

AFRICAN STATISTICS DAY 2022 CELEBRATION

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Speech by J.E Charles Cartier, Chairperson of Statistics Board

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Members of Statistics Board

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Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the Chairman of the Statistics Board, I have the pleasure and privilege to address you today on the occasion of the 2022 African Statistics Day.

As mentioned by the Ag. Director of Statistics Mauritius, this special day, which is celebrated every year by African countries, aims at increasing public awareness about the importance of statistics in all dimensions of life, including the society, economy and environment on the continent. To that end, I believe that it is fitting for this workshop to lay emphasis on two central themes, namely agricultural statistics and dissemination of the 2022 Housing and Population Census main results, which are of notable importance to us as individuals, members of society and economic agents.

But, before delving on these specific areas, allow me to share with you my appreciation of the headway made by Mauritius in reforming its overall national statistical system. Indeed, backed by a reinforced legal and institutional framework, Statistics Mauritius has made due progress in improving the collection, dissemination and analysis of official statistics.

Yet, our nation has unreserved ambitions to contrive even further growth and socio-economic development as means of engineering continuous enhancements in the

quality of our living standards. Thus, it is highly auspicious that these key statistics fields, amongst others, are the objects of our attention for today's workshop.

First of all, allow me to cast some light on agricultural statistics ...

Statistics Mauritius (SM) produces official statistics on agriculture and disseminates them through the Economic & Social Indicator and Digest. Yearly Food Balance Sheets (FBS) are produced and disseminated in the Digest of Agricultural Statistics. The FBS allows to track overall food availability and to analyse the overall content of a country's diet. The Producer Price Index of Agriculture provides information on trends in producer prices of agricultural product and purchase prices.

SM undertook major projects to update and improve existing estimates:

- In 2005, a Cost of Production Survey (ACOPS) was carried out through technical assistance from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to mainly update the operation ratios that are applied in the estimation of various inputs used for national accounts purposes. Additionally, it provided accurate measures of unit cost of production.
- In 2014, SM in collaboration with the Ministry of Agro-Industry and Food Security conducted a first Census of Agriculture (CA 2014) which provided benchmark data in terms of production, area harvested for food crops, fruits and flowers of both open fields and under covered structures and also statistics on livestock and poultry. This exercise allowed benchmark data to update national accounts estimates for the agricultural sector. Agricultural households were identified in both Islands of Mauritius (2%) and Rodrigues (8%).
- Since the 2000 Housing & Population Census (HPC), SM regularly produces data on fruit trees of bearing age. In the 2022 HPC, for the first time, data on dwarf fruit trees have been collected separately. As from the 2011 HPC, data on kitchen gardens mainly for own consumption, own account workers / employers / employees engaged in agricultural activities (agriculture / fishing / forestry, etc.) are obtained.

Today, with the impact of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, food security is of concern for all countries particularly Mauritius which imports most of its foods. I quote from Shri Narendra Modi Ji's speech during the 2022

G20 Summit held in Bali, Indonesia from 5-6 November 2022: *“The current shortage of fertilizers in terms of food security is also a huge crisis. Today’s fertilizer shortage is tomorrow’s food crisis, for which the world will not have a solution”*. It is worth noting that in 2022, the Development Bank of Mauritius (DBM) introduced a scheme of “Backyard gardening” to encourage Mauritians to set up their own backyard/rooftop garden.

Challenges and opportunities for modern data collection systems

Agricultural data is rapidly becoming a major driver not only of innovations in output and the food chains but also in environmental management. The collection of primary data is time consuming, needs lots of human resources and is quite costly. Today, developed and some developing countries are using emerging Big Data analytical platforms – such as cloud computing and machine learning algorithms – that drive artificial intelligence. Satellite imagery can be used for the production of official land cover statistics, to identify major crops and also to estimate yields. Some countries are also exploring the potential of earth observation (EO) satellite data for taking stock of and monitoring of agriculture.

The opportunities are there, for instance, the European Space Agency (ESA) provides Earth Observation (EO) datasets of good resolution and are available on the internet free of charge.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With regard to Mauritius, appreciable inroads have been made in respect of the dissemination of agricultural statistics, which are increasingly being used as a tool for policy-making at various levels. However, you will surely concur with me that further progress is warranted to improve the comprehensiveness and disaggregation of data, which will in turn act as a more solid foundation for formulating economic and social policies which promote an equitable and inclusive socio-economic development trajectory.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You will recall that the national Housing and Population Census was initially planned to be taken in year 2021 but had to be postponed due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Statistics Mauritius took the challenge to undertake the Housing and Population Census this year, and I would like to congratulate the Ag. Director and his team for making this happen. I understand that this was not an easy task but with the collaboration and support of every stakeholder, today we are all going to have a feel of the first results of this big exercise.

Now, let me briefly touch upon the dissemination of the census results, which are highly important, if not primordial, in spearheading the design and implementation of major socio-economic reforms in any given country. Overall, the census provides basic facts to the Government for policy-making, economic and social planning as well as general administration purposes. In particular, relevant data assists in scrutinising various trends and patterns related, for example, to urbanisation and the geographical distribution of the population as per variables such as occupation and education, as well as the socio-economic characteristics of the labour force. Apart from the Government, a census derives its importance from its utilisation as a key tool by private sector enterprises, business organisations and programme agencies, amongst others.

Moving on, I would like to commend Statistics Mauritius for taking a relatively shorter period of time for releasing the census results this time, that is eight months shorter than the time taken during the previous census exercise. This is largely attributable to the successful utilisation of Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) technology for census data capture.

Ladies and gentlemen, the methodology used for the 2022 Census is already a commendable improvement and still, we need to innovate. Thus, I would request Statistics Mauritius to make thoughtful use of the latest available technologies as well as other resources in order to be better predisposed to produce timelier and more cost-effective outputs. In this vein, I believe that it would be highly desirable to consider the holding of an e-census or even the setting up of a statistical population register as is being done in other countries in lieu of a traditional census.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The sceptics will ask us not to be blindfolded by the role of statistics. After all, the latter can reveal a lot inconvenient truths or can challenge established norms and principles. Besides, as Henry Clay said, *“Statistics are no substitute for judgment”*. However, beyond the usual rhetoric and the simplistic assertions, one cannot escape the fact that official statistics act as a dependable springboard for provoking constructive thinking and triggering purposeful action in various spheres of our life. Furthermore, as American economist and statistician W.A. Wallis said, *“Statistics may be defined as “a body of methods for making wise decisions in the face of uncertainty.”* In particular, in a world which is characterised by increasingly frequent disturbances and intricacies as regards the nature of our interactions with one another as well as with the environment with which we cohabit, reliable statistics are warranted for effectively detecting and modelling complex exchanges. Subsequently, data collected can play a cognitive role towards optimising the social welfare function of the nation. Indeed, by assisting us in judging the achievements of markets and policy makers in allocating resources, statistics are of prime importance in strengthening the decision-making process of the authorities.

Before ending, may I stress that statistics must not only be intelligently assembled, but they must also be accessible to the widest spectrum of end-users. In this line of thought, this workshop is but the first in a series of activities planned to enhance the visibility of Statistics Mauritius amidst the stakeholders and the public in general, alongside raising awareness on the importance of statistics in all spheres of life.

Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation to Statistics Mauritius for the efforts made in organising this workshop and for inviting me to officiate at this event to celebrate the 2022 African Statistics Day. With these concluding remarks, I thank you for your kind attention and wish you all happy celebrations and deliberations. I am now glad to declare this workshop open.