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Opening Statement by Ms. Danuta Hübner,
United Nations Under-Secretary-General,
Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues,

I welcome you all to the 49th Plenary Session of the Conference of European Statisticians.

This session takes place at a significant time in the life of our organization. Just three weeks ago, we concluded the Annual Session of the ECE which has confirmed the ECE's role in policy dialogue and in the implementation of the strategic directions which we have initiated in 2000.

These directions firstly call for greater consistency and policy orientation of the different activities carried out by the Principal Subsidiary Bodies in the various fields of the organization, particularly through intersectoral and cross-sectoral approach. Secondly, they also call for more focus on the "developmental dimension" of the ECE policy agenda, drawing on the most pressing UN priorities and stimulating the catching-up process in our region, and thirdly, for improvement of our capacity to attract policy attention, and correspondingly resources, so that full value and visibility can be given to the excellent work done by the various intergovernmental bodies and working groups of the ECE and the Secretariat.

In the discussion on the strategic orientation, we benefited from the contribution of your Chairperson, Mr. Sven Longva. I wish to thank him very much for playing an active and constructive role in the process on behalf of the Conference.

I know that the discussion on how the Conference of European Statisticians can contribute to the ECE reform process figures prominently in the agenda of this meeting. I would like to encourage you to invest your best energies in supporting the new orientation, and I look forward to having the outcome of the discussion.

Statistics have already contributed significantly to our work, and have a lot to contribute to support a more effective, visible and result-oriented policy stance through integrating databases and making them available in a user-friendly and policy-friendly way and through supporting cross-sectoral activities by providing comparable databases and indicators, and harmonized concepts, definitions and classification. You also contribute to implementation and policy monitoring by providing reliable measurement of progress made toward targets, and identification of remaining gaps. Monitoring has become an essential instrument for our result-based approach to policies and activities. Your contribution is also provided through extending quantitative analysis to cover areas of priority concern for member countries, such as poverty, good governance, human rights, conflict resolution, and through supporting statistical capacity building in transition economies, as part of institutions building aimed at strengthening democracy and the market economy.

These are recognized tasks entrusted by the United Nations member States onto the statistical community, and increasingly reflected in resolutions, declarations, conventions and codes. The Conference of European Statisticians, now approaching its golden anniversary, has a prestigious tradition of leadership and more achievements in responding to these challenges, but even more leadership and more achievements will be required in the future to face p to the new challenges ahead.

Let me briefly mention a few of these challenges:

First, intersectoral activities, particularly environment, transport and energy. The ECE is working at full speed to prepare the crucial appointment of 2002 for the Johannesburg summit on sustainable development (Rio +10), the Regional Ministerial Conference to take place on 24-25 September 2001 to which you are invited. The basic challenge, inherited from Rio, is to bring together into a consistent analytical and policy framework the distinct, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives of environmental protection, economic growth and social progress. We will not make it without good quality statistics and indicators. They must provide a solid basis and necessary infrastructure for integrating these analytical and political perspectives. I look forward to the forthcoming Ottawa meeting on environmental indicators, and to all other statistical activities contributing to ensuring a strong European leadership in the Johannesburg process.

The second challenge is linked to the Millennium Declaration, subscribed by the United Nations

member States last October. The Declaration has set ambitious objectives and targets for ECE member States, and raised key policy concerns for our region: environment, peace and security, development and poverty eradication, human rights, democracy and good governance, protecting the vulnerable. The Economic Commission for Europe discussed at its annual session the implications of the Millennium Declaration on the basis of a paper to which ECE statisticians contributed in a significant way. The real challenge is the implementation. Assisting member States in setting up effective policy monitoring and implementation mechanisms, and strengthening statistical capacity for this process have a fundamental role to play in the follow-up process (a paper on this issue has been distributed at the Commission session and is available here). Cooperation with other agencies has proved essential in this field: with UNDP (I welcome the ongoing project on statistical capacity building in transition economies); with the World Bank in relation to poverty reduction strategies; with the IMF, OECD, the Consortium Paris 21 (I am happy that the steering group of Paris 21 is meeting in Geneva this week). Only thanks to the excellent cooperation and coordination with all the partners can we achieve results. Our organization is fully committed to this cooperation and I thank all other organizations for their collaborative spirits.

The third challenge is about the subregional dimension of our work. The ECE is increasingly supportive of statistical cooperation activities in sub-regions of ECE, particularly in South Eastern Europe (in the context of SECI and the Stability Pact); and also in Central Asia (in the context of SPECA), in the Caucasus and the Community of Independent States, and in the Mediterranean. I welcome the successful outcome of the meeting of the countries of SECI and the Stability Pact this morning. The subregional dimension when justified could accelerate the process of statistical capacity building in transition economies. This fundamental component of the ECE strategy of operational activities can now benefit from the support of the re-established Regional Advisor function in statistics. In this field too we owe a lot to the other international organizations with which we cooperate, in particular Eurostat whose contribution through Tacis and Phare funds to facilitating participation of countries with economies in transition in our activities is particularly appreciated.

In conclusion, I wish to convey to you that we must have high expectations on the contribution of the Conference of European Statisticians, and on the outcome of this meeting because we face formidable challenges. We have the European Union enlargement process which is becoming increasingly important not only for the countries directly involved but for the ECE as a whole. We have the outstanding challenge of the stabilization and development in South Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. We face the challenge of the integration of the ECE economy, involving the EU, North America, Russia, and the CIS, and the launching of new initiatives for trade liberalization and social cohesion. We must work for Europe contributing to peace, security and development in the world.

All these ambitious goals require an important contribution from statisticians. The Secretary-General, in implementing the mandate for UN reform entrusted on him by the member States, has indicated the ambitious objective of shifting the system from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention, thus breaking-down the conventional compartmentalisation between the economic, developmental side and the political security of the United Nations' mission. For this change of culture we need strong statistical foundations in member States, in international organizations and in the UN system.

I wish you a good and fruitful debate and I thank you for your attention.