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## **Statistics on international labour migration**

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## **1. Introduction**

1. In today's globalized world, labour migration is a rising policy priority. Economic hardship and geopolitical crises leading to the lack of decent work are resulting in growing and diverse migratory movements. In many economies, including emerging economies, ageing populations and declining labour forces are also contributing to the growing mobility of workers. Women are joining migration flows in growing numbers as independent workers, with important consequences for gender equality in countries of origin and destination alike.
2. Migration flows have changed over the past few decades, growing significantly in some corridors and between countries of the South. The governance challenges have increased in complexity. There is a need to understand these dynamic migrant flows and their implications for labour markets, particularly in migrant-dominated sectors.
3. New thinking and new approaches to the governance of labour migration are needed: a fair sharing of the prosperity migrant workers help to create, and policies that respond equitably to the interests of countries of origin and destination, as well as to migrant workers, employers and national workers.
4. To be effective, such policies must be grounded in strong evidence. For this, data on the number of migrant workers, their distribution by sector and their employment patterns are urgently needed.
5. While acknowledging the many challenges of data collection and analysis in this field, this report presents conceptual and methodological guidelines on labour migration statistics. This document is part of a broader ILO effort to improve harmonization, collection and production of labour migration statistics at national, regional and global levels. In addition, it will contribute to the implementation of Resolution IV concerning further work on labour migration statistics, adopted by the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 2013, which called upon the ILO to carry out preparatory work for defining international standards on labour migration statistics, in close consultation with interested countries, the social partners and civil society organizations.
6. This report will provide the background to the 20<sup>th</sup> ICLS discussion in 2018 and the development of international concepts and standards on international labour migration statistics, agreed worldwide. It is hoped that this document will help to advance the national and international debate on labour migration policy and governance.
7. According to the ILO estimates, there are 150.3 million migrant workers in the world. The data on migrant workers that have been used to calculate the estimates refer to migrant workers in the country of destination and measure the migrant stocks in 2013. Among migrant workers, 83.7 million are men and 66.6 million are women, corresponding to 55.7 per cent and 44.3 per cent of the total respectively.

## *1.1 Rationale for international guidelines on labour migration statistics*

### *Protection of migrant workers*

8. A primary concern of the ILO is to identify and measure stocks and flows of migrant workers, and on the basis of that to promote measures to protect them. It is important to promote labour migration that improves the welfare of migrants and their families both in their country of origin and destination. To this end, it is necessary to:
  - a. manage migration taking into consideration the interests of different stakeholders and the sending (origin) and receiving (destination) countries;
  - b. better protect migrant workers and maximize benefits for development;
  - c. better match labour demands and supplies;
  - d. better utilize migrant workers for the benefit of countries of destination; and
  - e. better absorb return-migrant workers to benefit the economic development in countries of origin.

### *Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

9. The importance of having better statistics on international labour migration is manifested in the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed upon by the United Nations General Assembly in September, 2015. The SDGs follow on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for 1990-2015, and are intended to stimulate countries, especially low-income developing countries, towards the achievement of 17 goals during the period 2015-2030, reflected in 167 targets and monitored by over 500 indicators.
10. There is one explicit migration target, 10.7, under Goal 10 to reduce inequality within and among countries: “Promote orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.”
11. For the rest, as in the case of the MDGs, there are no explicit goals with respect to international migration in the new SDGs. Nevertheless, international migration will continue to play an important positive, even if indirect, role in the achievement of many goals and targets. These goals will be promoted by people moving from countries where they have low income, productivity, economic opportunities, and little access to good services and infrastructure, to countries where they have access to higher paying work and better services and infrastructure.
12. This applies in particular to the achievement of many targets specified in SDGs 1-11 which include: targets 1.1-1.4 relating to ending poverty; 2.1-2.2, on ending hunger; 3.1-3.2, 3.7-3.8 on improving access to health care and reproductive health services; 4.1 and 4.5 on improving access to education, including reducing discrimination against girls and women; 5.1-5.6, and 5a-c on eliminating discrimination against females in access to land and employment and eliminating sexual violence; 6.1-6.2 on access to safe water and sanitation; 9.1 on access to better infrastructure to support economic development; 10.1-10.3 on reducing inequality and improving socio-economic and political opportunities; 11.1 on improving access to better housing, and 16.9 concerning legal identity for all, including birth registration.
13. The Agenda for Sustainable Development also contains targets more directly related to international labour migration, specifically in SDG 8 on “promoting economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”, which includes a specific target 8.8: “Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment.” In

addition, targets 8.2 to 8.5 and 8.10 deal with improving access to better employment and conditions of work, labour protection, and access to financial services. International labour migration from low-income to high-income countries often facilitates the achievement of these goals.

### *1.2 Basic guiding principles*

- a. Concepts, standards and data sources on international labour migration statistics can be developed only within the context of international migration;
- b. The existing international standards, together with the existing national and international data sources, must be taken as the starting point;
- c. While it is desirable to be comprehensive in addressing the very diverse forms of labour migration, in order to be effective, it is also necessary to be selective and specific, focusing on the most important among those forms;
- d. Furthermore, within each of the labour migration categories identified as a priority, it is useful to elaborate cross-cutting categories, which are more homogeneous in terms of characteristics and circumstances of the labour migrants involved, and hence in terms of their data requirements and data sources;
- e. For each of the labour migration categories identified, it is required to clarify, select, and adapt as necessary, existing concepts and standards;
- f. Similarly, for each of the labour migration categories identified, it is required to identify the statistics required, assess the existing and potential data sources in the light of the requirements, and improve and develop data collection methodologies and instruments.

## **2. Background**

14. The 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), which took place in October 2013, adopted a Resolution concerning further work on labour migration statistics. This Resolution recommends that the ILO: “(a) set up a working group with the aim of sharing good practices, discussing and developing a work plan for defining international standards on labour migration statistics that can inform labour market and migration policies; [and] (b) prepare a progress report for discussion at the next ICLS.”
15. In order to implement the Resolution, the ILO established a Working Group on Labour Migration Statistics (WG) to provide guidance regarding agreed upon international standards, concepts and definitions, and to foster the exchange of experiences among data collection institutions and across countries. The aim is to overcome the main obstacle to the production of consistent and quality statistics on labour migration, namely the lack of harmonization across countries, and even within countries from different official agencies/sources, regarding data on labour migration.
16. The WG met three times: the first meeting took place in Istanbul, Turkey, 20-22 October 2015, the second one in Turin, Italy, 15 - 17 November 2016 and the third one also in Turin, 12-14 June, 2018. At these meetings, the WG discussed draft background technical report on labour migration statistics and grew on the knowledge and experience of international organizations, working on migration, national statistical offices and eminent experts in the field.
17. The ILO collected meta-data on the available sources of information on labour migration in its member states through a set of methodological questionnaires. At the same time, the ILO

developed a methodology to collect better, harmonized data and published global and regional estimates of migrant workers in 2015. A new round of estimates will be released in 2018.

18. The first part of this report summarizes existing international standards, identifies current problems associated with the definition of international migrant workers and existing practices of organizations, which collect data on labour migration. The second part proposes standard definitions of international migrant workers, discusses key measurement issues, and suggests ways to improve the data collection. While the focus is on international labour migration, definitions and current practices pertaining to both international migration and work/labour force/potential labour force also are reviewed.

### **3. Concepts and definitions**

#### *3.1 Guiding instruments, frameworks, standards concerning international migrant workers*

19. The definition of migrant worker in ILO International Labour Standards (ILS) has its origin in the ILO Constitution (1919)<sup>1</sup>, calling for the “...protection of the interests of workers when employed in countries other than their own”, although without providing a generic legal definition of ‘worker’.<sup>2</sup>
20. There are two major ILO instruments on labour migration and protection of migrant workers: ILO Convention No. 97 (1949) and accompanying Recommendation No. 863; and ILO Convention No. 143 (1975) and accompanying Recommendation No. 151.<sup>4</sup> The latter document states (in Art. 11) that the term ‘migrant for employment’ means “a person who migrates from one country to another with a view to being employed otherwise than on his own account, and includes any person regularly admitted as a migrant for employment”. Among other things, these instruments aim to prevent migration in irregular and abusive conditions and, certainly, Convention 97 and Recommendation 86 apply “of course, [to] refugees and displaced persons migrating for employment”.<sup>5</sup>
21. A wider framework is provided by the UN Convention of 1990.<sup>6</sup> The primary objective of this Convention is to protect migrant workers and their families, a particularly vulnerable population, from exploitation and the violation of their human rights. The Convention on Migrant Workers defines the rights of migrant workers under two main headings: (i) Human Rights of migrant workers and members of their families (Part III), applicable to all migrant

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<sup>1</sup> ILO Constitution, 1919, Preamble, recital 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cholewinski, R. (2015). Presentation at the meeting of the ILO Working Group and subsequent discussion, Istanbul, Turkey, October 20-22. See also ILO (1922). Methods of Compiling Emigration and Immigration Statistics. Geneva: International Labour Office.

<sup>3</sup> ILO (1949). Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), (No. 97);  
ILO (1949). Migration for Employment Recommendation (Revised), (No. 86).

It should be noted that the Convention does not cover self-employed migrant workers.

<sup>4</sup> ILO (1975). Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143);  
ILO (1975). Migrant Workers Recommendation (No. 151).

<sup>5</sup> ILO (1949). Record of Proceedings, ILC, 32nd Session, Geneva, 1949, p. 285.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations (1990). International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (entered into force in July 2003).

workers; and (ii) Other Rights of migrant workers and members of their families (Part IV), applicable only to migrant workers in a regular situation.

22. Article 1 of the convention notes that:

“1. The present Convention is applicable, except as otherwise provided hereafter, to all migrant workers and members of their families without distinction of any kind such as sex, race, colour, language, religion or conviction, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, nationality, age, economic position, property, marital status, birth or other status.

2. The present Convention shall apply during the entire migration process of migrant workers and members of their families, which comprises preparation for migration, departure, transit and the entire period of stay and remunerated activity in the State of employment as well as return to the State of origin or the State of habitual residence”.

23. According to Article 2, the term migrant worker refers to “a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national”.

24. The Convention also identifies and defines a number of migrant-worker categories it covers: frontier worker, seasonal worker, itinerant worker, project-tied worker, specified-employment worker, self-employed worker. It also specifies excluded categories (Art. 3): persons employed by international Organisations or other governments in official functions, seafarer and workers on an offshore installation (who have not been admitted to take up residence and engage in a remunerated activity), persons taking up residence as investors, students and trainees, and the most importantly for our present purpose, “refugees and stateless persons, unless such application is provided for in the relevant national legislation of, or international instruments in force for, the State Party concerned”.

25. The 19th ICLS, 2013, provides a revised framework for statistics on work and the labour force. Though the framework does not explicitly address international migration, it is of course relevant for it and should be applied to the extent possible to statistics on international migrant workers. The 19th ICLS Report of the Conference also contains a resolution concerning further work on labour migration statistics, as noted earlier.<sup>7</sup>

26. The fundamental United Nations technical documents relating to international migration are the Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration (1998)<sup>8</sup> and the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses (the most recent version being 2015).<sup>9</sup>

27. The 1998 Recommendations provide a generic demographic definition of international migration as referring to someone changing his/her usual place of residence, which involves moving across an international (country) border. The definition is stated to be “for the purpose

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<sup>7</sup> ILO (2013), *ibid*.

Resolution I: Resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization

Resolution IV. Resolution concerning further work on labour migration statistics.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations (1998). Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1. Statistical Papers, No. 58/Rev. 1, Sales No. E.98.XVII.14. Earlier key UN documents include those of 1949, 1980, 1985, and 1986 (Zlotnik, Hania, unpublished notes to ILO).

<sup>9</sup> United Nations (2015). Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 3. ST/ESA/STAT/SER.M/67/Rev.3, Sales No. E.15.XVII.10.

of measuring [international migrant] flows". It does not refer to the reason for that movement, nor to citizenship of the person. Hence, it does not distinguish those admitted for work from those admitted for study, to join a family member already in the country, to retire, etc. On the other hand, it characterizes migrants in terms of length of usual residence (actual or intended) as 'long-term' or 'short-term' migrants.

28. The 1998 Recommendations provide a framework for international migration statistics in general. They provide a framework for the compilation of statistics on inflows and outflow of international migrants, define information needed to characterize them (also including recommended tabulations), and provide recommendation on asylum statistics. The framework uses citizenship as the crucial organizing characteristic to classify migrants according to the composition of flows, thus distinguishing incoming foreigners from returning citizens, and departing foreigners from emigrating citizens.
29. However, the 1998 Recommendations are largely devoted to international migration flows as distinct from stocks: indeed, five of the six chapters in the Recommendations are devoted to flows, covering both in-flow and out-flow. The last chapter addresses migration stocks, but addressing only stock of immigrants which have entered the country, and not stock of emigrants who have left the country. They provide definitions of the two basic variables, namely place of birth and country of citizenship, which define 'life-time' international migration stocks.
30. The basic data to estimate the international migrant stock by the UN have been obtained mostly from population censuses, with some data coming from population registers and nationally representative surveys. The preferred variable for defining (life-time) international migrant is the country of birth (migrants being foreign-born persons), replaced by citizenship, where information on country of birth is not available.
31. The UN Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses develop in detail the concept of 'country of usual residence', which is a fundamental concept in defining international migration (this along with other basic concepts will be elaborated in the next chapter). Also are identified specific groups, which are normally included, and the corresponding groups which are normally excluded, from the population considered usually resident in the country.
32. The many of those crossing international borders do so for purposes other than 'work' or 'migration'—for tourism, shopping, visiting friends and relatives, for health care, for doing business, etc. Such persons are engaged in mobility, not in migration. The UN framework includes definitions for several types of cross-border movement providing relevant categories for the measurement of labour migration, including border workers, migrant workers, foreign trainees, and employment-based migrants for settlement. The following seven pieces of data are fundamental for identifying and measuring the numbers of international migrants, including international labour migrants
  - a. country of birth;
  - b. country of citizenship;
  - c. duration of stay (or of absence);
  - d. purpose for entering (or departing from) the country;
  - e. country of usual residence, and
  - f. country of last usual residence
  - g. labour force status during the stay (or absence)

### *3.2 Limitations of the existing conceptual framework*

33. Information is critical to formulating, implementing and evaluating labour migration policy and practice; therefore, its collection and application should be given priority.
34. Effective labour market policies inclusive of labour migration issues are complex and require reliable quantitative and qualitative data. Labour migration statistics are needed not only for informing policy debates at the national, regional and international levels, but also for formulating, implementing and evaluating labour migration policies, which address the real effects of migration on labour markets and national development.
35. The lack of international standards regarding concepts, definitions and methodologies for the measurement of labour migration continues to be a major obstacle in the production of harmonised statistics. The first step towards creating improved national and comparable international labour migration statistics is to implement common terms and definitions as established internationally. A more consistent and a more comprehensive terminology is needed to distinguish between the basic categories relating to international labour migration.
36. Even within countries, data comparability issues exist. Many systems from which migration statistics are derived are set up in response to specific administrative objectives, and not to generate accurate statistics on international migration. Fragmentation of the sources across different national institutions, lack of coordination among these, and frequently the focus of the information on ‘national security’ are also major obstacles.

### *3.3 Rationale for the suggested approach*

37. The overarching objective of the report is to identify the main conceptual issues, and recommend the concepts and definitions to be used in building national statistics on international labour migration. It also proposes, from the great variety of migration types, which could be of interest, those that should be given the first priority in developing the statistics.
38. The starting point and the basis of the present recommendations concerning international labour migration are the *existing international standards* on the one hand, and the *available data sources and statistics* on the other. Any recommendations must take both these aspects into consideration.
39. The aim is to suggest improvements in the existing framework and data sources, which can improve the scope, accuracy and in particular the inter-country comparability of statistics on international labour migration in the context of national as well as ILO concerns and responsibilities.
40. The primary objective is to contribute towards the establishment of a clearer conceptual and methodological framework to organise and limit the diversity of labour migration statistics produced in the countries. Another objective is to identify appropriate sources and methodologies for some of the statistics involved. To these ends, several ‘principles’ have been identified and developed, which can guide and serve as building blocks for the suggested approach.

### *3.4 Basic element of the suggested approach: need for balance*

41. On several aspects, choices have to be made between different options. The following aspects are some of the basic ones:

- a) International migration versus international labour migration; International migrants versus international migrant workers

The idea of ‘labour migration’ or ‘migrant worker’ is a marriage between two concepts: a demographic concept, ‘migration’ or ‘migrant’; and a socio-economic concept, ‘labour’ or ‘worker’. Of course, the principal concern is with addressing the latter concept; the former concept is primarily a concern of other organisations. Information on international migrant workers can be analysed and interpreted only in the context of and on the basis of information on all international migrants.

- b) Taking existing concepts and definitions as given, versus their adaptation or even replacement by new concepts or definitions

As noted above, the main objective is to suggest improvements in the existing framework and data sources, which can enhance the scope, accuracy and inter-country comparability of statistics on international labour migration. However, it is necessary to re-examine the existing concepts and definitions for their suitability for the present purpose. This has to be done in a balanced way: any departures from what has been developed and established must be minimised to the extent possible, but such departures cannot be precluded where needed.

- c) Covering all the diverse migration types, versus focusing on the most ‘significant’ of them

In principle, it is desirable to be as comprehensive as possible in addressing the whole diversity of migration types and situations. There is a need to take a long-term view, taking into account not only the current needs and situations, but also needs and situations as they may evolve over the next several years. Casting a wider net is also needed for developing a plan for improving national statistics on international labour migration in the medium-to-long term. There is another important reason for aiming at comprehensiveness: even at present, some countries have special situations and needs, which should be addressed.

Some migration types are more significant than others in terms of the size of the populations involved, or of the number of countries they concern; some are more feasible to address than others, given the existing resources; and some by their very nature are more ‘measurable’ than others in terms of the type of data they require.

## **4. Classifications**

42. International labour migration is characterized by its directionality, duration, and nature. Directionality distinguishes between entry and exit refers of international migrant workers. Duration refers to duration of stay in the country of labour attachment. Nature of international labour migration refers to its permanent or temporary character.

## **5. Data collection**

43. The items of data collection should provide comprehensive information for the various users of the statistics of international labour migration, taking into account specific national needs

and circumstances. The information should cover data on the main socio-demographic characteristics and the migrant status and work status of international migrant workers, for-work international migrants and return international migrant workers.

## **6. Data sources**

44. Information on different aspects of international labour migration and categories of international migrant workers may come from diverse sources. These different statistical sources should be treated as complementary, to be used in combination in order to derive comprehensive sets of statistics to the extent possible. It is useful to distinguish the sources of stock and flow statistics.

## **7. Future actions**

45. The ILO, in collaboration with interested countries, international and regional organizations, and workers' and employers' representatives, will continue methodological work relating to these guidelines and report to future sessions of the International Conference of Labour Statisticians, as appropriate.