

Regional Statistical Co-operation – GCC-Stat Case Study

by

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Abstract

The Statistics Centre of the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat) was created a few years ago by the Heads of States of the six countries composing the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC), namely: the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Qatar, and the State of Kuwait.

The creation of GCC-Stat marked the high-level determination to strengthen cooperation, coordination and harmonization in the field of statistics, in order to improve the production and dissemination of timely and high quality data and statistical information to decision and policy makers, researchers, planners, as well as regional and international organizations, the private sector and the public. It is a recognition that the availability of high quality data and statistical information is an important element to support GCC Governments in their policies to diversify the economy and enhance the economic unity within the region, including through a common market, a customs union (achieved in 2003), and a monetary union.

This paper examines statistical co-operation in the GCC region, based on the GCC-Stat Work Program and Road Map for the years 2015-2020, which aim to build and strengthen the GCC regional statistical system.

Keywords: GCC – GCC-Stat – Partnership – Arabian Gulf – Statistical Co-operation

1. Introduction

The six Arab countries of the Gulf (United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Qatar, and the State of Kuwait) formed the GCC in 1981 in order to achieve a high level of institutional coordination in the economic, social, political, defence and security fields. The evolution of the GCC has been greatly influenced by oil and energy demand and supply continuum as well as events in the region and the world at large. Leaders have recognised that the next phase of the GCC evolution will require closer cooperation and more thorough monitoring and evaluation of common policy areas and projects, to ensure that country progress is achieved at comparable rates.

To achieve this, there is a strong consensus on the fact that statistics are vital for policy makers at the national and regional levels. GCC-Stat's role becomes, accordingly, an important element in supporting decision making in the region.

This paper examines the statistical co-operation in the GCC region. It briefly describes the environment that led to the creation of GCC-Stat, then presents how GCC-Stat and the national statistical centers (NSCs) in the region are working together to strengthen the regional and national statistical systems.

2. Regional Partnership prior to 2013 – Challenges and Opportunities

Before 2013, i.e., the creation of GCC-Stat, the Secretariat General of the GCC¹, represented by its Statistics and Planning departments, played a dynamic role in strengthening the work of GCC statistical institutions and contributed to laying the foundations of the institutional structure and the statistical development process in the region.

The Statistics Department was responsible for disseminating data for the GCC countries, publishing bulletins, and providing available data from National Statistics Centers (NSCs) to different Departments in the Secretariat General, other NSCs and all other users.

The Planning Department organized the functions of a number of statistical committees and task forces, mainly, in terms of following up the implementation of recommendations and coordination with other committees and task forces.

Although there were a lot of statistical efforts had been done in the region, there were other areas needed to be developed and enhanced to strengthen regional co-operation, such as:

- The statistical committees and task forces met at most once a year
- Initiatives for developing statistical work were raised by member countries themselves in relation to specific statistical topics
- Member countries had the responsibility of implementation

At that time, these two departments became recognised as one of the strength areas in the Regional Statistical System. NSCs in turn had also developed their statistical systems. Progress had been achieved in areas such as:

- Statistical legislation in all countries
- Statistical development strategies in place in many countries
- Considerable investment in information technology (IT) infrastructure
- Unification of some methodologies, classifications, terminology, statistical surveys, and censuses

¹ The Secretariat General is one of three organizations comprise the Cooperation Council (GCC). The main function of the Secretariat General is to prepare studies related to cooperation and coordination, and to integrated plans and programmes for member states' action.

However, there were weaknesses at the national and regional levels. At the national level, many NSCs suffered from:

- Some deficiencies in the activation and application of statistical laws
- Lack of human resources in NSOs
- Inadequate financial resources for statistical projects
- Limited coordination with statistical data producers
- Weak methodological knowledge
- Limited relations with users of statistical data and information
- Unsatisfactory dissemination methods and practices

This contributed to broader regional problems including

- Lack of quality of data for some sectors
- Difficulty of making data comparisons among GCC countries

These regional challenges meant that the regional policy needs such as those related to the Customs Union, the Monetary Union and broader regional cooperation were not well served by quality statistical information.

At the same time, there was an increase in statistical awareness in the Gulf societies, and a growing interest in statistics to inform decision-making.

The combination of these factors created a tremendous chance to enhance statistical work in the region and develop the regional statistical system.

The creation of GCC-Stat therefore was an opportunity for statistical improvement in the region, with GCC-Stat aiming to be a reliable source and a dynamic driver of the GCC Statistical System, and to support decision-making, research and dialogue within GCC nations.

3. Creation of GCC-Stat

GCC-Stat was established in June 2011 to provide a common official pool of statistics and data for the member states of the GCC. The establishment was approved by the GCC Ministerial Council² in September 2011. The Charter was officially endorsed in December 2012 by the GCC Supreme Council, which is comprised of Heads of States.

GCC-Stat is currently governed by a Board (until the end of 2016), comprised of representatives of all GCC member states, plus a representative of the GCC General Secretariat and the GCC-Stat Director General. From 2017, it will be reporting to H.E. the Secretary General of the GCC and will be supervised by a ministerial committee, which will provide strategic and technical oversight, while the operational management will be overseen by H.E. the Secretary General.

The GCC-Stat Charter provides for its independence. The headquarters are in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, from where the executive secretariat and technical team operate.

GCC-Stat aims to play a vital role in coordination, harmonization of statistics in the region. Furthermore, it will be used as a vehicle to improve the statistical systems of the GCC from their current status to higher international standards. Moreover, it will produce regional aggregated data (six countries totals) representing them as a unified “block”.

² The Ministerial Council is one of three organizations comprise the Cooperation Council (GCC) and formed of the Foreign Ministers of the member states or other delegated ministers. Its main function is to propose policies, prepare recommendations, studies and projects aimed at developing cooperation and coordination between member states in various fields and adopt the resolutions or recommendations required in this regard. It also responsible of reviewing matters referred to it by the Supreme Council which is the highest authority of the Cooperation Council and formed of heads of member states.

4. Regional and National Statistical Systems in the GCC

The GCC regional statistical system aims to provide integrated statistics to support the major policy needs at the GCC level. Integrated statistics include GCC aggregates, which in turn require harmonised statistics across all of the six countries. The system also allows the GCC region to provide a GCC perspective on wider regional and international statistical issues.

The various components of the system co-operate through a number of statistical standing committees, which currently report to the GCC-Stat Board of Directors. These standing committees cover the main statistical areas such as population and social statistics, economic statistics, environment statistics and SDGs indicators.

They facilitate implementation of Board decisions, review agreed work programs, and discuss important issues that require high-level approval, and raise them to the Board.

Figure (1) (at the end of this paper) shows the GCC regional statistical system, where there are direct administrative relations between GCC-Stat and NSCs and other co-operative relations through NSCs with central banks and relevant entities

Coordination is also critical within National Statistical Systems. To support countries to enhance coordination, in 2015, GCC-Stat prepared a technical paper entitled “Ten Recommendations for Improving Coordination within National Statistical Systems in GCC Countries”³.

The main aim of these recommendations is to provide NSCs in GCC countries with a short summary of the main international recommendations that significantly and sustainably improve coordination of their respective National Statistical Systems, which in turn will contribute to reaching the following objectives:

- Improve the productivity of data collection, management and communication;
- Increase the timeliness and availability of harmonized, high quality data;
- Raise the efficiency and impact of human and financial resources, including by reducing unnecessary duplication of efforts in the context of scarce human resources; and
- Raise the culture of statistics and the public profile of statistics and information.

5. The Role of GCC-Stat in Regional and National Statistical Systems

GCC-Stat has nine key strategic objectives, all supporting the improvement and enhancement of the GCC Regional and National Statistical systems (NSSs).

1. Build and strengthen the statistical and institutional capacity of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to meet the statistical requirements at the GCC level, in particular and international level, in general.
2. Promote and improve the quality and quantity of statistical products on a sustainable basis.
3. Projecting the GCC region as a unified economic and social agglomeration.
4. Developing, expanding and marketing statistical dissemination.
5. Establishing joint work programs between the National Statistics Centers and GCC-Stat.
6. Unifying the National Statistics Strategies in GCC countries with the joint statistics programs in accordance with best international practices.

³ <http://www.gccstat.org/en/elibrary/publications/gccstat/item/ten-recommendations-strengthen>

7. Build the culture of statistics and raise the awareness about statistics, and strengthen actual and correct use of data and information in decision-making and policy formulation in GCC countries.
8. Ensure that the GCC region has an effective presence in international statistical development.
9. Ensure long-term organizational sustainability of GCC-Stat.

These nine objectives provide a framework for statistical development in the GCC countries. GCC-Stat's mandate is to lead statistical development in the region through extensive work with member countries and other regional and international stakeholders according to five strategic pillars, as follows:

1. Assembly, analysis and dissemination of data and metadata;
2. Development, harmonization and coordination of statistical work, use of the latest standards;
3. Capacity Development;
4. Cross-cutting institutional issues;
5. Support programs (internal to GCC-Stat);

Thus, the co-operation efforts in the region are organised along these five strategic pillars, to reach the nine objectives in order to enhance the statistical development at regional level. To reach these regional objectives, lot of harmonization activities should take place in NSSs to ensure both national and regional requirements. GCC-Stat is working with member countries to support their efforts to develop their NSSs to be aligned with the regional agenda.

6. Addressing Statistical Issues for Evidence-Based decision-making

In the process of the statistical development in the region, GCC-Stat co-operates with member countries to enhance statistical capacity in some major domains.

In 2014, GCC-Stat carried out with the help of a well-known international consultancy firm, a Current Status Survey of eight specific domains of official statistics across NSCs of the six member countries. The survey covered availability of data across the NSCs and a thorough assessment of the eight specific fields of official statistics.

This survey was used to help prepare an integrated Statistical Strategy and Road Map for the 2015-2020 period as well as two-year work programs with rolling horizon. The road map and work programs set out milestones to be achieved and the work to be completed by GCC-Stat and member countries.

The regional work program and the road map for the years 2015-2020 was endorsed by The Ministerial Council in September 2015.

The road map selected eleven major domains to be initial priorities for the GCC statistical development for the years 2015-2020. These domains, which play an important role for policy making in the region, are as follow:

1. National accounts;
2. Monetary and Financial Statistics;
3. Price and short term indicators statistics;
4. Foreign trade statistics;
5. Labour statistics;
6. Energy and environment statistics;
7. Development, progress and sustainability indicators;

8. 2020 registers-based Census;
9. Enhanced use of administrative data sources for statistical purposes;
10. Classifications and Standards;
11. Tourism Statistics

7. National Implementations Plans

The success of the GCC Statistical Strategy and Road Map 2015-2020 requires a joint effort between countries and GCC-Stat.

GCC-Stat plays a vital role to support member countries to develop/update the country national statistical plans in order that regional requirements are incorporated in national statistical plans and actually implemented. Based the agreed road map, GCC-Stat has been working with member countries in reflecting the regional strategic objectives/milestones into national implementation plans, and monitoring progress. Recently, GCC-Stat organized a High-Level Workshop (September 2016) to discuss actual execution of the national implementation plans, with participation of a number of Director Generals and senior management and staff in NSCs.

Currently, member countries are completing their national implementation plans with the technical support from GCC-Stat.

8. Achievements so Far

Although actual operations have started only about three years ago, GCC-Stat has already put in place processes for implementing the strategic objectives as shown in the table below:

Strategic objectives	Progress so far
Build and strengthen the statistical and institutional capacity of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to meet the statistical requirements at the GCC level, in particular and international level, in general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – More than 40 guidelines, methodologies etc. produced, discussed and adopted through the work of standing committees and working groups in 39 meetings – First version of CPI at GCC level – Economic model to predict the most important macro indicators – Countries have started to implement many of the priority projects (e.g. progress on Annual Labour Force Survey, Foreign Investment Survey, etc.) – 33 workshops and training sessions took place for the benefit of over 700 staff from the GCC Statistical System and in collaboration with major partners including UNSD, UNESCWA, ILO, IMF, and EUROSTAT – Member countries benefited from nearly 60 technical assistance missions with a total duration of over 450 expert/days
Promote and improve the quality and quantity of statistical products on a sustainable basis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Dedicated web portal supporting access to regional level statistics – Electronic link project

Strategic objectives	Progress so far
Projecting the GCC region as a unified economic and social agglomeration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Regional CPI – Increased range of regional level indicators (new publication – population, health, etc) – Showcasing the region in international events
Developing, expanding and marketing statistical dissemination.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Implementation of data and metadata transmission plans – Launch of dedicated data web portal – Publication of the first version of consumer prices at the level of the GCC countries – Build an economic model to predict the most important macroeconomic indicators – Publication of more than 54 statistical reports and bulletins – Started work on the electronic link project between the Member States and the Centre – Work is ongoing to put in place an advance release calendar.
Establishing joint work programs between the National Statistics Centers and GCC-Stat.	National Implementation Plans
Unifying the National Statistics Strategies in GCC countries with the joint statistics programs in accordance with best international practices.	Harmonised work programmes
Build the culture of statistics and raise the awareness about statistics, and strengthen actual and correct use of data and information in decision-making and policy formulation in GCC countries.	Use of Statistics in decision making
Ensure that the GCC region has an effective presence in international statistical development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Active participation in forums such as SDGs, Big Data, etc.; – Coordinated participation of GCC countries and GCC-Stat in the annual session of UNSC; – Increased presence in international conferences.
Ensure long-term organizational sustainability of GCC-Stat.	GCC-Stat building internal capacity – (82% of staff and experts from GCC countries)

As it gradually reaches its full operating mode, GCC-Stat plans to publish annually around 30 statistical reports and bulletins, organize about 15 workshops and training sessions, and offer over 300 expert/days of technical assistance to member countries.

9. Opportunities and Emerging challenges

GCC-Stat will continue to support the harmonized production of statistics in the GCC region according to the objectives stated above. In addition, it will seek to strengthen coordination and promote further joint work with regional and international partners, in order to ensure harmonization of the delivery of support to member countries while reducing the burden on the National Statistical Systems.

Similar to any other developmental process, development of statistics in the GCC region is facing multi-dimensional challenges. These challenges are seen at the same time as opportunities for GCC-Stat. The lack of perfect alignment between the GCC regional roadmap with annual national projects and programs, is one of these challenges, which in turn leads to difficulty in publishing statistics at the GCC level. At the same time, GCC-Stat is facing increased demand for statistical reports on the level of GCC and programs to provide technical support.

Moreover, the internal challenges related to NSCs in the region include:

- Oil prices and their impact on the budgets of the GCC countries, which consequently have impact on financial resources devoted to statistical work in NSCs, and therefore affect the implementing of strategic programs specially with limitation of specialized human resources;
- Difficulty of obtaining experts and specialists in methodologies and some statistical areas;
- Difficulty of retaining experienced staff of NSCs;
- Insufficient application of recommended and agreed concepts, classifications and quality controls by data producers;
- Structural changes in some NSCs and at the level of the GCC countries;
- Insufficient alignment of the available statistical products with the growing demand from data users

Through its presence in statistical agenda, along with its strategic objectives in regional and international cooperation and coordination, GCC-Stat is experiencing several external challenges, which keep the mode in high speed to enhance regional statistical work based on international recommended standards and maintains sustainability of GCC statistical system. Some of these challenges are:

- Technical development with appearance of Big Data, especially data from social media;
- Increased demand for statistics by decision makers with new set of non-traditional statistical areas coming to the surface such as welfare, happiness, transparency, and sustainable development, etc.;
- Community awareness of availability of data and freedom of obtaining it;
- Multiplicity of data and statistics producers from outside NSCs;
- The need to measure confidence, trends and tendencies, opinions and level of satisfaction in the statistical work and all related fields

To overcome these challenges, countries should take full advantage of co-operation and capacity development opportunities offered by GCC-Stat. In addition, building national plans based on the regional strategic plan and road map prepared by GCC-Stat and committed by member countries, will ensure actual implementation of regional agenda and will fulfill both national and regional requirements.

All parties in the statistical system should take advantage of the rapid development of information and communication technologies, to overcome many of the difficulties faced by the national statistical systems, with more focus on administrative data.

In addition, development of statistical work in the GCC region would be strengthened through increased cooperation with academic, educational and training institutes working in the field of statistics and IT, to improve statistical skills.

10. The Way Forward

GCC-Stat will continue to implement the agreed work program with a strong focus on areas of weakness while building on the success achieved so far. It will work with member countries in the context of implementing national plans, and will continue provide technical support as needed.

GCC-Stat will continue the efforts to reduce the burden on NSCs through the following:

- Work with regional and international organizations involved in statistics in the GCC region, to harmonize data assembly efforts from countries as well as coordinate capacity development activities and relevant events;
- Bear the cost of hosting a number of participants from NSCs in regional workshops and training courses;
- Expanding the use of electronic media in meetings and training sessions as much as possible;
- Organizing work groups meetings in conjunction with corresponding workshops whenever possible;

Moreover, progress in achieving regional priority goals and milestones will be managed and monitored at both national and regional levels. Countries will continue alignment of regional work plan in their national plans to ensure the actual implementation of agreed work program and road map at the GCC level.

11. Conclusion

GCC-Stat is a co-operated operation based organization, and will continue the efforts of coordination and harmonization of statistical work in the region, with strong sustainable relations with stakeholders involved in regional and international statistical development.

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Tables

Table 1: Relation between Strategic Pillars and main Objectives of GCC-Stat

Strategic Pillars	Main activities
1. Assembly, analysis and dissemination of data and metadata	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assemble, analyze and regularly disseminate data and statistical information (demographic, social, economic, environmental, etc.) of interest to decision and policy-makers, researchers, planners, organizations, the public;• Compile and publish GCC aggregates;• Adopt data dissemination policies and procedures, and disseminate through the web portal as well as regular publications.
2. Development, harmonization and coordination of statistical work, use of the latest standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve the quality and quantity of statistical products in a sustainable manner;• Harmonize and standardize statistical work across member countries;• Use the latest standards, definitions, concepts classifications, and systems;• Strengthen cooperation at the national, regional and international levels.
3. Capacity Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide technical assistance to member countries;• Organize training workshops and training courses, in-country and at the regional level;• Organize study visits for member countries to benefit from best practices.
4. Cross-cutting institutional issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Harmonize national statistical strategies in member countries;• Raise statistical awareness, and strengthen relationships with data users.• Achieve an effective presence in the international and regional statistical development.• Ensure the sustainability of GCC-Stat.
5. Support programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure efficient and effective operations of GCC-Stat, including by increasing the efficiency of human and financial resources, as well as ICTs.

Table 2: Relations between Strategic Pillars, Objectives and Priority Projects and Programs

Strategic Pillars	Strategic Objectives	Projects contributed in achieving Strategic Objectives
1. Assembly, analysis and dissemination of data and metadata	Objective (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Projects (01) – (08) – Project (11) – Project (13)
2. Development, harmonization and coordination of statistical work, use of the latest standards	Objectives (1) and (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Projects (01) – (10) – Program (12)
3. Capacity Development	Objective (3) mainly, serve all objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Projects (01) – (10) – Program (12) – Project (13)
4. Cross-cutting institutional issues	Objectives (4) – (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Program (12)
5. Support programs	All objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Programs (A), (B), (C)

Figures

Figure 1: Regional Statistical System

