

7 July 2005

ECOSOC Panel of Chairpersons of Functional Commissions,

Thursday 7 July 2005.

Statement by Mr. Hermann Habermann (United States delegation to the 36th Statistical Commission) at the request of the Chairman of the Commission. [check against delivery].

Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

Ms. Katherine Wallman, the Chair of the Statistical Commission has asked me to brief you on the 36th session of the Commission. To describe that session I would like to borrow from the famous words of Mr. Charles Dickens – “ ... it was the best of times it was the worst of times...”. I would like to start first with a brief summary of the best times. I am pleased to report to you that at its 2005 session the Statistical Commission was attended by a record number of representatives from 82 member countries. It is particularly noteworthy that a large number of developing countries were able to send their Chief Statisticians from the capitals to participate actively as observers in the substantive discussions.

The Commission discussed 26 reports covering a wide range of substantive issues including, for example, demographic statistics, energy statistics, national accounting and environmental accounting. The Commission agreed unanimously on a draft resolution on the 2010 World Population and Housing Census Programme. The Commission, thus, continued its almost 60-year tradition of working in a cooperative spirit towards a global statistical system which is based on agreed upon standards and scientific methods, to produce comparable data at the national, regional and global level.

As you know, the substantive contribution of the Statistical Commission to “achieving the internationally agreed upon development goals” lies in the area of conference indicators. ECOSOC had asked the Statistical Commission in its resolution 2000/27 to serve as the intergovernmental focal point for the review of indicators and the Commission continues to work towards further harmonization and rationalization of indicators. This is a crucial task as member countries - even those with established statistical systems - continue to be overburdened with data requests.

In his “Millennium Development Goals Report, 2005”, the Secretary General warns that [quote] “presenting aggregate figures for all regions obscures [...] the lack, in many parts of the developing world of adequate data to assess national trends and to inform and monitor the implementation of development policies”. [end quote]. For instance, 19 out of 56 countries and areas in Africa have not conducted a population census in the last 10 years, nearly twice as many as in the previous decade. Many countries do not have a sustainable, coherent programme of household surveys or administrative data systems.

Consequently, international estimates have taken the place of real country data as a basis for regional and global aggregation. This calls into serious question the ability of the development community to reliably assess, whether or not progress has indeed been made with respect to specific goals, both at the national as well as the global levels.

The international statistical community is aware of these shortcomings. In fact, the United Nations Statistical Commission has repeatedly emphasized that the statistical capability of countries to continuously produce basic economic and social data needs to be strengthened. It is in our view essential, that national statistical systems, under the leadership of the national statistical offices, be empowered to compile their own national data in accordance with agreed upon international statistical standards. To facilitate debate on this aspect at future sessions, the United Nations Statistical Commission has requested that a detailed report be prepared annually, analyzing the ability of countries to produce individual MDG indicators.

Let me now turn to the worst of times.

The last day of the Statistical Commission became an adhoc meeting of mostly mission representatives. This produced great confusion among the Chief Statisticians and I would submit does not serve either the Commission or ECOSCO well. With respect to development indicators the Statistical Commission is well placed to provide expert advice, inter alia, on whether indicators can be measured and if so the best procedures to measure them, the cost of measurement, the ability of statistical systems to produce data and the impacts on national statistical systems of new proposed indicators. It is the proper forum to agree on voluntary international standards for statistics. It is not well positioned to make decisions on priorities of indicators and non technical definitions. However, for example, agreement on the definition of poverty needs a political consensus not a technical one. The Statistical Commission can provide valuable technical input. I would also suggest to you that it is not within the province of the Statistical Commission to consider question such as whether some of the MDG goals deserve higher priority than others. I am not suggesting that these are not legitimate issues; merely that the Statistical Commission is not the forum for their adjudication. I further suggest that these issues deserve careful consideration and should not be decided at the frenzied end of the meeting of a technical body.

Let me end by making two modest incremental suggestions for how to proceed in the future.

The first relates to the Chief Statisticians of the countries. For many years the Statistical Commission was something of a boutique commission – it did not attract much attention from higher bodies. That is clearly changing. As statistics becomes more important it will attract more attention. In recognition of this the Chief Statisticians must reach out to their relevant bodies in the capitols and here in New York so that the Chief Statisticians can explain their position and so that they understand how their nation's interests intersect on the issues. Secondly, it will become more and more important for the

Secretariat of the Statistical Commission work with the missions in anticipating emerging issues and be transparent about the impact of these issues. The aim of course is to resolve these "political issues" before the technical Statistical Commission session begins. Having had the privilege of working at the United Nations for nine years I recognize the burden I am placing on the Secretariat. Even if all the issues cannot be resolved these two measures should result in a Commission whose members are more aware of the consequences of their actions and actions which are the results of more deliberative activities.

I would like to thank you again for giving me this opportunity to brief you on the work of the Statistical Commission, and I can assure you that we are looking forward to our future cooperation.