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**12th Meeting of the Africa Symposium on Statistical Development:**

**“Strengthening Basic Economic Statistics for the Compilation of National Accounts”**

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**Tunis, Tunisia**

**Opening Remarks**

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Representatives of the African Union Commission (AUC), AfBD, UNFPA

Representatives of the ASSD Secretariat

Representatives of the Host Government: Tunisia

Representatives of Member States

Representatives of Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

Representatives of Regional & International Organizations,

Development Partners

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Executive Secretary of Economic Commission for Africa and indeed on my own behalf, let me join those who have spoken before me to welcome you to Tunis and in particular to this meeting of the 12th Africa Symposium on Statistical Development (ASSD).The theme of this is symposia: *“Strengthening Basic Economic Statistics for the Compilation of National Account”* has been deliberately and carefully chosen to demonstrate our commitments in implementing regional statistical frameworks and initiatives for achieving the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (SDGs) and Africa’s Agenda 2063, which require that quality and timely data are made available for formulating sustainable development and macroeconomic policies that contribute to improving the livelihoods of people of Africa. The implementation of the Africa 2063 and Post 2015 development agenda calls for a data revolution anchored on statistical frameworks that integrate economic, social, environmental and spatial issues and promotes the application of technological innovations for data collection, management and dissemination.

***Ladies and Gentlemen,***

As you all know, economic statistics and national accounts in particular capture the production, exchange, expenditure, consumption, and accumulation, by and among, various economic actors. Moreover, in Africa, quality, timely, and comparable economic statistics are critical for the continents agenda of regional integration, structural economic transformation, and sustainable development. In this regard, economic statistics play a fundamental role in evaluating and informing the strategic economic choices facing our Member States in support of formulating macroeconomic policy; monitoring and analyzing macroeconomic trends; assessing the sustainability and inclusiveness of economic growth; as well as engaging in evidence-based decision making. To this end, the System of National Accounts (SNA) serves as the coordinating framework for economic statistics as well as a conceptual framework. The SNA ensures the consistency of definitions and classifications in economic statistics as well as the numerical consistency of data drawn from various sources.

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

**Let me quickly remind you of the current challenges we are facing in the area of economic statistics and national accounts*.*** National accounts experts are confronted with numerous challenges among which are the increasing complexity of measuring domestic and cross-border economic activities; the growing demand for statistics on new or previously unaccounted for economic activities; the need to balance data collection strategies and outputs against limited resources; and the increasing demand for quality, timely, and harmonized statistics by regional and international development initiatives.

In Africa, despite the improvements made in the last decade or so, economic statistics, including national accounts are still at the early stages of development. The quality, availability and timeliness of these statistics vary, depending on the statistical development of countries. In general, the problems with the production of economic statistics in Africa stem from the weak statistical capacity and infrastructure of countries. For example, some national statistical offices do not enjoy full institutional independence, while others do not have adequate capacity and infrastructure to regularly conduct basic surveys, or have not yet set up institutional arrangements with a wide range of data producers such as ministries or government agencies to acquire administrative data on a regular basis.

**Nonetheless, in the face of these challenges, Africa is collectively making significant efforts to improve economic statistics and national accounts.**During the last decade, several programs and initiatives have been developed to foster the development of economic statistics on the continent, these include:

* **The Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa (SHaSA):** a program adopted by African Heads of State and Government in July 2010, provides a systematic and coherent approach to scale up the efforts of the African Statistical System to produce quality and harmonized statistics. This program is currently being reviewed to take into account the data revolution, Big Data and also to embrace the issues arising from the agenda on SDGs and Agenda 2063.
* **The International Comparison Program for Africa (ICP-Africa)** conducted in 2002, 2011 and 2015 - a program that assisted participating countries to strengthen their economic statistics and compilation of consumer price indices, and related indices, as well as the production of purchasing power parities (PPPs).
* **The African Project on the Implementation of the 2008 SNA** developed by the African Group on National Accounts (AGNA) under the umbrella of the Statistical Commission for Africa (StatCom-Africa). The African Project on the 2008 SNA is aimed at improving the quality, availability and harmonization of economic statistics and national accounts in Africa. After a Phase I in 2014-2015, the project has now entered into its second phase for the period of 2016-2018.
* **The Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity Building in Africa (RRSF),** a framework designed for implementing the Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics (MAPS).The overarching strategy of the RRSF is the design and implementation of the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS). It showcases best practices in statistical development in Africa.
* **The global strategy for the improvement of agricultural and rural statistics** which came as a response by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to the declining quantity and quality of agricultural statistics. The purpose of the global strategy is to provide the vision for national and international statistical systems to produce the basic data and information on biofuels, global warming, the environment and food security.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me take a moment to address some of the important work being done by National Accounts experts to support Member States to implement the 2008 SNA. The implementation of the 2008 SNA is a global statistical initiative and commitment that provides an opportunity to improve the quality, availability, consistency, and harmonization of economic statistics and national accounts. Furthermore, the implementation of the 2008 SNA is the first pillar of the current Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa.

In this context, the African Group on National Accounts (AGNA) was created by the Statistical Commission for African to facilitate the implementation of the 2008 SNA on the African continent. Accordingly, the AGNA, under the umbrella of StatCom-Africa, developed the African Project on the 2008 SNA to address the technical, financial, and institutional challenges countries encounter when collecting and processing economic statistics. The objective of the project is to strengthen the capacity of Member States to produce timely, quality, and harmonized economic statistics and national accounts in support of good economic governance, regional integration, and sustainable development. After a Phase I in 2014-2015, the project has now entered into its second phase to be carried-out during the period of 2016-2018.

In its capacity as Secretariat and Chair of the Continental Steering Committee of the African Project on the 2008 SNA, ECA has actively engaged all project stakeholders through a series of Conferences and Expert Group Meetings in order to effectively coordinate, monitor, evaluate and report on the African Project. Additionally, ECA have developed 3 technical operational guidebooks: *Guidebook on Using Administrative Data in National Accounts*; *Handbook on Supply and Use Tables*; and *Accounting for Informal Sector for the Compilation of National Accounts*. The drafts of the 3 operational guidebooks have been completed and are currently being formatted, edited, and finalized. It is our belief that building on the successes of AGNA, new efforts are required to stir it to high heights based on the outcome of this 12th ASSD. Keeping the status quo and continuing doing business as usual cannot be accepted. The operations of AGNA need to be reviewed for it to deliver on the new demands.

***Ladies and Gentlemen,***

The 12th ASSD with theme: *“Strengthening Basic Economic Statistics for the Compilation of National Account* is the first in a series to be convened with a focus on economic statistics. This marks the beginning of a crusade to improve and strengthen economic statistics in Africa. It will go a long way to furthering our current drive in addressing the critics of African development and economics statistics. As you know not too long ago, some people wrote retrogressive books and articles, namely, “*The Statistical Tragedy in Africa*”, “*Poor Numbers – How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It”*, and many others. These issues require that statisticians and economist alike stand up to address the situation, including ensuring that African countries re-base their GDPs around the same time not only to assure comparability but also for Africa to take its rightful global economic position. It is only with updated economic information, will the true Africa’s contribution to global GDP be known, and the African national accounts experts are the only ones who get this right.

Just to cite an example which is of concern, the recent Global Economic Outlook and Forecasts prepared by UNDESA as of October 2016, shows that Africa is estimated to grow at 1.7% in 2016 which is far below our own estimates and expectations. The question is why do we have different figures; our we are using wrong estimates, assumptions and forecast methodologies or it is our data which is misleading. All these are issues which African statisticians and economist alike must find answers to. And the time is now. It is my hope that this re-energized crusade will help improve the state of economic statistics and national accounts on the continent, an also bring a new look and understanding of the true situation of economic statistics. The 12th ASSD is significant in that: (i) it marks the beginning of the economic statistics round of symposia (2016-2020); (ii) it will serve as an advocacy platform to raise awareness among policy makers and the African statistics community of the importance and challenges of compiling basic economic statistics in Africa; and (iii) it serves as a monitoring platform for CRVS and the 2020 Round of Population and Housing Censuses.

In light of the current momentum and with the aim of achieving the objectives of the 12th ASSD, I wish to urge all of us to actively participate and make this meeting as interactive as possible. Country representatives will share experiences and best practices in the area of economic statistics and national accounts. Regional and international partners are expected to provide inputs on how to best address the needs of countries as well as share with the ASSD their work plans and statistical capacity building activities in the area of economics statistics. Similarly, pan-African Institutions will shed light on the progress of the African Project on the 2008 SNA; and finally, the ASSD is expected to collectively provide guidance and deliberate on the way forward regarding the strengthening of economic statistics in Africa.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

In conclusion, I would like to mention one other critical issue that this symposia and the subsequent ones should begin to address, and this is about making official statistics open by default. Adoption of open data principles is one of the most effective approaches to making data available to wide audiences. Open data are data that are online, free of cost, accessible data that can be used, reused and redistributed – subject only, at most, to the requirements to attribute and share. The benefits of open data have been documented to include enhancements and/or improvements in: cross-departmental data sharing; citizen and constituent engagement in implementing services; transparency and accountability; innovative services and concomitant opportunities for business and economic development. Indeed, the well-respected Mckinsey Institute not too long ago published a study on Open Data systems and concluded that the adoption of Open Data systems can potentially contribute about US$ 3 trillion per year in additional value to the global economy by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of decision making and processes, by facilitating the creation of new products and services, and increasing value for individuals and countries. If Africa were to capture just a fraction of this additional economic value, this would have significant implications for economic growth and poverty reduction. For example, if Africa captured just 5% of this additional open data economic value in the global economy, that would translate into annual economic growth rates in excess of 10 percent. Such growth rates would result in the doubling of the African economy in less than a decade and bring about massive reductions in poverty levels along the magnitudes only recently seen in China and other fast growing East Asian economies. National statistical offices are therefore encouraged to seriously consider participating in open data initiatives.

In conclusion, I realize that the proposed agenda of this ASSD Meeting is very ambitious, but I have no doubt that you are up for the job and you will be able to tackle these critical issues with the attention they deserve. ECA along with other pan-African Institutions remain resolute in ensuring the provision of any support within their means to countries for them to provide the data to inform the Sustainable Development Agenda and Agenda 2063.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and thank you for your kind attention!

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