# ECOSOC

## Data for Development:
## Challenges and Opportunities in National Capacity Building

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Madam President,

Distinguished Representatives and Delegates,

Colleagues and friends,

Good afternoon. I am pleased to participate once again in this dialogue between Executive Heads and Member States and to speak today about data for development and the challenges and opportunities in national capacity building.

Today, I am speaking on behalf of UN funds and programmes and data for development is an important area of focus for all of us.

As you are well aware, knowing your population is key to sound policy-making and development. Information about a country's population, growth, characteristics, living conditions, spatial distribution and physical resources is vital for policy formulation, planning and implementation. It is also vital for evidence-based advocacy and policy dialogue.

And this data must be valid, reliable, timely, culturally relevant and internationally comparable in order to be used effectively.

The need for this type of data has been receiving more attention due to the demand to track development progress that evaluates the impact of programmes and policies and increases accountability. And this has certainly been intensified with the global push for achieving the Millennium Development Goals and for increased development effectiveness.

The current economic downturn makes the need for data all the more important. It is crucial to monitor continuously the impact of the crisis, especially on the poorest and the most vulnerable. In the context of the current economic downturn, the availability of regularly updated data allows for an adequate and timely response. Data can also be used to redirect public resources to the sectors that need it most.

The United Nations system is working on a vulnerability alert system to collect information on the impact of the crisis. The alert system will provide real-time information to support you, Member States. WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA are already working closely on a joint country-based review that is rapid and regular and can inform the identification of vulnerable groups and necessary actions.

Through its Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, WFP helps identify the root causes of food insecurity and vulnerability and makes recommendations about the most appropriate assistance. The analysis serves both as the foundation of the UN strategy in a country on food security and nutrition priorities and informs partners and governments' own programming.

These measures are deeply entrenched in the principles of national leadership and ownership in accordance with the Accra Agenda for Action and the Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review. The United Nations system is fully committed to supporting and aligning itself to one national framework, led and owned by governments. And the UN has long supported the development of national capacity to collect, analyze and disseminate data and statistics.

In partnership with relevant ministries, several UN agencies, such as FAO, UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the Regional Commissions are promoting the availability of data in their specific areas of expertise. Others, such as UNFPA, have mostly supported National Statistical Offices through the provision of technical assistance for national censuses, and data collection exercises such as Demographic and Health Surveys and related national surveys.

And some have supported countries to maintain and strengthen administrative records. An example is the support provided by UNICEF to strengthen the civil registration system, as part of its campaign to guarantee the right of children to a name and legal identity.

Another important example, which is increasingly attracting attention within the UN and elsewhere, is strengthening Health Management Information Systems. The International Health Partnership has recently made recommendations that emphasize the importance of improving the legal, policy and planning environment for health information systems and using information technology to improve data quality and timeliness by systematically including this aspect into funding proposals.

One of the successes that I would like to highlight is in Zimbabwe where several UN agencies worked together to assist the government to monitor the HIV status of pregnant women. While this did not have an immediate impact on the decline of HIV and AIDS, it helped detect the trend and identifying factors responsible for the decline in HIV prevalence – factors such as a reduction in the number of partners and increasing condom use among young people. The data allowed researchers to formulate evidence-based interventions that went beyond pregnant women and greatly enhanced the overall response to the epidemic.

This example shows why collecting data is so important. It helps understand broader social processes. And for this purpose we must pay attention not only to data particular to an issue, but to data that illuminates the broader context.

There is also a need to look at the capacity to collect and analyze, disseminate and use data at the sub-national and community levels, where capacity challenges are greater. Data has to adequately inform local development. There have been good experiences with Community-Based Monitoring Systems in the areas of food security and child malnutrition. The availability of data at places where action is needed and the involvement of existing community groups greatly enhance the impact of interventions.

Data is also crucial to advocacy. New powerful arguments can be devised from newly generated data. Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Africa and some parts of Asia was a well-known health and social problem long before 1990, but it was only when Demographic and Health Surveys in the 1990s came up with standardized data on the extent and the degrees of FGM/C that it became easier to mobilize public opinion to find.

In countries that do not possess good administrative records, population and housing censuses provide information that is desperately needed, not only for advocacy, but also for policy dialogue and programming. This is particularly important in post-conflict situations where the devastation of war has completely changed the basic fabric of society. A census also improves the sampling frame for regular survey programmes.

The censuses of Rwanda in 2002 and Sierra Leone in 2004 are successful examples of efforts to restore some degree of normalcy and rule of law, which will form the basis for other administrative systems. UN participation in both cases was extensive and of crucial importance for obtaining accurate results with a high degree of political acceptance.

In order to enhance the capacity of countries to conduct censuses of high quality, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and especially for the 2010 round of censuses, UNFPA has recently created a post of Executive Coordinator on Census, who reports directly to me.

One of the major challenges for censuses is funding. A census is extremely costly and the UN system is mobilized in dozens of countries to leverage financial and technical

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support for countries. The problem is usually not the lack of donor interest, but the limited capacity to present sufficiently detailed census plans in order to qualify for donor support.

We must seize the opportunity provided by the 2010 Round of Censuses to strengthen national capacity for data collection and analysis and train more statisticians and demographers. In Senegal, for instance, only three statisticians and even fewer demographers are trained each year. In many countries, the shortage of relevant expertise in Ministries is a major cause of poor quality data.

There are concerns that international partners tend to be focused too much on indicator development and reporting requirements, to the detriment of strengthening national statistical systems. In a meeting of the Organization of National Statistical Systems in South Asian Countries last year, countries complained that the MDG monitoring initiative had become an additional responsibility, and often an additional burden for national institutions, with little funding support from donors.

All development partners must work together to ensure that no additional indicators are requested from programme countries, while ensuring the quality and measurability of development programmes. At a minimum, international survey programmes funded by UN agencies should facilitate the monitoring of all relevant MDG indicators in their sectors and beyond.

There is also an urgent need for greater coordination of statistical capacity-building within the development community. Donors increasingly require that data be made available from projects they fund. However, few match this requirement with specific support. To minimize the reporting burden on countries, coordination of the monitoring of progress needs to be improved.

More specifically, there is a need to harmonize efforts and develop a common data architecture. In many countries, there are several household surveys conducted

regularly, each with their own methodology, and all collect some data on common indicators. The Chief Executives Board is working to harmonize data collection practices, definitions and timeframes.

At the global level, there is a need to give more emphasis to initiatives such as DevInfo and UNData as global indicator registries. At the country level, this effort for coordination is undertaken by UN country team, often under the leadership of governments.

We must make data more widely available and user-friendly. Several countries in Latin America, as well as some in Africa, now routinely make their censuses available on-line and country-tailored versions of DevInfo also provide us with this opportunity.

In closing, I would like to stress that access to data should be viewed as a component of good governance, transparency and accountability. Just as reliable and timely data is essential for development monitoring and effectiveness, building capacity in this area is essential for creating strong national institutions that promote human rights and dignity.