Opening Address

Mr. CHEUNG, Director of the United Nations Statistics Division

Honorable Minister of …, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates and Observers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure to welcome you to this Special Forum on "The Development of Land Information Policies in the Americas". I would like to thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules and traveling to Aguascalientes to actively participate in this Forum.

The Mexican Government kindly offered to host this Special Forum, and on behalf of Mr. Ocampo- the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations who unfortunately cannot attend this meeting but nonetheless sends you his best wishes- I would like to express our gratitude and appreciation to the Government of Mexico and INEGI for hosting the Forum. I would also like to thank the Permanent Committee on Spatial Data Infrastructure for the Americas, as well as the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) and its representative Mr. Parker, for their tireless efforts to ensure the success of this conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Seventh UN Regional Cartographic Conference for the Americas, held in New York in January 2001, passed a resolution that the UN with support of the Permanent Committee for Spatial Data Infrastructures for the Americas (PC-IDEA) and the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) arrange an inter- regional workshop, to be hosted by Mexico. The resolution, in short, aims to "*determine policies and programs for education, training and professional capacity building that will ensure the development of appropriate land administration systems and associated spatial data infrastructures"* and "*that member States develop appropriate institutional, legal and technical processes to integrate land administration and topographic mapping programs within the context of a wider national spatial data infrastructure"*.

The breadth of this resolution demonstrates the broad reach and importance of determining policies and programmes for educational, training and professional capacity-building that will ensure the development of appropriate land administration systems and associated spatial data infrastructures.

A review of the programme for this Forum shows the importance of building land information policies and their impact on growth and poverty reduction. I believe that the current Forum, gathering talented specialists on land policies from the Americas and other parts of the world, provides the opportunity to review and assess how successful Land Information Systems, GIS and digital cartography have been in dealing with these critical issues and to identify the impediments and barriers that still exist, with a view to finding appropriate solutions in order to overcome them.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While I will not attempt a comprehensive appraisal of the current status of land information policies in the Americas, it is useful to consider some key trends and important shifts which influence the development of land information policies and could help to address associated conceptual, institutional and technical issues of the current agenda.

First:

The recent technological developments, including new high-resolution sensors, global positioning systems (GPS), geographical information systems (GIS), Internet and World Wide Web services, are revolutionizing cartography, surveying and mapping in fundamental ways: geographic data is easily collected and combined with a variety of other data in order to create relevant information for spatial analysis and decision support.

Geographic Information is indeed a growing economic activity, with applications in many sectors: regional planning, land management, environment and natural resources, health care and emergencies, transportation and urban systems, marketing studies, as well as in most of the service sector activities. Increasingly, these geographic information applications are moving from the marketing and research area to management and strategic decision-making.

It is becoming clear that the major barriers and impediments to harnessing geographic information will not be technical ones but rather institutional and organizational ones like the ability to restructure national mapping agencies, land survey departments and other governmental organizations, in order to cooperate with one another, learn from each other and create data standards.

Second:

Most studies show that collection and management of spatial data can be costly. Moreover, the development and maintenance of spatial databases, including cadastral databases, is often expensive and time consuming. It is therefore necessary to minimize duplication of effort and data and encourage the sharing of basic data. The concept of spatial data infrastructure, as part of the national infrastructure, is emerging as a valuable solution.

Indeed, a National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) is coming to be regarded as a fundamental asset of a society, equal to its roads, communications networks, and other public utilities. In this context, increased attention is given to the role of cadastral data in developing national spatial data infrastructures. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that cadastral and topographic data sets gain to be considered as core components of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure and their integration is mutually beneficial.

Third:

The UN is not only aware of the importance of land information infrastructures but recognizes that their role is crucial not only for economic and social growth but ultimately for

human development itself. The UN and other international organizations such as the World Bank, UN-Habitat and FAO have recognized the importance of establishing appropriate land administration systems as a basis to promote economic development, social coherence and environmental sustainability, as outlined by Agenda 21.

Indeed, a number of recent UN Regional Cartographic Conferences adopted resolutions that encourage member nations to develop their national land information infrastructures, and endorsed the United Nations/International Federation of Surveyors Bathurst Declaration on Land Administration for Sustainable Development.

The establishment of an inter-agency Working Group to coordinate geographic information activities within UN, including the development of a global geographic database, demonstrates the importance the UN places in the development of geographic information, including land information.

Another major initiative I would like to note has been the creation in 2000, by Governments in the Americas region and through the assistance of the United Nations Secretariat, of the Permanent Committee on Spatial Data Infrastructure for the Americas -a co-organizer of this meeting, which aims to provide a forum for member States from the Americas to cooperate in the development of a regional geographic information infrastructure, contribute to the development of the global geographic information infrastructures, and share experiences and consult on matters of common interest.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This Special Forum is held in the beginning of a new millennium and a new age - the information age. Land information is facing crucial challenges: new sensors collecting high resolution data in digital form, integrated management of information and the use of Internet and multimedia to disseminate information, and increased demand on cadastral services and products. In addressing the issues of the agenda of this Special Forum, you will contribute to identifying appropriate solutions to reap the benefits of these challenges.

I wish you great success in your endeavors. Thank you very much for you attention.