

International Workshop on the Updated Recommendations in the Trade Statistics Manuals (IMTS 2026 and MSITS 2026)

April 14–16, 2025 | Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Recommendations

Background

The International Workshop on the Updated Recommendations in the Trade Statistics Manuals (IMTS 2026 and MSITS 2026) was jointly organized by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the Statistical Center for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat), with the participation of government officials responsible for the production of trade statistics from national statistical offices, customs administrations, central banks, and ministries of commerce, industry and investment promotion in GCC countries and other ESCWA member states.

The revised trade statistics manuals are expected to be finalized by the end of this year and will be submitted to the United Nations Statistical Commission for endorsement in 2026. Furthermore, the white cover version of the Handbook on Integrating Business and Trade Statistics (HIBTS) has already been endorsed by the Commission as an international guide for the integration of business statistics with trade statistics on goods and services. Whereas Volume 2 of the Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics (MPIBTS) is also expected to be finalized by the end of this year and will be submitted to the United Nations Statistical Commission for endorsement in 2026.

Objectives

The objective of the workshop was to support countries in preparing for the implementation of the revised International Merchandise Trade Statistics (IMTS 2026), the Handbook on Integrating Business and Trade Statistics (HIBTS) and Volume 2 of the Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics (MPIBTS). The UN International Trade Statistics Task Team, along with the foreign trade statistics team at GCC-Stat and representatives from the region, presented technical updates on the forthcoming manuals, HIBTS as well as Volume 2 of the Manual on Principal Indicators for Business and Trade Statistics (MPIBTS).

In addition, representatives from GCC-Stat, the GCC Customs Union Authority, and participating countries presented national initiatives and best practices related to trade statistics, as part of the broader effort to promote knowledge sharing and strengthen regional statistical cooperation.

Key Points

Scope of IMTS:

The updated IMTS framework encourages the inclusion of non-observed trade, including informal cross-border trade (ICBT). While this expansion was welcomed conceptually, several participants noted that such trade may not be economically significant in the GCC and Arab region.

Trade System:

The workshop emphasized the importance of adopting the general trade system due to its advantages in improving data quality, expanding statistical coverage, enhancing methodological consistency, and reducing bilateral trade asymmetries. The use of the relaxed definition of the special trade system was acknowledged as an alternative when the general trade system is not feasible, while the use of the strict definition was discouraged. A notable trend towards adopting the general trade system was observed among GCC and ESCWA countries.

Classifications:

The workshop extensively discussed international classifications relevant to IMTS, including the Harmonized System (HS), Broad Economic Categories (BEC), International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC), and Standard International Trade Classification (SITC). The importance of regularly updated correlation tables was emphasized, and efforts of the UN in this regard were acknowledged. The GCC Customs Union presented ongoing work to expand the HS to a 12-digit level for greater classification precision, which was well received. Participants also highlighted the need for simplified HS code descriptions in Arabic and called for stronger regional collaboration under the leadership of the GCC-Stat and the League of Arab States. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of HS tracking tools for monitoring the historical evolution of HS codes, including additions, deletions, and modifications.

Customs Procedures:

Participants commended the strategic plan initiated by the GCC Customs Union to modernize and automate customs declaration and clearance processes. This transformation is expected to significantly enhance the quality of trade data, particularly with respect to concepts such as time of recording, final destination, and warehousing.

CPC and Nature of Transaction (NoT):

The importance of harmonizing Customs Procedure Codes (CPC) was highlighted, with a call for closer cooperation between the GCC Customs Union and GCC-Stat. Participants emphasized the

analytical value of Nature of Transaction (NoT) codes in facilitating the transition from IMTS to the balance of payments statistics by capturing changes in ownership and financial compensation.

Trade Partner Attribution:

The workshop welcomed new guidance in the revised IMTS on trade partner attribution, particularly the recommendation to include the country of origin in re-exports. This is expected to enhance data accuracy and comparability.

More comparability on partner country attribution is needed, especially regarding the inclusion and exclusion of territories.

Valuation:

The workshop discussed the new text regarding the valuation of imports of used goods (which often have a high transaction value such as used cars, ships, aircraft etc.). The text stipulates that countries may find the country of consignment more informative for trade policy purposes than the country of origin. It was discussed that a recommendation/encouragement could be that if the country of origin is the main partner attribution for the compilation, then preferably both the country of origin and country of consignment be determined and provided for such goods. This would make the data more consistent and comparable.

Alternative Data Sources:

The workshop acknowledged the importance of using alternative data sources, such as oil export data from relevant ministries, to complement customs data and improve sectoral detail and overall coverage.

Data Validation, Pricing, Quantities, and Trade Indices:

Country experiences in data validation, outlier detection, imputing missing data, and calculating averages, prices, and indices were shared. Participants emphasized the need for regional collaboration to enhance methodologies and tools. The workshop took note of the expanded list of quantity units proposed in the 2022 edition of the Harmonized System by GCC-Stat to support accurate commodity classification and index calculation. The updated IMTS manual also proposes an extended list of quantity units. GCC-Stat and countries were urged to review the list and provide feedback. The need for coordination with WCO and UNSD to align statistical practices with evolving global requirements was also stressed.

Data compilation strategies; missing data treatment:

Participants discussed the concept of Structured Missing Pattern (SMP) as to how it relates to MCAR, MAR and MNAR, concepts expounded in IMTS 2026 draft. An effort involving GCC-Stat would be made to discuss this with IMTS Chief Editors or chapter leads as to how SMP relates to options for addressing data missingness in IMTS.

Linking Trade and Business Statistics:

Participants appreciated the progress made by the UN Task Team on the HIBTS and emphasized the importance of this handbook in assessing trade's impact on areas such as environment, employment, and gender. Continued technical support and capacity development were recommended. The workshop also appreciated plans to consider the consideration of informal economy in HIBTS final edition.

Data Innovation:

The workshop recognized the urgent need to enhance national capacity in data innovation, particularly through open-source programming (R, Python), machine learning, and artificial intelligence. Participants called on GCC-Stat to take a leading role in fostering innovation and providing technical assistance to member countries.

Regional Cooperation:

Participants praised the role of GCC-Stat in developing statistical methodologies and manuals and emphasized the importance of strengthening Arab regional cooperation, particularly in translating key international manuals (IMTS 2026 and MSITS 2026) and simplifying HS code descriptions in Arabic. They also called on the League of Arab States to play an active role in coordinating translation efforts and fostering unified statistical terminology and practices. The recommendations included providing full support for Arab statistical cooperation, organizing technical workshops and meetings, facilitating the exchange of expertise, and updating member countries on the latest tools and developments in trade statistics to support capacity building and professional advancement in the field. Many areas need collaboration, including on the improvement of the Arab League trade statistics questionnaire.