

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

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For decision

Item 4(f) of the Provisional  
Agenda

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER WORK IN MIGRATION STATISTICS

Prepared by the secretariat

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Due to the increasing need for information on short-term migration to support policy development and monitoring, a Task Force was created in 2008 to investigate the measurement of short-term migration and the impact of different length of stay definitions on international migration estimates across the UNECE area. The final report of this Task Force, presented at the February 2012 meeting of the CES Bureau, looked at definitions of migration and analyzed how different migration time criterion affects the relative level of migration flows.<sup>1</sup> One of the recommendations of this Task Force was to prepare a proposal for a common international statistical definition of circular migration.

2. The recommendation was supported by the Bureau in February 2012. At the November 2012 meeting, the Bureau requested further information to clarify the related concepts and to consider the possibility of including short-term and return migration in the scope of work. The present document is written in response to this request.

II. CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

A. Short-term migration

3. According to the United Nations definitions set forth in its Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration (1998), migration has both geographic and time components.<sup>2</sup> A **short-term migrant** is defined as “a person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least three months, but less than a year (12 months) except in cases where the movement to that country is for purposes of recreation, holiday, visits to friends or relatives, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimage.”

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<sup>1</sup> UNECE Task Force on the analysis of international migration estimates using different length of stay definitions (2012).

[http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/ge.10/2012/WP\\_15\\_Poulain\\_01.pdf](http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/ge.10/2012/WP_15_Poulain_01.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations (1998). Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Statistical Papers Series M, No. 58, Rev. 1. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, New York. [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesM/SeriesM\\_58rev1e.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesM/SeriesM_58rev1e.pdf)

## **B. Return migration**

4. The United Nations defines **return migration** as “persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short-term or long-term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their own country for at least one year”. Another definition posited by OECD (2008) for return migration is one where the migrant’s country of destination is the same as their original country of origin.<sup>3</sup> This differs in its focus on using country of birth as opposed to country of citizenship as a criterion of defining return migrants.

## **C. Temporary and circular migration**

5. The terms temporary migration and circular migration are not defined by the United Nations recommendations.

6. The European Migration Network (EMN) defines **circular migration** as “a repetition of legal migrations by the same person between two or more countries.”

7. The concept of circular migration overlaps with other migration concepts, such as short-term migration, temporary migration, and return migration.

8. According to the intergovernmental Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD 2008), circular migration can be understood as the temporary, recurrent movement of people between two or more countries mainly for purposes of work or study.<sup>4</sup> The Forum sees circular migration as different from concepts like permanent or temporary migration since these concepts are understood in a more linear and static way.

9. According to the European Migration Network (EMN), temporary migration is limited to a single movement, with a limited stay in the country of destination (or in their case the EU), while circular migration is the back-and-forth (repeated) movement between the destination and origin countries.<sup>5</sup> Circular migration is viewed as a type of temporary migration, in which the temporary stay in a destination country is repeated at a later time. Circular migration overlaps with the concept of return migration, as return is part of the circular movement. However, circular migration differs from the United Nations definition of return migration (see paragraph 4) with focus on its short-term nature, as a person does not necessarily need to intend to stay in his or her country of origin for at least one year. Return migration also refers explicitly to origin country, while circular migration takes into consideration both country of origin and destination.

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<sup>3</sup> OECD (2008). International Migration Outlook 2008, OECD Publishing.

<http://www.oecd.org/migration/internationalmigrationpoliciesanddata/43999382.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Global Forum on Migration and Development (2008). Workshop on Creating Development Benefits through Circular Migration, Mauritius, September 2008.

<sup>5</sup> European Migration Network (2011). Temporary and Circular Migration: empirical evidence, current policy practice and future options in EU Member States, European Commission, Luxembourg, October 2011.

### III. NEED FOR BETTER DEFINITIONS AND DATA

#### A. Need for a formal statistical definition of circular migration

10. Circular migration is badly captured by official statistics and often ignored – therefore the scale of circular migration is difficult to estimate. By its nature, circular migration is particularly difficult to measure as short-term residence may be subject to little or no administrative recording, particularly if permission to reside has already been granted in the context of a previous stay. Innovative methodologies need to be examined and applied in order to better capture circular migration in official statistics.

11. Both the GFMD and EMN feel that circular migration is a reality, but international statistics are scarce to non-existent. There are better statistics for temporary migration, especially for short-term mobility of less than 12 months.

12. The EMN synthesis report on “Temporary and Circular Migration: empirical evidence, current policy practice and future option in EU Member States” (2011) expounds the benefit of further developing a common understanding of temporary and circular migration, as developing a common understanding would be a first step towards developing common definitions for the purpose of data collection. It details the lack of comparable statistics on temporary and circular migration across the EU, and how current data collection methods do not adequately capture these forms of migration and the lack of the use of a common statistical definition. In particular it notes the general lack of longitudinal data that would allow individual migration patterns to be tracked over time.

13. As shown in the UNECE Task Force report (2012), national statistics on temporary and short-term moves remain largely incompatible, due to different definitions of duration of stay.

#### B. EMN country studies on temporary and circular migration

14. In the EMN study, while most countries could provide some form of data on temporary migration, for circular migration, the situation was much bleaker. Only a handful of countries (Austria, Germany and Sweden) could provide some statistical evidence on circular migration, though each country measured this concept differently.

15. There was no harmonized approach across the EU member states in defining circular migration. The Netherlands and Portugal were the only countries with formal/legal definitions for circular migration, while only Spain and Sweden had working definitions for this concept.

16. As described earlier, circular migration is often understood as a form of temporary migration, albeit repeated temporary migration, given that circular migration is often *de facto* included with the definition of temporary migration used by member countries. From a measurement perspective, temporary migration is measured using temporary residence permits, while no such single data source is applicable to circular migration.

17. The few countries which were able to produce statistics on circular migration followed their own methodologies. Austria used registrations and deregistrations from their Central Population register, Germany looked at and compared individual migrant exits and re-

entries, the Netherlands tracked individual migrants through its register based system (after 4 months they received individual identification numbers) to track exits and re-entries, and Spain used data from their National Survey of Immigrants, looking at intended duration of stay responses and patterns of short and return visits to their country of origin. Finally, Sweden differed from the others in the inclusion of its own citizens in the analysis, included all who moved at least twice across the national border.

18. The country studies emphasized the difficulty differentiating temporary and circular migration, as all forms of circular migration start out as temporary, but can become more permanent over time. Some countries highlighted the need to first agree upon a standard definition of circular migration in order to improve data collection methods. While the EMN definition is limited to legal migrants, these methods do not include information on irregular migrants who are not included in regular data sources.

#### **IV. CIRCULAR MIGRATION**

##### **A. Growing importance and benefits of circular migration from a policy perspective**

19. Circular migration is a topic of growing importance, for which information is needed for policy development at both the European and global level. The Global Forum on Migration and Development sees the promotion of circular migration as one of the keys to international migration's contribution to development. It has also become a priority for many origin countries, thereby ensuring the temporary nature of their citizen's outmigration.

20. Circular migration is often seen as a win-win-win proposition, benefiting the host country, the migrant, and the migrant's country of origin. Circular migration can alleviate host countries' labour needs and increase their economic production, providing a temporary workforce able to fill emerging labour and skill shortages. In countries of origin, it can provide unemployment relief and both financial and human capital (in terms of skills and resources sent and brought back to the country), as well as mitigate population loss and brain-drain due to outmigration. Individual migrants also benefit via increased income, greater work experience, and the development of their human capital.

##### **B. Measurement issues and justification**

21. Migrants who move back and forth between origin and destination countries are very difficult to measure using current statistical definitions. In fact, basic definitions for circular migrants vary widely. For example, some say circular migrants are limited to irregular migrants, others to regular labour-based legal migration. Operationalization of this concept would include purpose of migration, duration of stay in destination country, and frequency of movements at a minimum. For producing quality statistics on circular migration, the definition, time period, standards, and sources for its measurement need to be established. There is thus a strong need to develop better standards and definitions related to circular migration, though it does overlap with the other concepts of short-term, temporary, and return migration.

22. Short-term migration is already well defined by the United Nations, and this topic, as well as temporary migration, has already been the subject of a UNECE task force.

23. Circular migration is a form of return migration, but differs from the United Nations definition with its emphasis of temporary movements. A fair amount of work on measuring return migration has already been done by OECD, and the topic was included recently as a part of their International Migration Outlook Report (2008).

## V. DECISION

**24. The Bureau approved the terms of reference for the Task Force on Circular Migration presented (document ECE/CES/BUR/2013/FEB/15 Add.1).**

25. The Task Force on circular migration will develop a common international statistical definition of circular migration, taking into account the needs of data users, as well as available information from ad hoc studies on this phenomenon. Circular migration may need to be defined in terms of both duration of stay and a repetition of the change in place of usual residence. The potential implications on other population statistics concepts of this circular migration definition will also need to be considered.

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