

Keynote Speech: Georges-Simon ULRICH, Director General (Swiss Federal Statistical Office)

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Opening

Ladies and Gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, distinguished delegates,

It is both my honor and my responsibility to welcome you to this conference. Standing here, I am reminded of what the British historian Adam Tooze described only two years ago: “Welcome to the world of polycrisis.” One crisis does not simply follow the other; they overlap, interact, and reinforce one another. Energy crises interact with conflicts, geopolitical fragmentation meets economic uncertainty, and misinformation undermines trust at the very moment when clarity is most needed.

In these uncertain times, statistics are more than numbers. They are our compass. They ground us in reality when public discourse may be dominated by fear, speculation, or deliberate distortion. As Chair of the Statistical Commission, I wish to reflect with you on the progress we have made, the challenges we face, and the commitments we must pursue to ensure that official statistics continue to serve as a trusted foundation for evidence-based decision-making worldwide.

Allow me also to recall that, as statisticians, we are not only guardians of numbers but also guardians of trust. The March session of the 56th Statistical Commission reminded us that without trust, even the best data loses its value. When citizens, policymakers, and communities believe that statistics are impartial, transparent, and independent, those statistics can guide societies forward. In times of uncertainty, our credibility is our greatest asset.

This is why the Statistical Commission, and its subgroups, matters today more than ever. We are not only producing technical standards; we are defending the very possibility of shared facts in a fragmented world.

Setting the Scene: Global Challenges & Opportunities

Our context could hardly be more complex. Wars and violence persist. Economic inequality deepens. Climate change threatens livelihoods. Social cohesion is strained by populism and polarization. The sense of living in dark times is one we can all recognize.

And yet, colleagues, the story does not end there. Statisticians are perhaps uniquely positioned to remind the world that progress and crisis coexist. Hans Rosling often reminded us that humanity, taken as a whole, has never lived better. Measles deaths, once counted in the millions every year, have fallen more than twenty-fold since the 1960s. Since the year 2000, child mortality under five has been halved. Education, health, and access to infrastructure have expanded dramatically in much of the world.

This duality is the reality we must present: to recognize the gravity of the crises of our time, while also showing - through, comparable data - that progress is possible and has already taken place. In that balance lies hope, responsibility, and the core mission of this Commission.

The report of the Secretary-General on Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which states that the world is on track to meet or is making moderate progress on 35 % of the 137 SDG targets according to the data available. While progress has been uneven and limited on several Goals, notable achievements across regions and countries demonstrate that change is possible. Since 2015, extreme poverty has declined around the world ; for the first time, over half of the world's population was covered by at least one social protection benefit in 2023 ; progress in healthcare was noted etc. However, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating conflicts, geopolitical tensions, and growing climate chaos are hitting SDG progress hard.

The 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals remain a shared work program, not a wish list. They were agreed upon by all 193 UN member states as the world's first common social contract. Despite mounting challenges, progress since 2015 includes major gains in poverty reduction, healthcare, education, and access to electricity and the internet. These successes show that change is possible when countries work together and commit to action. But with the climate crisis, inequalities persisting, and development resources strained, we must accelerate efforts to fulfill our promise by 2030. Investing in data is investing in development and in the 2030 Agenda.

Achievements of the Commission

Since 1946, the UN Statistical Commission has played a central role in shaping how the international community understands itself. It was created to ensure that official statistics are not fragmented by national boundaries but harmonized by shared principles. The UN Statistical Commission has always been more than a technical forum. It is a political

achievement: it allows 193 countries, with all their differences, to speak a common statistical language.

At the 56th session, held earlier this year, we adopted two major resolutions: the 2025 System of National Accounts, and the Global Census Round 2030. These decisions illustrate the Commission's power to transform ideas into frameworks that guide global practice. A piece of paper becomes facts - millions of observations collected in households and businesses, compiled by national statistical offices, and transformed into knowledge that shapes policy.

Current Focus: Data Governance & Standards

Ladies and gentlemen, let me turn now to new and pressing issues: The Global Digital Compact, adopted in 2024 as part of the UN Pact for the Future, has made clear that equitable and interoperable data governance is a global priority. Our Commission has responded by establishing a dedicated Working Group on Data Governance. This group is tasked with defining principles and frameworks that ensure official statistics remain trustworthy in the face of unprecedented technological change. The Working Group of the UN Statistical Commission will work closely with the Working Group on Data Governance at all levels, established under the Global Digital Compact within the Commission on Science and Technology for Development.

This is not an abstract debate. Artificial intelligence systems are now shaping the information that billions of people see and use every day. Yet too often, these systems do not draw on official data, or they fail to distinguish authoritative sources from unverified ones. Our responsibility is to ensure that official data is accessible, open, interoperable, and - very importantly - AI-ready.

This also connects our work on standards. The adoption of the 2025 SNA, the updated Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, and other statistical norms reflect a commitment to coherence, transparency, and global comparability. Standards are not bureaucratic exercises. They are what allow us to compare poverty in one country with poverty in another, emissions across continents, and educational attainment across generations.

Colleagues, the importance of international standards cannot be overstated. Without them, cross-border comparability collapses. Imagine trying to assess global inflation without a harmonized framework or attempting to measure carbon emissions when every country uses different definitions. The result would be noise, not knowledge.

Metadata as Cornerstone

If standards are the grammar of our statistical language, metadata is its dictionary. Without metadata - without information about what our numbers mean, how they were collected, and under what definitions - they lose their power to be compared and trusted.

This is why metadata is at the heart of our work on quality assurance. The National Quality Assurance Frameworks and the Maturity Model on Quality Culture for Official Statistics embed transparency across all stages of data and statistical production. They ensure that from survey design to dissemination, principles of reliability, comparability, and openness are respected.

In the digital age, metadata acquires an even greater role. AI systems cannot interpret data without clear, machine-readable metadata. Without harmonized standards, these systems risk misrepresenting or overlooking official data, thereby undermining trust. That is why the Bureau is currently preparing to bring a draft resolution on “Enhancing AI-Readiness of Official Data and Statistics” to the next session of the Commission.

The Draft Resolution & Next Steps

Allow me, therefore, to speak more specifically about the draft resolution we are preparing. It calls upon Member States and international organizations to:

1. Develop centralized metadata catalogues of accredited official data sources;
2. Adopt and implement internationally recognized standards such as SDMX, DDI, and DCAT to ensure interoperability and machine readability;
3. Define and implement a Minimum Viable Metadata Set;
4. Harmonize data models and refine quality criteria for metadata;
5. Support capacity building, especially in low- and middle-income countries, to enable adoption of standards and modern dissemination platforms; and
6. Collaborate with AI developers, major search engines, and redistributors to ensure official data is represented accurately in AI-generated outputs.

This resolution is not about changing how AI models work internally. It is about ensuring that when AI systems interact with data, they prioritize authoritative, reliable, and well-documented sources. This is essential for combating disinformation, reinforcing the role of official statistics, and protecting the credibility of evidence-based policymaking.

Timing is critical. AI technologies are advancing rapidly, and public trust in institutions is fragile. If we delay, official data and statistics risk being overshadowed by less reliable

information. If we act now, we can strengthen the place of official data as a cornerstone of public debate in the digital age.

The opportunities and risks of this draft resolution are clear. On the one hand, improved visibility and usability of official statistics will strengthen trust and support evidence-based decision-making. On the other hand, if we fail to act, AI systems will increasingly rely on unverified sources, and misinformation will spread unchecked. The stakes could not be higher.

The draft resolution is also groundbreaking in another respect: it calls for partnerships with AI developers and redistributors. Never before has the Commission officially sought such collaboration. But in the digital age, it is indispensable. Major search engines and chatbot platforms shape the way billions of citizens access information.

This is about visibility, but also about democracy. We are in a data emergency, but at the same time we have an unprecedented opportunity to show the value of data and statistics. When official statistics are visible and trusted, citizens can make informed choices. When they are hidden or overshadowed by unreliable sources, democratic debate suffers. Trustiness helps drive the quality and inclusion we need to see in data.

Looking Ahead & Closing

Colleagues, the road ahead is not simple. We must continue to invest in capacity development. We must ensure that national data and statistical systems, including the NSOs in every country, regardless of resources, have access to the tools, training, and platforms they need. We must strengthen partnerships with international organizations, academia, and the private sector. Above all, we must remember that data is not an end in itself. Behind every number are human lives, human struggles, and human progress. New technologies give us new opportunities, but we should invest in capacity development to leave no one behind. Again, investing in data is investing in development.

The 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals remain our common contract. It is true that many targets will not be fully achieved by 2030. But even partial progress represents millions of lives improved, millions of opportunities created. This fight is worth every effort.

As we look ahead, let us reaffirm that our mission is to build a data and statistical system that is trustworthy, inclusive, and innovative. A system that speaks to citizens, empowers policymakers, and holds leaders accountable. And let us never forget that the integrity of statistics is central to the integrity of democracy itself.

I thank all of you—Member States, international organizations, experts, and staff—for your tireless commitment to this work. Together, we can ensure that in this polycrisis world, official data and statistics remain a source of clarity, trust, and hope.

Thank you.