to further the discussion which began last Friday.

Over the past few days, we have also heard repeatedly that the United Nations Statistical Commission can provide a very powerful guiding influence to the global statistical system. The governance of the global statistical system is complex because the Commission is not a Board as known in the business environment. Moreover, most of the international agencies have their own governance arrangements requiring management across different priorities and demands. But the Commission, as a global forum, is uniquely placed to bring both the countries and the international agencies together. However, the Commission can only be effective if the participating countries say what they think and, also, if the international agencies listen to the messages we hear. The international agencies may not always like the messages we receive but we must listen and act accordingly. The messages from the countries should shape our programmes and our strategies. It is clear that the global statistical system will not realize its full potential unless the Commission has a powerful influence on the work of national, regional and

international statistical agencies. This was one of the most pointed messages from Dennis Trewin's and Ivan Fellegi's excellent presentations last Friday and Monday.

Leadership by the Bureau

In this regard, the discussion has also pointed to the need for the Bureau to assist the Commission to provide greater leadership in coordinating global statistical activities. This includes following through on the decisions made by the Commission, as well as initiating activities that may be required.

The Bureau can for instance interact with interagency groups, provide prompt technical feedback on proposed indicators and generally advise the Director of UNSD on issues of strategic importance. I will discuss this further with the Bureau on how we might work in a more responsive manner in the future and report back to the Commission.

Programme Review

This is the fifth Programme Review that the Commission has considered. I am grateful to Statistics Canada for preparing the special report. However, it has been pointed out in several occasions that past programme reviews have not really achieved its potential and their impacts have been patchy at best, mostly because the follow-through on the Commission's conclusions has not been as good as it might be. At the same time, we should ensure that the recommendations of programme reviews are broadly carried by the representatives in the Commission to ensure their implementation. I will be consulting with countries and international agencies on how to make the programme reviews more effective and with greater impact. I will ensure that the decisions reached by the Commission on educational statistics are effectively implemented and its intended impacts monitored.

Programme aspects related to the work of United Nations Statistics Division

Let me now turn more specifically to the work programme of the UN Statistics Division (UNSD).

Emphasis on Basic Statistics

I would like to inform the Commission that UNSD will continue its focus on issues relevant to the compilation of basic statistics.

Our inter-agency programmes on the MDGs and Population and Housing Censuses, covering a large range of social statistics are functioning well. We are also in the process of refocusing our economic statistics programme on basic economic statistics. In 2007 UNSD will undertake further steps in such areas as economic census and surveys, statistical business registers, use of administrative data with a purpose of identifying good practices and promoting them among the countries to improve their capability to compile quality basic statistics in the most cost effective way. In addition to documenting national practices, UNSD will finalize draft recommendations on industrial and distributive trade statistics and produce a technical report on economic census and surveys in the African context and on results of the worldwide review of practices in international trade statistics. In response to requests from countries, we have also started the preparation of Handbooks on Good Practices in Economic Census in general and on Use of Administrative Data in particular. Similar normative work is undertaken on Manual on Water Statistics and a revision of Energy Statistics Manuals has started. We believe that this focus on basic economic statistics will bring long-term benefits and will support the implementation of the System of National Accounts.

Broadening the outreach

A key objective of our work at UNSD is to bring as many country participants to our core activities. In 2006, our programmes involved 1737 country representatives and other participants in various events. This is 30 per cent higher than 2005. During 2006, we conducted seven expert group meetings and eleven workshops with the total participation of more than 800 country experts. UNSD training workshops systematically include participants from statistical offices as well as from other line ministries and representatives of the user groups.

UNSD is making special efforts to establish a closer relationship with the user community. A good example of this was a user-producer Conference on Water Accounting for Integrated Water Resource Management held at Statistics Netherlands in May 2006 and a Seminar on Creation, Recognition and Valuation of Intellectual Assets held in July last year.

We have been improving our on-line communication with users. The established web hot-lines on various subjects are becoming ever more popular with an average of almost 300 inquiries per month. Furthermore, we have been conducting surveys of our web users to guide our future work.

Enhancing coordination at country level

UNSD fully recognizes that there is a need to promote greater coordination of technical assistance activities at the country level to increase efficiency and effectiveness. In the coming years, we will make special efforts to coordinate our work with other international and regional organizations. This would include a range of activities from cooperating in data collection (and sharing data) to avoiding duplication and lessening the reporting burden on countries, to conducting joint workshops and country specific projects. We note with satisfaction a growing number of examples of good coordination with the UN Regional Commissions and other sub-regional entities. We plan to build

upon this experience. We will intensify our effort to partner UN agencies at the country level in all statistical capacity building activities.

UNSD work programme 2008/09

As you may know, UN functions in a two-year budgetary cycle. Currently, the budget and work programme for the years 2008 and 2009 is being finalized for adoption by the General Assembly in 2007. You'll find the specific work programme for the Statistics Division in document E/CN.3/2007/28. The strategic framework, containing the objectives, the expected accomplishments and the indicators of achievement, has already been endorsed by the Statistical Commission at its thirty-seventh session. The new information contained in document E/CN.3/2007/28 refers to the detailed list of outputs.

According to UN budget and programme procedures, and due to the fact that the budget approval process is now fairly advanced, this document is presented to the Commission for information. I, therefore, invite the Commission to take note of the Division's 2008/09 work programme. Any comments you may have are welcome and will certainly assist me in the future management of the Division.

Update on the implementation of the current work programme 2006/07:

I am pleased to report that the implementation of the 2006/07 programme is progressing smoothly and that virtually all planned outputs will be produced in time. Nonetheless, due to changing priorities some adjustments had to be made, namely:

- (i) The UNSD newsletter has been replaced with multiple newsletters focusing on different substantive areas, providing more targeted information to colleagues throughout the world.
- (ii) The Manual on Waste Statistics will be deferred to the 2008-09 programme cycle due to manpower constraints.

I now invite the Commission to approve these adjustments in our current work programme and to comment on the strategic directions as outlined.

Thank you.