

# Opening address

## Johannes Rau, Federal President

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I.

I found your comparisons between statistical conferences and the Olympic Games very interesting and could have gone on listening for a long time. I was especially interested to hear when you would make the point that at the Olympic Games only amateurs are meant to take part, whereas at this conference, there are only professionals. I think that is an important distinction that should not be ignored. And now I would like to welcome you all to Germany and to Berlin. I am actually on holiday, but I am happy to interrupt my holidays to welcome you here today.

I have great respect for the good that statistics in general and the International Statistical Institute in particular do all over the world. In addition, as we have just heard, up to now Germany has had the chance to host an ISI conference only once every hundred years. So it may be some time before you come back again.

When the conference was held here in 1903 (with 245 participants, at that time a major world event), Berlin's first, newly opened underground rail line, or U-Bahn, was the talk of the town. It was more than 11 kilometres long and most of it was indeed underground. In those days a trip on the U-Bahn was a bit of an adventure. Today, the Berlin U-Bahn is more than ten times as long -- most of it still underground -- and riders take four hundred million trips on it every year, no longer out of a sense of adventure but to reach their destinations quickly and safely.

Over the decades, things have become bigger and faster in Berlin, as they have everywhere. That has not terribly impressed the people who live here. They are as cheeky and good-natured as ever – the legendary Berlin combination of a big heart with a quick tongue hasn't changed. Since the end of the division of Germany and of Europe, Berlin has been able to pick up where it left off during its heyday and is now a workshop of German and European unity, a laboratory of the new and hopefully of progress as well. The city is bursting with creativity and vital energy. I hope that your meetings will leave you at least a little time to discover or rediscover Berlin and to get to know this area and its people better. I see that you have an accompanying programme with many interesting excursions. I am sure that in taking advantage of these opportunities, you will gain many good impressions of Germany to take home with you.

II.

The science of statistics does not always have an easy time. Some people respect its clarity and wisdom, but they are also cautious, sometimes even terrified of statistics, as if standing before Zeus' daughter Athena, the goddess of wisdom, who carried the head of Medusa in her breastplate.

But other people tend to poke fun: According to them, the real gods of statistics are more likely to be Fortuna, Hermes and Justitia -- the ever unpredictable goddess of luck, the god of trade and trickery and the blindfolded goddess. You might even hear old jokes like this one: "Forgotten your telephone number? No problem – just ask a statistician to estimate it for you."

In reality, however, good statistics are not blind, nor do they deceive or blind us. On the contrary, they can open our eyes. That is why statistics are an indispensable source of information, particularly for those in political life. Indeed, I rather wish that some politicians would pay more and better attention to what statistics have to say. For example, Federal Statistical Office calculations show that by 2050, half of the population of Germany will be over the age of forty-eight and one-third will be sixty or older. So it seems likely that there will be far fewer people working and far more pensioners and elderly people than there are today, which threatens to turn the age pyramid on its head. If you think about this finding, you realise that political decisions are needed to make sure that social insurance systems set up under a very different demographic age distribution are still stable fifty years from now.

Statistics show not only where political action needs to be taken. They can also show whether the action taken is effective. For example, in Germany the number of traffic deaths is at its lowest level since people started keeping relevant records fifty years ago, despite huge growth in traffic density and the number of vehicles. These figures show that increasingly strict security requirements for cars and roads pay off, as does encouraging motorists to drive carefully and considerately. Lastly, statistics also help us see what we should stop doing. For example, they have shown us how much we suffer from environmental pollution and how urgent it is that we stop abusing the natural environment that is the foundation for all life.

This does not mean that all statistics are indispensable. There are some collections of data whose meaning and utility is hard to see even with the greatest amount of goodwill. But those are the exceptions. As a rule, statistical services do extremely useful and valuable work. It is therefore a mistake to do away with as many kinds of statistics as possible in the name of cutting red tape and saving money. There are supposedly some cases in which certain fields of statistics were done away with entirely, only to be sorely missed two or three years later by everyone in positions of political responsibility, who then called for these same fields to be reinstated. We should not keep repeating this kind of mistake. The old woodworker's saying also applies to cost-cutting and statistical services: Measure three times, cut once.

### III.

At the outset, I mentioned how important I think statistics are for the good of the international community as a whole. For example: Whereas the population of Germany is shrinking, the global population continues to grow at a rapid pace. Every two years, the United Nations publishes its projections on this topic. Even assuming the more moderate scenario from their forecasts, by 2050 the world's population will have increased to 8.9 billion people, or 2.6 billion more than today.

Already today -- as another statistic shows -- 1.4 billion people suffer from a chronic shortage of water; almost twice that number have to live without adequate sewer systems or sanitary facilities. And already today that leads to eighty percent of all illnesses in the so-called developing countries, where one out of every two persons suffers from illnesses caused by impure drinking water and every year five million people die as a result. Population growth threatens only to exacerbate this situation. This is far more than just statistics: This is a call to finally change things for the better.

In this way, it is possible to use the language of statistics in particular to argue very persuasively for more commitment to development policy. By the way, creating effective statistical services in the less developed countries is itself an important contribution to development policy. These countries need such services so that they can better understand

their own situation and their own path of development, so that they can organise assistance and self-help more effectively. For this reason, I particularly welcome the extensive involvement of the International Statistical Institute in this area. The Development Fund set up by the Institute, for example, has made it possible for young statisticians from developing countries to participate in this conference. This sets an excellent example. I would like to extend an especially warm welcome to these young people, and I recommend this practice to all other scientific communities.

#### IV.

Because statistics is a science benevolent and beneficial to humanity, it has been able to permeate all areas of life and do good everywhere. Of course there would be trade and commerce without statistics as well, but only statistics creates the necessary transparency for those involved and demonstrates how far global cooperation and the division of labour have already progressed and what opportunities and risks they offer.

Of course, statisticians have also profited from the incredible progress in communications and information technology. It has long been possible to send huge amounts of data around the world in the blink of an eye; and mathematical problems that, in the past, a scholar might have spent a lifetime trying to solve can now be easily dealt with by any home computer.

At the same time, the hunger for information and, consequently, the hunger for statistics is still growing everywhere. You can be pleased about that. However, this hunger must be accompanied by the ability to mentally assimilate and digest the information on offer. The greatest possible number of interested individuals should be able to truly understand and evaluate statistical information. The International Statistical Institute can certainly make a substantial contribution to carrying out this pedagogical task. In addition, all statisticians should regard it as a matter of professional honour to provide the public only with statistics suitable for consumption and free from questionable ingredients.

#### V.

Statistics is a lively science. It is constantly evolving and, like every discipline, it has different schools and currents of thought, unsolved problems, even issues of style and academic fashions. For 118 years now – or even 150 years, if counting its predecessors – the International Statistical Institute has been making a crucial contribution to progress in statistical methodology, which is so important for the entire field of statistics, and to promoting exchange within the international statistical community. That is why every two years statisticians from all over the world focus their attention on the ISI conference and its results. Unfortunately, I do not have the expert knowledge to follow your discussions, much less to delight in the beauty and clarity of some of the mathematical formulas that will no doubt be presented here. But I do know that there will be a lot here for the connoisseur in the next few days and that your findings will help people to make advancements in many fields.

Therefore I wish you productive meetings, fruitful discussions, and an enjoyable stay in Berlin and Germany. One more thing in closing: According to the tourism statistics, Berlin is becoming a more and more popular destination for visitors from all over the world. In 2000, visitors spent a total of 11.4 million nights in Berlin, up 20% from the previous year. That means, after London, Paris and Rome, Berlin is one of Europe's most popular destinations. You are also contributing to this trend with your conference. I can only encourage you: Come back soon – you won't regret it. And that is very good, not just for Berlin, but also for our statistics. Once again, welcome.