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Report of the Meeting of the Group of Experts on Migration Statistics
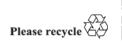
Prepared by the Secretariat*

Summary

      The document presents the key outcomes of the Meeting of the Group of Experts on Migration Statistics, which took place in Geneva, Switzerland on 7 and 8 May 2024. The meeting was organized at the request of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) Steering Group on Migration Statistics.

      The report is submitted to the Conference of European Statisticians for information.

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  * This document was submitted late for processing due to resource constraints.

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I. Attendance

1.   The meeting of the UNECE Group of Experts on Migration Statistics was held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland on 7 and 8 May 2024.

2.   The meeting was organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) with financial and organizational support provided by the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

3.   The meeting was attended by participants from the following countries and organizations: Armenia; Azerbaijan; Belarus; Belgium; Canada; Georgia; Germany; Hungary; Iceland; Ireland; Israel; Italy; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Latvia; Luxembourg; Mexico; Norway; Poland; Portugal; the Republic of Moldova; Romania; the Russian Federation; Serbia; Slovakia; Slovenia; Spain; Switzerland; Tajikistan; the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; the United States of America; Uzbekistan; European Union; International Organization for Migration (IOM); United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); United Nations Mission in Kosovo[1] (UNMIK); Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS-Stat); Stiftelsen Flowminder; Lomonosov Moscow State University and Sapienza University of Rome. There were 71 participants.

4.   The attendance of many participants was supported financially by EGRISS, UNHCR and IOM.

II. Organization of the meeting

5.   C. Conti of Italy chaired the meeting.

6.   The following substantive topics were discussed at the meeting:

   (a)   Statistics on refugees, internally displaced persons, and statelessness;

   (b)   Measuring new forms of international migration;

   (c)   Measuring undocumented migration;

   (d)   Measuring emigration;

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

   (f)   Results on migration from the 2020 population census round;

   (g)   Future CES work on migration statistics.

7.   Discussions were prepared and led for topic (d) by C. Doherty, Ireland; for topic (e) by J. Probst, Switzerland; and for topic (f) by A. Spataru, the Republic of Moldova.

8.   The presented documents and slides are available on the web page of the meeting.

III. Future work

9.   Participants appreciated the exchange of experience and good practice that took place at the meeting. The meeting acknowledged the progress made by the Task Force on Measuring Emigration and the Task Force on Defining and Measuring New Forms of International Migration.

10.   On future international work on population statistics under the Conference of European Statisticians, participants welcomed the proposed integration of the Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses and the Group of Experts on Migration

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[1] References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

Statistics into a Group of Experts on Population and Migration Statistics. The work of the integrated group is expected to cover, among others, issues related to all types of population censuses, supplementary population bases and migration statistics, and to improve the use of administrative data for population and migration statistics.

11.   Participants took note that a room and interpretation for the meeting of the Group of Experts on Population and Migration Statistics are reserved at the Palais des Nations in Geneva from 15 to 17 October 2025.

IV.   Adoption of the meeting report

12.   The meeting adopted parts I–III of this report before adjourning. A summary of the discussion in the substantive sessions of the meeting will be presented in an annex to this report, to be prepared by the Secretariat after the meeting.

Annex

Summary of discussions

I. Statistics on refugees, internally displaced persons, and statelessness

1.   This session included presentations from EGRISS, Uzbekistan, Italy and Hungary.

2.   The presentations illustrated data challenges and possible solutions across countries, in term of the need for harmonized definitions, issues related to data collection and the potential value to be added by data linkage. Confidentiality and data protection laws can also create similar challenges across countries in obtaining data, even when statistical laws in theory ensure access.

3.   Discussion covered the ways in which cooperation between administrative data owners and national statistical offices (NSOs) work in practice. It was observed that formal legal regulations may be necessary but not sufficient. Memoranda of understanding, as well as more informal approaches to working in partnership, are needed. In Italy, a formal agreement between the National Institute of Statistics and the Ministry of the Interior has proven useful, creating an understanding of the roles and competencies of the two agencies.

4.   Participants discussed the challenges of ensuring the survey respondents understand the concepts intended in survey questions which distinguish between refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless persons. In Uzbekistan, where there has been no census in 35 years, misunderstanding of such concepts is widespread not only among respondents but also enumerators, so training is essential.

5.   It was observed that administrative datasets can be evolving constantly and may have different or changing reference dates, necessitating choices about dates selected for linkage across sources. Ongoing research in Hungary suggests that the more stable sources are most suitable as principal sources, with those which change more rapidly having potential as satellite sources.

6.   Administrative sources can also change when the administrative matter in question changes – for example, when the temporary protection status of Ukrainian refugees in some European countries expires. Participants discussed the likely impacts of this, as it may not be possible to identify which refugees actually remain in the host country if all permits are automatically renewed.

7.   While much of the discussion in this section focused on administrative data, it was also noted that the international recommendations developed by EGRISS and adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission provide clear guidance on definitions and suggested census questions for enumeration-based censuses, with the aim of guiding correct identification of refugees, IDPs and stateless persons. Such identification remains challenging in surveys, and EGRISS continues to gather information on the experiences of countries, such on challenges in respondent understanding, and political sensitivities, in order to further revise the available guidance.

II. Measuring new forms of international migration

8.   This session included two presentations from the United Kingdom, one of which was presented on behalf of the Conference of European Statisticians Task Force on measuring new forms of international migration.

9.   While the task force on measuring new forms of migration intends to focus on measurement more than on definitions, it was observed during discussion that definitions will remain an ongoing challenge given the constant evolution of migration types and patterns.

10.   Understanding the reasons for changes in migration patterns is a further step, which depends on those patterns first being identified and measured. In the United Kingdom, for example, the drivers of change since the pandemic are hard to identify as they involve a confluence of different factors including a new ability to work from different locations and the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

11.   Participants discussed the methods available to 'track' migrants through the linkage of data on different passports and visa numbers. In the United Kingdom such linkage is performed by the border force for administrative purposes and as such the NSO is dependent on the border force for the resulting information. Political and legal changes, such as the changes in visa requirements after the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, can impact the availability of information for statistics. Relatedly, the requirement for a visa does not necessarily mean that the visa-holder spends all the expected time in the visa-issuing country; they may move around among other countries for which they do not require a visa. Hence the treatment of United Kingdom visa-holders as long-term migrants is based only on an assumption that they remain.

12.   There was discussion of the potential and challenges of using mobile phone data in migration estimation. It can be difficult to determine the quality of data or to obtain a full understanding of the adjustments made by the data holders, such as weighting. Since few characteristics are provided with the data, it can be hard to know details such as the national origin of a phone's sim card. The United Kingdom experience has found that such data is more suitable for tourism and short-term migration figures, since for such short periods people are less likely to change sim cards.

13.   The special challenges in measuring child migration were noted. It can be hard to match children's own visas with those of their parents, and many assumptions often have to be made, especially when using administrative sources such as tax records in which children do not feature. There are important policy questions around children left behind when their parents migrate – for which it is necessary to move beyond the assumption that children are necessarily migrating with their parents.

III.   Measuring undocumented migration

14.   This session consisted of a presentation from Poland.

15.   In discussion it was noted that although administrative data sources rarely offer the possibility to consider undocumented migrants directly, the experience in Poland illustrates that this possibility is now starting to emerge.

16.   The approach demonstrated by Poland does not currently allow for identification of those who are simply passing through as distinct from those who remain for some time. There may be systematic differences between documented and undocumented migrants in their propensity to remain in the country, but this is not yet known.

17.   Participants discussed public communications challenges surrounding the use of estimates or models for figures dealing with a highly sensitive topic. Labelling such estimates as 'experimental statistics' will help to communicate that they are not official. It is important to explore them in detail internally, and to compare them to existing statistics, in order to gain a thorough understanding of their limitations prior to publishing. It is understood that migration statistics in general, and those dealing with undocumented migrants in particular, may be harnessed in support of political statements. Hence it is crucial that the producers have a clear understanding of the nature and limitations of the methodology before they are published.

IV.   Measuring emigration

18.   This session included presentations from Norway, Switzerland, Israel, United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (presenting on behalf of the Conference of European Statisticians Task Force on measuring migration). Discussion was led by Ireland.

19. The well-known challenges of measuring emigration were reiterated during the discussion. It is always necessary to set a threshold of some sort to distinguish emigration from short-term absence. In Israel, for instance, a cumulative sum of visits exceeding three months is used. Another challenge is that stated intention does not always match actual behaviour at a later date. Hence Switzerland found that while two-thirds of respondents stated an intention to stay permanently in Switzerland, after five years almost half have left the country. There are also data problems, such as consecutive immigration events with no recorded emigration event in-between; such errors have to be corrected through imputation. In Norway, the ease of use of an online emigration portal should make it more likely that people will self-register their emigration, but this is not guaranteed. Statistical agencies and administrative data holders with non-statistical motivations may have divergent wishes when it comes to detailed definitions of concepts such as usual residence, e.g., for students studying abroad.

20. Discussion also touched on the issue of time-lags in obtaining administrative data for measuring emigration, and the benefits and limitations of using modelling based on a signs-of-life (SOL) approach as a means of filling gaps caused by such time lags. Where data is obtained from surveys, response biases may need to be corrected for by oversampling and weighting, as is done for example in Switzerland. The topic of data linkage was raised in discussion. There may be potential in the future for linking survey data and longitudinal data from other sources.

21. As highlighted during the presentation from the CES task force, it has long been considered that measuring emigration accurately poses a greater challenge than measuring immigration. Given the rapid pace of change in technology, data sources and statistical methodology, participants welcomed the efforts of the task force to assess the current situation across the region and develop updated guidance on these topics. In discussion it was noted that there is a greater emphasis on timeliness than there had been in the past, as well as greater attention to quality assessment. The growing need for flexibility, such as being able to adapt a methodology rapidly to account for new phenomena or to cover events spanning very small time periods, was noted. The value of alternative methods (both sources and statistical approaches) is being more proactively explored, including not only administrative sources but longitudinal perspectives, modelling and the use of machine learning and artificial intelligence.

22. The discussant noted the continued challenges posed by some variables across all methods and sources, such as country of next residence. The United States has used probabilistic matching, while the United Kingdom noted the potential for using border data as an inexact proxy for country of next residence. Data gaps still exist in measuring emigration of native-born populations, i.e. knowing not only that they have left but to where they have emigrated. Mirror statistics offer one avenue for filling these gaps.

23. The pace of development in administrative data and their suitability for use in statistics is accelerating. It was observed that the best results emerge when the public administration shares an interest in having a high-quality statistical system—when they see that the resulting data serve their own needs as well as those of the NSO. In Norway, the development of this attitude has been key to improving the quality of register data.

24. A suggestion was made to use the CES task force as a means of promoting the sharing of classifications, models and/or the underlying code for SOL approaches among countries.

V. Improvements in use of administrative data for migration statistics

25. This session included presentations from CIS-Stat, Lomonosov Moscow State University, the Republic of Moldova, Uzbekistan, Spain, Norway, and Canada. The discussion was led by J. Probst (Switzerland).

26. Before the discussion, some clarifications were provided on specific aspects of the presentations. In the Russian Federation, administrative data forms will change the format and the frequency with which the data will be provided. There is a new ID number for

migrants that will allow to determine the actual time the migrants spent in the country, when they entered and left the country, and correctly calculate the movements of the migrants across the country. A pilot testing is being carried out.

27. Qualitative aspects of migrants (highly or less qualified labour migrants) can be important to understand what kind of migrants are leaving the country – highly skilled or less skilled. If there is no direct information to evaluate the skills, the salary can help identifying highly qualified If there is no direct information to evaluate the skills, the salary can help identifying highly qualified workers. More than half of those graduated from Russian universities are high-skills labour, their intention is often to permanently settle in the Russian Federation.

28. Tajikistan noted significant discrepancies between data on migrants to the Russian Federation from Russian sources, which are much larger compared to data from Tajikistan, and asked how data can be made more comparable. It was noted that an agreement could be reached between Tajikistan and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russia Federation to obtain the full range of data collected and resolve the discrepancies. Often labour migrants register for a short period of time. Data on number of permits issued cannot be compared as many people are working without documents.

29. Data on acquisition of citizenship in the Russian Federation is available upon request. In the Republic of Moldova information on citizenship applications is available online. Data on who is applying for citizenship and whether people have several passports can be obtained on request but is not publicly available.

30. The discussant noted that two aspects transversally appear in several of the papers presented:

(a) Opportunities and risks of the use of administrative data (Russian Federation, CIS-Stat, Norway, Spain): Administrative data pre-exist to any statistical concern, it can be acquired relatively easily, but its statistical treatment and refinement is costly because admin data is shaped by the authorities producing it and by the laws of the correspondent state. This brings challenges especially in the case of migration data. Migration is a strongly political issue, touches on the question of state sovereignty and is governed by particular laws and procedures. Its use bears big opportunities but also risks and challenges;

(b) Administrative data on migration: stocks, flows, reasons (Norway, Canada, Russian Federation): There are two main administrative data sources for producing migration statistics:

(i) *Population registers* allow for establishing demographic balances and showing the contribution of migration in total population change of a country or subnational geography;

(ii) *Migration-specific registers* deliver information on the type of migration, especially regarding the reasons underlying the migration or the issuance of a permit by authorities.

31. The presenters answered some questions from the discussant. The presenter from Spain, with regard to the challenge linked to the time lags between the date of the event and the time when the information is received, noted that the time lag is estimated based on past experience, and migration estimates are corrected to take into account migrants for which the information was not yet received.

32. CIS-Stat explained that since the start of the Covid pandemic, immigration from CIS countries to the Russian Federation went down due to Covid restrictions. Those who were already in the Russian Federation remained there. After the end of the Covid pandemic, the previous migration pattern resumed.

33. It was noted that labour migration from Belarus to Azerbaijan increased. Belarus clarified that two different databases were used. After the pandemic, labour migration flows increased. There are also some known data comparability issues between Belarus and the Russian Federation. If labour migrants return home after three months this is not recorded, and if they then return to the country of labour – it is registered a second time.

34.   In Norway, there is strong interest by the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion in the reference person of family migrants from the European Union, for two main reasons: (1) to estimate the degree of integration, which is especially useful when longitudinal analysis is available, and (2) to provide information on what determines the flow of family integration in Norway and how certain type of immigration affects other types of immigration.

35.   In Canada, the loss of information on family migrants resulted from the shift between data sources, from survey to administrative data; work is being conducted to see how to get the family members back in the data. Administrative data was already used in population estimates and projections and for taxes, and it took longer to be used also for the population census.

VI.   Results on migration from the 2020 population census round

36.   Presentations in this session were given by CIS-Stat, Belarus, Armenia and the United Kingdom. Discussion was led by the Republic of Moldova.

37.   The discussant noted that since migration has a large impact on living standards of all members of a population, it is important to have not only numbers but information about the characteristics of migrants, and this information should be accurate and timely. As such, censuses remain a crucial source of data on the scale and patterns of migration but also on these characteristics. Censuses play a key role as a benchmark allowing retrospective calculation of migration figures. The discussant observed that census methodology is diversifying, and what is described as a 'combined' (enumeration and administrative sources) census in one country can be vastly different from that in another, e.g., when comparing the census approaches of Belarus and Armenia. One aspect they shared, however, was the inclusion of an extended block of questions on migration and labour. Belarus introduced questions on emigration plans, which is a novelty in censuses in the region. The use of an enumerated sample combined with a population register allowed Armenia to ask detailed migration questions to only a subset of the total population.

38.   The session revealed that many countries have learned useful lessons from the significant challenges that the pandemic created for the conduct of their censuses, and these lessons have in some cases spurred improvements in migration statistics.

39.   Participants discussed the particular challenges in measuring migration with census data in the CIS countries, due to the fact that citizenship information alone tends not to reveal the full extent of migration since many migrants already hold a passport from the receiving country.

40.   In discussion it was noted that when transitioning to new approaches and data sources in censuses, the confidence of data users is crucial to ensure that data is trusted and used.

41.   Across the CIS countries, several important lessons were learned in the last census round pertaining to migration measurement. The use of administrative sources is increasing and demands active cooperation with data holders. When planning future censuses, countries have learned that they need to evaluate each question or variable very carefully, to determine the necessity and value of including it in the census. This includes retrospective assessment once a census is completed, to determine the quality of the data collected and assess how useful it was for users, as well as to assess the suitability of the census design used and to plan for any changes in future design.

42.   An area highlighted in the discussion for future development of migration statistics is better measuring the migration of a country's own citizens: emigration, returning to the home country, etc., as well as capturing the characteristics of these migrants. In the United Kingdom, for example, it was noted that the population of British nationals still poses methodological challenges when they stop interacting with domestic authorities such as the tax administration following their departure. There is great potential in the rich data within the 'advance passenger information' collected for international travel, but this remains extremely complex to process and analyse. In discussion it was also mentioned that international cooperation is becoming increasingly important for measuring migration, as countries share data on immigration and emigration, especially in contexts of dual citizens.

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