Inaugural Address by
H.E. Lyonpo Dorji Wangdi,
Minister of Labour and Human Resources,
Royal Government of Bhutan

Honorable heads of statistical organizations,
Representatives of media,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

When I received Mr. Kuenga Tshering’s invitation to attend this meeting of the Heads of SAARC Statistical Organizations, I was overwhelmingly enthused by the list of issues to be taken up for profound, open and of course ‘statistically significant’ discussions. It is very timely and relevant that it is happening in the Kingdom of Bhutan, only after our country hosted a successful and memorable Sixteenth SAARC Summit, during which our leaders unanimously agreed that the meetings of such significance should follow to keep up the spirit of the great SAARC Summit. In a befitting manner, this event is taking place in the year we have jubilantly marked as SAARC’s Silver Jubilee-its 25 years of journey-the journey the member states have undertaken together and has reached thus far when we are already beginning to see some silver lining.

I must proudly praise this initiative because it comes when SAARC countries are beginning to recognize the need to ‘correlate’ ourselves not only through physical connectivity, trade and services, but in numbers, through statistics. Today, emergence of globalized economy and the advancement in information and communication technology have given rise to new problems that have or will affect every nation and each one of us in critical and profound ways. The problems of interdependent nations cannot be separated but only will become more common. We live in the era when the integration of our economies and other forms of regional cooperation has become so indispensible. But, I doubt the integration of our economies can be done optimally unless it is based on certain and consistent regional data.

Obviously, our effort to integrate SAARC economies through the promotion of free trade, common investment, single tourist destination and finance as well as promoting social dimensions such as health, education, IT, environment, crime, community development, research and innovations all depends on the quality of basic regional social and economic statistics. The governments, media, businesses, donors, foreign investors, public and all needs sound statistics at the regional level to initiate any projects, programmes, enterprises and investments. Our effort to reinvigorate our economies and boost the confidence of foreign investments and donors aid in the region also require us to project higher level of transparency, which I feel can come only if we can readily provide them region wide accurate and adequate statistics.

For that matter, and statistically speaking, the ‘probability’ that SAARC integrative initiatives can succeed can go higher if we can first appreciate and the use sound regional statistics as a strategic resources for regional cooperation. I am sure you will be the first ones to acknowledge that the gathering, compilation, classification and dissemination of reliable statistics in the SAARC region are not so developed. Nonetheless, the fact that all of you have gathered to discuss these issues here today is a testimony to your infallible concerns for the same. I am
optimistic that no sooner than later, through similar initiatives and through your unwavering support we will be able to develop authoritative, reliable, relevant, timely and accessible SAARC statistics. I am gratified that since the first meeting of heads of statistical organizations in, Kolkata, 2005, you have proceeded in a gradual and meticulous manner, completely undeterred by sheer magnitude and complexity of the task, and have come a long way closer to fulfilling our long-term goal. I can clearly envision, even as I stand here, the birth of SAARC database, essentially linked to all national databases, containing data of the international statistical standards.

Acknowledging the need to address many issues before achieving the greater goal that you and I aspire for, you have rightly identified the importance of introducing SAARC exchange programme of experts and statisticians through MOU as one of the themes for today's discussions. This means-in one way or the other- we are already called upon to give priority to activities that will enhance partnerships between statistical offices and institutions in the region. Not all the SAARC member-states have similar level of expertise and capacities in managing the functions of statistics, and therefore, such exchange programme can go a long way in promoting the national capacities of the member states. Much more than this, I am certain that exchange programmes can lead to works on harmonizing statistical standards, concepts, definitions and measurements. Basically, when we talk about exchange programmes, we are stressing on the kind of institutional framework of partnerships we ought to develop among (and between) the statistical offices and institutes in the member-states. This is the basic premise by which we can build on SAARC Statistical database, and I hope, after today's extensive deliberations, adequate framework for institutional partnerships will take birth. Let me congratulate you in advance!

In going through WHO website on the health statistics, I got the impression that the countries in the region has rather vague, inconsistent and inadequate national health database, forget about the comprehensive regional one. This has hindered our approach to fighting diseases in strategic, collective and cost-effective manner, particularly those illnesses that know no boundaries and spread like wild fires. Because health statistics involve human lives, it is all the more important to develop standard concepts, definitions, measurements and classification of health statistics for the SAARC region, particularly suitable for our countries sharing geographical proximities. I could not help being delighted by the fact that you have rightly decided to spare some hours today to review the progress in the project on concepts, definition and standards of health statistics for our region. I urge you to do so in the manner that befits our common needs so that one day we can take pride in having a very comprehensive, accessible and reliable regional health statistics that can serve us in disease prevention strategies and in health research and development in the region.

As I said earlier, statistics have a particular importance to SAARC’s economic, financial and social integration. I can say with utmost honesty that it is more than appropriate that you have chosen to deliberate on development of institutional framework for data collection on trade service. With intra-regional merchandise trade standing at 4.8% of the region’s total world merchandise trade in 2008, South Asia is considered as one of the least integrated regions in the world. This picture, which is not so good, emerges because the recorded trade data actually under-estimate the real trade flows among South Asian countries.

South Asia is yet to exploit the advantage of the geographical proximity of its countries by building new partnerships in various sectors like energy, banking, information technology, telecommunications, transportation, education, and health and capital markets. Therefore, it is
critical that South Asian countries which in general have stronger extra-regional than intra-regional trade and financial ties assess and intensify regional trade and economic integration. For this to happen on the positive way, we need to strengthen regional trade link, establish a mechanism for monetary cooperation, harmonize macroeconomic policies, intensify cooperation in the service sector and formalize informal trade. However, the realization of all these strategies require the availability of effective policy instruments, which makes the availability of reliable national and region wide trade, economic and social statistics all the more urgent. More importantly, region wide statistics are crucial as we seek to promote SAARC as free trade area, one investment hub and tourism destination. I am hopeful that today’s meeting will lead to emergence of a new institutional framework for trade and investment data collection, analysis and dissemination.

On the disability statistics, I do not know much about other SAARC countries. But as far Bhutan is concerned, we do not have much data on this particular aspect. Our disability statistics is still disabled! However, I am glad that something is being done; the initiative to gather national disability data is underway. As you all know, disability impacts quality of human life. If we are to create egalitarian society-the society in which everyone is equally well, happy and have equal opportunities, then we need to bring our disabled lots into the mainstream development. Disability statistics is critical for the development of comprehensive disability policies.

All of us know very well that disability and poverty are intricately linked. In South Asia, a large number of our people are disabled and lack basic support system like gainful employment, education and health services; and worse, we have no reliable data, as a result of which our priority on disability issues is low, and often are disabled people excluded from our official statistics. I commend the members here that you have creatively began to think about generating region wide disability statistics; and I pray that with regional disability statistics in place, the countries in the region will pick up disability and development as a new area of priority. Yes. I say it with confidence because statisticians can influence policy makers and politicians.

With this note and in this great spirit, I wish you all a open and fruitful meeting. I solemnly declare today’s meeting of the SAARC Heads of Statistical Organizations open.

Tashi Delek