

MESSAGE
Opening Ceremony of the 30th National Statistics Month and the 14th
National Convention of Statistics
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The Key to a Better Nation

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Thank you very much. Kindly take your seats.

Usec. Rose Edillon, representing Sec. Ernie Pernia of NEDA; Usec. Dennis Mapa of the Philippine Statistics Authority; Dir. Gen. Ronald Golding of the Senate Economic Planning Office; member institutions of the Philippine Statistical System; representatives from the different international development agencies and civil society organizations; members of the academe; professionals; honored guests; ladies and gentlemen: Magandang umaga po sa inyong lahat! [*Audience: "Magandang umaga! Good morning!"*]

Thank you very much for inviting me here today as we celebrate the National Statistics Month. I am very privileged to join some of our country's best and brightest, whose contributions often go unnoticed, yet whose work shapes the lives of so many of our people.

We cannot stress enough your significance in building our nation. Statisticians like you are the bedrock of our government in creating policies and programs that accurately respond to the needs of our people. You don't just do surveys, study algorithms, and manage countless datasets. You understand and interpret the meaning behind the numbers, so that the public can easily understand information. So to all that you do for our people, thank you very much.

Data is the lifeblood of decision-making. It shows why people do what they do, how they see life, and how they live every day. But ultimately, the value of accurate and timely data is that they allow us—both individuals and organizations—to make informed decisions. This is why it is not enough to just tell the story. It is important to tell the right story to ensure that our policies, programs, and projects are responsive and effective.

In this data-drenched world, everyone is scrambling to adapt to one development after another. As we all approach the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the reality of the digital age is rapidly outpacing fiction—self-driven cars, virtual reality cameras, drone aircrafts, surgical robots, artificial intelligence, and of course, big data.

Big data, particularly, is one of the gamechangers in today's world. In 2011, Mckinsey Global Institute predicted that big data will create new waves of productivity, growth, and

innovation.¹ For instance, through big data and innovation, scientists proved that in terms of tree cover, our planet has lost the equivalent of 40 football fields per minute in 2017.² Imagine: we are able to pinpoint and stop harmful emissions with unprecedented precision. That is a huge step towards mitigating climate change.

Big data can also help identify and locate vulnerable individuals in risk hotspots that are hard to reach, ensuring that we can save lives during disasters. In India, a combination of automated risk analytics, geospatial data, and the digital identity system have helped identify and deliver assistance to millions of drought-affected subsistence farmers.³

These are all exciting news and I'm sure you will agree with me that there has never been a better time to be a statistician than today. As Hal Varian, Google's chief economist said, and I quote: "*The sexy job in the next 10 years will be statisticians. People think I'm joking, but who would have guessed that computer engineers would've been the sexy job of the 1990s?*" Close quote. There's a massive opportunity for data scientists and statisticians now. But the challenge for us is this: How do we explore the use of data innovation, such as Big Data, to

¹ Mckinsey Global Institute, 2011, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/digital-mckinsey/our-insights/big-data-the-next-frontier-for-innovation>

² World Economic Forum, 2018, How big data can help us fight climate change faster, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/10/how-big-data-can-help-us-fight-climate-change-faster/>

³ Mckinsey Global Institute, 2019, <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/innovation/the%20value%20of%20digital%20id%20for%20the%20global%20economy%20and%20society/mgi-digital-identification-a-key-to-inclusive-growth.ashx>

complement traditional data sources? How do we craft concrete roadmaps for statistics development, especially in the context of the data revolution? How do we ensure that our use of information will not [only] improve the quality of statistics, but also create real transformation on the ground? How do we truly harness all these tools to help our people, especially those in need?

In my experience, evidence-based, data-based policy setting is critical to the success of any program. Without baseline numbers, we are blind.

Right after assuming the Vice Presidency, we decided to reinvent our office and make it more advocacy-heavy. We started by finding the baselines that will anchor our programs. So during the first few months of my term, my team and I—with the help of local officials and experts—looked at all the poverty, hunger, health, gender, disaster planning, and other development data, so we could identify and validate where the need is greatest and find areas of convergence with our partners.

We started with 50 of the poorest communities—most of them come from the 20 poorest provinces listed in the Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA). We also selected these communities based on the following criteria: poverty magnitude, poverty incidence, proportion of underweight among children below five years old, and provinces with the highest incidence of stunting. After choosing the 50 communities, local officials in these

communities went through a pre-summit workshop to flesh out priority needs under rural development and livelihood, health and nutrition, public education, and women empowerment.

During the launch of our program, Angat Buhay, in October of 2016, we did a “developmental speed dating” for 300 private organizations, Mayors, and other local officials. By the day’s end, we gathered more than 700 pledges.

And for three years now, we have seen the remarkable results of collaboration. We have contributed in transforming the lives of almost 405,000 beneficiaries in over 211 cities and municipalities in the Philippines. This is made possible with the help of over 347 organizations, who are our partners in addressing the needs of Filipino families in the smallest, farthest, and poorest of communities.

One of the communities that show remarkable transformations is Siayan in Zamboanga del Norte. Siayan is one of the poorest municipalities in the country from 2003 to 2009, which has also one of the highest school dropout rates. When we visited Siayan, several students told us that they were forced to walk for two to three hours each way, through steep slopes and rivers, just to get to school on time.

In partnership with the Yellow Boat of Hope Foundation, we have built two dormitories for the students of Siayan National High School—one for boys and one for girls. We

are very happy because students living in the farthest areas in Siayan and those who came from the poorest percentile can now stay in the dorms for free. The dorms are currently home to at least 60 students, who now have the time to rest and study for their lessons every day. And I know how important these are, since I have raised three girls myself and helped them study and prepare for school every day when they were students.

Since we turned over the first dormitory in 2018, the principal said that the dorms helped reduce distance-related dropout cases in their school and improved the academic performance of those who used to skip classes.

Aside from Siayan, we are also starting to witness beautiful transformations in the dormitories we built in Sumilao, Bukidnon and in Eastern Samar—in the municipalities of Balangkayan and Salcedo—where enrollment and retention rates have dramatically improved.

We have also been partnering with several universities and organizations in coming up with baseline studies and metrics for our programs. For instance, in Marawi, our office partnered with Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro, initially, to help with the relief operations and to provide immediate assistance to families who were affected by the siege. Since we had limited manpower and resources, we partnered with students and other volunteers of Xavier University to effectively mobilize, plan, and organize the relief operations for those living in the evacuation centers.

But when we personally saw the condition of the families who were displaced from their homes, with no means of livelihood, we knew that we needed to come up with something more than just a one-time, big-time effort.

So with the help of our partners, we constructed an Angat Buhay transitory village—giving families who have been displaced by the siege, and who have been living for years either in evacuation centers or with their relatives, a space to call their own. Last July 2018, we formally opened the village in Barangay Sagonsongan, and with the help of Xavier University, we are able to monitor our projects on the ground, and identify other needs that may arise. For us, rebuilding Marawi is not just about building homes, but it is about building back better an entire community.

We want our programs to be sustainable and effective even after our term ends. That is why Xavier University is also our partner in carrying out our Bridging Leadership program for all our projects in Mindanao, where we equip the local officials of our adopted communities with skills to sustain the developments in their respective areas. Through the program, local officials can gain a deeper understanding of critical issues affecting their communities and work with different stakeholders to develop tailor-fit solutions to address local problems.

Xavier University is also coming up with a baseline study on the best and most effective livelihood interventions that can be done in the community, because if residents are to

rebuild their lives, then we need to create opportunities for them that are truly responsive to their needs.

As you can see, the work gets more challenging as we do more in each community. The data that we need to gather and analyze are more voluminous. But through all these experiences, our biggest learning is this: Data is not just about accurate data systems, it is about real lives. Our metrics should not be confined to the number of dormitories we have built or the number of our accomplishments. We need to focus on the impact to the quality of life in the community, sustainability, and the number of lives transformed because of our innovations. The question we need to ask ourselves is: “Is the community far better than when we first found it?”

We also need to make sure that we are constantly innovating, at the same time keeping in mind that why we do what we do is not just a duty or a skill, but our service to our people. That we are transforming lives by equipping those in position with accurate and timely information. That we are empowering the Filipino people by telling the truth, the whole truth, the unadulterated truth. Hiding or fudging the numbers is, by itself, a form of oppression.

In this post-truth world, where people today simply trust what they see on screen, and where countless data and statistics everywhere are abused to lend support to false claims and narratives, we need to stand our ground. We need to redeem truth-telling in our conversations and be

unafraid to debunk falsehoods, to counter lies and to expose frauds who deceive our people so brazenly. In the historical TV series, “Chernobyl”—I don’t know if anyone of you saw this—we learn about the story of the April 1986 nuclear plant disaster which occurred in Ukraine, and the cloud of misinformation that took place. The first episode opens up with a dialogue by Valery Legasov, chief of the commission investigating the crisis, and I quote: *“The real danger is if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognize the truth at all.”* Close quote.

We should not let the ability of statistics to accurately represent the world be undermined. Let us do better, innovate faster, and act with more passion and purpose. It is not just innovation that will make us a better nation. It is by working hard together to serve our people that will make this country great again.

Thank you very much. *Mabuhay po kayong lahat!*
[applause]