

First meeting of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on COVID-19 Mortality Assessment
19 February 2021, 9:00-10:30am EST

Opening remarks by Mr. Elliott Harris,
Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development and Chief Economist

Dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to welcome you today on behalf of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). I am the Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development and the Chief Economist of the United Nations.

Our Department has been closely examining the global social and economic impacts of COVID-19 through a series of policy briefs, including the pandemic's impact on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. We have launched several initiatives to support countries' response to the pandemic, including efforts to ensure the continuation of statistical operations.

Let me also highlight that for many years, data and statistics on population and health have been an area of common interest and collaboration between UN DESA and the World Health Organization. A complementary relationship exists, for example, in the area of mortality estimation and life tables, whereby the Population Division of UN DESA produces estimates of total mortality and WHO provides a breakdown in terms of causes of death. At the same time, the Statistics Division of UN DESA promotes coordination across national statistical systems and has worked with WHO on various occasions to encourage a closer cooperation between health ministries and national statistical offices, and to support the development of comprehensive international standards for the production of regular, reliable and accurate vital statistics.

In the short term, UN DESA has the immediate task of reflecting the excess mortality from COVID19 in one of our flagship products, the *World Population Prospects*, for which a new edition will be published later this year. More broadly, having evidence on the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic can inform current policy choices. And looking ahead, we must be sure to document these impacts thoroughly for the historical record and to ensure that lessons are learned that can help guide the response to future pandemics.

With these goals in mind, UN DESA and WHO have come together to create this technical advisory group, using the convening power of the United Nations and its specialized agencies to bring together experts from around the world and from different areas of specialization. To advance our understanding of the mortality impact of COVID-19, we see great value in bringing together different constituencies, including national statistical offices, ministries of health, and the academic research community, especially in the areas of demography, epidemiology and statistics.

We hope that this technical advisory group will help to guide the work of UN DESA and WHO as we seek to fulfil our mandates in the area of global mortality estimation. But more than that, we hope that this new group will foster and encourage the statistical investigation of "excess deaths" in the context of COVID-19. We believe that the TAG can serve as a global platform to support a network of existing and emergent projects and mechanisms, while avoiding duplication of effort. We hope to encourage an inclusive global participation in this work and to promote harmonization and common approaches for the analysis and interpretation of "excess deaths", taking into account the wide variety of national data systems and available resources.

As mentioned, we expect that the combined expertise and advice of this group will be beneficial to us in our own work. But you can also assist us in supporting and guiding countries as they grapple with the multiple challenges that the pandemic has created for national statistical system.

I thank you again for joining us today, and I thank our partners in WHO for our ongoing collaboration.

I look forward to hearing the initial discussions today and to a fruitful collaboration going forward.

I now hand the floor back to Dr. Asma, who will give us an overview of what we have learned thus far about the mortality impact of COVID-19.