Introducing Modernization into the Statistical System in the Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

Before now, all the statistics offices under took only two tasks: field work data collection from surveys or censuses, and collecting official statistics from governmental organizations, agencies or other formal organizations. Later, Council of Ministers in Kurdistan Region determined to improve statistical issues by establishing an appropriate statistical organization within Kurdistan Regional Government. The process of modernization into Kurdistan Region Statistics Office was developed in different dimensions such as Key statistical areas, Information and Communication Technology, Infrastructure as well as Human resources. The recent structure of Kurdistan Region Statistics Office composed of 10 statistical departments and all of these departments have been statistically improved by receiving support from internal and external agencies as well as international organization. And now, KRSO is considered an Official data reference for all users and particularly for decision makers.

Key words: Kurdistan Regional Government, Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office, Statistics System, Key Statistical Areas, Human Resources, Infrastructure.

Background on Kurdistan Region

Kurdistan is a region characterized with different topographic features. The desert in the southern border and high mountains in the northern border make a very varied and fabulous landscape with the total area of 46,861.41 km^2. It covers four provinces in northern Iraq: Erbil, Sulaymani, Duhok and Halabja, which was a part of Sulaymani governorate and has been recently established in 2014. The region was first established after the First Golf War in 1991 and it was recongnized by the Iraqi constitution in 2005.

Despite the instability in Iraq, Kurdistan has made progress in many fields including security, education, health, economics, tourism etc. Although no census has been in place in Iraq since 1987, but, the department of Population and Labour force estimated the population of Kurdistan region about 5.61 million in 2016, 2.82 million males and 2.79 million females (1)[1]. Erbil, the capital of the region, which has 2.06 million people stands on top followed by Sulaymani with 1.98 million people and then Dohuk which has 1.47 million people, and finally Halabja with population of 0.11 million people.

In addition, the urban proportion of this population is at a very high level of 81.56%, and the sex ratio of the region is 1.01. Average life expectancy for both sexes is expected to be 75.1 years in 2016, with an expected age of 73.4 years for males and 76.2 years for females. The estimated growth rate was 2.7 in 2012, while it is expected to reduce to 2.6 in 2016 and 2.2 in 2020. Moreover, the total estimated number of children under the age of five is estimated about 711,844 individuals in 2016, which is 12.67% of total population. Unemployment rate was 13.53% in the second half of 2015, while it was 7.13% in the second half of 2014. This dramatic rise in unemployment rate is due to economic crises that faced the region since the beginning of 2014.

Introduction

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, statistics was not well instituted before of KRSO. Following forming of KRSO, three directorates of statistics were established in three governorates, Erbil, Sulaymani and Duhok; and some sub-directorates in districts. Before establishing General Directorate of Statistics and then KRSO, there was no statistical organization in the region to supervise the activity of these offices in order to provide them with statistical instruction in doing professional work. The main responsibility of these offices were only implementing the field work and sometimes editing the filled questionnaires; for instance, conducting the field work stage of censuses such as population and agriculture. In addition, collecting data on areas such as agricultural, industrial, services, economic and living standards were done by statistics offices, without any further statistical step regarding the collected data.

KRSO was established in 2002 in order to design a well-organized structure for all statistical activities within the region. It started this work with less than 10 staff in the main office, and now it has more than 70 staff. The main purpose of establishing KRSO was to organize the statistical issues in a scientific and professional way and redefine the task of the statistical offices in order to respond the needs of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for planning and administrating matters. Since then many improvements have been done in statistical works.

The first step was to define the duties of KRSO and the working strategy with CSO in Bagdad. The strategy of KRG is different with the one of Iraqi governorate. The KRSO's strategy is to provide all necessary data for the government in order to achieve all the goals which the government has planned for. However, there are many activities in national context that KRSO was very successful in carrying them in coordination with CSO at the beginning of its establishing, for instance population census.

The main purpose of this paper is to make a presentation on the stand of KRSO and the improvement it made in statistical system in Kurdistan Region during its work activities as a statistical organization.

Importance of Statistical System

In any country or region, decision making for any policy formulation relied on trustworthy and comprehensive statistics. This could not be achieved except by well-organized statistical system. Identifying the most urgent needs, monitoring the progress of policies, current strategies for dealing with problems and planning for future development, all these could be possible by statistics. Most important, statistics form the foundation upon which successful policy planning in many areas rests. There is no unique globally used definition for statistical system, although "a working definition could be the 'totality of statistics produced and published by national government'" [5].

KRG concentrated its policies in three directions [2]. First, to develop a wide-ranged economy that relies on the private sector that is not purely independent from oil. Second, to advance the economy and improve the standard living of population through providing appropriate social services, which are essential for responding the needs of the society. Then, to provide labor market opportunities and improve education system, which will improve living standards of population.

Data availability is essential to develop the policies, address the priorities of the policies, and evaluate policies. Powerful data needs a relevant and accountable statistical system considering the nature of the society and government. The objective of existing Statistical organization, which is responsible of all or most of statistical issues, is to provide data and information to the government,

public and business community in the fields such as demography, economic, social, agricultural, environmental, etc. [3]. Moreover, optimizing available resources used by the undertakers of statistical activities, avoiding duplication of statistical undertakings, developing authentic, effective, and efficient national statistical system are aims of developing statistical system [4].

The wide of administrative structure and needs in national level dominant the roles of any statistical organization and they are usually defined by law [5]. There are two main types of statistical systems worldwide, centralized and decentralized [2, 4]. Deciding an appropriate type of the statistical system for a country depends on the responsibility for delivering official statistics across the range of activities of government [5].

Centralized statistical systems produce and publish all or most of statistics, while in decentralized systems, different producers of statistics such as agencies and ministries, are available according to the responsibility of the agency or ministry for that sector [2, 4]. According to Bill McLennan [6], the discrepancy between these two types of statistical systems has made a basic dilemma faced official statistics which is defined as "policy relevance versus statistical integrity". Although still there is no statistical law in the Kurdistan Region, its statistical system lies between the two types of statistical systems, similar to the most of the national statistical systems around the world such as Mozambique [5].

Improvement of Statistical System in the Kurdistan Region

Before 1992, data collection and all other statistical issues were implemented in a very simple and traditional method approved by CSO in Baghdad. Mandate of all of the statistics offices in the Iraqi governorates were two main objects: field work data collection from surveys or censuses, and collecting official statistics from governmental organizations, agencies or other formal organizations. These issues are not scientific and proficiency side of statistics science and knowledge, this means that statistics has been shrunk to data collection, which is actually not statistics. In 1992, when KRG established, and 11 years later until 2003, there was no formal or direct relation between statistics offices in Kurdistan region and CSO in Baghdad. All the statistical issues that implemented by the statistics offices in the region were limited to collecting some official statistics and field work data collection for the surveys to meet the needs of KRG organization and all these were conducted by UN agencies or some NGO in the region.

In 2000, the Council of Ministers considered reorganizing statistical issues in the region. As first step, it established a Directorate General for statistical issues linked to the Council of Ministers. Two years later, in 2002, the idea of improving the DG to a wider organization came into consideration and KRSO was established. KRSO as headquarter has 6 offices and overall number of

13 sub-offices. All the statistics offices and sub-offices have defined tasks and responsibilities. KRSO knew the importance of relation with CSO in Baghdad, so their relationship started in 2003 based on cooperation between two statistical organizations, in which KRSO is cooperating with CSO in national level and with KRG in regional level. Further, cooperation and collaboration with UN, NGO and other national and international organization established thereafter. The Statistical System Modernization Program in KRSO was developed in different fields. Key statistical areas, ICT and infrastructure, Human resources, and Implementing the Roadmap are major fields that practice the mentioned program and they are described as below.

1. Improvement in key statistical areas

Before establishing KRSO, the statistics offices dealt with Agriculture, Industry, and Construction as the main statistics and the subjects like population, communication, tourism, hotels, prices and any other statistics were classified into one group under "Others" name. And now, according to the last classification that prepared in KRSO and approved by the Ministry of Planning (MOP) in 2010, there are 10 major statistical sections that are Population and Labor Force, Communication and Transportation and Commerce, Environment, Agriculture, Industry, Price Consumer Index (PCI), Education and Health, Construction and Building, Gross Domestic Production (GDP), and Statistical Analysis. However, Information Technology (IT), Geographical Information System (GIS), Translation, Dissemination and Relations, Administration and Finance are non-statistical departments in KRSO.

2. Improvement in Information and Communication Technology & Infrastructure

A powerful statistics office with professional statistical tasks to do needs a well-equipped place with new technology. Currently, Headquarter of KRSO using a place that not actually built for statistical purposes. The statistics offices in the governorates are particularly built for statistics purposes, but the sub-offices has the same situation of headquarter. On its way into modernization, Process of building a place for KRSO is in place now and the process is undergoing by constructing a worthy standardized building for headquarter. The new four floor building has been equipped with internet, networking and server requirements, data warehouse, meeting rooms, conference and video conference rooms, café, etc. as well as work places for technical and administrative departments.

The collaboration of KRSO and UNFPA has a great role in developing KRSO. An appropriate professional IT staff is planned to be trained before moving to the new building. Currently, IT equipment and personnel are available and working in different IT areas such as website, networking and server, maintenance and programming. In addition, some staff has already finished working with a professional team supported by UNFPA to prepare and develop meta-data. The team started its work on September 2013 with a comprehensive training course and several missions to follow up the results

including two workshops to show achievements as well as one in-depth training course in the middle of 2015.

3. Improvement in Human Resources Management

Statistical offices and sub-offices were poor in skillful and expert human resource. KRSO focused on developing and raising skilled human resource for all related statistical, technical and administrative areas. Before establishing KRSO and at its beginning, the number of staff, in general and statisticians and experts in other areas in particular; in the offices and sub-offices was much less than today's. Collaboration with CSO and supports from UN agencies played a significant role in improving KRSO. In 2009, KRSO and UNFPA signed a cooperation agreement for five years in order to improve human resources of KRSO and this made UNFPA to be the main character with a greater role. Many staff was trained and skilled in varied areas during this period.

In addition, in 2010, the Ministry of Planning decided to contract with the RAND Corporation to support and improve KRSO to get policy-relevant data. Recruitment and placement, performance management, career management, competency modeling, and training curriculums and modules are the significant steps KRSO took to achieve the aim of its existence as a professional and powerful statistical organization backed by its proficient and experts.

4. Progress of Implementing the Roadmap

Statistics in general and official statistics in particular, was misplaced before establishing KRSO. The roadmap of KRSO aims to strength statistics and its applications among all governmental and non-governmental formation within the Region. KRSO is referred to as an official statistical center in providing official statistics to government, business sectors and community. Undergraduate and postgraduate students, researchers, institutes and universities, companies and businesses, etc. refers to the reports published or data produced by KRSO as a reliable source to meet their needs. The policy of dissemination of official statistics as well as the policy of dealing with media are approved and used by KRSO. Labor Force Survey is the first trimester survey KRSO conduced with full support from RAND for the first trimester of 2012 and thereafter it was completely designed and conducted independently by KRSO staff.

KRSO official statistics are used in policy /decision making processes. The research 'Designing a System for Collecting Policy Relevant Data for the Kurdistan Region' was the first research essentially based on KRSO data. This research was conducted in corporation between KRG and RAND and the result was published in 2012. In addition, 'Social Protection Strategic Framework' and 'Reforming the Economy for Shared Prosperity and Protecting the Vulnerable' implemented by the Ministry of Planning in cooperation with the World Bank and announced in 2016, are two master and significant research examples used data and reports of KRSO.

Training courses are highly concerned by KRSO. The trainings consist of technical trainings focused on statistics, administration, finance, IT and GIS. Short training courses are provided by different organizations such as KRG organizations or UN agencies. Furthermore, during last 4 years, KRSO obtained more than 12 Master postgraduates in different areas such as Demography, Social Statistics, Finance, Law and Management. Majority of them used the capacity building program supported by the ministry of Higher Education and graduated from abroad universities.

KRSO has provided better quality data by supporting modern infrastructure and IT. It has planned to use electronic questionnaire filling in the field work instead of using paper questionnaire in the field and entering the data into the computer thereafter. Nevertheless, data are transferred to the KRSO headquarter directly after connection to the internet by using appropriate applications. Official communications between the KRSO headquarter and offices are used to be accomplished using emails instead of paper or other traditional ways.

However, KRSO possess its own website which was developed in 2014 supported by UNFPA. Reports are prepared in a standard way. The fact sheets, press releases and other useful information are provided and published on the website in addition with regularly updated quick indicators as a significant part of the website. Moreover, data requesting from KRSO is now available online through filling a request online application and the requested data would be available for applicant within maximum period of one week in case of availability of requested data.

5. **Problems and Difficulties**

Dealing with problems and difficulties is substantial to better undertake the tasks and issues. Statistical organizations are composed and the composition is between IT, statistician, analyzing and field working staff. A desirable statistics work could only be provided through a joint work and cooperation between these people who work in different fields.

In addition, there are problems in providing desirable data to user due to lack of skilled statisticians. Using traditional or non-modern methodologies by line ministries or other organizations to provide or collect data lead to inadequate collection. Finally, as insufficient human resources have always been a big problem in front of KRSO, for this reason it always emphasized on attracting skilled staff in all fields. Beside statistics, management, accounting, translation and dissemination are most significant fields where KRSO has started to raise enable staff in these fields and the process is still ongoing. Sampling design, computer programmer, data base management and statistical analysis are the areas where KRSO still need further works to reach an adequate number of skilled staff.

Future Steps

Although KRSO has taken steps toward well performance in statistical areas and developing the statistical organization in the Region, many vital and substantial issues are in place that needs to be resolved soon. The most urgent step that needs to be taken by KRSO is to work for passing statistics law. The draft of the law has been sent to the Council of Ministers and then to the parliament. Efforts should be continuously in place in providing more qualified human resources, for instance Msc. or PhD.

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