

CGD MIGRATION STATISTICS WORKING GROUP: CONCEPT NOTE

Center for Global Development

One cannot properly understand the complex relationship between international migration and economic development without empirical research. That requires sound, systematic and quantitative measures of how people move between low- and high-income countries. Those numbers, when they are collected at all, are not compiled in any single accessible place where researchers can use them. Anyone who wants to know how many Christmas tree ornaments were exported from Malaysia to the United States of America in April 1992 can find this number on a readily-available CD-ROM. But anyone who wants to know how many doctors moved from Angola to Portugal in 2003, or how many engineers moved from the United States to India in 1995, has nowhere to look. It is insufficient to compile existing numbers; they are a thicket of ignorance (very poor data on departures) and incoherence (conflicting definitions of temporary and permanent migrants).

The Center for Global Development (CGD) will convene a small blue-ribbon group of experts to discuss what might be done, in the short and long terms, to improve this situation. While other groups have discussed these issues in the past, the CGD Migration Statistics Working Group will distinguish itself through innovation and independence: It will propose creative but expedient short-term actions to improve statistics in a way that will be readily useful to rigorous researchers, and will independently and forthrightly assess the political barriers to long-term improvements in the global migration statistics apparatus.

While migration statistics have resisted many attempts at reform, there are good reasons to hope for improved statistics in the future. One is that statistics on international flows of goods, services, and capital 60 years ago were roughly as poor as migration statistics are now, but over the subsequent couple of decades they improved dramatically. They improved in response to the recovery of world trade and investment flows after 1945, and it is reasonable to believe that analogous forces will raise the demand for better migration statistics as the number of international migrants will continue to increase. Another reason for hope is that the long tradition of superb statistics on refugee flows demonstrates that better numbers on people movements are feasible. A third reason is that many sources of data already exist that could be compiled in ways of interest to migration researchers with nominal expense and little political difficulty.

CGD will convene the group of experts for two or three meetings in 2008. Its policy impact will be assessed by evidence that either the OECD or other national and international statistical agencies have taken initial steps to improve the quality of data on international migration, ideally steps toward instituting routine collection of information on entries and exits that would permit adding up the flows of people across countries (as is the case for trade in goods and services), including standardized definitions of temporary versus permanent migrants, as well as of major skill and labour categories. Basic measures of this type are an essential starting point for rigorous empirical research on the development effects of migration. CGD has carried out numerous consultations with the World Bank, the OECD International Migration Division, the United Nations Population Division, the Migration Policy Institute and academia with the result to create a working group to address two objectives:

1. For the long term, sow the seeds for changes in the international system of data collection on migration flows, analogous to changes in the system of data collection on trade and investment flows that evolved from the 1940s to the 1970s, and inspired by current successes in accurately

tracking refugee flows. Priority areas for long-term improvement are the international standardization of definitions for different types of migrants, improved tracking on the occupations and destinations of emigrants, and the creation of an enforceable legal framework for data collection comparable to successful international treaties now governing data collection on refugee movements. The United Nations and others are already working on these issues and have been for some time, but with constrained progress. The working group will issue recommendations to improve existing data collection on migration flows.

2. For the short term, prepare practical recommendations for collection and compilation of migration data by developed and developing countries and by the United Nations, the World Bank and other groups on emigrants and emigrant behaviour. Possible short-term improvements include: Annual compilation of existing national labour force surveys into a worldwide harmonized database, adding new questions to existing and recurring migration surveys such as SOPEMI, and intensive migrant-tracking surveys styled on the Mexican Migration Project and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) surveys but for important new country pairs such as Philippines-United States or Morocco-Spain.

CGD has consulted with possible chairs and several possible invitees from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the OECD, the United Nations and the World Bank academia and foundations. Other potential invitees may include a representative of a statistics bureau from a major sending country such as Morocco or the Philippines, and a representative of the Australian Bureau of Statistics to demonstrate best-practice on tracking migrant outflows.