

SESRI Policy Brief

Why Qatar Needs a Guest Worker Welfare Index

The case for data-driven policy

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Here we make the case for a survey-based index to capture a comprehensive view of the living and working conditions of blue-collar guest workers in Qatar, and to track these conditions over time. We explain why reliable, timely, and nationally representative data are critical to understanding the complex issues underlying worker welfare, as well as to assessing the substantive impact of current and future policy interventions on the actual lives of workers. To help illustrate the problems posed by the current lack of reliable and nuanced data on worker welfare, we present findings from previous SESRI worker surveys.

SESRI has recently embarked on the first-ever effort to measure and track over time the welfare of blue-collar guest workers in Qatar. This “Guest Worker Welfare Index” is the product of a closed expert workshop convened at SESRI in January 2016 that brought together local and international scholars, stakeholders, and policymakers, including the former Minister of Labor H.E. Dr. Abdullah bin Saleh Al Khulaifi.

The index will be based on the results of an annual or semi-annual survey conducted with a large, random, and representative sample of blue-collar guest workers in Qatar. Key domains to be included in the survey and eventual index were identified by workshop participants and include: health and safety, living conditions and housing, working conditions, social life, and overall satisfaction. By combining answers to survey questions on these and other relevant topics, SESRI will create an objective, reliable, and regularly-updated index reflecting the actual conditions and experiences of laborers in Qatar and able to track changes in welfare over time.

But why does Qatar need a Guest Worker Welfare Index?

Scientific polling for a comprehensive view of worker welfare

Almost since the moment Qatar was selected to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the country has faced fierce international scrutiny over the welfare of the workers responsible for creating and maintaining the nation’s infrastructure, which is being overhauled in advance of the tournament to the tune of an estimated \$220 billion.¹ The *kafala* system of foreign labor sponsorship, employed in Qatar as throughout the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), has been criticized as akin to “modern day slavery.”² Some have gone so far as to predict that the state of occupational health and safety of workers building Qatar’s World Cup stadiums “will leave 4,000 ... dead.”³

Yet, without discounting the seriousness of concerns over worker welfare in Qatar, it is clear that extant studies can afford but a limited view of the problem and so limited policy options in response, based

TABLE 1

Summary of data sources used in selected reports into workers rights in Qatar

“Qatar’s World Cup ‘slaves’: Abuse and exploitation of migrant workers preparing emirate for 2022”

Source: *The Guardian*, 2013

Data: Documents from Nepalese embassy in Doha

“Qatar World Cup construction ‘will leave 4,000 migrant workers dead’”

Source: International Trade Union Confederation, cited in *The Guardian*, 2013

Data: Mortality rate of all 1.2 million migrant workers in Qatar; deaths for Indian, Bangladeshi, and Nepali nationals in Qatar in 2012 and 2014

“The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar’s construction sector ahead of the World Cup”

Source: Amnesty International Publications, 2013

Data: Interviews and focus groups with 289 migrant workers; meetings with state representatives, 22 private firms

“Qatar migrant workers describe ‘pathetic’ conditions”

Source: BBC News, 2015

Data: Interviews with three construction workers

as they are on potentially unrepresentative samples of interviews and other sources of data, as illustrated in Table 1. Indeed, among the sources used in previous, well-publicized reports of worker welfare in Qatar have been: selections of documents from sending country embassies, country-level mortality rates for specific nationalities (irrespective of cause of death), and, most commonly, targeted interviews with as few as 3 and as many as around 300 workers. In providing a source of updated, unbiased, and nationally representative data, then, SESRI aims to help avoid reliance upon personal impressions and individual cases that may or may not reflect wider patterns across employers, sectors, housing units, nationalities, or other variables.

Accurate metrics to track change

While wholesale dismantling of the *kafala* regime does not appear to be on the table in Qatar or elsewhere in the GCC, still Qatar continues to introduce policies designed to improve the conditions of low-wage guest workers. Most recently, for instance,

the state has amended the sponsorship system by issuing Law No. 21 of 2015,⁴ which makes it easier for workers to leave the country and thus to be less dependent on their sponsor. Yet, it is difficult to gauge the effect of this and other changes on the actual lives of workers. The state may make great strides in improving the working and living conditions of guest workers, or, alternatively, initiatives may fail to achieve their intended aims; but without consistent and scientific measurement, it is impossible to quantify substantive changes in worker welfare over time, or to link these outcomes to specific policies.

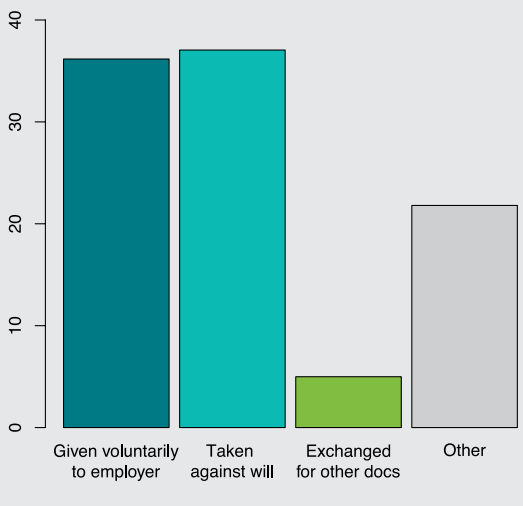
Consider, for example, Figure 2 below, which illustrates one such change using data collected in SESRI’s annual Omnibus surveys.⁵ In 2011, a full 92% of the 854 blue-collar workers surveyed reported that they had surrendered their passport to their employer. By 2014, this proportion had dropped by 18 percentage points to 76%, while the proportion of workers reporting that they themselves held their

Extant reports on blue-collar workers’ welfare in Qatar have been based on as few as three interviews

FIGURE 2
Passport possession among workers in Qatar, 2011-2014



FIGURE 3
Reason for not possessing passport, 2014



passport nearly tripled, from 8% to 22%. Now, after its effective date of December 2016, the aforementioned Law No. 21 will formally bar employers from possessing workers' passports.⁶ So a new fielding of this question as part of SESRI's Guest Worker Welfare Index will offer both an updated data point with which to chart the larger post-2011 trend, and a measure of legal compliance with the new regulation.

Untangling complicated questions to reveal effective policy options

Beyond tracking progress and change per se, nuanced and representative survey data can also help to untangle complex policy problems and to identify new areas for improvement. In 2014, for instance, in order to understand the issues underlying passport holding by employers, SESRI asked respondents a follow-up question to explain *why* their passports were not in their possession. These results are given in Figure 3. While approximately one-third (37%) of respondents reported that their passport was being held against their will, an equal proportion (36%) said they had given it to their employer at their own request, out of concern for the passport's security in their shared accommodation.

Such findings therefore evidence a more complicated policy landscape surrounding the issue of passport confiscation than a *prima facie* analysis would suggest. In the first place, in 2014 only around 28% (that is, 37% of 76%) of all blue-collar workers

Workers were three times more likely to hold their own passports in 2014 compared to in 2011

in Qatar faced active passport confiscation by their employer, a substantially different percentage than one gleaned from an initial look at the data. Moreover, and more importantly, the findings make clear that if the aim is to increase passport holding by individual workers, then any solution must involve bolstering the security of the camps and rooms where workers live, for instance through the provision of safes or storage lockers. Absent such improvement, it is likely that many individuals will continue to *prefer* that their employer hold on to their passport, in spite of legal proscription.

The long road to 2022

The current lack of reliable, timely, and comprehensive information about worker welfare in Qatar is problematic for all those concerned for the well-being of the many hundreds of thousands of guest workers helping to build the country. This is true of both advocacy groups inside and outside Qatar as well as senior policymakers. For all concerned parties, analysis of problems and possible solutions is forced to depend on incomplete or even anecdotal data that lacks the depth and breadth necessary to enable informed, targeted policy decisions or systematic evaluation of policies already

implemented. Under these conditions, the six years remaining until the 2022 World Cup are likely to witness the same pattern of accusations and counter-claims on the part of Qatar and its critics, with neither side able to convince the other of progress or a lack thereof. With its development of a scientific and independent Guest Worker Welfare Index, SESRI aims to contribute to a clearer and perhaps less contentious road ahead.

Notes

1. Smith, M. (2015). "Qatar building boom proves a challenge for foreign construction firms." *Reuters*. June 23.
2. McGeehan, N. (2013). "'Modern-day slavery' in Qatar: there's bad and good news." *The Guardian*. September 27.
3. Booth, R. (2013). "Qatar World Cup construction 'will leave 4,000 migrant workers dead.'" *The Guardian*. September 26.
4. *Law No. 21 of 2015 Regulating the Entry, Exit, and Residence of Expatriates*. State of Qatar.
5. Diop, A., Gengler, J., Khan, M. N., Traugott, M., and Elawad, E. (2015). "Annual Omnibus Survey: A survey of life in Qatar 2014." Executive Summary Report. SESRI. Qatar University. pp. 49-50.
6. See, e.g., Kovessy, P., Sheble, R., and Fahmy, H. (2015). "Qatar's Emir signs into law kafala changes (updated)." *Doha News*. October 27.

Policy summary

Ambiguity and acrimony surrounding the welfare of blue-collar guest workers in Qatar will continue in the current low-information environment devoid of comprehensive and scientific data on the status of low-income laborers. Even as the state takes steps to improve guest worker living and working conditions, at present there are no systematic mechanisms in place to track any resulting progress, to identify specific domains where progress has been especially rapid or slow, or to understand differences in outcomes that may exist across sectors, companies, nationalities, or geographical regions. Only by conducting regular, objective, and nationally representative surveys can decisionmakers and observers understand the true nature and drivers of the challenges facing blue-collar workers, and assess the impact of efforts to address them. With its development of a scientific and independent Guest Worker Welfare Index, SESRI aims to contribute to a clearer and perhaps less contentious road ahead.

More than one-third of workers in 2014 asked employers to hold their passports out of security concerns