



MR. JOHN WILMOTH, DIRECTOR, POPULATION DIVISION  
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Opening Statement at the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the  
Commission on Population and Development  
New York, 11 April 2016

Madame Chairperson,

Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations,

Ms. Catherine Pollard, Under-Secretary General for General Assembly and Conference Management,

Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund,  
Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to address the Commission on Population and Development at the opening of its forty-ninth session today. This session of the Commission comes at an important moment, at the start of the implementation phase of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This year, the Commission has a double duty. In addition to its annual theme, the Commission has been diligently reviewing its methods of work. In my brief remarks this morning, I would like to touch on some key aspects of both topics.

The theme of strengthening the demographic evidence base has stimulated what is probably the most technical discussion in the modern history of the Commission, since the Cairo conference in 1994. Indeed, it is first time the Commission has focused on Chapter XII of the Programme of Action, on technology and research, including data.

We should recall that building an evidence base requires not only data but also analysis of those data, leading to a better understanding of the topics considered. In addition, we should recall the complementarity between this Commission and the Statistical Commission: put simply, the Statistical Commission focuses on data production, whereas this Commission focuses on data analysis and on the insights and guidance for policy that follow from that work.

Through its deliberations this year, the Commission has an opportunity to contribute expert advice on the kinds of population data, and on ways of collecting and disseminating those data, that will enable a better and richer analysis, thereby strengthening the demographic evidence base.

In that spirit, I would like to highlight three key messages in relation to the special theme of this session. First, high priority should be given to strengthening national systems for collecting traditional forms of demographic data, in particular, data coming from population censuses, civil registration systems, and household surveys.

There has been much talk in recent years about “big data”, a term that refers to diverse collections of information resulting from commercial transactions or other everyday activities. Such data typically include thousands or millions of records and contain valuable information with an enormous potential for analysis, but also many challenges.

One key point is that, so far, there are no signs that the various forms of “big data” will be capable of replacing the traditional sources of information that form the foundation of the demographic evidence base. In our enthusiasm to embrace “big data”, we should not reduce our ambition for ensuring universal coverage of populations and events in censuses and civil registration systems, while also working to strengthen national capacities for collecting other kinds of information through household surveys.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of maintaining and strengthening the traditional sources of demographic data, allow me to mention two key recommendations on techniques of data collection and management. Both topics are notable for their simplicity and low cost combined with a potential for high payoff.

First, there is much to be gained from embracing “open data” policies. In short, there are vast stores of existing data that remain inaccessible to researchers and other potential users of the information. Governments should be encouraged to provide access to anonymized micro-data – that is, to records of individuals or households that have been stripped of individual identifiers to protect privacy. Access to micro-data opens up many possibilities for analysis, including for disaggregation by social group.

Second, much can be gained from the widespread application of a technique known as “geo-referencing” – that is, associating geographic information with each unit of analysis, typically referring to the location of a neighbourhood rather than individual households. With such information, it becomes possible to derive estimates that are disaggregated by geographic location, helping to document inequalities between social groups. In addition, geo-referencing facilitates the integration of data from diverse sources, greatly expanding the possibilities for analysis and understanding.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The other topic that has occupied the Commission and its Bureau over the past year is a review of the Commission’s methods of work. In this case, let me back up and recall part of the history of how it was decided that the Commission would consider this topic during the current session. Last year, I had various discussions on this topic with the Chair, who at that time was Ambassador Frankinet of Belgium.

It is fair to say that Ambassador Frankinet and I shared a view that the Commission was broken and needed to be fixed. This view derived from several factors, including the rancorous discussions of recent years, the difficulty to achieve consensus, the recurrent focus on difficult issues for which international consensus is still lacking, and a concern that the stalemate on these issues might never be resolved and was holding back progress on other matters – these were, for us, signs of a problem that needed to be addressed, and we looked to a discussion on the methods of work as a way of helping the Commission to find a constructive path forward.

After further discussions, however, the Ambassador, myself and others began to observe that changes in the Commission’s methods of work would not be sufficient to

resolve the problems I have just mentioned. For those issues, it would be necessary to consider as well the mindset of delegates when they walk into the negotiating room. This includes their willingness to listen and to try to understand with compassion the views of others, their commitment to flexibility, and their determination to find common ground and consensus. I should add that all of these traits are required, equally, by the Secretariat and the UN system in supporting the work of the Commission.

In short, over the course of the last year, the review of the methods of work shifted from being an attempt to fix a broken Commission to being mostly a discussion on how to adapt the Commission's practices to the exigencies of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The review has helped to shine a fresh light on some of the most challenging issues and has fostered a constructive dialogue amongst delegations and with the Secretariat and UNFPA. It is important to acknowledge, nonetheless, that the review and any resulting revisions to the Commission's working methods will not resolve some of the larger issues that helped to motivate the review.

I would like to commend the Chair of the current session, Ambassador Kasese-Bota of Zambia, for her commitment to guiding the review of the methods of work in a manner that has been fully transparent and inclusive and for setting a good example in making arrangements for the informal consultations on the draft resolutions and decisions of the current session. It took time and was not easy, but eventually the Chair succeeded in identifying two teams of co-facilitators, pairing countries of different regions and finding capable and enthusiastic delegates from both inside and outside the Bureau to lead the negotiations. I think the result has been quite positive so far, but we must still reach the finish line.

I will not say much about the details of the review of the methods of work, except to mention one topic that seems fundamentally important from the perspective of the Secretariat: the multi-year work programme of the Commission. Many of you will recall that prior to 2014, the Commission had maintained a two-year planning horizon for more than a decade. Since 2014, however, the Commission has been planning its work only a year in advance.

A multi-year work programme is valuable for several reasons. First and foremost, it helps the Bureau and the Secretariat to plan ahead. It may also help to promote a congenial atmosphere in the negotiations on the special theme for a given year, by reassuring participants that their preferred topic(s) will be considered, if not in the current year, then in some future year.

I am still hopeful that the Commission will make progress on this issue during the current session, at least by reversing the narrowing of the planning horizon that occurred two years ago, and possibly also by expanding the planning horizon of the Commission, or anticipating its future expansion, to match the four-year cycle of the high-level political forum in its review of the 2030 Agenda.

Dear delegates,

I hope that, in the coming year, we will continue to reflect on how this Commission can best contribute to the global review of the SDGs, while maintaining a focus on its core mandate of assessing the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development.

In closing, I would like to recognize my colleagues in the Population Division, who have been working very hard over the last several weeks and months in preparation for this meeting. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate them and to thank them from the bottom of my heart for their tireless efforts. They stand ready to assist you throughout this week in any way that would be helpful.

Let me finish by saying that I look forward to this week's deliberations, and to a successful outcome of the current session.

Thank you, Madame Chairperson.