**UNITED NATIONS EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON
SUSTAINABLE CITIES, HUMAN MOBILITY
AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION**
Population Division
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations Secretariat
New York
7-8 September 2017

Revisiting the Concepts, Definitions and Data Sources of International Migration in the Context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Keiko Osaki-Tomita
Assistant Director and Chief of Demographic and Social Statistics Branch
UN Statistics Division

I.   Introduction

The efforts to improve statistics on migration are not necessary new at the international level. International statistical community has been concerned for some time about the critical gaps in statistics on international migration needed to inform policies. There has been a series of initiatives since the late nineteenth century, to clarify and standardize the definition of international migrant, often with the aim at improving international comparability (Kraly and Gnanasekaran, 1987). Alongside, in-depth assessments of existing statistical data sources and their fuller use have been constantly encouraged to enhance evidence base on international migration.

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 (A/70/1), and subsequently that of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (A/71/1) in 2016 by the General Assembly, have generated further impetus for strengthening national statistical systems to produce timely, reliable and fit-for-purpose statistics on international migration. Both instruments strongly call for data that would properly capture certain types of population mobility and elucidate the vulnerability of migrants. There is an urgent need to implement existing migration standards, refine some migration-related concepts, leverage traditional data sources and explore innovative means of data collection with a view to producing data that can address the concerns expressed in these instruments.

The present note aims to discuss the new statistical challenges posed by these global policy instruments, in terms of the needs for improving concepts, definitions and data sources on international migration. This note builds upon the debates held during the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Improving Migration Data in the Context of the 2030[1], organized from 20 to 22 June, 2017, in New York.

II.   Concepts and definitions yet to be refined

Treating international migration as a demographic phenomenon, the United Nations (1998) defines an international migrant with space and time elements as a person who moves a country other than that of his or her usual resident for a period of at least a year (12 months). Apart from such fundamental definition developed for measurement purposes, the improvements in the concepts and definitions on migrants that would allow further classification of migrants or characterization of the complexity of migration remain to be achieved.

The 2030 Agenda addresses the issue of international migration by including explicitly some migration-related targets in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Most notably, the SDG target 10.7 calls on countries to "facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility and to implement well-managed migration policies", considering international

---

[1] https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2017/new-york--egm-migration-data

migration from the perspectives of migration management. The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants also reiterates the SDG's call.

The immediate challenges that these instruments pose to the statistical community are how to conceptually define "orderly", "safe", "regular" and "responsible" migration, which are applicable at the international level. While the terms are frequently used in everyday life, characterization of these types of population mobility often entails ambiguity, leaving much room for subjective interpretation. Hence, for effective monitoring of SDG implementation, the development of operational definition of "orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration" is a priority. Some stakeholders such as UNDESA and IOM consider this challenge as an opportunity to define and track progress towards better migration governance, and started working on the development of new measures such as Migration Governance Index[2].

The 2030 Agenda also concerns human trafficking as a serious crime observed worldwide, as addressed in target 16.2 "End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children". Trafficking in persons is defined in the *UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*[3] as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Despite the articulated definition given above, however, there is no internationally established methodology regarding how to collect the data on human trafficking. The existing traditional data collection system captures only detected victims and requires refined methodology to estimate undetected victims of trafficking.

"Refugees" are another migrant subpopulation whose concepts are established using legal frameworks. It is a standard practice to define a refugee in consistent with the definition established by legal instruments, notably the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, as a person in need of international protection. The recent efforts by Statistics Norway, the Turkish Statistical Institute, Eurostat and UNHCR to produce international guidelines on refugee and IDP statistics under the auspices of UN Statistical Commission[4] reveal that there have been extended definitions of refugee status by various regional instruments including *Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, Cartagena Declaration for Latin America,* and *EU's Qualification Directive*, in order to respond to particular refugee situations in different regions. It should be noted that not all legally defined refugees are international migrants when

---

[2] https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2017/new-york--egm-migration-data

[3] The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, was adopted by General Assembly resolution 55/25.The definition of trafficking in persons is included in Article 3, paragraph (a) of the Protocol.

[4] See the report of the Statistical Commission on its forty-seventh session in 2016, available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/47th-session/documents/Report-on-the-47th-session-of-the-statistical-commission-E.pdf

analysed by existing statistical systems. Given that the definitions of refugees are already established by legal instruments, the gaps between legal and statistical approaches in measuring refugee population need to be identified and clearly explained to facilitate better understanding of migration statistics.

It is well acknowledged that the pledge of the 2030 Agenda to the principle of "leave no one behind" requires disaggregating relevant SDG indicators by migratory status, wherever relevant, to elucidate the vulnerability of migrants and certain types of mobility. UN Statistics Division identifies that there are at least 24 out of 244 SDG indicators that might be disaggregated by migratory status, including two that explicitly require data disaggregation[5]. For instance, existing SDG indicators on poverty, health, education might to be disaggregated by migratory status to assess if there are significant differences between migrants and non-migrants that require policy interventions.

Defining "migratory status", however, can be rather complex exercise. There are different ways to define migrant groups – they can be defined based on country of birth, citizenship, usual residence, legal status or descent. What complicates the definition even further is the fact that the migrant group of interest differs depending on the indicators that are being associated with. For example, it might be sufficient to compare foreign-born persons and native-born persons regarding their access to social protection programme. Indicators on education, however, could apply to foreign-born persons as well as native-born children to foreign-born parents (second-generation migrants).

Dividing the migrant group further into subgroups could also be of interest, given the principal of "leaving no one behind". Migrants who arrived more recently in the country certainly require more attention and effort in settling in, compared to those who arrived many years ago. Migrants who are forced to migrate face different challenges than those who choose to come and settle in the country of destination.

For SDG indicators data disaggregation, the experts who gathered for the aforementioned UN Expert Group Meeting agreed on taking a step-wise approach in defining migratory status. As a first step, migratory status can be classified, per national practices, regardless of legal status, as

- Native-born and foreign-born persons,
- Citizens, non-citizens (including stateless persons)

Countries interested in other migration-related population groups, could further disaggregate the data by country of birth of the parents, duration of stay in country, and reason for migration. Internal migrants and internally displaced persons could also be considered if countries are

---

[5] https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2017/new-york--egm-migration-data

interested in population mobility within the country. Efforts can also be made to disaggregate data into regular and irregular migration.

III.   Fuller use of conventional data sources and beyond

The comparability of migration statistic is often hampered by the use of different data sources which employ different concepts of migration. The enormous demands for data arising from the monitoring of the 2030 Agenda have also prompted the international statistical community to revisit the use of conventional sources of migration statistics, namely, the population and housing censuses, household surveys, and administrative records. There are also strong urges to seek a possibility of integrating data from different sources and consider new sources to enhance the evidence base on international migration.

It is widely recognized that, although conducted infrequently – once in ten years in most countries-, population and housing censuses are key sources of information that enable to produce internationally comparable data on migration stocks. Given that the preparations for the 2020 round of censuses are currently underway in many countries, countries are encouraged to continue including questions to identify migrants (country of birth, country of citizenship and year/period of arrival), as recommended as core topics in the *United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses*.[6] In conducting a census, countries need to ensure that all migrant populations are fully counted in censuses. Once enumerated, the data on migrants should be tabulated and disseminated swiftly. In many countries, the topic of migration receives a low priority in census data analysis, reducing the value of information to inform policy and programme.

Household surveys are also important source of information, especially for understanding the dynamics and complexities of migration phenomenon, including determinants and consequences of migration on countries of origin, transit and destination. Given resource constraints, however, it is not realistic to expect that countries regularly conduct a stand-alone migration survey, unless there is a strong political will in a country to tackle migration issues through empirical data analysis. Therefore, better use of existing household surveys as a source of migration statistics might be considered. It is suggested that regularly-conducted household surveys include key migration questions. International statistical community might want to develop a set of harmonized questions as a migration module and promote the use in surveys in order to improve comparability of data within the country and across countries.

Most countries have administrative procedures for registering foreign citizens, or granting permits to stay in a country for study, work or other reasons. These administrative records are still not fully recognized as a source of migration statistics and largely under-utilized in many countries. Countries should conduct thorough assessment on the administrative records

---

[6] United Nations, 2015, Sales No. E.15.XVII.10, para. 4.21

maintained by different government offices with a view to identifying whether the migration population can be identified from the records. In addition, the formal mechanism needs be established to facilitate the exchange of such statistics generated by different government offices, as those statistics tend to stay within respective offices.

In order to fill the gap in migration statistics quickly, innovative approaches in data collection and production are also crucial. One of such approaches may be the integration of multiple data sources to yield statistics with a variety of socio-economic characteristics of migrants. An increasing number of countries are producing migration statistics by linking difference administrative records maintained by various authorities in a country, or combining for instance the survey data with census data.

Lastly, an increasing amount of migration-related information is now available from the private sector, often fueled by the rapid technological advancement. An unprecedented amount of data, commonly known as "big data", have been generated through the use of digital devices such as mobile phones, or internet-based platforms such as social media and on-line payment services. There has been a growing body of research that attempt to demonstrate how big data can be used to elucidate forced displacement, transnational networks, human trafficking, or estimate remittance flows. While the use of big data still comes with significant challenges, including concerns about privacy and data quality, the potential of using such data to understand migration must be fully exploited.

IV.   Conclusion

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants by the UN General Assembly has posed significant challenges for statistical community, to meet the huge demands for migration and migration-related statistics. Given the rapidly changing contexts in which international migration take place, the efforts to increase the production of migration statistics should be paralleled with the endeavors to further develop the concepts and definition of international migration for international comparison. While existing sources of migration statistics should be fully used, a possibility of using new or innovative data sources should be sought, to reveal the complexity of migration phenomenon that the conventional sources of information could not measure.

With no doubt, migration statistics is the area where effective capacity development of national statisticians is critical, especially in developing countries. To date, there has been very limited opportunities for them to learn about the statistical concepts of migration and sources of information. There is also a need for a dedicated global forum on migration statistics to facilitate the sharing of innovative practices and better identify capacity-building needs.

References:

Ellen Percy Kraly and K.S. Gnanasekaran (1987). Efforts to Improve International Migration Statistics: A Historical Perspective. *International Migration Review*, Volume XXI, Number 4.

United Nations (1998). Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1. Statistical Papers, Series M, No.58, Sales No. E.98.XVII.14.