

**Remarks by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, on the occasion of the fifth meeting of the Statistical Conference of the Americas of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)**

**Bogota, 10 August 2009**

Álvaro Uribe, President of the Republic of Colombia,  
Héctor Maldonado, Director of the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) of Colombia,  
Representatives of the member countries of the Executive Committee of the Conference,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Friends

Good evening.

From afar, I first wish to say, "Thank you, President Uribe".

Once again, Colombia has lived up to its international commitments and provided us with a fine demonstration of the professionalism, dedication and commitment of its public officials.

Just over a year ago, the Director of National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia (DANE), Héctor Maldonado, proposed hosting this meeting in Bogota and offered to make the necessary arrangements in terms of human and financial resources. He knocked on doors, lobbied support, and used his ingenuity and creativity to make that happen, and now it is with great satisfaction that the fifth meeting of the Statistical Conference of the Americas is being inaugurated in Colombia today.

I offer him my congratulations and my gratitude.

Secondly, Mr. President, I would like to apologize for not being with you and the delegates in person at the inauguration of this meeting of the Conference as I had hoped.

Obligations of protocol will unfortunately prevent me from arriving in time to join you. As you know, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, has instructed me to represent him at the swearing-in ceremony of the President of Ecuador, which is also scheduled for Monday, 10 August.

I am highly aware and appreciative of the special honour you have paid the Conference, Mr. President, by inaugurating this event, which is one of the most important intergovernmental meetings on the calendar of activities of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Your presence reflects the strong ties of cooperation and collaboration that have been established between your Government and the Commission. I therefore reiterate my sincerest apologies for not being able to accompany you in Bogota on this occasion.

## **Distinguished delegates**

Without accurate and reliable information, democratic systems flounder.

Generating public statistics, which constitute a public good, is a basic function of any State; and statistics are consequently treated as a core issue at ECLAC.

Statistics play an important role in governability and in good governance because they provide society with the data and information needed to gauge the accountability of policymakers and increase transparency in public decisions. They constitute an effective tool for fostering more informed participation among citizens in public affairs and in the topics that are of immediate concern, and they ensure that debates on national issues are based on hard evidence of the economic, social and environmental realities of the country.

Statistics constitute key input for results-based public administration. Statistical information facilitates public policymaking in all its stages: from the needs detection stage and policy design, monitoring and implementation right through to results assessment. Relevant, timely and high-quality public statistics can make a substantial contribution to society's well-being through their impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of public policies. A more effective and efficient public sector is better placed to optimize its role in solving people's problems and to consolidate the workings of democracy.

The credibility of official statistics is a fundamental asset for the proper functioning of democratic institutions. Credibility is also, however, one attribute of national statistics systems that needs to be fostered over time and requires the systematic and consistent fulfilment of certain basic principles and conditions.

Over the last few decades, the international community has gained valuable experience and learned much about the conditions needed to facilitate and actively promote public statistics, as well as about the State's responsibilities in this area. This has resulted in various initiatives, most notably: the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, approved by the United Nations, and the European Statistics Code of Practice. The region has also gained considerable experience in strengthening national statistical systems, especially in the past 20 years. The most notable developments include: new legislation to grant more autonomy to national statistical institutes; the establishment of the position of statistics director and other senior positions as high-level public posts that can be filled only through competitive selection processes and whose terms may not coincide with that of the presidential term; and the transformation of national statistical offices from departments or divisions of ministries into national statistical institutes that function as independent technical entities that are authorized to manage their own affairs.

There is obviously more than one right way to organize and operate statistical systems given that broader considerations, need to be taken into account, such as the country's institutional architecture, which is to a large extent historically conditioned. One essential component, however, is an institutional framework that guarantees that decisions on the statistical system are made independently and solely in light of professional considerations.

The concept of “professional independence” is a broad one and covers not only freedom to decide on methods, standards and procedures for statistics production, but also on the content and on the timing of releases of statistical data and indicators. This technical independence does not mean, however, that statistical offices should work in isolation from Governments’ efforts to implement policies to improve public welfare. The work priorities of the institutions that operate in a national statistical system are largely determined by the Government through the appropriate mechanisms. It should be noted, however, that much still remains to be done in this regard and that some statistics initiatives are proving to take a long time to bear fruit.

In an appropriate institutional framework, the State is responsible for providing statistical offices with adequate and sustainable human and financial resources to carry out the statistical work programme. As noted in Strategic Plan 2005-2015 of the Statistical Conference of the Americas, “in certain cases, the national statistical offices of the region carry out their functions in a precarious institutional and legal framework, without sufficient information technology and human and financial resources, and efforts must be made to remedy that situation.”

Lastly, I would also like to draw attention to the fact that, as well as institutional frameworks and adequate resources, national statistical systems need ongoing dialogue between users and producers of statistics. This ensures that the statistical products generated are relevant and provides feedback for producers on quality matters and on the new and shifting demands and priorities of users.

For all these reasons, it is strategically important for the region that this meeting of the Conference initiate the journey towards the preparation of a Code of Good Practice in Statistics in Latin America and the Caribbean. The core objective of this Code, which it is proposed to approve at the next meeting of the Conference in 2011, will be to strengthen the countries’ commitment to building up the legal, institutional and management frameworks of national statistical systems, with a view to ensuring full professional independence, impartiality and objectivity, and commitment to quality in public statistics.

The next session of ECLAC, which will be held in Brazil in 2010, will be a more than fitting occasion for the Statistical Conference of the Americas to put these demands for the institutional capacity-building of national statistical offices to the assembled Government representatives. Here and now, I place my commitment and firm support behind this initiative.

**Mr. President**  
**Distinguished delegates**

It gives me great satisfaction, as Executive Secretary of ECLAC, to see how, within a few short years, the Statistical Conference of the Americas has become a front-line actor in the region in developing public statistics and strengthening the coordination and cooperation of international agencies and organizations with beneficiary countries. The Conference has rolled out major initiatives to spotlight the great achievements and challenges of public statistics in the region, raising the awareness of governments and political actors of the need to endow national statistical systems with the legal, institutional and financial wherewithal to properly perform the mission of national statistical offices and systems.

I am certain that during this meeting of the Conference, its discussions will continue to play a key role in driving the statistical projects to improve the quality, coverage and harmonization of statistics in the region. I would like to draw your attention to some of the initiatives brokered by the Conference in this regard. One such is the project funded under the Regional Public Goods Program of the Inter-American Development Bank, which concludes this year. This project has helped to strengthen activities related to statistics on poverty, migration and remittances, indicators for monitoring progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and those used to harmonize the contents of population censuses and social statistics. ECLAC will be lending technical support for another similar project, which will be launched in the second semester of 2009 and will be aimed at compiling a “Regional strategy for developing a directory of firms and establishments”, as part of the Regional Public Goods Program of the Inter-American Development Bank.

I would like to make particular mention of the International Comparison Programme and to express the Commission’s willingness to undertake the coordination of the next round of the programme in the countries of the Latin American and Caribbean region and contribute by financing the central coordination team. I would like to call upon the international agencies and organizations to afford priority to this project in their financing programmes for statistical development.

Another highly significant initiative is the project ECLAC has been carrying out to update the measurement of the poverty line in the countries of the region, whose results will be available around the first quarter of 2010. Then will come the challenge of harmonizing methodologies for measuring poverty by income in Latin America and the Caribbean, based on the results of the project and the experiences of the countries. I am therefore most pleased by the proposal to set up a working group for this purpose.

The Statistical Conference of the Americas also makes a major contribution to statistical development in the countries of the region by promoting best practices and disseminating methodologies and international standards. In this endeavour, international agencies and organizations have provided valuable cooperation with support for workshops, seminars and technical assistance. Here I would like to express our satisfaction at having concluded the project to build the database of statistical activities conducted by international agencies in Latin America and the Caribbean. This database will be a powerful instrument for promoting coordination and timely exchange of know-how by the countries with regard to the different statistical activities under way in the region and will encourage them to participate in those activities. It will also foment regional and international cooperation and help avoid duplication of efforts.

Lastly, special mention is warranted by the contribution made to technical and methodological capacity-building in statistics by the eight working groups of the Conference, which comprise experts from different countries and are supported by international agencies. It is most impressive and gratifying to see these working groups’ multiple activities and especially the positive results they have obtained. This way of working has proven particularly effective for addressing the broad range of statistical development needs in different fields, including those in emerging statistical issues –such as statistics on information and communications technologies, the environment and gender affairs– and technical cooperation needs in areas that have a broad and powerful impact on national statistical systems, such as indicators for monitoring progress towards achievement of the

Millennium Development Goals, the census round of 2010 and the implementation of the 2008 System of National Accounts.

The call to the working groups is therefore to keep up and strengthen the good work and, to the international agencies, to redouble their support for those activities. Of course, ECLAC is committed to providing technical support for the fulfillment of these working groups' objectives.

**My dear friends,**

I would like to reaffirm the Commission's commitment to the work of the Conference and very particularly to the objectives and activities contained in the biennial programme of regional and international cooperation activities of the Conference for 2009-2011. The implementation of this programme will undoubtedly represent a major step towards achievement of the strategic objectives set forth in the Strategic Plan 2005-2015 of the Conference.

In its capacity as secretariat, ECLAC will continue to lend the support needed for the organization and implementation of the activities of the Conference. The divisions and units of ECLAC will continue to provide substantial technical support for the fulfillment of the objectives of the Conference, mainly through their work as the technical secretariat of most of the working groups and through their staff's activities in different types of technical cooperation and their participation in seminars and workshops. We are also firmly committed to promoting the coordination of the international agencies and organizations that conduct statistical activities in the region, in order to help them to contribute effectively to the achievement of the objectives of the Conference. Here I should like to recall the importance of efforts to pursue Economic and Social Council resolution 2006/6 on "Strengthening statistical capacity", with regard to the development of national statistical systems in the Latin American and Caribbean region. This resolution expresses the Council's deep concern that many countries still lack adequate data to assess progress towards the realization of all the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, and to inform and monitor the implementation of national development policies and strategies, and that many countries lack the capacity to use the data available. ECLAC remains committed to respond to this call from the international community and we urge the member countries of ECLAC, donor organizations and the international statistical community to step up their efforts to boost national statistical capacity.

**Mr. President**

I have been unable to attend this opening session in person, but I am sure that my message has reached you nonetheless. The fifth meeting of the Statistical Conference of the Americas in the beautiful city of Bogota will be remembered not only as the first meeting of the Conference to be held away from the ECLAC headquarters, but as one whose decisions will reflect the maturity achieved by this intergovernmental Conference.

And we have Colombia to thank for much of that.