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Topic (iv)

**Cooperation between the Federal Statistical Office and the Federal Office for Refugees in Developing  
Statistical Data on Asylum-Seekers in Switzerland**

Submitted by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office<sup>1</sup>

**Asylum in Switzerland: The Institutional Framework**

1. Foreign citizens living or working in Switzerland can be categorized into two broad groups, defined by and subject to two different legal bases. 'Regular' or authorized immigrants arrive for settlement, employment on a temporary or permanent base, education or family reunification. They are subject to the law on aliens. Asylum-seekers who arrive in Switzerland without previous authorization to immigrate, on the other hand, are subject to the law on asylum. At the ministry level, the Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP) has jurisdiction over all legislation on non-nationals.
2. Like most other developed countries, Switzerland experienced a dramatic increase in refugee claims in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After 1986 the number of people in search for asylum began to soar, reaching a first peak in 1991 with more than 41,600 requests and a second one in 1999 with 46,100 applications. Asylum-seekers constituted one of the major categories of international migrants in the 1990s, accounting for 1 in 8 immigrants in 1991 and 1 in 5 immigrants in 1999.
3. As the steady increase of the number of requests for asylum began to exceed the work capacity of the Federal Aliens Office (FAO), the agency responsible for administering and enforcing immigration laws, a separate agency, the 'Delegate for Refugee Affairs', was created in March 1986 to deal exclusively with all issues concerning asylum-seekers. In October 1990 this special asylum agency was elevated to the status of a federal office and renamed the Federal Office for Refugees (FOR).
4. The FOR employs over 600 people and is charged to execute Swiss asylum law. It is responsible for the registration of asylum-seekers, provisionally admitted rejected asylum seekers and recognized refugees, as well as all the administrative aspects of the asylum sphere (admission, monitoring, adjudication, care and welfare assistance etc.). A fully computerised and centralized data bank has been maintained since 1986. This register on asylum-seekers – or, to be more precise, register of the cases of asylum-seekers - permits the follow-up of the status of each case over time.

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## **The Need for Closer Cooperation**

5. In the late 1980s the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO) became aware of the fact that its traditional administrative data base for foreign population statistics – the Central Aliens Register containing all foreigners arriving in Switzerland under the provisions of the alien law – did not adequately cover the foreign population anymore. Urgent needs in connection with an update of the national population projections and methodological problems in calculating the total fertility rate (TFR) for non-nationals<sup>2</sup> gave impetus to the first 'statistical' contact between the SFSO and the FOR in 1990.

6. In 1991 the SFSO officially asked the FOR for the permission to obtain anonymous individual data extracts from the Swiss Register of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees (AUPER) on a regular basis. At the same time, the SFSO pointed out that even though AUPER had the potential of producing statistics on the number of asylum-seekers present in the country, the register - like any other data base used mainly for administrative purposes – did not meet some of the fundamental principals of official statistics. The main points of concern were: (1) the lack of standardized data plausibility tests; (2) the high frequency of missing data for certain basic variables; (3) the lack of a systematic link between stock and flow data; (4) the non-availability of statistical files with a definite time reference as the base for every statistical exploitation of asylum data.

7. In order to guarantee the delivery of statistical data files which met the minimum quality criteria, the SFSO partly financed the hiring (by the FOR) of an external expert with a sound knowledge of the system of Swiss population statistics. This expert oversaw the efforts within the FOR to improve the quality of the register data as well as the programming of the statistical data extracts for the SFSO. In 1992 the first data extracts from AUPER were received by the SFSO. As a direct consequence of this project the FOR established its own statistical data dissemination concept and created a separate statistical unit.

8. Since the IT solution of AUPER was completely reengineered in late 1992, the data delivery to the SFSO had to be revised as well. A working group consisting of members of both offices was again established. The contents and format of the statistical data extracts were changed in order to better suit the requirements of the SFSO. Since 1996 the SFSO receives extracts from AUPER every three months. Although certain problems remain, the SFSO considers AUPER to be a reliable data base of good quality.

## **AUPER: The Swiss Register of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees**

9. AUPER is not comparable to a common population register, in which each person is represented by a record containing all relevant information in the form of selected socio-demographic-economic variables. The registration in AUPER is 'event or case-driven'<sup>3</sup>. The data collected include demographic variables as well as asylum-oriented variables. Events in the asylum process are represented by a combination of individual codes. For each event, the beginning, the end and the legal validity are recorded, e.g. 'application for asylum' (date of event, date of registration, administrative remarks), 'decision in first instance' (date of event, date of registration, nature of decision) etc.

## **Statistical Data on Asylum-Seekers Produced by the SFSO**

10. It is important to note that valid statistics cannot be produced directly from AUPER, as the data bank is being continuously updated. For statistical purposes extracts from the register have to be made on a regular basis. Such extracts cover a group of people (whatever the selection criteria) as it appears in the data base at a given time. The transformation from 'event-based' data bank to 'person-based' statistical database involves

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the fact that the civil registration offices did not ask for the type of permit of foreign parents an ever increasing number of children born to asylum-seekers were included in the total number of births. Since the mothers of those children were excluded from the permanent resident female population the calculation of the TFR lead to absurd results for certain nationalities (e.g. Sri Lanka).

<sup>3</sup> AUPER is a relational data bank consisting of various tables connected by unique identifiers. There are three register elements: (1) person (as identified by a unique PIN); (2) file (as identified by a unique file or request number); (3) event (stage in the asylum process at a given time, as identified by a unique combination of event or decision codes).

the process of data mining (defined as the process of extracting useful, previously unknown or unused information from data sets which had been created for non-statistical - usually administrative - purposes). Special statistical files with a definite time reference which have been subjected to editing (e.g. checked and corrected for errors, the validity of codes and the omission of data) are prepared by the SFSO and provide the basis for compiling demographic and migration statistics.

11. The statistical system must make it possible to produce two types of statistics: (1) status statistics of the population at a given point in time (stock data), and (2) statistics of events in the population during a given period (flow data). Accordingly, the main statistics produced by the SFSO on the base of AUPER refer to (1) the stock of asylum-seekers according to status (e.g. temporary protected status, admitted for humanitarian reasons, recognized refugees etc.) and (2) the components of change of the asylum-seeker population. The number of asylum-seekers in the country may increase because of new arrivals of different kinds, the change of status of certain foreigners or births to the asylum-seekers already in the country. Reductions can take place because of departures of different kinds, changes of status or deaths.

12. Despite the growing numerical importance of asylum-seekers in the country, the SFSO has not yet changed the methodological framework for its current population and migration statistics which is based on the notion of the permanent resident population<sup>4</sup>. In partial compliance with the UN Recommendations on International Migration Statistics only long-term migrants are included in the permanent resident population. Due to the uncertain or unknown duration of stay at the time of arrival asylum-seekers are not considered long-term migrants and are therefore excluded as well<sup>5</sup>. Statistics on asylum-seekers are published separately in the annual 'Report on the Foreign Population in Switzerland', however.

13. In 1998 the SFSO and the Swedish Migration Board carried out a joint study on cohort-based asylum statistics<sup>6</sup>. For the purpose of that study the existing asylum data base in Switzerland was analyzed for the first time in statistical terms employing a longitudinal approach. The attempt was made to define, distinguish and link different data flows within the asylum process. As a result a statistical cohort data file, covering all asylum-seekers between 1986 and 1996 was established. Even though the advantages of a longitudinal approach (in addition to calendar-year based statistics) was clearly demonstrated, the SFSO – due to a lack of resources and different priorities - never followed up on this study. Cohort-based statistics on asylum-seekers are not part of the SFSO's statistical program.

### **Statistical Data Produced by the FOR**

14. One of the by-products of the rather complex Swiss asylum eligibility/refugee status determination procedures is the compilation of statistics on various aspects of the process. The FOR maintains a small statistical unit (with a full-time staff of 2 people) which regularly disseminates a wide variety of statistics on the asylum process in Switzerland. The statistics most commonly available relate to the number of asylum applications submitted, the number and type of decisions (positive, negative, otherwise closed) at various stages of the asylum procedure, pending cases and recognition rates during a certain time period.

15. Like every national asylum agency, the FOR's interest and approach tend to be administrative rather than purely statistical. Therefore, asylum casework or workload statistics are more frequently produced than demographic statistics. The compilation and dissemination of statistical information on asylum and refuge by the FOR are largely conceived for purposes related to managerial economics, e.g. as indicators for the efficiency of the asylum procedure. The FOR's asylum statistics firstly serve policy purposes: they support the development and evaluation (monitoring) of Switzerland's national asylum policies.

### **Division of Labor Between the SFSO and the FOR**

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<sup>4</sup> Even today the majority of asylum-seekers are still excluded from official current population and migration statistics in Switzerland.

<sup>5</sup> This unsatisfying situation was also exacerbated by the fact that no binding international recommendations regarding asylum-seekers existed before the publication of the Revised UN Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration in 1998.

<sup>6</sup> *Swiss-Swedish Joint Study on Cohort-Based Asylum Statistics*, published as Eurostat Working Paper 3/1998/E/n<sup>2</sup>.

16. Ideally, asylum statistics should cover both the asylum-seekers and the asylum process. In an informal and never officially agreed upon division of labor, the SFSO (specifically its Vital Statistics and Population Trends Section) is responsible for the sociodemographic statistics on asylum-seekers (including migration stock and flow data) whereas the FOR publishes statistics on the asylum process with a special emphasis on timeliness (e.g. monthly statistics). Obviously, there are various areas of overlap between those two types of statistics. However, there are no binding agreements delineating each office's respective fields of authority in data dissemination.

17. Whenever the SFSO and the FOR publish the same type of data (e.g. stock of asylum-seekers), it is generally accepted that the data do not necessarily correspond. This is primarily due to the fact that the SFSO relies on edited data from specially prepared statistical files with a definite time reference whereas the FOR accesses the register data bank directly each time for every statistical exploitation<sup>7</sup>. Naturally, certain data checks are carried out in order to guarantee that the data produced by the two offices are in the same order of magnitude. There is a regular contact between the SFSO and the FOR's statistical unit.

18. At the supranational level, the SFSO is responsible for the delivery of demographic statistical data on asylum-seekers to international organizations (e.g. ECE, Eurostat, Council of Europe, UNSD). The FOR, on the other hand, maintains close cooperation with specialized international asylum agencies, such as UNHCR and IGC, as well as IOM.

## Conclusions

19. In Switzerland, the close cooperation between the special agency for asylum matters (FOR) and the national statistical institute (SFSO) allows for a fairly comprehensive and accurate description of the asylum process in statistical terms. Being responsible for the coordination of the statistical activities of all the agencies at the federal level, the SFSO as the main producer of statistical data initiated the contact with the FOR in the field of asylum statistics. With initial financial support by the SFSO, the FOR improved the quality of its administrative data base (AUPER) and implemented its own statistical program.

20. The compilation of asylum statistics covers both the asylum-seekers and the asylum process. Because these topics are closely related they should use the same set of data. This could be done e.g. by creating a statistical data base with individual but anonymous records of asylum-seekers. The SFSO set up such a data base for its own purposes; unfortunately, this data base is not used by the FOR for its statistical exploitations. The divergent objectives of the two offices (one statistical, the other administrative) and the fact that they belong to different ministries proves somewhat counterproductive to an even closer collaboration.

21. Developing new or improved demographic and migration data from the asylum data base in Switzerland is a continuous process. The SFSO - guided by the fundamental principles of official statistics - strives to improve the quality and international comparability of its statistics on asylum-seekers. A constant close contact with the FOR is essential in order to get information about any changes in Switzerland's asylum law as well as any changes in the registration procedures of asylum-seekers in the administrative data base. Efforts to create a new central data base for all foreign citizens living in Switzerland are currently under way within the Federal Department of Justice and Police. The SFSO is privy to all these discussions and intends to make sure that the statistical point of view is adequately taken into account in all the deliberations.

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<sup>7</sup> Since the register is continuously updated (including corrections of previously entered erroneous information) each subsequent statistical exploitation can lead to slightly different results even if it covers the same time period or refers to the same calendar day.