

**ADDRESS TO THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE OF THE
SOUTH AFRICAN STATISTICS ASSOCIATION**

**TREVOR A MANUEL, MINISTER OF FINANCE
EKHURELENI, 05 NOVEMBER 2003**

Outgoing President of SASA, Professor de Wet;
Distinguished Delegates;
Dear Friends

Thank you for honouring me with the invitation to address this milestone conference, the fiftieth anniversary of SASA.

This place called Caesar's. I am reminded of the of the old Latin maxim - Africa semper aliquid novi - "out of Africa, theres always something new". Well, what is new out of Africa today is that statisticians choose to gather at a casino.

This fact presents me with a philosophical problem. Is this the thesis or the antithesis of the behaviour of statisticians. If it is the thesis, then we accept that the throw of dice or the spin of a one-armed-bandit are all determined by statistical probability, Indeed, then, all of statistics is a gamble and understanding life and numbers has just become much easier. If, on the other hand, this is the antithesis, then the statisticians here who may, in the circumstances, demonstrate a rush of blood to the head, hot flashes or "hoopla" display - all of the characteristics that one would not want in statisticians.

Whilst we ponder that, I have a confession to make. I too am a gambler.

I have a wonderful pair of brass dice. Instead of numbers, my dice have words. On 2 sides the word NO appear, on a third side MAYBE, a fourth side has IF, on the fifth UNLIKELY and the sixth side has the word YES.

These dice are the tools of Finance Ministers. We roll them to determine how to approach the request from colleagues for more money. Of course NO has a much better chance. This method has never let me down. I call it "derived evidence-based decisions-making". Each year, at around this time, I roll the dice and take the decisions. Each year they add back to the predetermined fiscal framework. We then set about describing these decisions in words and numbers thus we compile the 1100 or so pages we release on Budget Day.

Returning to SASA I would suggest that of its 50 years existence, the past decade has been the most challenging and the most rewarding because it is the first period that SASA was freed from the strictures of apartheid. For the first time therefore, SASA could draw on the skills of much wider cross-section of South Africans. This fact is borne out by the representation here.

Let me share with you some of my observations about challenges that confront SASA. I speak as a non-statistician, but as one depends on timely and accurate statisticians for evidence-based decision-making. I speak as the Minister responsible for statistics, but who is prohibited by statute from being directly involved in the work of STATS SA. I have a filter in the form of the Statistics Council Chaired by Dr Hillary Southall to intercede between STATS SA and I on the outputs of STATS SA.

The first challenge I would like to share with you is embedded in South Africa's past. Apartheid was a lie. It was a lie, which masqueraded as truth, because it was apparently supported by numbers. Blacks were not counted, they were not even regarded as South Africans. Notwithstanding, there were so-called statistical outputs derived by warped fertility and morbidity models, with the occasional aerial photographs to support the thesis. Today, there exists amongst ordinary people an unhealthy disregard for official statistics. Perhaps people remain of the view that the numbers will be made up anyway.

The first challenge, which confronts SASA, is the restoration of trust in official statistics. Without the vital element of trust, no official statistics will be reliable.

The second challenge is that there are too few South Africans who love statistics or have a passion for it. As with first challenge, this too is embedded in South Africa's apartheid history. On 17 September 1953, the Minister of Native Affairs, H F Verwoerd, addressed Parliament and said, "What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice." Thus Bantu Education was introduced in 1954, consciously de-emphasising the teaching of Mathematics and Science.

A generation of maths students was destroyed and thereafter, successive generations of maths teachers. To this day, the teaching of maths and science, where it occurs in the majority of schools is too frequently mediocre. Ten years into democracy, this residue of apartheid decision lives on. It must be reversed - not merely at universities or in the work place, but at primary and pre-schools. SASA has a role to play. We have a model teaching approach in ICOTS which must be built out as a conscious effort to interrupt the cycle of the poverty of numeracy.

The third challenge is the absence of sufficient discourse on methodology and outcomes. At a distance I observe how easily positions are polarised and entrenched. I have seen this with data sets like causes of death, road accidents, crime and HIV and AIDS. Statisticians become the analysts. Results trump method. The value of statistics is lost. I truly hope that SASA, and this conference, in particular, will deal with this illusion of certainty which parades as professional confidence.

The fourth challenge is to try and pace ourselves relative to our capacity. I have, at close quarters, observed the struggles of my counterparts on the Africa

continent as they prepare poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. PRSP's. The PRSP's must be consulted upon and have a strong statistical foundation. In the absence of the latter, these countries cannot easily access facilities such as the debt relief for Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). South Africa, or parts of it, are highly sophisticated. We aren't deemed either highly indebted or poor. We are thus required to play in a different league. We have to comply with the Standardised Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS). The requirements are onerous.

Yet, we must recognise that the South Africa of the majority is indeed deeply poor. Similarly, we lack a sufficient skills endowment to meet all of the requirements. SASA must rise to the challenge of deepening the skills base whilst engaging in a process to determine how much we can undertake reasonably.

The fourth challenge I wish to draw attention to, is what gets measured – and who determines that. I observed an interesting debate in the USA recently on the war in Iraq. What do you measure as the cost of war?

- ❖ The cost of the bombs dropped in April and the troops deployed.
- ❖ The additional \$87 billion approved by Congress last week for reconstruction efforts.
- ❖ The number of body bags returned (measured alone?) or with the number of injured (both physical and mentally) troops returning.
- ❖ The profound anti-Americanism developing in large parts of the world or
- ❖ The inter-temporal taxation effects of a deficit now approaching 5% of USA GNP.

What gets measured? And, who determines that?

I recognise that the work of statisticians is incredibly hard. I recognise too that the work of statisticians too frequently tends to be numbers driven – many statisticians appear happy to live in a rarified environment with their computers and models and then tend to see conversation with other people as a horrible intrusion. But, our best endeavours are not about numbers, they are about people and the quality of the lives of even the poorest. This is the measure of civilisation.

Statistics can make an enormous difference to the quality of democracy. Innumeracy is the enemy of democracy. People familiar with numbers and facts can measure progress in their own lives and are empowered to speak about what remains to be done.

SASA, through its work, can thus significantly contribute to the quality of democracy. It can do this by broadening the number of statisticians, and generating the love for numbers and a broad statistical literacy in society. This is

a huge but highly rewarding task. It is the kind of task that makes everyday worth getting out of bed for.

In conclusion, I am reminded that Ian Hacking argues “Quiet Statisticians have changed our world, not by discovering new facts or technical developments, but by changing the ways that we reason, experiment and for our opinions.

I invite SASA to go forward in the same spirit.

I have pleasure in opening the 50th Anniversary Conference of SASA and I wish you the very best – your discussions and decisions.

THANK YOU.