

**CO-OPERATION IN THE AREA OF STATISTICS
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
AN ENHANCED FLOW OF INFORMATION AMONG THE MEMBER
COUNTRIES OF THE ORGANISATION OF THE ISLAMIC
CONFERENCE**

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After stressing the importance of statistics as a branch of knowledge and of its role in planning and economic policy making, this paper gives an account of the progress achieved by the SESRTCIC in its efforts to enhance co-operation in statistics among the OIC member countries. Among these efforts, the organisation by the Centre of Meetings of Heads of National Statistical Organisations proves to be particularly fruitful.

1. INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

It is widely observed today that the world has already completed the Age of Industry and entered into the Age of Information, where the most abundant, yet vital commodity is information. It permeates the daily life and routinely inundates all the corners of the globe unhindered. This is made possible thanks particularly to the recent advances in the fields of telecommunications and information technology. The world has thus become truly globalised. No individual, institution or society can escape this avalanche of information. Furthermore, the level of civilisation and human progress have reached such levels that man can only survive by generating systematic information and utilising it consciously and intelligently. Yet, this is only natural in this age of continuous and accelerating change and rapid scientific-technological developments.

Man needs information not only to remain aware of the environment and the age he lives in, but to understand, interpret and control it as well. Moreover, information, as the record of accumulated knowledge, is needed to evaluate scientific, economic, social and political development and progress. It is used as well to test hypotheses in different fields of scientific study and to generate still more information. Finally, it is essential in making forecasts relating to the possible future paths of events and developments. Consequently, it is vitally important to be able to organise the inventory of information into manageable forms so that one can extract from them systematic and meaningful data to be used in different fields of human endeavour.

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As a sub-category under information, statistics lie at the core of this picture. It is the name given to vast amounts of systematic quantitative information on various events, activities and aspects of life. It is also the scientific field whose tools are used to good effect to help organise, analyse and correctly process and summarise large volumes of data to discover the meaning of past events, as well as the hints they contain regarding the future.

2. STATISTICS IN PLANNING AND ECONOMIC POLICY-MAKING

Statistics have become very important for the functioning of modern society. Economic and social statistics are a case in point. Though their use in conveying information has become widespread only recently, they already shape popular understanding of social and economic conditions and developments to a large degree.

There are many types of statistics, and consequently many uses for them depending on the countries involved. Islamic countries, in particular, all of which being developing countries, lay a special emphasis on the use of statistical information in development planning and economic policy-making. Irrespective of the political systems or regimes that are in effect, economic policy-making is a major task of the states and the governments in power. For this reason all the countries have chosen to establish national agencies for collecting, processing and disseminating statistical data and information that attends to the needs of users and is useful for the understanding of social and economic conditions. Their work could be crucial in determining the rates of economic growth and could affect the pace of social progress.

The interaction of planning and economic policy-making, on the one hand, and the statistical structure, on the other, is very important for Islamic countries. The demands of the planning mechanism are of great concern to the statistical system. In the development of the statistical frameworks, then, due attention is always paid to the close relationship between these two national activities.

With a wide variety of information available for collection and analysis, the national statistical offices have to select which activities to undertake and which to emphasise, as well as the lines along which statistics are collected, organised, and presented. Here the key concepts are efficiency and usefulness. As needs change over time, these concepts need to be re-examined from time to time.

In terms of organising statistical structures, the first and major responsibility of the national statistical offices relate to data collection, as well as the analysis and presentation of statistics. It would necessitate a substantial organisation of working responsibilities and the statistical structure, with greater attention being paid to analysis activities and to the needs of the users of statistical services.

The second aspect relates to the organisation of work in the maintenance and presentation of data. A systematic allocation of some responsibilities and distribution of work would be important here for a continuous improvement in and conscious expansion of the national statistical base and its framework, through an inflow of new concepts into the statistical structures.

The third major aspect involves the presentation of statistics in publications, reports, and studies. Although this might appear as a cosmetic public relations activity, quite often the cosmetic enhancement may also result in more meaningful and more useful publications. After all, such output is a basic *raison d'être* of the statistical office in the first place.

Any organisation of statistical systems will have to be suited to the needs of the country keeping in mind a set of constraints that define what is feasible. Costs, in terms of both time and money, will clearly influence the eventual configuration to be decided upon. Thus, various factors will play against one another in determining the eventual structure and operations. Yet, there will be an allowance for a process of evolution and development through adaptive responses, if the statistical structures are to maintain or increase their contribution to the process of development in a continuously changing world.

The end result, however, will be determined by the national conditions and organisational circumstances, although support from other countries and relevant international bodies in terms of human and capital resources and concepts would certainly help the process. Eventually, the determination and outlook of the statistical body will provide the impetus for choice and action.

3. INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION IN STATISTICS

As international co-operation involves partnerships of different types between the national units and external parties, requirements are greater for large amounts of dependable and current information about the national environment, mechanisms, achievements and potentials of the country in question. So the issues of international standards in definitions, coverage and quality gain prominence.

Furthermore, since statistics collection, processing and dissemination is a major activity for the governments the world over, there are many common issues and problems where external help could be and is sought at the sub-regional, regional and international levels. The national prerogatives, of course, would eventually determine the effectiveness of any such co-operative endeavour. If there are positive responses at the country-level, it would be possible to mobilise the necessary external resources to support a particular initiative and in the process inter-country relationships would be strengthened. This could also serve as a basis for greater standardisation of statistical systems among countries.

At the international level, such exchanges would make it possible to bring about a greater co-operation among the Islamic countries, with greater co-ordination between the statistical activities of the UN agencies and that of the member states.

4. EMERGENCE OF OIC ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference started out in 1969 as an initiative that sought basically to cultivate co-operation and joint international action in the political area in reaction to certain alarming developments in the Middle East. Yet, from the very beginning it became clear that economic issues were very much intermingled with and underlying the political issues. Besides, all the Islamic countries were developing countries, with large portions of their populations amongst the poorest in the World, despite the fact that they were rich in natural and human resources and highly promising in terms of their production and trade potentials. Many of them had attained statehood relatively recently after years of subjugation or colonial rule under the industrial and political powers of the World. They had similar, even common, problems in the global sphere.

In the light of all the above, the introduction and rapid proliferation of economic issues on the OIC agenda came naturally. Especially after the Second Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore in 1974, items relating to promotion of economic co-operation among the member countries were placed permanently on the agenda. It was, therefore, not surprising that quite early on the need to have readily available comprehensive socio-economic information and statistics on the member countries was raised and ways of realising it started to be discussed extensively.

As a natural consequence, therefore, in 1977 the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM), as the highest decision-making organ of the OIC, decided to establish in Ankara, Turkey, the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRTCIC), which became operational in June 1978.

The Centre was conceived as the socio-economic information centre for the OIC. It was mandated to regularly collect socio-economic data on all of the member countries from the countries themselves and elsewhere, collate them into standard configurations and disseminate this data in the form of regular and occasional publications.

5. CO-OPERATION AMONG OIC COUNTRIES AND THE ROLE OF STATISTICS

Having been given such a wide mandate, SESRTCIC started its activities by initiating extensive research on the statistical activities and publications of the member countries within the context of a special project. The first task of the project on the statistical research was the assessment of the extent and details of the existing socio-economic data about the Islamic countries.

The initial stage of the project was restricted to the survey of the international publications that contain statistical data about the OIC member countries, since official links between the Centre and the relevant member country institutions were not yet established. A number of organisations and their publications were included in this list, comprising mainly the UN and its affiliated bodies. The preliminary list of subjects that were considered relevant for the purposes of the project included 15 headings and several sub-headings. This list, later became permanent and was used during the subsequent phases of the project. These headings were population, health, education, labour, agriculture, mining, energy, manufacturing, construction, transportation, money and banking, finance, foreign trade, prices and national accounts. A fast, yet comprehensive, survey of the said sources for the listed subjects was completed and the results were evaluated using special definitions and calculations.

Although this research was quick to reveal the problems of availability and quality of statistical publications put out by the OIC countries, it was not readily possible to pinpoint the causes of the lack or poor quality of information where it was so. Specifically, it was not possible to say whether the data did not exist at all or its unavailability was due to inefficient dissemination. Apparently direct contacts with the relevant institutions were called for. Here the Centre had to face certain problems that stood in the way of establishing such contacts.

The fact that the statute of the Centre had not yet been finalised at that initial stage made it difficult to contact the official member state institutions directly. Thus extensive help from the Foreign Ministries and/or or the General Secretariat of the OIC had to be sought in establishing these contacts. In the case of certain countries, where direct contacts were sought, the intercession by the Foreign Ministry was explicitly demanded. In certain other cases, the General Secretariat had to intervene to reconfirm the status of the Centre in carrying out its functions. In certain other cases, SESRTCIC was even asked to pay for the published statistical material, and it proved to be the only way to obtain the much-needed data.

Experience later on proved that the reciprocal relations could and would improve, if not after, at least concurrently with, the establishment of the Centre itself as an authoritative intra-communal official body of statistical data collection, collation and dissemination. Clearly, the situation called for the breaking up of a certain vicious circle that has developed: the Centre could not establish itself as such without the enthusiastic co-operation to be extended to it by the member state institutions, and the said institutions would not extend this co-operation readily if the Centre has not proved itself effective.

As a result, the convening of the Meeting of the Heads of the National Statistical Organisations of the Member States of OIC became all the more indispensable. Yet, such a meeting could only prove fruitful if certain basic preliminary preparations were undertaken. The Questionnaire on the State of Statistics was the outcome of such an understanding

6. STATE OF STATISTICS IN OIC COUNTRIES

One of the major conclusions that could be drawn from the evaluation of this initial questionnaire, which still holds true for many countries today, was that most of the member state statistical organisations themselves do not, or at least not regularly, collect data about the following four subjects: finance, money-banking, mining and construction. Instead, respective ministries gather statistics on these areas for their internal use. (As far as finance, and money-banking are concerned, data on these two subjects appear in Central Bank publications.) These areas further happen to be the ones that reflect the fewest details on the average. On the other hand, most regularly gathered statistics happen to be the ones that are also gathered in greatest detail.

The only exception is international trade which figures among the most regularly collected, but at the same time among subjects collected with the least detail. This is explained by the fact that data gathering in this field finds its source in the exports and imports bills reported by the customs departments. So, in general, even where it is collected most regularly, trade data is limited to the distribution of exports and imports by countries and commodities.

As far as the frequency of data collection with respect to each of the 15 subjects is concerned, the most striking result may be seen in the fact that price data is usually available on a monthly basis. Therefore, the data on prices are not only collected most frequently, but they are also collected most regularly and in greatest detail.

Population data are among the most regularly collected and in greatest detail, although periodicity is somewhat varied, at least it was so in those early years. Presently, however, almost all OIC countries follow the international practice of holding decennial censuses on years ending in zeros. What is more important is the observation that the number of member countries that actually held censuses has been increasing over the years.

Except for data on education, which are collected every 10 years, and data on labour which in one case are collected every five years, data on all the rest of the subjects are collected at least at annual intervals.

What has been said above also sheds light on how up-to-date the data collected are and how promptly they are disseminated. As expected, price data lead the list

here also. Almost all subjects fare satisfactorily as far as currentness is concerned, the only exception being the data on national accounts. Although collected in some detail and with regularity, apparently the finalisation and preparation for publication handicap the currentness of these data. As far as dissemination is concerned, it may be added that the subjects which lead the lists of most regular and most up-to-date publications are prices, international trade, manufacturing, transportation, energy and labour.

As far as the irregularly conducted activities are concerned, they serve to make up for the areas where regular activities slacken. Although the relevant information from the countries on the subject was too limited to draw general conclusions from, it may, nevertheless, be stated with some degree of reliability that more than two-thirds of the irregular activities of data collection are reflected in publications.

The last aspect concerns the supplementary institutions dealing with data collection in certain specialised areas where national statistical organisations are not active. At a first glimpse it appears that in only one-third of the cases where statistical organisations do not collect statistics, other government bodies make up for the deficiency. Yet, as is pointed out above, this is only an impression that needs to be verified by further research.

Another important point is that some countries, while responding to Centre questionnaires, come up with responses that fall short of a full description of the actual level of activities carried out, as evidenced by the information contained even in the limited sets of publications many countries have sent to SESRTCIC.

Conversely, in the case of a different set of countries, if all the information that is claimed to be collected in the questionnaires were to be relayed to the Centre, it would considerably improve the availability of information at the Centre about the concerned countries, as compared to what is already available in its existing sources of information represented by both the international publications and documents actually received from the individual countries. This is verified by a comparison of the said three sources.

The most striking improvements in this regard occur in the manufacturing, prices and labour data. Less pronounced improvements occur in the areas of international trade, population and agriculture. Only in two subject areas are the contents of the questionnaires relatively poor. This is easily explained by the fact that the areas concerned are energy and money-banking. Fortunately, the international sources happen to be so eminently satisfactory on these two areas that no additional measures need to be proposed on how to improve the quality of the information that the SESRTCIC already has in this connection.

All of the above points to one simple, yet very important, proposal. As the member country statistical organisations are known to have significantly better data than that is already in possession of the SESRTCIC, a way should be found

to complete and up-date the member country collections at the Centre library quickly and promptly by the national statistical bodies, to be followed by a regular and uninterrupted mailing of future issues of their publications. It is only after this step has been taken that it will be possible for the Centre to initiate a project that would focus on the improvement of the quality of the existing statistical data in the member countries.

As for the important, yet difficult, subject of the methodological aspects of statistics collection, collation and dissemination in member countries, further research is definitely needed, as very few of the publications include introductory sections defining the concepts and magnitudes, and describing the procedures followed.

In trying to understand why the member country statistical institutions fail to respond to the Centre's questionnaires and queries on the subject of methodology, one can reach several conclusions. One obvious reason for not responding might possibly be that the level of activity on the subject itself is actually quite low. Secondly, the countries that respond satisfactorily might be the ones who are equipped better to do so, with better apparatus in terms of statistical collection, including the established practice of following well-established and long-observed methodological blueprints, mostly of the UN.

7. FIRST MEETING OF HEADS OF NATIONAL STATISTICAL ORGANISATIONS

The initial results of the Centre's extensive research in the area of statistics collection, collation and dissemination activities of the OIC countries have been reviewed by the First Meeting of the Heads of National Statistical Organisations of the OIC Member Countries, held in Ankara on 16-18 November 1979, and certain decisions were adopted as guidelines for the future. These may be gathered under three groups: ones that involve the SESRTCIC itself, ones that involve the OIC members themselves, and finally ones that involve the relations between the two. The following are offered only for purposes of constituting a basis for discussion, and in this form they represent a combination of some of the points already made in the text in the preceding sections:

1. The SESRTCIC, in order to make its collection of documents in its Library and Documentation Unit a comprehensive one, will continue to cultivate and establish direct contacts with institutions such as ministries, research organisations, etc., to obtain original data in areas where the respective statistical organisations have shown relative inaction or where the relevant documents were prepared for internal use by other national organisations.
2. The SESRTCIC will also routinely prepare rosters of all the periodical publications it could discern the existence of and diligently follow the matter

up with reminders to the publishing establishment for the completion of the missing issues.

3. The member state statistical organisations, on the other hand, will have to ensure that all their publications reach the SESRTCIC Library regularly and promptly. They should further help solve the institutional problems standing in the way of the SESRTCIC obtaining all their publications free of charge.
4. The SESRTCIC will continue to accelerate and expand its databank activities to consolidate its role as a clearing house of information between the member state statistical organisations.
5. In order to contribute to OIC co-operation, the national statistical organisations should keep to and widen their practice of following UN guidelines for standardisation of data collection and processing. In terms of dissemination activities they should follow the practices followed by the OIC in choice of languages, i.e., supply the publications also in one of the following languages along with their own, namely Arabic, English or French.
6. To reach common decisions and to review what has been accomplished in the way of closer co-operation, the meetings among the Heads of Statistical Organisations of the Member States of OIC and the SESRTCIC should in time be given a periodical character. Besides organising such meetings, whenever individual or special meetings are being organised by the national organisations and/or by the Centre, each should communicate to the others the necessary information prior to the meeting so that participation would be made possible. Whenever actual participation proves impracticable, the final documents of such meetings should be communicated.
7. Whenever possible, computer facilities and international network arrangements should be utilised to speed the exchange of information among the national organisations and the SESRTCIC, e.g., provisions for exchange of disks, tapes, etc., should be allowed for.
8. A last, but certainly not the least, important area of co-operation lies in the field of technical co-operation and training. This will definitely not only improve the quality of the whole gamut of activities but also foster co-operation by the way of direct contacts.

Such co-operation at the OIC community level, if realised, would also foster inter-country activities. Meetings and discussions could take place periodically to establish close links and co-operation between the member states and their relevant institutions. If the activities at the community level provide the fora for meetings and discussion, then the primary tool at the inter-country level could be the exchange of technical personnel for short and medium-term periods. This procedure could be used to design new statistical components and to obtain

expertise on specific topics. It would provide a channel for the transfer of technical skill between countries, and could lead to a high level of statistical co-operation between Islamic countries. Another very important benefit--perhaps the most important one--would be the creation by such a process of co-operation greater awareness about the state of affairs in the other Islamic countries.

The prospective contributions in terms of trainers, facilities and experiences of national statistical institutions with the necessary means to the design and implementation of SESRTCIC training programmes will be most welcome. On the other hand, the specific training needs of the member state statistical bodies will provide guidance to the selection of the relevant training programme areas by SESRTCIC.

Also, either through SESRTCIC Statistical Project or independent of that, a discussion of the modalities of co-operation in the training area between the member state Statistical Organisations would prove implemental in both solving the problems relating within the community to the scarcity of specialised skills in statistics and in enhancing closer bonds between the member countries themselves.

8. SECOND MEETING OF THE STATISTICAL HEADS

Empowered by the decisions of the First Statistical Heads Meeting the Centre accelerated the pace of its activities in the area of statistics and took the necessary initiatives to develop itself into a socio-economic databank and the major socio-economic research arm for the Organisation.

Progress was also achieved in terms of the relations of the Centre with the National Statistical Organisations and other relevant bodies in the member countries and on the international plane.

As a result the Centre's specialised library came to access the published data sources in the member countries on a regular basis to the extent this material was made available to the Centre by the national institutions, supplemented them with data from various other sources and kept them in one main statistical database and various other more specialised databases established on its computers. After extensive work on systematisation, standardisation and analysis, these data were prepared as a yearbook published bi-annually. Several specialised handbooks were also put out as an output of the Centre databases. The same data were also made available to outside users on diskettes upon demand.

The Centre decided to organise the Second Meeting of the Statistical Heads along certain themes as an international conference with the participation of the major international statistics collecting and disseminating institutions.

The Second Meeting of the Heads of National Statistical Organisations of the Member States of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference was, consequently, convened in Istanbul, from 12 to 16 October, 1982.

At the conclusion of its wide-ranging and highly fruitful deliberations, the Meeting reached an extensive set of decisions:

A. In terms of data collection and analysis:

The National Statistical Organisations of the Member States are urged to

1. Provide, on a prompt and regular basis, to the Ankara Centre, all their relevant publications and documents, either in printed or machine-readable format.
2. Designate contact points in each member state to exchange the relevant statistics and information with the Ankara Centre and to reduce delay in the transmission of data.
3. Automate-computerise, to the extent possible, their data processing activities so as to promote research and assist in the analysis of collected data.
4. Expand the coverage of data collection activities and improve data quality to render them as relevant as possible to user's needs at national and sub-national levels.

The Ankara Centre is requested to:

1. Assist the member states in the processing and analysis of data, including the possible provision of relevant consultancy services.
2. Seek out further methods for collecting data from the member states, such as through the use of special questionnaires, by means of computer tapes and other appropriate procedures.
3. Expedite the establishment of a comprehensive data bank on main social and economic indicators of the member states.
4. Undertake region-specific statistical studies on economic conditions, particularly on agriculture, population, labour and human resources.

B. In the area of standardisation of statistics, the Meeting recommended

1. That Statistical Organisations of the Member States and international agencies provide the Ankara Centre with reports and documents on data classification, nomenclature, and methods employed in the field of statistical work.

2. That Member States work towards the standardisation of statistics, including agriculture, labour and population statistics taking into consideration the recommendations by the Centre.
3. That the Ankara Centre (a) analyse the information on data classification, nomenclature, and methods of statistical work, (b) try to formulate a set of standards of statistical concepts and data classification for the Member States, based upon country experience and international recommendations, (c) submit these proposed standards to an Expert Group Meeting to consider and finalise these recommendations for adoption by the Member States.

C. In the strengthening of national statistical structures, the Meeting requested:

1. The Member States to review their existing statistical structures with a view to modifying and extending them, where appropriate.
2. The National Statistical Organisations to co-ordinate the collection and distribution of statistics with their users.
3. The National Statistical Organisations to collect appropriate socio-economic data with a greater view to the needs of their planning organisations.
4. The Ankara Centre to provide support, within the limits of its financial and human resources, to the national statistical organisations after reviewing the status of these organisations and their needs.
5. That resources from the Islamic Community and international sources should be sought out to assist in the strengthening of national statistical systems. The international organisations may be requested to indicate the nature of these external resources to the Ankara Centre, so that a programme may be started to inform and make available these resources to the Member States.

D. Noting with appreciation the offers of Malaysia and Turkey for the training of personnel in various areas, the Meeting requested that:

1. The national statistical organisations inform the Ankara Centre about training opportunities in their countries, for statistical personnel, which may be made available to trainees from Member States, with the co-ordination of the Ankara Centre.
2. Member States, in a position to do so, provide training support in statistical work to trainees from other Member States, and to the extent possible, provide financial and other assistance for such training.

3. Member States desiring training support indicate their requirements for such support to the Ankara Centre.
4. The Ankara Centre (a) design and organise training courses of short duration and directed towards the specialised training of statistical personnel in the specific areas of agriculture, population and labour statistics, in co-operation with the existing training institutions of the Islamic community, (b) prepare a list of statistical training centres in the Member States with a view to identifying the available community resources for training activities.
5. The regional and international organisations, especially the FAO, ILO, ECA, ESCAP and ECWA, be urged to assist at the Community level in the training of statistics personnel. The modalities of assistance might include the joint conducting of workshops, training programmes, national demonstration programmes and their financing. The possibility of jointly financed teams for undertaking country studies was also noted by the FAO, where such a team might consist of representatives from FAO, the Ankara Centre, and Member State specialists.

E. In the area of general co-operation, the Meeting recommended:

1. That further technical co-operation take place between Member States to increase the efficiency of statistical undertakings, and also to allow Member States to benefit from each others' resources and experiences, especially between neighbouring Member States.
2. That Member States with a large stock of trained manpower should provide statistical experts on short-term deputation to the Ankara Centre, taking into consideration the resource constraints of the Ankara Centre.
3. Member States should financially support the Ankara Centre to enable it to carry out the various tasks assigned to it. Specifically, they are urged to pay their contributions to the Ankara Centre on time.
4. That the Ankara Centre should (a) consider regional groupings of Member States to facilitate regional and inter-regional statistical co-operation. Country co-ordinators for such regional groupings could be identified to assist in the co-ordination of statistical activities, (b) convene specialist working groups at the regional levels to meet once a year to deal with issues relating to statistics. At such meetings one representative from the other regions could be invited to attend, (c) explore the concept of 'lead' countries in the regions for research and analysis projects, (d) help co-ordinate computer and technical activities between the Member States, the Ankara Centre, and international organisations

9. THE EXPANDED ROLE OF STATISTICS IN THE NEW ERA IN OIC ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, socio-economic development and co-operation issues on the agenda of the OIC came to comprise about a third of the total agenda of the ICFM every year. Starting with the Third Islamic Summit Conference held in Taif and Makkah in 1981, the OIC has also adopted a ten-sector Plan of Action to Strengthen Economic Co-operation Among the Member States. Since 1984, the implementation of this Plan was mandated to the Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Co-operation (COMCEC), headed by the President of the Republic of Turkey, to be accountable to the Summit. This important forum has been meeting regularly in Istanbul every year since then with the participation of the economy ministers of the member countries. Here again very useful work was done to establish and expand joint projects and activities in the Islamic World.

Recently, the COMCEC had been mandated by the Sixth Islamic Summit Conference to develop new strategies for co-operation making use of the experiences accumulated in the implementation of the Plan of Action and to prepare a revised version of the Plan taking into consideration the recent global changes. After the adoption of the New Strategy, the New Plan was also adopted by COMCEC in October 1994 and by the Seventh Islamic Summit in December 1994. Both of these documents have placed a great emphasis on the subject of information and its basic nature regarding the development and implementation of any co-operative endeavour within the OIC.

In this context, in the new Plan, which is again made up of ten sectors/areas of co-operation, but including new areas like environment, technology development and human resource development with particular prominence, there is a highly expanded role for the basic information and statistical activities under the different chapters of the Plan. The idea, of course, is not only to have a continually updated inventory of data for the specific activities of the OIC in general and the COMCEC in particular, but to have this dynamic body of essential information to be made readily available to all the quarters in the Islamic World by transmitting them through national, regional and international networks that are presently available and are to be developed in the future. In this way, the concerned implementing parties and governments will have been given the full information and data that would be necessary in establishing modalities of co-operation, in developing joint projects and activities and in identifying and implementing technical co-operation programmes for the benefit of all concerned.

10. OIC CO-OPERATION IN THE AREA OF INFORMATION AND STATISTICS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

All of the above developments show that the Islamic world is very much aware of the central role of information and statistics in achieving and furthering the development efforts of the OIC countries. Yet, it needs to be emphasised once again that recognition of issues is not enough. An organised, diligent effort with the participation of all concerned at the national, communal and international levels would be necessary to uplift the statistics and information-related activities in the OIC countries and the Islamic community. This would be needed not only to close the gaps that exist with the developed world, but to join and keep up with the pace of the global transformations, if the OIC countries and peoples are not to remain on the periphery of the new world order that is rapidly developing.

The basic infrastructure, facilities, and resources, as well as the required skills and experience to realise such effective and extensive co-operation in the area of statistics already exist in these countries and their institutions. What is required is the political will to design, initiate and expand extensive co-operation among different elements with an open mind and a sense of purpose. Such co-operative arrangements, schemes and programmes in this vital field will not only benefit individual countries and institutions in need, but the Islamic world in general will gain immensely as well. The existing regional and international institutions and organisations in the OIC countries remain ready to contribute to this effort as long as they are supported in implementing their activity programmes by the national governments and their relevant specialised institutions.

There is a need to create some sort of a stable structure to support future co-operation. This structure must be flexible and objective at the same time, for it must link various areas together, while allowing frank assessments of the individual economic sectors. Further, the structure must be designed so that it can be extended naturally and easily in the future.

A structure providing information would seem well-suited to the task at hand. The existing statistical structures in member countries could constitute a good starting point in this direction. If specific concerns having to do with greater comparability were emphasised in statistics, practical, yet sophisticated tools, could quickly be made available to policy-makers in the member countries.

The immediate priority is to increase the compatibility of national statistical structures with one another. Once greater compatibility is ensured, the statistical information can be used for policy purposes at both the national and the regional levels. All this would have to be a part of a broad-based and co-ordinated plan of action to create unifying structures at both the national and the communal levels.

The Third Meeting of the Heads of National Statistical Organisations scheduled to be held in 1996 would be the OIC forum best suited to take up this issue, deliberate on it in detail, set the necessary guidelines and a framework for it so that the technicians and experts can develop the necessary details. Once such a well-structured co-operative scheme is developed and rendered operational, it

will not only lend solid support to the implementation of the new OIC Action Plan, but will also yield substantial benefits to the National Statistical Organisations of the OIC countries themselves in forging stronger links among them to improve their own activities as well as those that will serve the Islamic world in general.

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