

The Power of Micro-Level Data: Improving Precision in GCC Policy Design

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Executive Summary

Data is becoming increasingly critical for shaping policy decisions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. With the GCC nations aiming to establish themselves as global leaders, leveraging available data is essential for informed policy formulation. This policy note emphasizes the potential of micro-level data to enhance GCC policy design, with a specific focus on migration. The GCC countries have a substantial migrant population, making data accuracy vital. While the exact figures fluctuate, the region collectively hosts over 10 million migrant workers. Existing research primarily relies on descriptive studies and macro-level data, leading to inconsistencies and limited actionable insights for policymakers. The significant policy changes in the Gulf, including reforms in labor laws and nationalization policies, create an opportunity to explore their direct effects on various outcomes through causal inference. However, this requires access to micro-level data and the use of advanced research designs. To contribute to global migration research, the GCC should improve data transparency, make micro-level data available, and support research funding. The region can utilize experimental and quasi-experimental techniques to study the causal impact of policy reforms.

Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries include a significant percentage of migrants as a share of their populations. Depending on the data source and time period (e.g., World Bank's Development Indicators database or national data), Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) consistently rank among the top 5 countries worldwide with a migrant population exceeding 70 percent. Bahrain and Oman also feature in the top 20 countries with a considerable share of migrants. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which has the largest total population in the region (over 32 million), typically falls within the top 30 countries with 42% of its population composed of foreign nationals (Reuters, 2023).

Collectively, the GCC region hosts more than 30 million migrant workers (Sherman, 2022). The number of foreign nationals in the region is subject to change year on year, primarily influenced by economic factors such as the price of oil, infrastructure investments, and local labor market demand. Despite these fluctuations, the number of foreign nationals has shown a steady increase over the past decade. In the last decade alone, the number of foreign workers almost doubled (GLMM, 2023).

Migration Research in the Gulf Region

The large presence of foreign nationals in the Gulf has triggered interest from the research community both in the region and overseas. An online database search of Google Scholar yields 16,400 articles about the Gulf region and migration. In 2013 that number was 965, while in 2022 it was 1,550 (the number of articles has grown from 1,270 in 2018 to 1,700 in 2021, slowed down to 1,550 in 2022 but at the time of writing is already at 858 for 2023). Statistics on published research articles on the intersection of the GCC countries and migration suggest a growing research area. It would be hard to examine the types of data and research