Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians

Online Meetings on Migration Statistics
26−28 October 2021

Report of the 2021 Online Meetings on Migration Statistics:

- **Workshop on measuring migration and remittances (26 October)**

- **Meeting of the UNECE Group of Experts on Migration Statistics (27−28 October)**

Note by the Secretariat

I. Attendance

1.   The online event was attended by representatives of the following countries: Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Croatia Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, and Vietnam. Eurasian Economic Commission, Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-Stat), Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) were also represented.

II.   Organization of the meetings

2.   The event included two meetings. The workshop on 26 October focused on countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (EECCA), and included substantive sessions on the following topics:

(a)   Migration and remittances in the pandemic: overview of the situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia;

(b)   National presentations on migration and remittances;

(c)   Review of the Harmonised Module on Migration and Remittances.

3.   The second meeting, on 27−28 October, discussed the measurement of migration and remittances in the whole UNECE region. The following substantive topics were discussed:

(a)   Survey on measuring migration and remittances in the pandemic;

(b)   Improvements in use of administrative data for migration statistics;

(c)   Covid impact on immigrants and related population groups;

(d)   Timeliness of migration data and use of estimates;

(e)   Use of new data sources for measuring migration and mobility;

(f)   Updates from the United Nations.

4.   Mr. Enrico Tucci from Italy was elected as Chair of the meeting.

5.   The following participants acted as discussants: for item (b) Tristan Cayn (Canada); for item (d) Pubudu Senanayake (New Zealand).

6.   Documents and slides presented at the meetings are available at the UNECE web site.

7.   The meetings were supported financially from the project "Enhancing coherence and integration of economic and social statistics in support of the implementation of 2008 SNA" (grant TF0A4764) of the World Bank's ECASTAT programme.

III.   Summary of proceedings

A.   Workshop on measuring migration and remittances

1.   Migration and remittances in the pandemic: overview of the situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

8.   The representative of CIS-Stat gave a presentation on the current situation regarding data on migration and remittances in countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

9.   A UNECE consultant presented the main results of a survey on migration and remittances measurement in the pandemic, carried out in October 2021, focusing on countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. A second presentation was dedicated to mapping digital remittance infrastructure in Russia and Central Asia.

10.   The main issues discussed after the presentations are presented below.

11.   Available data for 2020 and the first half 2021 showed direct correlation between government restrictions and migration flows as well as remittances. In particular, time series data in 2020 show a clear impact of health and safety measures imposed in times of pandemic, which resulted in reduced migration flows and remittances. It was noted that the available

time series data could potentially be used to predict future patterns and volumes of remittances, in relation to health and safety measures imposed by the governments. In general, as the governments impose other lockdowns in the fourth quarter of 2021, it can be expected that the volume of remittances will also decrease. Passenger volumes or airline tickets issuances can also sometimes be used to obtain information on the flow of migration.

12. With regard to the survey, some participants asked on whether the survey was able to consider other circumstances other than the pandemic that may have contributed to the reduced level of interaction between NSO departments and administrative bodies. It was noted that there is a need to identify and consider such existing deep/underlying causes of the limited cooperation and interaction between NSOs and other administrative data providers, beyond the pandemic. It was stressed that cooperation within and between countries is very important. It was also acknowledged the need to reformulate and incorporate the question and include it in the next survey. This suggestion is in line with the handbook on measuring migration, whereby specific recommendations on collaboration with other providers of administrative data were made.

13. With regard to digital remittances, some participants posed the question on how the quality of data received was assessed. The presenter responded that for each country in which the survey was conducted a certain organization was hired to lead the exercise. Specific information on data quality for the various countries is available. It was noted that significant progress has been made in this area compared to a few years ago when it was not possible to trace money transfers sent by labour migrants. Now remittances data are available according to statistical needs and allow identifying data related to labour migrants.

14. On the use of bank cards, in some countries in the region the population mostly use cash, however the use of bank cards is gradually growing. The use of digital banking is not widespread likely due to lack of option offered or lack of financial literacy on such use. The pandemic opens up opportunities to improve the financial literacy of the population as well as for the financial institutions to further develop digital payment systems which could lead to decrease remittance costs which is part of the implementation of SDGs.

2. National presentations on migration and remittances

15. Presentations in the session showcased how countries are using both traditional and new data sources to measure migration in the Covid era. Armenia, Belarus, and Russian Federation presented the migration activity questions included in their recently fielded population and housing censuses. While censuses are a fundamental source for data on migrant stocks, long term trends and migrant characteristics, most countries rely on administrative sources for more timely data on migration flows. The countries represented in the session shared experiences integrating administrative data from a variety of government sources including border control agencies, ministries of labour, education, and internal affairs, as well as newly or soon-to-be developed population registers (Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan) to produce timely and accurate migration statistics. Georgia presented on its exploration of the use of mobile-phone data to measure mobility in real time, as a complement to migration statistics based on traditional sources.

16. Discussion during the session highlighted the common challenges countries face in digitizing migration monitoring systems and integrating data across sources and producers. As countries in the region transition from paper-based to digital systems for the registration of foreign citizens and expand the use of these administrative sources, statistical offices must develop new frameworks for the assessment of data quality and approaches for communicating issues and limitations to data users. The development of automated and integrated data-sharing systems requires resources and political will across many government domains. Presenters emphasized the complementarity of data from different sources.

Administrative sources can be used to fill gaps in registers and migration databases. Censuses and household surveys are essential for calibrating statistics based on administrative or non-traditional sources and for the analysis of migrant characteristics.

17.   It was observed that countries with good administrative data systems were better prepared to maintain statistical production during the pandemic than those countries relying on surveys. The main conclusions of the session were that administrative data are crucial for the measurement of migration but not without shortcomings. Data producers should recognize and communicate these limitations but work towards improving administrative data systems and promoting the better use of data from these sources.

18.   Some country-specific issues were discussed as follows.

19.   In Armenia, the quality check of administrative data produced with the new system is complex, since data come from different sources including the population register and border management administration. The procedures set up for the new combined census help data checks, and the UNECE Guidelines on the use of administrative data are also useful.

20.   In Belarus, the population register was used to support the 2019 census and will be used extensively for the next census. Unfortunately, other registers do not have the same good quality. There are also plans to add questions for migration purposes.

21.   In Georgia, work to develop the population register continues, and the production of statistics using administrative data is a priority for Geostat. Big data (from mobile phones) is not a replacement, but an additional data source. Geostat does not have the right to access directly mobile phone data, but is working on a project with the Communication Commission that has right to collect this information from mobile operators. The role of Geostat is only to develop the methodology. For internal migration at the moment the population census is the only data source available, while international migration statistics are based on administrative data and are available annually.

22.   In Kyrgyzstan, the data are uploaded directly to the central database, there is no paper at all. The main computing centre checks for data quality, completeness and consistency. Since the population isn't too big, it is relatively easy to work with the database. After data are checked, they are sent back to regions to allow them to work with them on site. However, the work is hard because of the limited staff. The completeness of data is an issue. Some employees of the Minister of digital development consider that some questions, like education or employment, are secondary or not important. The quality of data as part of digital transformation is really an important issue.

23.   In the Russian Federation, as part of the Internet census, the respondent can respond for all members of the household.

3.   Review of the Harmonised Module on Migration and Remittances

24.   The harmonized module on migration and remittances was developed in 2018 with the objective to standardize migration estimates in order to improve comparability. In addition, the module aimed to improve information on remittances and its relationship with the household welfare and to optimize the way migration indicators are factored into the development of public policy to achieve the SDGs.

25.   The module was updated to include the developments related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Relevant questions were added to the survey module in 2021, including on the labour market's dependence on foreign workforce, changes in migration intentions (e.g. because of risk of losing jobs related to lockdown, high cost of returning to the country of origin, etc.) and the use of alternative data sources.

26.   Although administrative data are used to produce migration statistics, surveys complement administrative data and are an important source to get the qualitative part of migrants' characteristics, e.g. related to changes to the economy, to the well-being of families and the intention to migrate. While admin data can show only migrants or only foreigners, surveys allow for a more in-depth analysis. Furthermore, the use of big data (e.g. use of mobile phones) can also help fill in gaps. In the Russian Federation, for example, the availability of data on migrants who use Russian mobile connection could be a potential source.

27.   The updated module investigated the impact of closing/opening of borders on migration during the pandemic, how much time migrants are spending in the country and what are the options/obstacles for departures and return migrations in 2020 and 2021. It also adapted the information collected on migrants' social-economic integration to the new pandemic situation, in particular on the job changes and critical situations caused by business shutdowns as well as on access to healthcare (immunization, diagnostics), digital financial services (financial integration), and other types of government support during the pandemic. Several additional questions were proposed to make statistics on remittances more accurate and complete, e.g. about sending/receiving remittances in cash and digitally, and their purpose (also taking into consideration the impact of the pandemic).

28.   Climate issues can motivate people to move temporarily or on long term. This could be an issue to examine in further adaptations of the module. In international practices there have been a number of indicators which enable to trace climate migration in and out of countries.

B.   Group of Experts on Migration Statistics

1.   Survey on measuring migration and remittances in the pandemic

29.   The UNECE consultant presented the main results of the survey on migration and remittances measurement in the pandemic, carried out in October 2021. The survey results, based on replies from 26 UNECE countries, showed that remote survey taking became more widespread in the region, but not in EECCA countries. Some NSOs did introduce some methodological innovations pushed by the pandemic or searched for alternative data collection/compiling methods. NSOs relying on population registers data reported less disruptions in producing/compiling migration statistics due to the pandemic. There is general interest in data reflecting the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and migration increases. For this reason, NSOs explore alternative data sources and expand the list of variables on international migration.

2.   Improvements in use of administrative data for migration statistics

30.   In this session, several countries presented different aspects of the work done to improve the use of administrative data for migration statistics. The experts highlighted the benefits of successful collaboration between departments as well as potential caveats such as bureaucratic hurdles in setting and implementing shared agreements, privacy concerns in exchanging the information, etc. It was noted that when it comes to data collection, the more decentralised is the government the more difficult is to get to agreements. While the objectives varied between countries, e.g. track better unregistered migrants, improve the disaggregation capacity from their surveys, or report sooner, they all wanted to augment their accuracy and improve quality of their data.

31.   In the discussion, the representative from Estonia clarified that the NSO receives administrative data on an annual basis, and they are linked using personal identification

numbers. Although data are collected from many different administrative sources, there are no delays in the production of migration statistics, based on the last five years.

32.   There are no big differences between the results of the new method used in Estonia based on the signs of life approach, and the old method. The results were also validated with European social surveys, with differences of less than 1%. The signs of life approach is also used to correct the coverage of the population register, and to define the resident population. The method is not used to produce an estimate of undocumented migrants since this is not considered a big phenomenon in Estonia. But in the future this possibility could be explored.

33.   With regard to the use of big data, some research was done in Estonia by a university on using mobile data to research transnational people (living in multiple countries). Mobile location data would be useful in this case to define transnational people.

34.   New Zealand presented its approach to administrative data driven migration estimates based solely on the observed behaviour of travellers and not on their intentions. Data users require timely (around one month elapsed time) migration estimates. To provide for such quick estimates, Statistics New Zealand employs an outcomes-based method, which relies on time spent in/out of the country and a machine learning model using daily border-crossing data and individual level data (e.g. passport data) to identify unique travellers. The machine learning method performed well during the pandemic and kept the percentage ratio of migrants and non-migrants.

35.   New Zealand uses a 12 out of 16 months rule to identify migrants, instead of the UN concept of "usual residence" defined as a continuous period of 12 months. This allows for people to be able to take short trips in and out of the country during their stay, and particularly to allow long term students to be classified as residents. This avoids the situation where a university student spends around 3 - 4 years in New Zealand, but because they happen to go home for the summer, they are never counted as a migrant. A similar method is adopted in Australia to determine migrant arrivals. The representative of Eurostat noted that the UN reference period of 12 months can be applied in different ways, including a continuous period of 12 months, or at least 6 out of the last 12 months. The migration estimates produced with this method are used to inform the assumptions for future migration, used for population projections. The machine learning (ML) method used by New Zealand doesn't attempt to forecast migration. There are some ML methods for short to medium term forecasting but they are not used by New Zealand.

36.   The Czech Statistical Office obtains data on migration from various migration sources. Household surveys are not used due to the underestimation of number of foreigners in the sample. Although the collaboration with the admin departments works well, the data collected is inconsistent as different sources and registers are used, but they are not linked among them, affecting data comparability. Data protection allows for only aggregate data on subgroups of migrants.

37.   The presenter from the United States noted that administrative data sources have their own weaknesses and caveats, so it is not expected that they will replace completely survey data. Both survey data and administrative data have their unique weaknesses. By linking and combining the two together, it is hoped that those weaknesses can be overcome. Research is conducted on using social security and tax administrative records to estimate migration and linking them to already obtained survey data to supplement each other. In doing this, consideration is given to the known limitations of admin data.

3.   Covid impact on immigrants and related population groups

38.   The session discussed the impact of Covid-19 on immigrants and related population groups in South Africa and on forcibly displaced people, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, worldwide.

39.   In 2020, South Africa conducted a three-wave online survey to measure the social impact of Covid-19 on health behaviour and perceptions, socio economic characteristics, income, mobility, migration, education and time use. Internal mobility during the lockdown has mostly been temporary. Migrants were classified as a vulnerable group - a higher proportion of migrant respondents were vulnerable in more areas than non-migrant respondents, e.g. unemployment, living in informal dwellings, working in the informal sector, etc. The survey also included questions on remittances.

40.   While the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on displacement globally is not yet clear, UNHCR data shows that arrivals of new refugees and asylum-seekers were sharply down in most regions. The main reason was that countries closed their borders during the peak of the pandemic. Emerging evidence indicates that, in some cases, Covid-19 may also have been a factor in triggering new movement of people in 2020. In 2020, UNHCR refugee registration numbers dropped to their lowest levels since 2012, returns to the countries of origin and resettlement were also at lower levels.

41.   The Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics (EGRIS), composed by representatives from 45 countries and 25 regional and international organizations, has developed two sets of International Recommendations on Refugee and IDP Statistics (IRRS & IRIS).

4.   Timeliness of migration data and use of estimates

42.   Timely and accurate data are really important and need to be improved continuously. In this session, three countries - United Kingdom, Canada and the United States - presented their effort to deliver faster and higher quality migration data during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the pandemic amplified the demand for more relevant, coherent and timely data on migration, it made data less available and more volatile. In the United Kingdom and the Unites States for example, the main traditional face-to-face source of information, the International Passenger Survey and American Community Survey respectively, were either put on hold or resulted in high non-response bias. In Canada, the assumptions in the current Covid-19 context became less realistic and models had to be adjusted.

43.   While in the United Kingdom, admin-based migration estimates were produced even before pandemic, they moved to only admin-based estimates, first early results of which were released in April 2021. Overall, the new approach showed good results, especially for groups with high quality coverage like workers. Some underestimation occurred mainly with regard to groups with limited coverage, such as students from non-EU countries and children under 16. Modelling used to fill in the gaps worked well. United Kingdom plans to publish the migration estimates in November 2021. Next year they will also look for insights about labour market shortages and how the international migration influence that.

44.   Canada took steps to adjust its quarterly preliminary estimates based on child benefit data and demographic models estimates by integrating new sources with timely and detailed data: flight data and Registration of Canadians Abroad (ROCA) data. While the two sources complement each other, biases could be even more profound in similar data sets or in some small numbers data – e.g. when immigrants do not register their intentions when coming from more risky countries or emigrants register only if they have the intention to return in the future. Canada is moving slowly but steadily to use border data to measure immigration.

45.   The main source on migration in the United States is the American Community Survey. In 2020, Covid-19 disruptions to survey operations however led to exceptionally high non-response bias. In response to this challenge the office developed a Benchmark Database, which complies published statistics from various agencies to forecast immigrant series for the Covid-19 period. This is an example of macrolevel data integration in which aggregate data from multiple sources are combined to produce a practical estimate. While it is only available as aggregate statistics at national level and does not give the exact levels, trends are really useful. Current research on the Integrated Database for International Migration (IDIM) examines microlevel integration, using individual-level and internal-use federal admin data to measure migration by subnational geographic and demographic detail.

46.   Handling admin data requires subject-data expertise and modelling. Some key considerations were put forward, e.g. NSOs should communicate to the relevant stakeholders that the perceived outputs are not purely data driven, NSOs should ensure internal consistency and that all sources are telling the same story, etc. The experts noted the importance of remaining open to new sources and methods. Several challenges with admin data were discussed, such as the timely delivery from the data suppliers, the difference in migrant definitions used by the admin units, the need to strengthen the assumptions, etc. Once again, the importance of close cooperation between agencies was reiterated, especially in times of uncertainty. Timeliness is increasingly relevant with Covid-19 which allows to foster the national partnerships. The need to keep the momentum is a key in acquiring new data and developing new models.

47.   Moving to admin data naturally raised questions about the definition of migration. Admin data does not show the person's judgement, intentions or interpretation (e.g. whether the purpose of travel is for example holidays). Such uncertainty can either be built in the model or get captured by extending the migrant definition to a longer than 12 months period. The experts however mentioned the impact on the international comparability. A solution could be to use models that predict whether a border crossing is a migrant crossing rather than extending the period in the definition.

5.   Use of new data sources for measuring migration and mobility

48.   The Chair of the UNECE Task Force on the use of new data sources for measuring international migration and cross-border mobility presented the work of the task force and the draft report. A follow up survey was carried out in December 2020 to collect additional information on the reasons why countries do not use new data sources for measuring migration and mobility, and on other innovations on measuring international migration. The report is expected to be finalized by the end of 2021, and reviewed by the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians in February 2022.

6.   Updates from the United Nations

49.   UNSD presented the work of its Global Programme of Migration Statistics. A revised conceptual framework on international migration was endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission in March 2021. The main aim is to be more flexible and grounded on policy needs, but at the same time ensure maximum comparability of statistics on stocks and flows. Some additional work is being carried out on temporary mobility, on the finalization of the set of core topics and indicators, and on the operationalization of the framework.

50.   The representative from South Africa mentioned that in the new conceptual framework there are two options for the reference period that are being proposed: 1) six months + one day; and 2) at least 12 months. He noted that what is important is not to compare or choose one over the other, but rather that countries need to align their measurements of migration with the measurement of resident population for purposes of consistency. If all

countries measure their resident population consistently then there will be consistent measures of migration. It should be avoided that countries measure migration in one way and resident population in a different way.

7.   Future work

51.   UNECE provided an overview of ongoing and future work on migration statistics under the Conference of European Statisticians. The work for the coming year will include the finalization of the work by the Task Force on new sources for measuring migration and mobility, and the preparation of the 2022 meetings on migration statistics.

52.   Feedback was collected from the participants, through an interactive session, on areas of migration statistics in which they see a need for further international work. The areas indicated by most participants include emigration and undocumented migration. The Conference of European Statisticians Steering Group on Migration Statistics will consider developing concrete proposals for further work in these areas.