

Observing the World Statistics Day on 20 October 2015



Dear Colleagues,

Following recommendation by the United Nations Statistical Commission, the General Assembly decided to designate 20 October 2015 as World Statistics Day. World Statistics Day is to be observed in five years intervals, on 20 October. The theme of this year's World Statistics Day is

Better data, better lives.

The word “Data” is spelled out whenever there is any talk about sustainable development, about post-2015 agenda, about long-term strategies. Some of the speakers, and let me to be sincere, as I talk to friends now, use it as a fashion item, but there are also those, who are serious, and who understand the role that data and statistics have. Yes, we have to recognise that it is not better data that will lead straight to better lives, but that better data are a key to a well informed decision making, formulation of strategies, policies and development plans, transparency, better governance of public affairs, accountability – simply ensuring that people benefit from a *“better social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”*.

Statistics – a modern science with historical roots



One of my favourite artistic expressions of statistics is the picture of an antic relief displaying a population census in the Ancient Rome. The relief shows an enumerator on the left side, who counts people, but also their property and other socio-economic characteristics. When we speak about official statistics, we are aware that it has made significant development of its methods, techniques and approaches over the generations, and that there is a lot to modernise in the near and immediate future (seeking new data sources, implementing new technologies, advanced dissemination channels). However, when we speak about official statistics, we should also recognise that it accumulated a wisdom worse of thousands of years of experience, that it builds its methods and techniques on a solid scientific basis, that it maintains relevance to policy issues of development of nations, that it is a public service producing public good – statistical data, and it is likely the most impartial source of data driven by ethical principles, such as:

- Principles of Professional Ethics of the International Statistical Institute;
- Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

What does it mean better data?

When Arab people took the streets half a decade ago, it was clear that they were concerned about the quality of their life, about their rights, about governance. There are lessons learned from these events for everyone, statisticians too. Modern statistics should respond to the increased dynamics of the society. Therefore, we need more frequent but reliable statistical estimates with a cross sectional breakdown combined with a detailed geographical breakdown. Statistics has to display potential



disparities between ethnic and social groups, generations, gender, etc. while statistics has also to capture the local specifics of small geographical areas. Definitely national aggregates at annual frequency are not sufficient anymore.

Moreover, there is a number of areas that are not sufficiently covered by the current official statistics, such as human rights, governance and well-being.

Statistics and data vis-à-vis human rights

If I mentioned human right, let's recall one of the fundamental human rights – **Right to Information**. Data are a public good, and everyone has a right to an unrestricted access to such data. Data should not be anymore restricted to a narrow circle of policy makers, they should not be screened by a political force prior to release. In this respect the General Assembly adopted, by its resolution 68/261, the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics that define 10 principles of professional ethics, transparency and independence of official statistics on political power, along with the protection/confidentiality of data on individuals and the demand for national and international coordination in official statistics. A good practice in implementing the Fundamental Principles calls for a simultaneous release of data to all users.

While statistics itself contributes to fulfilment of one of the fundamental human rights, there is not much of data from official statistics that document the situation of respect to human rights. Here we have evidently a lot to do, in cooperation with academia and possibly, to the extent of ensuring impartiality, also civil society organizations.

Statistics and data in informed policy making

The primary role of official statistics is to provide data to policy makers, businesses and citizens – to facilitate the formulation of strategies, development plans, business operations and everyday life. Statistics is not an accounting and auditing tool, it has much broader role in provision of timely, relevant and impartial data. We have to explain and repeat this again and again, in particular with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Post-2015 agenda that statistics and statistical data are not to be limited to a set of indicators for monitoring and publication of progress reports. The role of statistics is to document, through detailed and relevant data the issues that need attention of policy makers, to identify potential disparities, obstacles to development and risks in order to formulate and update the policies and relevant decisions.

Statistics and data in monitoring progress

Obviously, we cannot deny that there is surely a role of official statistics in ensuring accountability and of monitoring a progress towards set targets. Such monitoring should provide data that provide policy makers with information on whether the development is on track or lagging behind. Therefore, also monitoring indicators should be relevant to policy issues and structured in a way that would allow taking corrective measures.



On the other hand, we shall refrain from taking development as a competition. In particular, I would like to raise flag against the proliferation of composite indicators (based on subjective weights) that have their primary role in ranking countries. There will be always front runners and those catching up from behind. However, in order to catch up the policy makers need to understand what to change, and not to be embarrassed by a relatively weak rank of their country.

Statistics and data in conflict

There is an old Latin proverb “Inter Arma Silent Musae” – translated into English: “For among [times of] arms, the Muses fall mute”. There are several reasons to brave this proverb.

Particularly in our region, we see countries facing internal and external conflict, occupation. We are well aware that there is a necessity of development after the conflict. Lives continue during the conflict, so as the role of the community to ensure better lives. Therefore, statistics and data need to be secured, they should not vanish in the noise of arms. Moreover, production of statistics and data is to continue, even in a limited scope, during the conflict. For this reasons, ESCWA cooperates with the Partnership in Statistics in the 21st Century (PARIS21) on inclusion of statistics in conflict within the guidelines for developing National Strategies for Development of Statistics (NSDS).

We shall mention an important role of statistics and data in creating public awareness of the conflict. What else than relevant, reliable and impartial data can better document the socio-economic and environmental repercussions of the occupation and conflict. It is our role to show the downgrading of the quality of life, the hardships of the situation of households, displacement -- and these data should be displayed within studies drawing attention to destructive impact of the occupation, war and other kinds of conflicts. Let me to mention here, the support by ECRI and SD to the Post-War Survey in Gaza, following the Israeli attacks on Gaza in 2014. Data document the hardship of households in Gaza, households that already live in a restricted place resembling, due to a total blockade, the largest prison of the World.

Let’s also mention the regular input, by ECRI, to the annual report by the Secretary General on repercussions of the Israeli occupation of Palestine – a study drawing on the Palestinian data.

Role of statistics and data in building the national pride

I choose to participate in the observance of the World Statistics Day by accepting participation in the conference organized in Ramallah – participation was confirmed by guests from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Sudan, Tunisia, UAE, as well as Brazil, France, Germany, Mexico, South Africa, Sweden, Turkey, USA and UK. This brought my thoughts to the position of official statistics in Palestine. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) founded in 1993 became a success story in institutional building for the Palestinian state – the state that, while under occupation and siege, is recognised by a growing number of governments and international organizations. The quality of work of the PCBS was acknowledged through various awards, let’s mention the acceptance to the IMF’s Special Data Dissemination Standard that is awarded only to national statistical offices meeting the highest quality of statistical production.

The production, publication and communication of nationally produced statistics and data (showing successes and failures) is an expression of national identity. There is a display in Nasr City in Cairo at



the top of the building of the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS) – the display shows the number of Egyptians, based on a model drawing on the past censuses. The widest statistical operation – the population and housing census is a demonstration of national unity, a celebration in which citizens identify with their nation – almost in every country of the World undertakes regular population and housing censuses at 10 years intervals.

Statistics in research and development

Let's not forget about data used in evaluating experiments and pilot projects in order to choose the options showing the best results. From medical research that results ultimately in raising the life expectancy, through technology to research and pilot projects of a complex inter-disciplinary nature.

Better data, better lives

The above are few (non-exhaustive) examples on how statistics and data relate to lives of people. Better data are one of the keys to better lives. We have to use it in a proper way in a proper lock – a lock that will open a gate, or at least a door leading to better lives.

Everyone will continue emphasising that “Data are important” in various reports, strategies and work plans. May I ask you, when you speak about importance of data, to think about what does it mean to you, what data are needed to fulfil your mandates, how will better data impact on outcomes of your work. Please do not hesitate to share your thoughts with us in the Statistics Division – at least for pragmatic and work related reasons that we better know about your data needs.



My colleagues will distribute on Tuesday 20 October 2015 the badges of the World Statistics Day produced in Arabic, French and English. It would be a nice gesture, if you display and wear the badge in

recognition of the importance of quality data in fulfilling our mandates in sustainable development in the Arab region.

With my most sincere regards (from Ramallah, State of Palestine),

Juraj
and colleagues in the Statistics Division

Beirut, 20 October 2015