

2008 Global Event on Measuring the Information Society

Geneva, 27-29 May 2008

Opening Statement

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on behalf of Paul Cheung, Director

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Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me join my distinguished colleagues Dr. Touré, Ms. Puri and Ms. Dirven in welcoming you to this Global Event on Measuring the Information Society.

As we are all aware, advances in information and communications technology over the past few decades have had a great impact on development in business and society around the world and have in fact become one of the driving forces in many areas. Developments in ICT have transformed the way business is being conducted, have contributed to economic growth and increases in productivity, have transformed the way our society interacts and have also transformed many activities in our personal lives, the way we communicate with others and how we obtain and share information.

The importance of information and communications technology and the challenge of enabling all countries to benefit from advances in the technologies have been highlighted on the international stage by including this as an explicit target in the Millennium Development Goals. This target also spells out the biggest challenge that we are facing now, which is not only to advance the technical aspects in ICT and cross new technological frontiers, but to enable the whole world to really benefit from these developments.

Statistics, whose main goal is to describe the evolution of our society in measurable terms, has to develop its methodology to keep up with the challenge of measuring the impact of these new technologies. While changes caused by a widening use of ICT, such as increases in productivity, have been recorded in traditional mainstream statistics, these changes have not always been traced back to its source in advances in ICT use. Due to its far-reaching impacts, ICT is one area that does not easily fit into the historical domains of business statistics and social statistics, but is an area that impacts all.

The demand for ICT statistics has increased as countries seek to design, monitor and review national policies and strategies to take advantage of the rapid advances in ICT. In addition, the business community requires information about access to, and use of, ICTs by various consumer groups as well as information about the impact of ICTs.

All this is equally important for developed and developing countries, with many of the latter just starting their statistical work on the information society. It becomes evident that international standards in this field have to be developed to guide countries in the process of setting up and further developing their work on ICT related statistics.

The work carried out by the partnership over the past years is especially commendable in this context, since it has tackled the task of producing statistics on ICT without being constrained by traditional boundaries of statistics, providing users with better measurement tools of the impact of ICT on a wide range of activities of businesses and society in general. In particular the development of a standardized set of indicators and definitions for ICT statistics has paved the way for the production of consistent ICT statistics across countries.

The next steps in the work on ICT measurement should now be the integration of ICT statistics into the regular statistical programmes of national statistical offices and into statistical frameworks. The United Nations Statistical Commission as the apex entity of the global statistical system has at its meeting in 2007 reviewed the report of the Partnership, covering its activities during the past five years. The Commission, which brings together the Chief Statisticians of

member states from all over the world, coordinates the work in statistical offices around the world by promoting standards, especially in developing areas of statistics.

In its review in 2007, the Commission has congratulated the Partnership on its work carried out and recognized the leadership of UNCTAD in initiating the Partnership, which has become an example of successful cooperation among international organizations. At the same time the Commission noted areas that need further attention in the work of the Partnership.

In particular, the Commission has endorsed the list of core indicators developed by the Partnership and encouraged countries to use this list in their data collection programmes. While the development of this core list is a very important achievement of the Partnership, the Commission also acknowledged the ever widening impact of ICT and encouraged the Partnership to continue its work to improve and update the list of indicators, especially with regard to measuring the use of information and communication technology in education and in government, the contribution of such technology to economic growth and social development, and the barriers to the use of the technology. The Commission further encouraged the Partnership to assist countries in their capacity-building efforts for the collection of data for the information and communication technology indicators. These capacity-building activities should now be on the forefront of the work of the Partnership.

The past and future contributions by the Partnership to the theoretical basis of measuring ICT are very important. However, any development of statistical concepts and methods can only be called successful if it leads to the worldwide production of comparable statistics. It is this goal that now should get our main attention.

In this context of building capacity in statistical offices, I would like to mention the work carried out by UNCTAD on the development of the Manual for the Production of Statistics on the Information Economy, which is scheduled to be submitted to the Commission in 2009. This manual will be an important tool in supporting countries in the setup of statistical programmes that lead to comparable statistics on ICT, but we know that specific country assistance is needed to enable all countries to participate and benefit from the work already carried out. Specific steps in

providing a sound methodological basis for measuring ICT, as well as enabling individual countries to produce relevant statistics in a timely fashion, need to be further developed by the Partnership and the international statistical community as a whole.

We welcome very much the development of this Manual and other initiatives that have been undertaken under the umbrella of the Partnership. It is clear that more coordination with other programmes is necessary and that the ICT-specific components have to be embedded more closely in activities carried out under the Marrakech Action Plan or the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics.

The Statistical Commission will review the progress on ICT statistics at its next session in 2009 and will review the Manual for the Production of Statistics on the Information Economy for adoption at that session. I am sure that the continuing work of the Partnership will result in recommendations being brought to the Commission that can be adopted in the global statistical system for the goal of further advancing the state of ICT statistics in all member states and lead to the production of rich, comparable data on the different aspects of ICT and its impact on our society throughout the world.

The UN Statistics Division is prepared to work with you on this goal.

I would like to thank you in advance for your active participation in this Global Event and look forward to the outcomes of this important meeting.