

# ► Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)– ILO cooperation

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## ► Executive Summary

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a regional political and economic organisation, established in Abu Dhabi in 1981, comprising the Kingdom of Bahrain, State of Kuwait, Sultanate of Oman, State of Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The GCC's headquarters is in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The objectives of the Cooperation Council are:

1. To coordinate, integrate, and interconnect efforts across all fields to achieve unity among member states.
2. To deepen and strengthen relations, ties, and areas of cooperation among their peoples in various fields.
3. To formulate unified regulations in economic and financial affairs, commerce, customs, communications, education, and culture.
4. To promote scientific and technological progress in industry, mining, agriculture, water, and animal resources by establishing joint scientific research ventures and encouraging by private-sector cooperation for the benefit of their peoples.

## ► Key facts about the GCC

The GCC implements its labour strategies through Decent Work Country Programmes (DWCPs), which provide expertise on labour and social policy. Bahrain and Oman pioneered DWCPs in 2010, with Bahrain focusing on institutional capacity, social dialogue, unemployment insurance, and migrant worker protection, and Oman emphasizing workforce nationalization, social dialogue, and labour administration.

Kuwait has also engaged, using ILO diagnostics to guide labour market reforms. These early efforts reflect the region's growing commitment to decent work principles and structured cooperation with the ILO.

Demographically, the GCC has a unique labour market structure. With a total population of approximately 58 million, expatriates constitute a large portion of the workforce, making all GCC states major labour-receiving countries. Employment data reveals that migrant workers significantly outnumber national workers in the private sectors across the region.

### Labour Market Reforms

GCC countries are undertaking significant reforms to modernize their labour markets. A key priority is enhancing governance and aligning with international benchmarks. Key initiatives include:

- **Labour Market Governance:** Developing unified Labour Market Information Systems (LMIS) to improve data-driven policymaking and reforming the Kafala (sponsorship) system to enhance migrant worker protection.
- **International Labour Standards (ILS):** Advancing towards the ratification of fundamental ILS, with several member states actively reviewing conventions on occupational safety and health, and fundamental principles and rights at work.
- **Social Protection:** Expanding and modernizing social protection systems. This includes reforms to end-of-service benefits for migrant workers and the development of broader social security schemes for national populations.
- **Skills and Dialogue:** Upskilling the national workforce to improve private-sector competitiveness and gradually fostering social dialogue mechanisms to strengthen industrial relations.

These efforts are part of a broader agenda that also encompasses managing new forms of work, promoting a just transition to green economies, and strengthening occupational safety and health (OSH) regulations—a critical focus given the region's significant petrochemical industry.

## ► GCC and the ILO: An Emerging Partnership of Cooperation and Progress



Since the signing of the first Memorandum of Understanding in 1999 between the ILO Regional Office for Arab States and the GCC's Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs, the collaboration has steadily expanded. This initial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) established a framework for consultations and coordination of activities tailored to the Gulf region's unique labour and social dynamics. It emphasized policy alignment, the exchange of critical information, and the development of initiatives to address shared priorities.

In 2000, the first Plan of Activities was launched, setting a precedent for sustained collaboration. This biennial tradition has continued, culminating in the signing of the latest plan for 2025–2029 during the ILO Governing Body meetings. Over the years, these plans have prioritized technical assistance, advisory services, and capacity building in key areas such as labour market information systems, social security, labour legislation, occupational safety and health (OSH), and vocational training. The partnership has also targeted recruitment policies, governance of

labour migration, and labour dispute resolution frameworks- aimed at supporting the socio-economic development of GCC countries while advancing the ILO's mission.

### Key Studies in the GCC-ILO Partnership



**1. Social Protection for Migrant Workers:** In 2023, the ILO published a comprehensive study titled "Social Protection for Migrant Workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries: A regional mapping of provisions on paper and in practice." The report assessed migrant workers' access to social protection across the GCC, analysing both legal frameworks and practical implementation.

**2. Reforming End-of-Service Indemnity (EOSI) for Migrant Workers:** Also in 2023, the ILO analysed EOSI schemes in GCC countries and proposed policy reforms aligned with international social security standards to better safeguard migrant workers' rights.

**3. Labour Migration and Skills Development:** In 2018, the ILO released a publication examining labour migration trends and skills development in the regions. The study provided forward-looking recommendations for both origin and destination countries to shape the future of work in the GCC.

## ► A Landmark Step Forward: Joint Plan for 2025-2029

During the 352nd session of the ILO Governing Body (GB) in November 2024, the ILO and GCC signed a Joint Plan of Activities for 2025-2029. This agreement reinforced their shared commitment to advancing the Decent Work Agenda and promoting sustainable labour market development. The plan identifies eight key priorities:

- **New Forms of Work:** Protecting worker rights in an increasingly digital economy.
- **Labour Dispute Mechanisms:** Strengthening frameworks for efficient and fair dispute resolution.
- **Green Jobs and Just Transition:** Supporting workforce adaption to align with climate-friendly economic shifts.
- **Gender Equality:** Enhancing women's participation and closing gender pay gaps.
- **Occupational Safety and Health (OSH):** Improving workplace safety systems and protocols.
- **Skills Forecasting:** Anticipating emerging labour market demands.
- **Employment Policies and Minimum Wage:** Evaluating national employment strategies and wage structures.
- **Social Protection:** Extending coverage, with particular focus on migrant worker protections.



Mohamed Al Oubaidy, Director General of the GCC Executive Bureau with Rubejanat, ILO Regional Director for Arab States.

## ► South-South and Triangular Cooperation in the Gulf States

South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) is a comprehensive framework for collaboration among developing countries of the South in the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, and technical domains. Rooted in the principles of solidarity and non-conditionality, SSTC advocates for inclusive and demand-driven development models. At its core, SSTC recognizes that developing countries can address their needs by sharing and acquiring expertise, knowledge, skills, resources, and technologies from peers in the Global South—particularly those with experience from traditional development cooperation initiatives. This approach complements North-South cooperation, fostering collective progress toward shared development goals.

In recent years, SSTC has evolved into a proven practice, supported by country-led projects, development agencies, and global commitments to strengthen such partnerships. The ILO considers SSTC pivotal for advancing the Decent Work Agenda and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Notably, SSTC directly contributes to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8—promoting sustained, inclusive economic growth, full employment, and decent work—and SDG 17, which underscores partnerships to achieve all SDGs, including through SSTC itself. The ILO-GCC partnership strategically leverages South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) to implement concrete projects aligned with the Decent Work Agenda and SDGs. Under the 2025-2029 Joint Plan of Activities, SSTC is operationalized through targeted initiatives in key areas. These include sharing knowledge on Green Jobs and Just Transition, such as policies for decarbonizing key industries; Capacity-Building for ministries on labour inspection, social dialogue, and data collection; and Skills Development programmes focused on digital literacy and vocational training.

## ► GCC countries' commitment to the ILO: Key Highlights

- **Kuwait's Commitment to Palestine:** Kuwait has consistently supported the ILO Regional Office for Arab States, with a dedicated focus on promoting decent work and social justice in the State of Palestine through an annual contribution of US\$500,000. Kuwait reinforces its commitment to advancing labour and social welfare for Palestinian workers.
- **Qatar's Investment in Palestinian Social Security:** In 2017, Qatar allocated US\$1 million to establish an Independent Social Security Institution in Palestine. This initiative aims to develop a comprehensive social security system for private-sector workers and their families, significantly enhancing the territory's social protection framework. In addition, Qatar has signed an agreement to support ILO's regular budget supplementary account by 2 million\$ in June 2025 and has continued to support work to combat the Kafala system.
- **Saudi Arabia:** In June 2025, Saudi Arabia and the International Labour Organization (ILO) launched the third phase of their technical cooperation programme, focusing on advancing decent work reforms. This initiative supports the Kingdom's Vision 2030 by enhancing labour mobility, wage protection, and social dialogue. The partnership aims to improve employment and labour market policies and outcomes, with a budget of approximately USD \$4.2 million. Additionally, the agreement establishes pathways for Saudi professionals to gain international experience in labour policy and global standards through junior professional officers and secondment programs ([International Labour Organization](#)).



## ► Key Events and Initiatives in GCC Countries

The GCC's engagement with South-South cooperation spans over a decade, evolving from global expos to digital platforms and future-facing summits.

### 1. Forging the Future: The 2025 World Summit for Social Development

- The upcoming 2025 Summit in Doha will build on the region's legacy of collaboration. The Zero Draft of its Political Declaration emphasizes poverty eradication, decent work, and cross-cutting issues like gender equality and climate resilience. From an SSTC perspective, the Summit presents a critical opportunity for developing countries to share knowledge, build capacity, and collaborate on joint initiatives.

### 2. Digital Platforms: Ongoing Knowledge Exchange

- **The South-4-Care Platform:** This contemporary digital initiative, hosted on the ILO Global Care Policy Portal, enables countries to share and discover integrated care policies that promote decent work and gender equality. It explicitly uses South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) to document innovative solutions and foster collaboration through an interactive dashboard.

### 3. Global Expos: Establishing a Leadership Role

- **Global South-South Development Expo (Dubai, 2016):** This event marked a significant scaling-up of the region's role, being the first Global Expo hosted by a Member State. It convened over 500 participants from 100+ countries and showcased 170 Southern-led initiatives, with the ILO presenting labour-focused solutions for the SDGs.
- **First Arab States Regional South-South Development Expo (Doha, 2014):** As the pioneering event in the region, this Expo first established the GCC as a venue for showcasing scalable development solutions from the Global South. The ILO contributed by presenting labour-related solutions to promote decent work and social protection.