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ESCWA STATISTICAL COMMITTEE, 14TH SESSION
10 February 2021, Online session

Opening Statement
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Distinguished Colleagues and Statistical Friends from the Arab Region,

It is an honor and a pleasure to be with you, this morning. We are all living a moment of crisis and global challenges, but we, as a professional statistical community, want to send a strong signal that we are connected and work together in professional solidarity. And that's why I would not want to miss to be with you this morning, even though it is a very early hour in New York City. I also want of course to send a strong signal of support to our colleagues in the ESCWA Secretariat under the leadership of Juraj, with whom we work so closely throughout the whole year.

Dear colleagues,

Everybody says that we need more data. But is it really MORE data? Isn't it rather GOOD data that we need? High quality data? Consistently disaggregated data? Timely data? Integrated data? Comparable data across countries – following global United Nations norms? Comparable data over time – so we can meaningfully assess progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals?

I always say that the only ones that can sustainably produce good development data are National Statistical Offices. And I want to use this opportunity to confirm that we at the United Nations rely fully on national data sources – your data. The recent COVID crisis has shown that National Statistical Offices, including those in the Arab region, are quite capable of being agile, responding to new challenges, leading the national information systems, using innovative data sources (such as telephone data), integrating big data and especially geospatial data to show the spread of the disease.

All these topics will be discussed by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 3 weeks, where we expect more than 150 countries to be represented by their Chief Statisticians. And even though this is a moment of crisis, it is also a moment of opportunity and I hope to see more countries and more young Statisticians at the UN Statistical Commission than ever before. And I very much hope you will also be part of it. ESCWA will have a prominent role as it will report on its regional programme. Actually, the Statistical Commission has already started with a series of side events. If you still have the energy after this Committee session at 15h Beirut time, you are cordially invited to join our High-Level Side Event on the important topic of “Data Stewardship and the role of National Statistical Offices in the changing data landscape”.

ESCWA has a long tradition of working very closely with UNSD on the full integration of regional and global data. ESCWA Secretariat and ESCWA countries have played an important role of helping to define global methodologies in relevant specialized areas such as ‘Islamic banking’. ESCWA also is a key provider of international trade data on the Arab regional to our COMTRADE database, based on national data sources. And we are certainly looking forward to our joint experimentation on issues like globalization and measurement of the digital economy leading up to the planned revision of the System of National Accounts 2025.

Dear colleagues,

Only high quality, globally consistent data allow for meaningful aggregates and evaluation of progress to the SDGs. Quality assurance and national ownership are critically important before any data is posted on a United Nations website.

I keep reminding donors around the globe, multilateral institutions, bilateral and private donors, that solid data are not cheap. We need to collectively invest and support country capacity in creating resilient and sustainable national information architectures, based on statistics, big data and geospatial information. We have a strong mandate in “The Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Data”, adopted by the General Assembly, which lays down concretely the needs of member states. Moreover, the Secretary General’s UN Data Strategy reflects a strong political commitment to data at the highest level of my organization.

Again, I would like to express this morning our professional solidarity and support from the UN Statistics Division. Ivo and Francesca from my team will join you a little bit later to follow your substantive discussions and understand, first-hand, the needs and concerns of the countries of the Arab region.

I wish you success for your meeting. Please, do take good care of yourselves, your families and your statistical teams. I am looking forward to seeing you soon at the 52nd session of the UN Statistical Commission; And I certainly hope that we can all meet soon again personally, either here or there.

Shukran.