

**UN STATISTICAL COMMISSION and  
UN ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

**STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE  
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**CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

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**Session V**

**POSSIBILITIES OF DEVELOPING A REGIONAL STRATEGY TO PROMOTE  
PROGRESS BY ECE AND EUROSTAT COUNTRIES TOWARDS COMPLYING MORE  
FULLY WITH THE UN RECOMMENDATIONS ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION  
STATISTICS**

Note prepared by the ECE secretariat

**I. ISSUES OF CONCERN IN THE FIELD OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION  
STATISTICS**

1. It is widely recognized that international migration statistics are among the least developed of all fields of social and demographic statistics. One of the major problems that have characterized them for several decades has been the serious lack of international comparability in the immigration and emigration statistics that countries compile and produce. This problem of the serious lack of international comparability in the field of international migration statistics has prevailed for many decades, and it is primarily due to numerous factors, including the following ones:

- The statistics on immigration and/or emigration that countries are now compiling use definitions and coverage that are designed to meet their own national needs. Countries may well be concerned that if they were instead to compile their statistics according to the definitions that are contained in the UN recommendations, their countries' national needs will no longer be met (or they may fear that their national needs might less adequately be met with the internationally recommended definitions).
- Immigration and emigration are politically sensitive issues in many countries in the ECE region, and as a result, some countries or NSIs may be reluctant to begin compiling statistics in a different way, which because of improved coverage of the immigration and emigration flows would result in statistics on immigration and/or emigration being published that would be considerably higher than the statistics that they are currently publishing.
- UN recommendations, regardless of the field of statistics, by their very nature "have no teeth". The Organization can publish recommendations and promulgate them as

examples of good statistical practice, but it cannot compel countries to implement or use them.

- In some countries, it is not the NSIs but other government agencies that are responsible for compiling and publishing statistics on immigration and/or emigration, and these other agencies are generally more motivated and concerned about having the statistics continue to meet their agencies' policy needs than about implementing a set of recommendations that the UN Statistical Commission has adopted.

2. It is also important to note that this lack of international comparability in immigration and emigration statistics has occurred despite the fact that there have been a series of three different sets of recommendations on international migration that the UN Statistical Commission has adopted in the post-war period. The first set of recommendations was the one that the Statistical Commission adopted in 1953, but this first set was replaced by a second set that it adopted in 1976. Similarly, the 1976 set was subsequently replaced by the current set of recommendations that the Statistical Commission adopted in 1997. In each case, the earlier set of recommendations remained largely unused by countries, and the problems of the lack of international comparability in the statistics remained.

3. This suggests, therefore, that unless at least a small number of interested countries are willing to critically review the new set of recommendations in order to assess whether and to what extent they can be used in real life situations by them – either alone or in combination with the data sources they are now using and the practices they are now following – there is reason to believe that there will be little or no progress towards complying with the new set of recommendations in the coming decade or so, nor will any real progress towards the overall goal of improving international comparability in this field of statistics be made. And if this situation emerges, the international statistical community may well once again find itself in the situation where it will feel compelled to set aside the current set of recommendations, and invest again in attempts to develop another new set of recommendations.

## **II. SHOULD THE PRESENT SITUATION BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE?**

4. The national and international statistical and demographic communities have a basic choice before it – namely, to accept the status quo, or to invest and work towards improving on the present situation. Although the first option is always possible, it is not viewed as being the most appropriate one, particularly in view of the fact that in the contemporary period international migration is a topic of high policy interest and public interest in many countries in the ECE region. Indeed, in recent years the issue of international migration has moved to the forefront of the international agenda. This has resulted in increased demand for information on international migration flows, and in most cases the national statistical systems have not been able to satisfactorily respond to these demands. These, then, are additional reasons why it is important that the national and international statistical and demographic communities should make a serious attempt to improve on this situation.

5. There are other reasons why efforts should be made to improve on the current situation. International migration has been an issue of concern to EU countries for quite some time, but political interest in the flows of migrants into and out of the European Union has increased in recent years, and particularly since mid-1999 when the Treaty of Amsterdam entered into force. Interest in international migration statistics has grown within the European Commission in Brussels, because of the provisions of this treaty. And today, that interest has grown to encompass work on the preparation of a possible Community regulation on migration and asylum statistics. These recent developments add further weight to the calls for improvements to be made in the quantity, quality, coverage and international comparability of the statistics on immigration and emigration currently being produced by countries in the region.

### III. IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES, WHAT IS THE BEST WAY FORWARD?

6. There are several possible ways forward if efforts are to be made to try to improve on the current situation. A concrete plan will not be proposed here, because that cannot realistically be put forward without consulting with countries. However, that consultation can take place or at least be initiated at the 28-30 April joint meeting, under the agenda item where these issues are to be discussed.

7. In order to facilitate that discussion, the following elements are put forward as factors that could be taken into account in deciding on a feasible way forward:

- It is advisable to establish a small Working Group or Task Force composed of interested countries, who would look into the possibilities of applying the current set of UN recommendations on international migration statistics in real-life situations in their countries.
- In doing so, whenever possible, the countries should use the data source(s) that they are now using to produce their national statistics on immigration and emigration, in combination with other data sources that could also be used to produce other types of data relating to immigration and emigration flows for other types of relevant categories that are outlined in the taxonomy of international migration in the current set of Recommendations.
- It should be understood that in these field trials, the goal for the participating countries is not necessarily full compliance with the current set of recommendations, but rather modest amounts of progress aimed at realistic and attainable goals, and that at the same time represents some improvement for the country concerned in comparison to the present situation.
- Whenever possible, the field trials in given countries should be conducted not only by officials in the NSI; they should instead conduct these field trials by working in close collaboration with international migration policy analysts and with officials in other national agencies and ministries who have responsibility for other types of migration-relevant data sources in the country.
- The above types of “testing” of the Recommendations in real-life situations by a small group of interested countries in the ECE region should be viewed as a regional contribution by Eurostat and the ECE to the promulgation and possible implementation of the Recommendations in this region.
- The results achieved in the above “field tests” should be reported on by the countries concerned at the next ECE-Eurostat joint meeting on international migration statistics and at the next meeting of Eurostat’s Working Party on Migration.
- The UN Statistics Division should consider initiating similar types of field tests with interested countries in other regions (whenever possible, in collaboration with the ECA, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA), and UNSD should be asked to report the results of those field trials in other regions to the future meetings in the ECE region referred to above.

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