Opening remarks, John Wilmoth, Director

Joint KNOMAD – Population Division seminar on migration and population modeling

29 April 2014

Dear colleagues,

It is a pleasure to be with you today to discuss what is increasingly being recognized as an important aspect for the work of the Population Division: the use of demographic and statistical models to improve our work in population estimates and projections.

A this moment, we are in the process of finalizing the latest round of the World Urbanization Prospects, which contains our estimates of the proportion urban for all countries of the world, plus estimates of city size for cities with populations of 300,000 or more inhabitants. That work will be released in June, and then we will focus our attention on the next revision of the World Population Prospects.

As most of you know, over the past decade the Population Division has made a great deal of progress in strengthening the evidence base on international migration. Since 2003, we have produced four revisions of the estimates of international migrant stocks by sex. Since 2010, we have supplemented this collection with estimates of the age and origin of international migrants.

In terms of international migration flows, we have greatly expanded the type of information that we collect. Our most recent empirical data on flows cover 44 countries, compared with only a handful in our compilation of 2006. Yet we are well aware that our work on migration flows is far from complete. Available data on international migration, especially on flows, tend to be inconsistent in coverage and content and thus lack comparability across countries and even over time for the same country. Our methods must take into account these deficiencies.

We recognize the importance of migration modeling for improving our work on both estimates and projections of migration. Although both are important, we would place a higher priority on improving our estimates of migration stocks and flows, compared to projections of future trend. Finding a means of assuring the internal consistency of our stock and flow estimates would be especially valuable. For projections, the key issue is communicating the enormous uncertainty that surrounds future trends in migration and highlighting the impact of alternative assumptions.

It is useful also to keep in mind that work by the Population Division on migration estimates and projections is part of a larger package of estimates and projections. We are currently in the process of seeking external funding to strengthen our work on our core dataset, the World Population Prospects. In this work, there will be many competing priorities: better documentation, increased public access, greater transparency of methods, more data and more advanced modeling, among others.

Keeping that broader perspective in mind, I have no doubt that there are many areas where we can improve our methods through the kind of work that you are discussing here today. I have been looking forward to this meeting and have enjoyed reading or skimming the various papers. I am sure that there will be many ideas for us to absorb and potentially to incorporate into our work as part of future revisions of our population estimates and projections.