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PRODUCING MIGRATION DATA THROUGH HOUSEHOLD SAMMPLESURVEYS

**CREATION OF THE SUITLAND TASK FORCE ON THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF
HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS TO THE MEASUREMENT OF MIGRATION AND
REMITTANCES***

Submitted by United States Census Bureau

I. BACKGROUND

1. On January 15-16, 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau, UNECE, and the World Bank convened an expert group meeting to discuss the contributions household surveys can make to the measurement of migration and remittances. The U.S. Census Bureau hosted this meeting in Suitland, Maryland, outside of Washington DC. The meeting's main objectives were: i) to review recent initiatives aimed at measuring migration and remittances using household surveys in both sending and receiving countries; ii) to review key conceptual and methodological issues related to the measurement of migration and remittances using household surveys; and iii) to agree on a plan for addressing the main methodological issues and for developing best practices when designing and using household surveys to measure migration and remittances. The meeting was organized under the framework of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) Work Plan on Improving International Migration Statistics that is chaired by the United States. A summary of the meeting proceedings is given in Annex 1.

* This paper has been prepared by Victoria Velkoff at the invitation of the secretariat.

2. This topic was discussed at the last UNECE/Eurostat Work Session on Migration Statistics in Edinburgh, Scotland, in November 2006.¹ As requested at the Edinburgh meeting, Switzerland prepared an issues paper to highlight a number of important questions which call for conceptual clarification and increased coordination among international organizations and national statistical offices on the European and global levels. In order to address the issues, the U.S. Census Bureau, UNECE, and the World Bank organized the above-mentioned expert meeting to present and discuss national and international experience in using household surveys to measure migration and remittances.²

3. Based on the presentations and discussions during the meeting in Suitland, participants agreed that further work is needed in a more formalized institutional setting at the international level to improve the quality and availability of the data on remittances and migration and to better harmonize current international, regional, and national initiatives for household surveys in this area. Participants proposed to create a task force, the "Suitland Task Force," to be convened by the United States and which would operate under the auspices and guidance of the Conference of European Statisticians.

II. TERMS OF REFERENCE

A. OBJECTIVES OF THE TASK FORCE

4. The main objective of the Suitland Task Force is to support the efforts of national statistical offices and international organizations on the collection of information on migration and remittances. More specifically, the task force aims to:

- a) advance the methodological work on household surveys to measure migration and remittances;
- b) develop international recommendations on how to best design and implement household surveys to measure migration and remittances;
- c) develop a survey module or modules on migration and remittances to be included, where relevant, in existing international and national survey programs.

B. RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER GROUPS

5. Another expert group, the "Luxembourg Group," has worked on the development of a guide for estimating remittances within balance of payments statistics from various sources, including household surveys. There is no overlap between the objectives of the two groups; the work is complementary.

¹ <http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2006.11.migration.htm>

² The issue paper and the other papers presented at the meeting can be found at the UNECE website: <http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2008.01.migration.htm>.

6. The Suitland Task Force will focus on **survey content and methodology** for better measuring migration and remittances. Its focus is not the production of balance of payments statistics but the measurement of personal transfers between different types of migrant and non-migrant households (or household members). The Suitland Task Force will include survey methodologists and experts on migration and remittance statistics. However, experts familiar with the balance of payments statistics will also need to be involved.

C. ACTIVITIES OF THE TASK FORCE

7. The Suitland Task Force is expected to perform the following activities in relation to the use of household surveys to measure migration and remittances.

- d) Consolidate existing knowledge. There are lessons that can be drawn from the survey-related activities of national statistical offices, international organizations, and other organizations. Many questions remain about the advantages and disadvantages of different data collection methodologies. However, the experiences of various agencies can be combined to define several recommendations that can be used to guide future data collection efforts. A number of internationally standardized surveys (such as Household Budget Surveys or Labor Force Surveys) can be improved without great cost to better measure migration and remittances.
- e) Develop a research agenda to address the methodological issues where there is not enough evidence for developing clear recommendations. This would include field-testing and validating methodologies, such as survey design, sampling techniques, and questionnaire design.
- f) Develop a list of suggested best practices. There are a number of topics or areas where recommendations about what methods should be used depend on the circumstances in the country where the survey is to be fielded (including the capacity of the statistical system, available resources, specific profiles of migrants etc.). Consolidating best practices, with examples based on the experiences of surveys fielded around the world, would benefit new data-collection efforts.
- g) Develop standardized survey modules on migration and remittances, such modules would be recommended for inclusion in existing international and national survey programs as well as in new initiatives in the future.
- h) Develop standards for data tabulation, access to micro-data, publication, and dissemination.

D. EXPECTED OUTPUTS

8. The expected outputs of the Suitland Task Force are the following:

- a) a collection of lessons learned based on past and current international and national initiatives in measuring migration and remittances using household surveys;
- b) recommendations on how to adapt existing surveys to improve the measurement of migration and remittances;
- c) clarification on methodological issues that are still being debated;
- d) a collection of best practices in areas where a best method cannot be recommended;
- e) a validated survey module or modules that can be included in existing international/national survey programs;

- f) a core set of harmonized concepts and definitions, questions, and tabulations for household surveys on migration and remittances.

The United States has agreed to chair the task force and host the first meeting. Other participants from the expert group meeting in Suitland agreed to work with the task force. Outputs during the first year will include a work plan and charter. The task force will report back in 2009 on progress made thus far.

III. ANNEX 1: SUMMARY OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING IN SUITLAND JANUARY 15-16, 2008

A. MAIN METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN MEASURING REMITTANCES AND MIGRATION THROUGH POPULATION BASED SURVEYS

9. Household surveys on migration and remittances in sending and receiving countries pursue different purposes, including the estimation of total remittances, the study of the reasons for migration, the characteristics of remittances senders/receivers, the use and impact of remittances and the analysis of the migration and development nexus. The data collected through these surveys can be used to contribute to the estimate of the remittances component of the balance of payments. The survey data also can be used to better understand the demographic and social processes of migration and their impact on development. It is therefore important that the surveys take into account economic, demographic, and social aspects of migration, and use appropriate survey methodology and definitions of migration and remittances. This reinforces the need for a discussion where experts from different backgrounds and disciplines have an input (migration, development, balance of payments, household income and expenditures, etc.).

10. In many countries, there are discrepancies between estimates of remittances based on balance of payments calculations and those derived from household survey data. It was noted that there are no benchmarks to assess which estimates are the most accurate.

11. Many international, regional, and national organizations have recognized the growing importance of migration and remittances and the need to better measure both more accurately, including through household surveys. There has been a proliferation in the number of regional/international coordinated surveys to measure remittances and migration led by organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Bank, UNICEF, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. However, these initiatives have largely been developed in isolation and major differences can be noted across the various initiatives. These differences can prevent even simple comparisons of the data since the basic concepts such as the types of remittances included, the definition of current migrants, and the reference periods are generally not harmonized.

12. There are a number of methodological issues, which relate to the implementation of surveys on remittances and migration.
- a) Definitions and concepts. There is no agreed method for translating into survey methodology the new definitions of remittances as adopted in the revised balance of payment definitions.³ There is also a lack of common understanding about how the residency rules of demographic and migration statistics can be applied to measure remittances according to the balance of payment's framework
 - b) Types of surveys. The topic of remittances and migration has been covered in different types of surveys in both sending and receiving countries:
 - i) questions included in existing national surveys with large sample sizes (mainly labor force surveys and household budget surveys);
 - ii) ad hoc-modules included in existing multi-country international surveys such as the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) and the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS);
 - iii) specialized surveys focusing on international migration, preferably including remittances data.
 - c) Questions on remittances have also been included in a few population and housing censuses. However, it is unclear if a census is the best vehicle to use and there are no published best practices for which surveys produce the best results. Different objectives and national circumstances may define differing optimal solutions, but research is needed to better connect the data collection goal with the appropriate data collection vehicles.
 - d) Sampling. Sampling is critical when collecting data on remittances and migration because the target population (i.e., migrants or remitters) is usually a small part of the total population, be it in sending or receiving countries, and may include both migrants and non-migrants. Appropriate sampling strategies are needed to make sure that (a) the small target population is reached and is also well represented in the sample, and (b) the appropriate comparison group, for example, non-remittance sending or receiving households, is included. A few studies have been carried out to compare the costs and quality of different sample designs, but, more research is needed to determine how best to find persons who send/receive remittances, and to evaluate the quality of the sample used in surveys covering the total population.
 - e) Testing and validation. The importance of remittances is increasingly recognized internationally, as indicated by the growing number of surveys collecting remittance data. However, in addition to the concept of remittances being new to many countries, statistical offices often have limited experience and capacity in fielding surveys. There is, therefore, a need for testing and validating methodologies covering all aspects of survey implementation and questionnaire design, with particular attention given to the following issues:

³ For example, in-kind remittances and remittances received by non-family members are often not included in surveys. Remittances sent to collective entities are also almost always excluded.

- i) Reporting the total amount of remittances sent/received. Respondents often find it difficult to remember the amount that they sent or received. Research suggests that senders tend to overestimate and recipients tend to underestimate the amounts. The questionnaire should provide specific tools to help the memory of the respondent.
 - ii) Reporting in-kind remittances. Many national and international surveys do not cover the collection of data on in-kind remittances, for example, donations or services paid for by the remitter. There is little information on how questions about these kinds of remittances should be phrased and administered.
 - iii) Individual/household questions. It is still not clear who should be asked the questions--a single respondent providing information for the whole household, or should questions be asked of every member of the household? Testing questions using different approaches can provide the advantages and disadvantages of each.
- f) Seasonality. Research suggests that remittances sent and received may reflect seasonal patterns. For example, remittances may increase at the beginning of the school year or around major holidays. Seasonal patterns need to be considered when designing and fielding surveys.
- g) Non-response and selection bias. Survey questions related to income and finances are often seen as sensitive by respondents and can lead to high non-response rates. High non-response rates have been reported by some surveys that have collected data on remittance senders/receivers. Also certain sub-populations, for example, the wealthy, may be hard to reach and exhibit remittance patterns that are very different from the rest of the population. This type of non-response can bias the result, but little is known about the effects of selective non-response on the measurement of remittances.
- h) Documentation, access, and release of data. Some national statistical offices have reported problems releasing their remittance data because the estimates were different from those developed by their Central Bank. Sometimes there are plausible reasons why the data are different (e.g., due to different definitions or concepts used). Nevertheless, there is a need for releasing survey data and for the organizations involved to work together to ultimately improve the quality of official balance of payments statistics.
