

# International Symposium on Transforming the Statistical System in GCC Countries: Productivity and New Data Challenges

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## Theme 1: GCC Statistical System: The Way Forward

Strengthening National Statistical Systems of GCC Countries through GCCStat

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*Bismillahi Ar-Rahmanir-Raheem,*

*Excellencies Heads of the National Statistical Offices of GCC Member Countries*

*Distinguished Representatives of the National and International Organisations,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuhu,*

It is a great pleasure for me to address you on the occasion of the Official Launch of the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (“GCC-Stat”) and the International Symposium on Transforming the Statistical System in GCC Countries with the theme “Productivity and New Data Challenges” in this historical city of Muscat. I would like to congratulate the GCC Member Countries for the launch of the GCC-Stat and extend my best wishes to H.E. Mr. Sabir Al Harbi on his inauguration as the Director General of GCC-Stat.

*Distinguished Participants,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Many developing countries have statistical systems and mechanisms where measuring for results is still in its infancy period and has a wide room for improvement. Today, it is a well-known fact that the measurement of progress in terms of reaching objectives set for the development of countries can only be achieved through reliable and good quality statistics as they inform decision makers about the effectiveness of policies and programmes conducted.

Although statistics may not play a direct role in overseeing the whole development process, the complex process of development activities cannot be thought without this essential component.

Statistics-related fields require sound financial and human resources together with technical specialization. To provide these infrastructures, avoid duplication and involve all relevant stakeholders in statistical processes; an overall coordination mechanism is a must.

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Over the past two decades, the regional integration processes have been observed to increase in the developing countries. As the Gulf countries are progressing to become a union under the umbrella of the GCC, the need for integrated flow of information among them comes into view. Correspondingly, the type of statistical indicators and system needed to produce those indicators should be based on the adopted strategy; implementation, monitoring, evaluation and analysis of programmes.

From this perspective, comparable statistics are a requirement for integration to inform common policies at the regional level. Besides; an interest for the common good, a desire for economic and social development, ensuring economies of scale, emergence of comparative advantage of the regional level, and conducting advocacy at the regional level are among the other factors for developing statistical activities under a regional mechanism.

In the light of these factors, the GCC countries have shown their determinism by establishing the GCC-Stat as it is expected to lead the coordination role among the National Statistical Offices of the GCC countries.

A similar role for the member countries of the European Union (EU) is being shouldered by the EuroStat, a supranational entity that feeds statistics at European level to users to enable them make comparisons between EU countries and regions. Eurostat's main purpose is to provide statistics to various EU institutions with data for the design, conduct, evaluation and assessment of the EU policies. EuroStat, as a regional statistical entity, delivers comparative cost advantages and good results in terms of harmonisation, comparability and exchange of methods and data.

EuroStat also tries to arrive at a common statistical 'language' that comprehends concepts, methods, structures and technical standards. EuroStat consolidates the data collected by the EU Member States and ensure they are comparable and use harmonized methodologies.

The European Statistical System 'ESS' functions as a network in which Eurostat's role is to lead the way in the harmonization of statistics in close cooperation with the national statistical authorities of the EU Member States. The ESS work concentrates mainly on EU policy areas - but, with the extension of EU policies, harmonization has been extended to nearly all statistical fields.

The current European statistical system needed more than 50 years to arrive where it stands today. In this aspect, the success stories of and lessons learnt by EuroStat, among others, can be a reference point while building the GCC statistical system.

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Due to the pace of speed brought by the technological advancements, we witness that the nature of official statistics is not that static any more as it used to be in the past. In the global statistical community, we also witness the emergence of new terms such as; “big data”, “open data”, and “data revolution”. Although taking their place in the agendas of statistical organisations, a lot of people seemed to be confused about these terms.

Big Data is a catch-all phrase. As applicable to most catch-all phrases, Big Data is ambiguous and can mean different things from person to person. One common definition for Big Data states it as “... high-volume, high-velocity and high-variety information assets that demand cost-effective, innovative forms of information processing for enhanced insight and decision making.”

A position paper prepared by the UNECE in 2013 states that Big Data has the potential to produce more relevant and timely statistics than traditional sources of official statistics. The same report also finds out that private sector may take advantage of the Big Data era and produce more and more statistics that present new challenges to official statistics on timeliness and relevance, as in the example of Google Flu Trends that uses aggregated Google search data to estimate flu activity. Against these emerging new players in the statistics field, statistics disseminated by national statistical offices should ensure relevancy to the daily lives of people.

In this sense, what should be the way forward for GCC-Stat in the Big Data era? To proactively manage and coordinate activities related to Big Data at the Gulf countries level, GCC-Stat can establish a Big Data Integration Research and Development Division with a vital role in guiding the national statistical offices of the Gulf countries how to incorporate relevant Big Data sources into their existing infrastructures and statistical processes to support the accuracy, consistency, relevance and timeliness of the official statistics. This division can also train statisticians from the Gulf countries equipped with a new mind-set and new skills. In addition, this division can conduct research on how Big Data can be used in an official statistics setting.

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As early as 1792, Condorcet asserted the importance of informing citizens about governance, and presenting evidence about the state of society. This call for liberating data has gained a wider audience nowadays. The Open Data Institute (ODI) defines open data as information that is available for anyone to use, for any purpose, at no cost. The ODI also advocates that open data has to have a licence that says it is open data. In many countries, statistical data is already “open” (in the sense that data belongs to people and available to everyone upon request) but is subject to confidentiality and constraints.

A report prepared by the Public Administration Select Committee of the UK House of Commons in 2013 stated that the supply of statistics as open data with minimal restrictions

on re-use is a major advance. It facilitates adding value through further products and services, ultimately adding to effective communication of the statistical data.

The economic impact of open data has been mentioned in an October 2013 report prepared by McKinsey&Company, a global consultancy firm. According to their findings, seven sectors including education, transportation, consumer goods, electricity, oil and gas, healthcare, and consumer finance could generate more than \$3 trillion a year in additional value as a result of open data, which is already giving rise to hundreds of entrepreneurial businesses and helping established companies to segment markets, define new products and services, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of operations.

How should the GCC-Stat approach the “open data” issue? If GCC-Stat together with the NSOs of the GCC decide to take steps in the path to “Open Data”, they should (i) exhibit a strong will to proactively support the open data agenda through related activities, (ii) adopt data dissemination practices which are consistent with their strategies, and protect the confidentiality of the individuals, and (iii) embrace “Open Data Principles” of reuse and redistribution, universal participation, and availability and access.

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Given this background, the international community took these developments into their agenda. The High-Level Panel Report on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, making recommendations on the development agenda beyond 2015, called for a “data revolution”. The Report mentions that “A true data revolution would draw on existing and new sources of data to fully integrate statistics into decision making, promote open access to, and use of, data and ensure increased support for statistical systems.”

The Report also proposes a new international initiative to get the job done. The proposed public-private initiative, called the Global Partnership on Development Data, would be responsible for developing a strategy to address gaps in critical information, improving data availability, and ensuring that quality baseline information is in place to measure and define progress against established development goals.

The Panel proposes that, in future – at latest by 2030 – all large businesses should be reporting on their environmental and social impact – or should explain why if they are not doing so. Similarly, the Panel proposes that governments should adopt the UN’s System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, along with the Wealth Accounting and the Valuation of Ecosystem Services (WAVES) introduced by the World Bank, with help provided to those who need help to do this. These metrics can then be used to monitor national development strategies and results in a universally consistent way.

This call will undoubtedly necessitate the involvement of the National Statistical Offices and the respective regional and international statistical initiatives which now need to position themselves in new fields to measure sustainable development by embracing the Big Data and Open Data perspective into their infrastructures and processes.

Given the high responsibility in formulating a successful data revolution strategy, the GCC-Stat can play a major role in coordinating the activities in the GCC statistical system by:

- Taking the lead in bringing about a culture of quality in statistical activities;
- Improving the human resources capacity of the National Statistics Offices through statistical capacity programmes;
- Increasing the awareness of the policy-makers regarding the roles National Statistics Offices play in the evidence based decision making processes; and
- Promoting the Open Data idea among the relevant stakeholders.

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The points I tried to touch upon previously, without any doubt, require a high level of statistical capacity. Statistical capacity development activities are a never-ending track as the need for statistics is shaped by the ever-changing socio-economic and environmental conditions.

Since 2007, SESRIC conducts its statistical capacity development activities under its flagship StatCaB (Statistical Capacity Building) Programme. To collect information on the needs and capacities of the National Statistical Offices and carry out our training activities, the StatCaB Survey is being circulated every two years, the last of which was circulated in 2013.

Our analyses show that the National Statistical Offices of the GCC countries have indicated the following statistical domains as a priority:

- Social and Demographic Statistics: Population and Migration, Social Protection, Justice and Crime
- Economic Statistics: National Accounts (Social Accounting Matrixes, Institutional Sectors, Supply-Use and Input-Output Tables), Business Statistics (Mining-Manufacturing-Construction, Wholesale and Retail Trade, Transport and Communication), Cross-Cutting Economic Statistics (Tourism, Prices, Informal Sector)
- Environment and Multi-Domain Statistics: Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Poverty, Living Conditions and Cross-Cutting Social Issues, Sustainable Development, Millennium Development Goals Indicators
- Methodology of Data Collection, Processing, Dissemination and Analysis: Data Analysis, Population and Housing Censuses; Registers of Population; Dwellings and Buildings, Household Surveys, Data Editing and Data Linkage
- Strategic and Managerial Issues of Official Statistics: Quality Frameworks and Measurement of Performance of Statistical Systems and Offices, Statistical Programs; Coordination within Statistical Systems

Starting from 2013, our StatCaB Survey also included questions concerning the needs and capacities in Professional Skills for Official Statisticians. The priority areas as indicated by the National Statistical Offices of the GCC countries include:

- Effective Communication: Analytical and Critical Thinking, Effective Oral and Written Communication Techniques, Leadership and Personal Development in an Official Statistics Setting
- Change Management: Concepts of Leadership, Organising Effective Meetings, Team Formation and Management, Time Management, Understanding the Business of Statistics and Project Management
- Stakeholder Relations and Statistical Literacy: Efficient User Complaints Management Systems, Community Outreach through Social Media for NSOs, Developing Statistical Literacy and Data Awareness Initiatives, Stakeholder Relationship Management

Given these needs indicated by the National Statistical Offices of the GCC countries in Statistical Domains and Professional Skills for Official Statisticians, the GCC-Stat can carry out statistical capacity activities for its stakeholders in cooperation with international organisations. I would like to gladly state our readiness in cooperating with the GCC-Stat on the areas of need.

As a matter of fact, the area of migration statistics can be a starting point in our cooperation. The labour market structure of the GCC countries heavily relies on the outsourced human resources from different countries and has an impact on the policies implemented at the national and regional level. ILO reported that the GCC countries attract flows from the South Asia and South East Asia region. Much of these flows are in fact intra-regional due to the strong economic performance of the GCC countries.

A recent report by the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC found out that the lack of a unified framework for collecting, processing, and distributing data on migrant workers in the Gulf is one of the major obstacles to effective cooperation among countries involved. The lack of such a framework blinds policy makers to the realities of labour migration and prevents researchers from evaluating the associated achievements and obstacles. The report concludes that these problems lead to “trial and error” approaches on the practical side and speculation on the theoretical side.

To avoid falling in the "trial and error" approach trap, the GCC statistical system should be strengthened to identify a common data scope and then consolidate migration data under the National Statistical Offices. To achieve the cooperation linkages, GCC-Stat may take up this issue in collaboration with the international organisations and provide solutions for its member countries.

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Besides these opportunities of cooperation in statistical capacity building activities, another avenue for cooperation with GCC-Stat is the unique activities of OIC Statistical Commission (OIC-StatCom). OIC-StatCom is an important forum aiming to generate a dynamic platform for the National Statistical Offices of the OIC Member Countries to share and exchange knowledge and best practices that can help them become more efficient in managing their

national statistical systems. Based on the Istanbul Declaration of the 2010 Meeting of the National Statistical Offices, OIC Member Countries agreed to organise their annual meetings under the umbrella of OIC-StatCom.

Since 2011, three Sessions have been organised together with Islamic Development Bank, as ex-officio members of the OIC-StatCom Bureau. The Fourth Session will be taking place on 21-23 April 2014 at SESRIC Headquarters in Ankara-Turkey. The content of each OIC-StatCom Session is determined by its members. In this respect, each Session specifically focuses on the issues articulated by the member NSOs.

As a platform, the OIC-StatCom highly contributes towards the multilateral cooperation among the member NSOs by bringing about an environment where they can discuss and set the road-map for action with respect to their needs in both the mainstream official statistics and the statistics specific to the Islamic world. In this respect, we would like to cooperate with the GCC-Stat on statistical fields specific to the Islamic world including Islamic Banking and Finance Statistics, Halal Products Statistics, and Waqf Statistics.

Additionally, the OIC-StatCom is about to finalize the preparations for the OIC Certification Programme for Statisticians (OIC-CPS). This Programme also offers a cooperation opportunity between OIC-StatCom and GCC-Stat. The project basically aims at certifying the expertise and knowledge on the professional conduct of statistical work by official statistics professionals in the OIC Member Countries. The project further aims at recognizing those who have achieved an acceptable level of professional competence in the understanding and application of statistical methods and are bound by code of ethics, principles and good practices of Official Statistics. The candidates who pass the certification exam will contribute to enhance the quality of human resources in the National Statistical Offices of OIC Member Countries. In general, the project will be one of the channels for the capacity development of the National Statistical Systems of the OIC Member Countries by recognizing bright junior statistical professionals.

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*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

SESRIC, with its vast experience in initiating cooperation and collaboration, is ready to cooperate and collaborate with the GCC-Stat in fields of mutual interest. As I conclude, I would like re-iterate my sincere congratulations for the launch of GCC-Stat and my best wishes for its future activities.

May Allah (Subhanahu wa ta'ala) bestow his mercy on the undertakings of this Symposium.

*Wassalamu Alaykum we Rahmatullahi we Barakatuhu*