

**Iran's Lack of Transparency and Accountability and
its Underdeveloped Data & Statistics Infrastructure**
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Data and statistics play an important role in assessing and monitoring the status of social and economic development in a country.¹ Moreover, in the era of data-driven decision-making and Big Data, it is essential that governments maintain and provide easy access to official data and statistics. It is key that governments maintain transparency, and accountability in order to provide reliable and unbiased observations of the status of the nation's measurements of development such as education, economy, environment, and health, among others.

The right to access governmental data and statistics may be viewed in the broader context of enjoying the benefits of science as a human right. The right to science is enshrined in Article 15 of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), as well as in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).² In particular, Article 15 of the ICESCR requires:

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone:
 - a. To take part in cultural life;
 - b. To enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications;
 - c. To benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.
2. The steps to be taken by the States Parties to the present Covenant to achieve the full realization of this right shall include those necessary for the conservation, the development and the diffusion of science and culture.
3. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity.
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the benefits to be derived from the encouragement and development of international contacts and co-operation in the scientific and cultural fields.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a ratifying party of the ICESCR. Thus, Iran is obliged to recognize the right of its citizens to science, including, the right to access governmental data and statistics, and the right to conduct data collection and reporting by non-governmental entities, amongst others.

Currently, Iran's data and statistical infrastructure is severely underdeveloped. This is mainly due to a lack of independent channels of data collection and reporting by non-governmental organisations and entities. The underutilisation of the existing data and statistics infrastructure, may stem from the lack of reliability, transparency, and accountability of these existing channels of data collection and reporting which are mainly governmental entities.

In recent years, the lack of data/statistics reliability and transparency has resulted in many controversies in the media, and often highlighted by conflicting reports produced by governmental agencies and entities. Although the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) is considered to be the main governmental entity responsible for the collection, processing, and reporting of official statistics, other agencies and organisations related to the government continue to release statistical reports on their areas of interest, which often stirs controversies due to conflicting results between their reports and those released by the SCI.³ A well-known example is the conflicting statistical reports on economic indices, monetary and financial statistics (e.g., unemployment and inflation rates, etc.) reported by the SCI and the Central Bank of Iran.⁴

The lack of transparency in statistics reported by government agencies has, in some cases, been suspected to be intentional, mainly in order to mitigate the risk of raising concerns and objections in society on sensitive

¹ Amstat News, ASA participates in focus group on science and human rights, November 2012, <http://magazine.amstat.org/blog/2012/11/01/stats-and-human-rights>

² International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ICESCR.aspx> and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

³ Statistical Center of Iran, <http://www.amar.org.ir/>

⁴ Tabnak News, Who will win Iran's statistics war: Statistical Center of Iran or the Central Bank?, July 2015, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/515179>

or critical issues. A recent example includes the conflicting reports on the rise of the number of cancer diagnoses in Iran, as well as significant reduction in average age of Iranians diagnosed with cancer. The statistics reported by the Iranian Association of General Surgery were negated and conflicted by data from Iran's Ministry of Health.⁵

Another recent example involves the critical issue of water resources in Iran where conflicting statistics reported by different government entities has resulted in ineffective policies and water resource management.⁶ In fact, many experts consider the lack of data-driven policy-making as the main issue behind Iran's water crisis, which has seen the drying of several rivers and wetlands due to mismanaged water resources and⁷ a lack of rigorous scientific studies into the construction of dams.⁸ The economy is another area where conflicting statistical reports have created controversies, and as a result, has generated a sense of suspicion and lack of trust in Iranian society in the reports released by the government.⁹ For example, there have been several controversies due to conflicting statistical reports by the Central Bank of Iran and other governmental agencies on key economic indices and figures,¹⁰ such as, in a recent case, the statistics reported by the Central Bank of Iran on the Out-of-Pocket Health Expenditure Index conflicts with Ministry of Health's reports.¹¹

Conflicting reports have also, in some cases, been published from within the same governmental entity¹² as well as by a spokesperson for the government and the related governmental agencies.¹³ Examples of such conflicting reports include in the areas of oil and gas¹⁴, the environment¹⁵ and crime statistics¹⁶ among others, which commonly illustrate the lack of reliability and transparency in data and statistics generated by the state, as well as state's lack of accountability.

A look at the history of official statistics in Iran may help us better understand the underlying problems which have less to do with the skills and abilities of Iranian statisticians and Iranian statistical organisations and more with the perceived political implications of the data and statistics. The first modern census in Iran was conducted in 1924, since then official statistics have been generated and reported by different government entities. The SCI, established in 1965, was assigned to collect data through sampling surveys and censuses, and all government agencies were obliged to provide the SCI with the required statistics and data. After the revolution in 1980, as a result of laws passed by the Revolution Council to decentralise and restructure governmental organisations, the statistical regions affiliated with the SCI were merged with the Planning and Budget Offices in provinces. As a result, the collection of statistics and information at the province-level were assigned to the Deputy for Statistics and Informatics of the Planning and Budget Organization. Although the SCI experienced a substantial reduction in statistical projects during the period immediately following the revolution, the organisation was soon granted new and additional responsibilities - including the tracking of construction permits and surveying mining industry activities among others). In 1986, the SCI conducted the first Census after the 1979 revolution. In 2007, following further restructuring of governmental organisations there were reduced connections between the SCI and the provincial offices in charge of data and statistics collection in provinces. In 2011, the SCI was required by the Ahmadinejad government to conduct the Censuses every five years (instead of 10). However, due to high expenses, the Rouhani government returned the Census to its original 10-year schedule.¹⁷

The politically-driven fluctuations in decisions related to governmental statistics and the SCI, shows the important nature of the role of statistics and the SCI in Iranian politics. In fact, this is one of the primary factors behind the underdevelopment of statistics in Iran. Often, governmental entities, or the regime as

⁵ Dr. Malekzaeh, the Vice President of the Research and Development of Iran's Ministry of Health negates the rise of cancer in Iran, August 2014, <http://www.behdasht.gov.ir/?siteid=1&pageid=1508&newsview=111968>

⁶ Water resources policies based on incomplete or incorrect statistical information, February 2015, <http://www.mohitzist.ir/fa/content/1594>

⁷ BBC Persian interview with Sam Khosravifard and Dr. Nasser Karami, August 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18VubgktauY>

⁸ Deutsche Welle, Lack of scientific studies in dam construction in Iran over the recent years, August 2014, <http://www.dw.com/fa-ir/a-17938393>

⁹ Islamic Consultative Assembly News Agency, Lack of trust in governmental statistics due to conflicting statistical reports, September 2012, <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/205417>

¹⁰ Current and future challenges of independent production of statistics, June 2015, <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81656358/>

¹¹ Salamat News, Conflicting statistics on out-of-pocket health expenditure in Iran, August 2015, <http://www.salamatnews.com/news/158558>

¹² Conflicting statistical reports by the Chair and the Vice Chair of the Central Bank of Iran, July 2015, <http://arshnews.ir/prth6vnxq23n6kd.tft2.html>

¹³ Conflicting statistics reported by the Governments Spokesperson and the Minister of Labor, October 2014, <http://melimazhabi.com/### : 68389, http://melimazhabi.com/%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%AE%D9%86%DA%AF%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%86%D8%B1%D8%AE-%D8%A8%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%B8%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1/>

¹⁴ Conflicting statistics released by the Central Bank and Ministry of Petroleum, August 2015, <http://www.veykenaft.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=84&articleType=ArticleView&articleId=506>

¹⁵ Conflicting reports on wildlife statistics, July 2013, <http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2093507>

¹⁶ Conflicting crime statistics, July 2011, <http://www.dw.com/fa-ir/a-15259881>

¹⁷ Census back to 10-year frequency, September 2014, <http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2360179>

a whole manipulate data and statistics on sensitive issues, which undermines the scientific legitimacy of the SCI, resulting in conflicting and sometimes contradictory reports. Such attempts have undermined the recognition of the SCI as the sole governmental entity responsible for the collection and reporting of official statistics. In addition, the lack of independent channels for generating data and statistics on politically sensitive issues has resulted in a government monopoly on the provision of data and statistics.¹⁸

The lack of data and statistical freedom and transparency impacts the government's accountability and means a more challenging environment for critiques of the government with regards to inefficiencies or mismanagement of government affairs, given their inability to present robust evidence.

In fact, in recent years, there have been several examples of governments around the world trying to control and censor attempts to publish data and statistics not 'approved' by those governments, in several cases this has resulted in oppression of statisticians.¹⁹ For example, in 2007 Argentina's government fired several statisticians due to their consumer price index calculations which were not approved by the government.²⁰ In another recent example, in 2015, the Greek government arrested the head of its official statistics service on the charges of inflating deficit figures.²¹ Thus, although this is not exclusive to Iran, the issue of government control and lack of transparency in the production of data and statistics in Iran is a serious problem and seems to be present in many levels and sectors of the society.

The recent nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 introduces a great opportunity for Iran to reconnect with the international community.²² In particular, international investment in Iran would have a significant positive impact on the country's ailing economy.²³ A key element in guaranteeing the success of this process will be in the provision of transparent, unbiased, and reliable data and statistics to the public, investors, and business. This will also apply pressure on the Iranian government to acknowledge the principles of transparency and accountability, if they are willing to continue cooperation with international organisations. This requires vast improvements in Iran's data and statistics infrastructure by following robust standards of data collection and reporting. To this end, the SCI should be fully recognised as the sole governmental entity responsible for official statistics; the government should also permit and encourage the partnerships with the private sector with a view to improving Iran's underdeveloped data and statistics infrastructure.

¹⁸ Iran Court Reported To Jail 2 Pollsters Over Survey on U.S., February 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/03/world/iran-court-reported-to-jail-2-pollsters-over-survey-on-us.html>

¹⁹ The Economist, Don't lie to me, Argentina, February 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21548242>

²⁰ Amstat News, Politics and Statistics Collide in Argentina, December 2012, <http://magazine.amstat.org/blog/2012/12/01/argentinastatistics/>

²¹ Nektaria Stamouli and Stelios Bouras, Greeks Investigate Statistics Chief Over Deficit Figure, Wall Street Journal, March 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/deficit-drama-greek-authorities-step-up-probe-against-statistics-chief-1427060060>

²² US Department of State, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran, the P5+1, and the EU, July 2015, <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/>

²³ Deutsche Welle, Nuclear deal opens Iran for global business – and shuts out the US, November 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/nuclear-deal-opens-iran-for-global-business-and-shuts-out-the-us/a-18709405>

