

Unlocking the Value of Data

3 Recommendations for GCC Governments

Introduction

Data is an essential asset at the centre of both public service delivery and economic activity. As of 2018, over 90% of all data in the world had been created since 2016, and the pace has only accelerated since then. It's estimated that every two years, the volume of data doubles. The recent data revolution has required governments to increase their capacity to harness and use data to improve public sector performance, business growth, and social welfare.

“In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), countries are slowly moving towards a more transparent, citizen-centred and digitally-enabled public service, with an open approach to how data is collected, managed, accessed and shared,” explains Armando Cubillan, Palladium Director of Consulting. “This is all while ensuring the protection of personal and sensitive information.”

However, compared to global standards, there is plenty of room for progress, particularly in creating a more enabling legislative landscape, setting out clear roles and responsibilities across government, and designing well-defined data strategies.

“By establishing enabling laws and regulations and creating clear roles and responsibilities, governments signal commitment to promoting transparency and affirming citizens’ rights to access public data,” Cubillan says. “A national data strategy sets a nationwide direction and aligns internal efforts away from a fragmented fashion.”


1. A More Enabling Legislative Environment

In some parts of the GCC, few laws and regulations promote the proactive release and use of data. However, some progress has been made in the past five years. In 2015, the Dubai Data Law established a framework for the dissemination and exchange of data. That same year, Qatar enacted a law concerning privacy and protection of personal data. In Oman in 2019, the Statistics and Information Law mandated the creation of a national data strategy and included an article on data privacy and personal information protection.

Despite this progress, most GCC governments have yet to enact laws that reinforce the national importance of data as a strategic asset, hold governments accountable, or mandate government action in open data and digitisation – which global best-practice countries have widely implemented to much success.

For instance, South Korea’s 2013 Act on Promotion of the Provision and Use of Public Data and the 2009 Framework Act on National Informatization were instated to create a knowledge and information-based society. They effectively promote the provision and use of data managed by public institutions; guaranteeing citizens’ rights to access public data.

In France, the 2016 Digital Republic Bill – jointly prepared with citizens and internet users – was enacted to enable the State’s digital transformation. The Bill promoted public data openness by demanding that public bodies and authorities publish databases online and maintain their quality, and mandated that their websites comply with accessibility regulations.



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Putting similar regulations and legislation around data in place in the GCC would provide citizens with access to information held by public authorities, promote further transparency in state affairs, and define the boundaries of private and confidential information and the circumstances under which such information can be shared.

These laws are extremely important for private citizens and can provide control and protection around how organisations, businesses, and the government utilise personal information, and put into place penalties for the misuse of personal data.

2. Responsibility Across Government

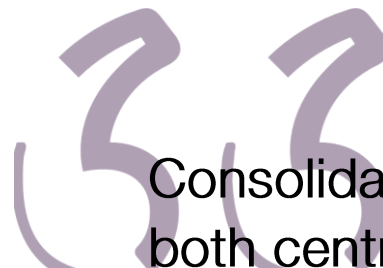
Governments need to have the ability to treat data as a strategic asset. To accelerate the adoption of a data-driven government, individuals and teams must take the lead on championing better data use, management, and capabilities. Furthermore, centralised data authorities signal the importance of data as a strategic national asset and maintain government-wide oversight and direction over data policy and management within a single, dedicated entity.

Globally, established data authorities are responsible for collecting, exchanging, and disseminating data across the government. For example, Etalab – the Prime Minister’s task force for open data in France – is responsible for coordinating the design and implementation of the State’s strategy in the field of data, including its legal and societal components. The task force coordinates administration activities regarding data inventories, governance, production, circulation, and use. Etalab protects personal data and State secrets and determines the best use of data by the State and its various organisations.

But only a few GCC governments have acknowledged the need to establish entities and clear data roles and responsibilities at the national level. In the UAE, for example, the Dubai Data Establishment acts as a central body supervising the implementation of data policies, whereas designated data teams lead operations at the agency level.

Saudi Arabia recently established the Saudi Data & AI Authority to lead the data agenda, define the national data and AI strategy, and coordinate cross-government effort, while the National Data Management Office under the Authority defines data policy and develops data regulations and standards. In Qatar, government agencies are required by law to appoint a senior officer with overall responsibility of data management, including preparing and implementing an open data plan.

While some GCC countries are starting to move in the direction of assigning government-wide roles and responsibilities to unlock the value of data, others have yet to consolidate data – a priority that requires both central and operational government action.



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3. National Data Strategy

It wasn't until recently that governments began looking at data explicitly as opposed to as part of a broader e-government strategy. Now, strategies exclusively focused on data are emerging, as seen in the example of the Data and AI strategy prepared by the Saudi Data and AI Authority, and the National Data Strategy mandated by the new Omani Statistics and Information Law.

Other GCC countries need to build on current efforts in the region and develop similar strategies, which present a coherent government-wide vision for strategic data use and management by the public sector and define national priorities concerning data and its release. A national data strategy will provide the stimulus for purposeful data collection, stewardship, sharing, and use across all relevant government bodies. Global best-practice examples include the UK's "National Data Strategy," an ambitious, pro-growth strategy to drive the UK to build a world-leading data economy while ensuring public trust in data use and providing coherence to the government's data-led work.

While there is a need for common national-level principles to guide overall efforts, different government departments might have their own needs, and department-level data strategies can champion their data efforts. Both South Korea and Canada exemplify this model with their clear overarching data plans and ministry-level input, requiring all departments, agencies, and portfolios to have a data strategy in place that feeds into the larger government plan.

GCC countries need to define and implement similar strategies that underpin the use of data. Doing so will ensure that the public service is empowered and prepared to harness its potential to make better decisions while protecting citizens' privacy. Such strategies set the national direction, align efforts, and provide greater clarity on who oversees data within individual entities and generally within the government.

Building the Foundation for the Future of Data

The fact that many best-practice countries have already taken steps to introduce legislation that prioritises data should motivate GCC countries to do the same.

Once the basic building blocks are in place, countries can begin to explore additional foundations, including managing cyber threats, ensuring data privacy and security, improving data literacy, and formalising collaborative relationships with the private sector and wider community. Each of these are part of a comprehensive approach to unlocking the value of data, and the GCC is poised to forge ahead.



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