

Efforts on Implementing the SDGs in the Arab Region



An Interview with Juraj Riečan*

Mr. Juraj Riečan is the director of the Statistics Division at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. On the occasion of his planned visit to Palestine to attend the 9th meeting of the High-level Group established by the UN Statistical Commission, he answered a few questions about the preparedness of official statistics in the Arab region to respond to challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Question: Thank you for accepting the interview. Is this your first time in Palestine?

JR: Thank you. In the nine years that I have worked for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA), I have had the chance to visit Palestine eight times, and each time I return I am inspired. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) is one of the leading national statistical offices – not only in the Arab region, but also by global standards. Therefore, the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity Building in Statistics has accepted the invitation and is holding its meeting in the State of Palestine.

Q: What are the benefits of holding the meeting of this High-level Group in Ramallah?

JR: This event helps us to keep the Arab statistical community on the world map of official statistics. Arab statisticians pursue a

tradition of cooperation and exchange of experience and expertise with the goal of producing a reliable and useful picture of the Arab region via dependable and relevant statistics and data. This becomes particularly important in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015.

Q: You mentioned the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Are the Arab national statistical offices ready to support policy makers in implementing the agenda, and what is the role of regional organizations in this context?

JR: Arab countries show differences in the availability of data, setting the SDG implementation plans, putting in place the governing mechanism, and producing voluntary national reviews, but they share the desire to produce relevant statistics and data on sustainable development. Analysis undertaken by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) shows that Arab national statistical offices are able to provide data on 48 percent of the indicators included in the global framework of sustainable development indicators. If we take into account only those indicators that have internationally agreed-upon definitions and methodologies, then 59 percent of such indicators are covered by data.

During the coming months, ESCWA plans to review for the second time the data that have been made available through national official statistics. It furthermore intends to collect this data in a regional database that should become operational at the beginning of 2018 and be made available to the public during the course of the year.


Q: I am sure that policy makers and other users would like to have a more complete set of data pertaining to the Sustainable Development Goals.

What are the plans for increasing the data availability?

JR: You are right, beyond the collection of data and the establishment of the database, ESCWA's primary and most important tasks regarding statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development involve the pursuit of activities on statistical capacity development and the fostering of technical cooperation in the Arab regional statistical system.

Q: You mentioned the role and activities of UN-ESCWA in supporting the national statistical offices. However, there are other important players in the Arab region that are also active in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. What are you doing to ensure that all these activities in the region pursue the same goals in a coordinated way?

JR: Regional statistical agencies that include the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the League of Arab States, UN-ESCWA, Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat), the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS), the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRI), and others cooperate in establishing regional frameworks of indicators on sustainable development that are related to the indicators of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). These agencies furthermore develop statistics on national resources and partner in developing capacities within the Arab region to produce data for the global framework of sustainable development indicators.



Q: All these activities, and in particular the increased production of statistical data, will require new resources and more funding for official statistics. How do you expect to entice policy makers and donors to invest more resources into statistics?

JR: First of all, we have to convince them through the quality, timeliness, reliability, and relevance of the statistics that we generate for these stakeholders. However, the region is also pursuing efforts that aim toward the innovation and modernization of official statistics, seeking ways to produce more statistical data without a massive increase in budgets and resources.

The Arab Conference on a Transformative Agenda for Official Statistics was organized in April 2016 in Ankara, by the UN Statistics Division, SESRIC, UN-ESCWA, AITRS, and the Islamic Development Bank, with the significant participation of the Arab national statistical offices. The conference marked the beginning of common work on new and innovative sources and methods for generating official statistics, among them the inclusion of geospatial information with statistical data, and other innovative approaches.

The regional statistical agencies also undertake to establish a platform for wide regional data sharing. National statistical offices, in cooperation with agencies such as Eurostat, PARIS21, UN-ESCWA, the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), GCC-Stat, and the African Development Bank are undertaking a comprehensive assessment of their national statistical systems, with a view to establishing


national strategies for the development of statistics sensitive to the issues.

Surely, despite modernization efforts, but also in support of modernization, we will have to mobilize some additional resources. In the Arab region, we do so through the United Nations Development Account program and through partnerships with regional development banks and other funding institutions (such as the African Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank, development assistance programs, and other donors).

Q: Let's return to capacity building and development in statistics. Do you envisage organizing specific training sessions related to the indicators of sustainable development?

JR: I have to emphasize that capacity building and development involves more than training. A whole set of processes assist individual nations and their statistical systems in creating conditions that enable statistical activities to be carried out. This includes the building of skills and knowledge and the exchanging of experience. It also involves the creation of national partnerships and organizational platforms to facilitate better cooperation between producers and users of statistics. Finally, capacity development also requires political support in establishing supportive legal and legislative frameworks for official statistics.

I must emphasize that data for indicators of sustainable development can be produced only when we strengthen basic statistical activities. In the Arab region, we identified some priority areas that span across all three components of sustainable development: economic statistics (national accounts, business registers, short-term indicators, price indices,



and sectoral economic statistics), demographic and social statistics (civil registration and vital statistics, Pan-Arab Harmonized Household Surveys, population and housing censuses, poverty statistics, gender statistics, and social and population indicators), and statistics on environment and natural resources (statistics on water and climate change, System of Environment Economic Accounting).

Q: When we talk about development, we have to recognize that everyone progresses at a different pace. Would you agree that broadly aggregated statistics are not sufficient in the context of the 2030 Agenda?

JR: Yes, I agree. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pays great attention to the detailed breakdown of data by various criteria, including geographical breakdown, breakdown by race, sex, ethnic origin, age, disability, rural/urban areas, and any other applicable criteria that are compatible with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Currently, within the Arab region, 31 percent of applicable indicators are available with their sex-disaggregated breakdown. The Regional Office of UN Women, with UNESCWA and other partners, therefore, plans to intensify capacity development in gender statistics – in particular regarding the aspects relevant to the sustainable development indicators.

Q: We talked about the production of statistics and how it can be improved. What about bringing statistics to policy makers and users?

The dissemination and use of data are being streamlined in the Arab region through the modernization of data dissemination and communication and by engaging in dialogue with policy makers and other users of sustainable development statistics. To this end, multi-stakeholder partnerships are being established both regionally and within each individual country.

As the director of the Statistics Division at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia since January 2009, Dr. Juraj Riečan is primarily responsible for managing the UN-ESCWA's program of assisting countries of the Arab region in developing capacity of their statistical systems. Dr. Riečan holds a PhD in mathematical statistics; his thesis focused on applications of the Kolmogorov Consistency Theorem.

* Dr. Riečan was not actually interviewed. He chose to use the format of a fictitious interview to convey his thoughts about the implementation of the SDGs in the Arab region.