A Conversation With Ola Awad, President, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

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Published on: Oct 28, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/99608f92.2617629d>

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ABSTRACT

Harvard Data Science Review's Founding Editor-in-Chief, Xiao-Li Meng, and Media Feature Editor, Liberty Vittert, interviewed Ola Award, President of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). They discussed the initiatives Ola leading at the PCBS including efforts to modernize how they collect census data and ways they have encouraged the public to engage and respond to surveys.

This interview is part of HDSR's Conversations with Leaders series.

HDSR includes both an audio recording and written transcript of the interview below. The transcript that appears below has been edited for purposes of grammar and clarity.

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Audio recording of the interview

Xiao-Li Meng: Thank you, Ola, for joining us. I know how busy you are. We really appreciate your time. So, let's just get to the conversation right away. I think you'll remember that we started to talk about having this conversation because of your presentation at the celebration of World Statistics Day. And you talk quite a bit about the kinds of innovations your office has been doing to reach out to the general population, and to engage them in official statistics. So, my first question is, can you tell our listeners briefly about how you conduct your census? What do you do to raise the general awareness about a census to engage the public?

Ola Awad: First, thank you very much for inviting me. I'm really very much pleased to be with you and to talk more about our work in Palestine, especially in the work of official statistics. I want to start to talk about our census. The first one was in 1997, the second one was in 2007, and the third one was in 2017. In 2017 we made a decision to collect data electronically using handheld devices linked with GIS [geographic information system]. So, it was very much different from the first and the second. And we had two schools of thought inside our workplace, PCBS, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Because one school inside PCBS was stressing the importance to stay as is, collecting the data as we used to do on paper because we have so many challenges and it's really hard to conduct the census actually on the ground with the conflict that we have here.

Xiao-Li Meng: I see.

Ola Awad: And the second school of thought that we have, which I was actually leading, is that we can't move ahead and we can't develop our official statistics if we can't actually develop the techniques and the tools to move ahead. So, at the time, we took a decision that we are going to an electronic data collection using handheld devices linked with GIS. So, we started to work on it at two levels. First one was inside PCBS, increasing awareness for employees and engaging them in the whole census process. The second level was outside PCBS, developing an awareness campaign map for the rest of our stakeholders. So, this is how we started.

Xiao-Li Meng: So from this process, what do you think worked and what are the lessons learned?

Ola Awad: I would like to start with what works.

Xiao-Li Meng: Yeah, sure.

Ola Awad: We had a plan for each stage of the census process in increasing awareness. So, the delimitation, in the enumeration phase, in the data collection phase, even in the launching results phase, the campaigns targeted different levels and segments. Policymakers, schoolchildren, media, university communities, influencers, municipalities, churches, mosques, every single person in Palestine. All of these targets were also raising awareness on their own, on the importance of the census and the importance of cooperation during data collection. The good part is that we invested so much with the new graduates in media and we hired them to lead the awareness campaign in each of the governorates. And this led to a really amazing competition between these graduates in the governorate. So, we needed a bit more decentralization and they were amazing with

fresh and bright ideas. We recruited also our enumerators from the locality itself. So, they were very much well known to the community. This is how we stayed close to the community and we engaged all sectors in the census, including the public, the private sector, everyone. Also, we contacted everyone, starting with the public sector, with all the ministries, governments, and institutions to talk about the census. We tried to engage them with the whole process.

So, for example, we engaged the governors and we told them that you will lead the census in your governorate. They took the lead of the process. They engaged the mayors of the municipalities and the governorate. We engaged also the chambers of commerce. We engaged the private sector, the police, everyone. And we had so many meetings, workshops, sessions, talking about the census, informing them where we are and our challenges in each governorate. I mean, the whole community was really very much engaged. We succeeded to form a close relationship with the households. And it was such a winning strategy. We gained their trust and this is really very important. Most of them knew about the importance of the data, and that the data is very much confidential and nothing on the individual data will be shared by anyone for any reason. I'm going to tell you, Palestine is such a small country, but it's different. I mean, the southern part is very much different from the northern part and also from the center. Jerusalem is very much also different. That's why we work on the decentralization level. In all of the census process, we succeeded in engaging every single sector and every single individual as much as we can.

But what has not worked, what we did, especially in the awareness campaign, we built on what we had. So, we said, OK, we are going to use what we used to do in the previous two censuses, like, for example, leaflets, distributing leaflets in the streets and putting them on the lights and so forth. And then we had the digital kind of awareness campaign, and that was really too much. I mean, if I could go back, I may just go to the digital media, because first, we are such a young population here in Palestine. Sixty-eight percent of the total population is under 30 years old and they use social media. So, we invested a lot in the social media and it was a great success. And, I may say, for other tools that we use, for example, so many visualized messages targeting each segment differently. But there was no need to print leaflets, put them on the lights in the streets and distribute them because the old tools didn't make a real impact. And the digital campaign was much more effective than what we used to have in the previous two censuses. Social media has taken place in Palestine much more than ever, since the last 10 years or even 20 years.

Xiao-Li Meng: With all these efforts, I have to ask you that, compared to the previous two censuses, particularly in 2007, did you see a significant increase in both the quantity and quality of the responses in terms of people's participation? How completely they filled out your questionnaire? Anything you can tell us in terms of the improvement you made?

Ola Awad: I'm really very much pleased that we went to the third census using the handheld devices linked with GIS. This improved first the response rate, and even the data quality, because the enumerator was actually collecting the data and sending it immediately. We have a technical operation room inside PCBS receiving the

data on a daily basis and checking the data on a daily basis. Anything that we questioned, we came back immediately to check on the questionnaire and to double-check and so forth. So, this has increased a lot the data quality, and even shortened the time of the data collection, since it was electronic. We actually skipped a phase which we used to have. When we filled the questionnaire on paper, they used to bring it and then we enter it and then we start the data processing and then check the quality, you know. We skipped all these phases.

The software that we had could monitor the enumerator in real time, such as how many minutes the questionnaire took him to complete. Even when he walked from one household to another, we are able to follow him. And if there's no response, you just click to see the status. For example, an orange light indicates that a household is nonresponsive. If it is another light, it means the questionnaire was incomplete and so forth. So, we had this kind of technical operation room and then we had another operation room, which was on the very high level where the challenges are the nonresponses, where we have some kind of incomplete questionnaire. And we then would follow it case by case. And this is how we were able to succeed. We succeeded even to overcome so many challenges on the ground.

Liberty Vittert: Ola, these are such innovative methods that you guys are using to raise awareness. Do you feel that your methods are applicable to other governments and other people trying to perform censuses, or do you think they're sort of more specific to your situation?

Ola Awad: I think we all share the same nature of work, same challenges, and I think the same methods are very much applicable. It's really important here not to reinvent the wheel and share experiences. We learned very much best practices. Before we conducted our census in 2017, we had this kind of best practice of Jordan's experience. And, I went personally as a chief statistician to Jordan. I sent my staff to Jordan to learn about their experience in conducting their census electronically for the first time. I may tell you even at the launch of the results, I was there with the prime minister of Jordan from whom I requested to rent their handheld devices because we can't afford purchasing 20,000 handheld devices. He immediately said, "It would be our pleasure to give Palestine the handheld devices. When you finish, you can bring them back." And this is what we did. And, also, we sent our staff, IT personnel, and technical statisticians to Egypt's CATMAS (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics) to learn from their experience. They went with them actually to the field, and they did the data collection with them in order to learn more about the challenges and how they can overcome their challenges, and also how we can get this kind of practice and to customize it to our own case. So, this is how it went.

Liberty Vittert: This brings me to your position as a statistician, a chief statistician, and dealing with many, many countries, you know, as you were the president of the International Association for Official Statistics, IAOS. What did you learn in your role there with reaching out to other countries, and with reaching out to the public?

Ola Awad: I may tell you, it was such a rich experience. I just loved it in all means. I gained a global perspective. You know, when you work in one country, you just focus on everything about this country. But when you have more broad perspective, more global perspective to statistics, it was such a rich experience. I could view how the same issues, concerns, and challenges are applied globally by an NSO (National Statistical Office). When it comes to reaching the public, gaining trust, the whole world respects the same values and principles. And a person or an NSO has to remain independent and always reassure good communication to stay trustworthy of people's data.

I was also very much more involved with different stakeholders, not only official statistics, not only national statistical organizations. And that was such an added value for me. So, I actually was introduced and met a pool of experts in different fields from different institutions, whether from the private sector, from academia, and from different countries. It was, I mean, a very rich experience for me, and it has an added value on the way we think now differently and the way that we developed ourselves as a Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics from the census and afterwards.

Xiao-Li Meng: You have assumed a lot of leadership roles in various organizations internationally, and I want to ask for your advice to other statisticians aspiring to be a leader of some kind. Do you have any good advice for them? Assuming these kinds of roles are different, for example, from what Liberty and I do in a university setting. Do you have any advice or tips for other statisticians and data scientists who want to take on this kind of government and international roles?

Ola Awad: I may say, leadership. Leadership is very much important, being innovative and creative. Don't wait for others to reach you. This is really important. Communication, I think it's something really crucial being a chief statistician. It's not only about producing statistics, it's such a comprehensive perspective. So, communication, communication, communication is the real success with all partners. We have to be, every time, creative enough, innovative enough, and engaged as much as possible with more stakeholders. So, it's not limited to what we do. It's not our work alone. We have to listen to others. We have to listen to all of our stakeholders. And we need to be a very good listener. This is, I think, a key to success for all of us wherever we work and whatever challenges that we have. So, engaging stakeholders, communicating with stakeholders, being good listeners and leading the institution, leading the development, and be really very much creative. I may add one more thing. We have to take risks. I mean, if we don't take risks, then we can't develop our work, we can't develop our statistics, we can't reach everyone. And we can't reach the public. We can reach out to all of our targets and stakeholders. So, this is really very much important. I may just summarize it in that way.

Xiao-Li Meng: I really appreciate your point of communicating to different stakeholders. Now, communicating to different stakeholders may take a different set of skills, right? Communicating to the public, communicating to government leadership, communicating to your partners in other countries, they probably all are kind of different. Anything you can tell our readership about your experience in what works, what's the effective strategy for communicating with different kinds of stakeholders?

Ola Awad: We have to have a communication strategy. So, we developed a communication strategy that targets everyone and deals with each of our stakeholders. We have a website for our kids and schools. We communicated and engaged with the Ministry of Education, the materials that they have, statistics, whether in math, whether in science, whether in social science, sometimes also in geography. But the most important thing is to engage and to try to work all together. The policymakers, it was exactly the same. They will never come to us as chief statisticians. How can we reach them? They can't read reports. They can't read more than a paragraph. So, sometimes we do special events together with them.

We did, for example, on the International Disability Day, a video. It was about the data of disability, but the ones who talked about the data are the disabled themselves. So, it had such an incredible impact when it was launched. Data are such rigid numbers, and we have to talk about what is behind these numbers. When the disabled talk about the disability data, you see how they talked about them. It was such an incredible video that impacted everyone. Even when our President of Palestine watched this video, because we actually publicized it everywhere on the TV after the event. And then lots of decisions supporting the disabled were made afterwards. So, this is where I see our role. It's not only about publishing data, it's how this data can bring an impact and change things. Otherwise, it's of no use.

Liberty Vittert: OK, I always have to ask this question at the end of our interviews. If you could wave your magic wand and have one data set in the whole world, what would it be?

Ola Awad: I think, with full confidence, it would be a global data set on women because women all around the world share the same challenges in terms of wage gaps, discrimination, unemployment, poverty, especially those heading households. Women all over the world suffer from acts of injustice like violence. So, I think such a data set would be very useful.

Liberty Vittert: Well, I am with you, and I can see our producer in the back rah-rah-ing as you say that.

Xiao-Li Meng: We are all with you, and I assume, you know, such data is being collected and I hope there will be more to be collected. And, I want to thank you again, Ola, first for your conversation with us, but most importantly, for all the things you have done and for gaining the public trust. And I hope that our readers will find your conversation and your journey both inspiring. And I want to take this opportunity to thank our readers for listening to this episode of *The Conversation with Leaders*, which is a production of *Harvard Data Science Review*, where we publish everything data science and data science for everyone. Thanks again, Ola.

Ola Awad: Thank you very much.

Disclosure Statement

Ola Awad, Xiao-Li Meng, and Liberty Vittert have no financial or non-financial disclosures to share for this interview.

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