

Opening remarks by Professor Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi at the workshop on Demographic Measures and their Policy Implications: The Case of ECO Countries 6-7 November 2012, Tehran

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Dr Bhakta Gubhaju
Distinguished International Participants
Dear Colleagues and friends,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this regional workshop on Production of Population Statistics and Information which is jointly organized by the Civil Registration Organization and UNFPA in Tehran. We are thankful to the Civil Registration Organization, the Statistical Center of Iran, the ECO Secretariat, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their collaboration and support in hosting this important and timely workshop. Dr Bhakta Gubhaju and I are honored to be jointly presenting at this workshop and we are looking forward to learn from the experiences that our distinguished participants brought to this meeting.

This is a very important and timely workshop in many ways:

First, the core of demography is the data that we collect and analyse. Data quality and accessibility are the main issues for training and research in the discipline of demography, and also is important for policy making. Too often, we demographers spend so much time on demographic substances and study fertility, mortality, migration, family and marriage without paying enough attention to the core. It is thus important that we learn about the ways by which population data are collected, and to make sure that population data are accessible to the public and to users.

Second, usually there is a lack of understanding about demographic measures by the public and even by policy makers. Manipulation and misuse of the data are sometimes matters of concern particularly if population issues become the centre of political debates. Demographic measures such as labour force participation, unemployment rates, poverty, level of infant mortality, maternal mortality ratios, number of deaths, migration rates and particularly refugees, abortion and unwanted pregnancies are important for policy makings. Sometimes there are disagreements and/or disputes about the accuracy of these measures. Effective collaboration between all stakeholders including government organizations, research centres, academics, and UN agencies can ensure proper analysis of data, and provide professional and reliable measurements of such figures, and more importantly enrich the interpretation and meaning of the data.

Third, government officials and officers at Vital Registration Organizations and Statistical Centres spend their time, budget, and energy in producing data that becomes good bases for policy making. While they make every effort to provide data for the public use, their useful resources are not properly used by demographers, population experts, economists and planners. Too often, we take the accuracy of the data for granted. It is important, therefore, that not only data collectors but also

academics collaborate with a mutual understanding to carefully analyse the data so that the results presented to the public are trusted.

These are just a few examples that show the importance of this workshop. I am very pleased to inform you that based on these justifications, the Council and Scientific Committee of the Asian Population Association decided to set up a Scientific Group on Data Quality and Accessibility. This scientific group includes distinguished scholars in the Asian region and its aim is to promote research and training within the APA membership in collaboration with other organizations and associations. The first activity of this scientific group took place at the time of the second APA conference in Bangkok in August where participants from many Asian countries shared their experiences on how to improve the quality of population data and the ways by which the data can be shared and accessible for publish use.

Today, we are pleased that the Civil Registration Organization has successfully hosted this workshop to discuss the implication of demographic measures for policy making and planning in the ECO countries. The list of participants who have arrived for this workshop truly reflects the wide variety of interest and expertise on population data and demographic issues in the respected ECO countries. I believe we are now well positioned to facilitate research on our common issues and mobilize knowledge into policies and solutions in our countries.

So what is this workshop about?

It is about bringing forth and sharing new research and policy visions on issues ranging from population data and information, as well as such demographic issues as fertility, mortality, to migration in our region. It is about bringing together a new community of data producers, data analysts, and practitioners who are concerned with the practical issues affecting the ECO countries as well as the global trends today. It is about forming intellectual, research, and government officers that focus on the most fundamental issues concerning individuals, families, and communities in the ECO countries. Above all, the workshop is about a platform for the dissemination of new data and results by members of the ECO countries. The workshop is also organized to create spaces for critically engaged conversations that will extend our vision towards the population issues that we are facing across countries.

The fact that we have come together in Tehran to leverage different perspectives and approaches to these issues shows that we aim to achieve a deeper understanding of, and make significant contributions to, the multi-faceted field of population. I believe that the ECO region can, and must be, an epicenter for comparative research and public policy development on these multifaceted issues. The ECO countries are the best example of Unity in Diversity. All countries in the region share Asian culture as well as family and traditional values. Our religion, Islam, is also a unifying element. Three of countries in the ECO countries, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan are among the largest Muslim countries today.

Despite this unity, the region experiences diverse level of development, and are in different stages of demographic transition. There are many ethnic groups in the region who speak different languages and live in different geographic and climate

boundaries. In addition, these countries are in different stages of fertility transition, and there are fertility differentials in each of these countries that is specific to each country or to subgroup of populations and ethnic groups within each country. There are emerging issues on health and mortality, the youth bulge, environment, poverty, migration and refugees.

With the wide range of cultures and societies we represent at varying levels of social and economic development, this region will be a test-bed for social and cultural sustainability: our ability to live in harmony not only with the planet but with each other. As we come together for this workshop, it is time to renew our commitment to strengthening our ties, findings our commonalities, respecting our differences, and pursuing solutions across institutions and countries.

One of the main questions that we should ask ourselves in this workshop is how and when does regional collaboration makes sense? What are possible mechanisms for strengthening our collaborations? Who will be leading this collaboration? How can resources and expertise be shared? What kind of Research/Training do we need? Should we apply western or international standards or alternatively development our regional and country specific standards?

I hope we have fruitful discussions over the next two days, and I am sure the contributions of participants in this workshop become very useful materials to share with other members who were not able to participate. I also wish that this will be one of the first steps in promoting regional collaborations within the ECO countries which will contribute to a better understanding of our common values and population issues.

Before I conclude, let me thank those who made great efforts over the last 9 months in preparation of this workshop. In particular, let me acknowledge and thank Mr Mahzoon, Ms Amirhosravi, Ms Alizadeh from the CRO, Mr Kabiri from the UNFPA, and Mr Zahedian and his colleagues at the SCI for their relentless efforts in making detailed arrangements for this workshop.

I firmly believe that this workshop will yield stimulating debates as well as the knowledge that can drive regional change. And with this, I wish you, all the participants of this workshop, a successful and rewarding meeting.

Thank you