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Reports, guidelines and recommendations prepared under the umbrella of the Conference**Extract from the Final Report of the Task Force on
Measuring Circular Migration – Defining and Measuring
Circular Migration****Note by the Task Force on Measuring Circular Migration***Summary*

The paper presents an extract from the final report of the Task Force on Measuring Circular Migration entitled “Defining and Measuring Circular Migration”. It covers the existing concepts and definitions, dimensions and key issues for a statistical definition of circular migration.

The Task Force’s objective was to prepare a proposal for a common international statistical definition of circular migration. The Task Force consisted of Mexico (Chair), Israel, Italy, Norway, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Eurostat, the International Organization for Migration, the Swedish Migration Agency and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. The Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians reviewed the report in February 2016 and decided to send it for electronic consultation. The report is available at: www.uncece.org/index.php?id=40939#/

The full text of the report has been sent to all members of the Conference of European Statisticians for electronic consultation. Subject to positive outcome of the consultation, the full report will be submitted to the 2016 plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians for endorsement.



I. Introduction

1. Circular migration is a topic of growing importance on which information is needed for policy development. The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD)¹ sees the promotion of circular migration as one of the key ways to increase the contribution of international migration to development. It has also become a priority for many countries of origin as a way of ensuring the temporary nature of their citizens' emigration.

2. Circular migration is often seen as a win-win-win proposition, providing gains to countries of both origin and destination, as well as to the migrants themselves. In countries of destination, it can alleviate labour needs and increase economic production. In countries of origin, it can provide unemployment relief and both financial and human capital (in terms of skills and resources brought back to the country), as well as mitigate population loss due to emigration. Individual migrants also benefit via increased income, greater work experience, and the development of their human capital. However, circular migration is not well captured by official statistics and its scale is therefore difficult to estimate.

3. The European Migration Network (EMN) synthesis report "Temporary and circular migration: empirical evidence, current policy practice and future option in EU Member States" (2011) expounds the benefit of developing a common understanding of temporary and circular migration, as a first step towards a common definition for the purpose of data collection. The report details the lack of comparable statistics and a common statistical definition on temporary and circular migration across the European Union and the inadequacy of current data collection methods for capturing these forms of migration. In particular, it notes the general lack of longitudinal data that would allow individual migration patterns to be tracked over time.

4. An important challenge in measuring circular migration is that it is frequently related to short-term residence that may be subject to little or no administrative recording, particularly if a residence permit has already been granted in the context of a previous stay or if a migrant is a citizen of the countries he or she migrates to/from (double or multiple citizenship). Another considerable challenge related to defining and measuring circular migration is that by its very nature, circular migration is not a single event taking place at a particular point of time, but rather a series of several events happening within a specific period. National statistics on temporary and short-term moves remain largely incompatible due to different definitions of duration of stay (UNECE, 2012). There is also considerable variation among definitions of circular migration. To produce comparable statistical information and to analyse the developmental impact of circular migration, countries need to have a common definition.

5. Operationalization of this concept would include duration of stay in destination country and frequency of movements at a minimum. For producing quality statistics on circular migration, the definition, reference period, standards and sources for its measurement need to be established. There is thus a strong need to develop better standards and definitions related to circular migration, and position it clearly with respect to the related concepts of short-term, temporary and return migration.

¹ The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) was founded in 2007 as an initiative of the United Nations Member States to address connections between migration and development. It has acted as an informal, non-binding, voluntary and government-led process, acknowledging the limits of a strictly national approach to migration issues. Civil society representatives as well as governments have been involved in the GFMD process. For more information, see www.gfmd.org.

6. In 2012, the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES)² reviewed the final report of its Task Force on the Analysis of International Migration Estimates Using Different Length of Stay Definitions (UNECE, 2012), which recommended, among others, to prepare a proposal for a common international statistical definition of circular migration. The Bureau welcomed the report and conducted a further review of statistical concepts of short-term, return and circular migration (UNECE, 2013). Based on this, the CES Bureau set up a new Task Force on Measuring Circular Migration in February 2013, to prepare a proposal for a common international statistical definition of circular migration. This report presents the results of the Task Force.

7. Section II of this document provides the key definitions of international migration statistics and looks at how circular migration has been framed and defined in different contexts. Section III examines the following five dimensions of circular migration: repetition of move (frequency), directionality, duration, purpose or reason for move, and developmental impact. Section IV proceeds to lay out the key issues and present proposals for a statistical definition of circular migration, followed by conclusions. Practical applications of the proposed definitions can be found in chapter 5 of the full report with testing examples from Italy and Sweden.

II. Existing concepts and definitions

A. Different types of migration

8. The United Nations Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration (1998) provide the following definitions of long-term, short-term and return migrants:

Long-term migrant is “a person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence. From the perspective of the country of departure the person will be a long-term emigrant and from that of the country of arrival the person will be a long-term immigrant.”

Short-term migrant is defined as “a person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least 3 months, but less than a year (12 months) except in cases where the movement to that country is for purposes of recreation, holiday, visits to friends or relatives, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimage.”

Return migrants are “persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short-term or long-term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their own country for at least one year”.

9. Another definition posited by OECD (2008) for return migration is one where the migrant’s country of destination is the same as their original country of origin. This differs

² The Conference of European Statisticians is composed of national statistical organizations in the UNECE region (for UNECE member countries, see www.unece.org/oes/nutshell/member_states_representatives.html) and includes in addition Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Japan, Mexico, Mongolia, New Zealand and Republic of Korea. The major international organizations active in statistics in the UNECE region also participate in the work, such as the statistical office of the European Commission (Eurostat), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS-STAT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

in its focus on using country of birth as opposed to country of citizenship as a criterion of defining return migrants.

10. The terms “temporary migration” and “circular migration” are not defined by the United Nations recommendations. EMN (2011) defines circular migration as “*a repetition of legal migrations by the same person between two or more countries*”. According to GFMD (2008), circular migration can be understood as “*the temporary, recurrent movement of people between two or more countries mainly for purposes of work or study*”. GFMD sees circular migration as different from concepts like permanent or temporary migration since these concepts are understood in a more linear and static way.

11. According to EMN, temporary migration is limited to a single back-and-forth movement, with a limited stay in the country of destination (or in their case the EU), while circular migration is repeated back-and-forth movement between the destination and countries of origin. Circular migration is viewed as a type of temporary migration, in which the temporary stay in a destination country is repeated. Circular migration overlaps also with the concept of return migration, as return is part of the circular movement.

B. Definitions and conceptualizations of circular migration in selected literature

1. Typologies and dimensions

12. Agunias and Newland (2007) put forward a typology of circular migration, which can serve as an example for a rather broad and all-encompassing approach to the phenomenon. The authors distinguish between permanent and temporary migration as well as between temporary and permanent return. According to this matrix, four broad types of circular migration can be identified:

(a) Permanent migration and permanent return: Migrants who spend a lengthy period abroad and then return to stay in their country of origin;

(b) Permanent migration and temporary return: Migrants who have emigrated for good but who return for temporary stays;

(c) Temporary migration and permanent return: Migrants who only stay abroad for a short period and then return for good;

(d) Temporary migration and temporary return: Migrants who regularly shuttle between two or more countries.

13. According to this typology, all migration movements that include at least two cross-border moves could be categorized as circular migration – a rather inclusive and broad conceptualization.

14. A more narrow and precise definition is proposed by Fargues (2008), according to whom migration that meets the following six criteria can be characterized as circular:

(a) temporary residence (time-limited permit),

(b) renewal option (possibility of multiple entries into the destination country),

(c) circularity (freedom of movement between country of origin and destination during the period of residence),

(d) legality of stay,

(e) protection of migrants’ rights, and

(f) satisfaction of a (temporary) demand for labour in the destination country as a central purpose.

15. Fargues' definition is thus much more restrictive than the one proposed by Agunias and Newland. By emphasizing, for example, the protection of migrants' rights, it also contains normative elements in addition to more "neutral", descriptive elements, such as temporariness.

16. The METOIKOS study³ studied the links between different types of circular migration in addition to the processes of integration in the country of destination and reintegration in the source country. As part of this study, Triandafyllidou (2010) proposed four dimensions for circular migration: space, time, repetition and scope. The space dimension pertains to the crossing of a border, while in terms of time, circular migration involves stays of limited duration that can vary from several weeks to several years but does not apply to stays of a decade or more. With regard to repetition, the author specifies at least two-time back-and-forth movement between a country of origin and a country of destination as a minimum requirement for circular migration. The scope of circular migration does not refer exclusively to dependent employment but primarily to economic activities such as employment, trade or investment.

2. Spontaneous and managed migration

17. A general distinction is sometimes made between circular migration as a migratory phenomenon occurring within organized and controlled regulatory frameworks (such as bilateral agreements on labour migration between specific countries), and between more "spontaneous", "naturally occurring" and uncontrolled cross-border moves.

18. EMN (2011) looked at the empirical evidence, current policy practice and future options in 24 European Union member States regarding temporary and circular migration. It found that there is a regulated type of circular migration taking place, for example, in the form of migrants entering an EU Member State for temporary, seasonal work, and a more "spontaneous" type of circular migration. "Spontaneous circular migration" refers to people who decide themselves whether or not to migrate to a different country, about the length of their stay, and whether or not, and when, to return to their country of origin, and eventually migrate again. Such circular migration thus takes place outside organized frameworks, such as seasonal workers schemes or other temporary migration under bilateral agreements between states.

19. Newland (2009) uses the term "de facto circular migration", thus distinguishing between spontaneous circular migration and circular migration that occurs within the parameters of official programs.

3. National definitions

19. According to EMN (2011), the EU Member States do not differentiate between the concepts of temporary and circular migration. Countries also approach these phenomena very differently.

20. The EMN study found that, while most countries could provide some form of data on temporary migration, for circular migration, the situation was much bleaker. Only a handful of countries (Austria, Germany and Sweden) could provide some statistical

³ In 2010-2011, the METOIKOS Research Project at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute in Florence looked into circular migration patterns in three European regions: South-eastern Europe and the Balkans, South-western Europe and the Maghreb, and Central Eastern Europe.

evidence on circular migration, though each country measured this concept differently. The study could not find any harmonized approach across the EU member states in defining circular migration.

21. The EMN country studies emphasized the difficulty differentiating temporary and circular migration, as all forms of circular migration start out as temporary, but can become more permanent over time. Some countries highlighted the need to agree first upon a standard definition of circular migration in order to improve data collection methods. The EMN definition is limited to legal migrants, as irregular migrants are not included in regular data sources.

22. The EMN study also found that the development and promotion of policies on temporary and circular migration in the EU Member States were at a very early stage. While most Member States had accommodated elements of temporary or circular migration into their policies, legislation and practices, this was rarely with the explicit aim of promoting circularity. Nonetheless, reports of initial evaluations of existing programmes and policies had confirmed positive results for migrants.

Table 1

Definitions used in literature for circular migration

Author	Definition used for circular migration
W. Zelinsky (1971)	Circulation denotes a great variety of movements, usually short-term, repetitive or cyclical in nature, but all having in common the lack of any declared intention of a permanent or long-lasting change in residence.
J. A. Bustamante (2002), Instituto de Investigaciones Juridicas, UNAM	A process through which a migrant, legally or not, alternates his/her place of residence between origin or destination country, until eventually settling down in either of them due to age or family reunion. Based on the notion of a migrant's "migration career (history)" defined as a sequence of loops, complete or not.
K. O'Neil (2003), Migration Policy Institute	Migrants returning to their sending country, once or many times over a period of time.
Council of the European Union (2007)	Temporary, legal movement of people between one or more member states and particular third countries, whereby third country nationals take up legal employment opportunities in the EU or persons legally residing in the EU go to their country of origin.
European Commission (2007)	The two main forms of circular migration most relevant in the EU context are: (a) that of third-country nationals residing in the EU, such as business people from third countries working in the EU and wishing to start an activity in their country of origin or in another third country; (b) that of third-country nationals established outside the EU, such as nationals wishing to engage in seasonal or temporary work within the EU or to study there before returning to their country.
A. Constant and K. F. Zimmermann (2007), The Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA)	Guest workers who have left Germany (at least once).

Author	Definition used for circular migration
D.R. Agunias and K. Newland (2007), Migration Policy Institute	(a) Permanent migration and (generations later) permanent return; (b) permanent migration and temporary return; (c) temporary migration and temporary return; (d) temporary migration and permanent return. The term “permanent migrants” refers to those who have permanent residency or citizenship in their adopted countries.
P. Fargues (2008), CARIM	Temporary, renewable, circulatory, legal, respectful of the migrants' rights, and managed in such a way as to optimize labour markets at both ends, in sending and receiving countries.
Global Forum on Migration and Development (2008), International Organization for Migration (2011)	The fluid movement of people between countries, including temporary or long-term movement which may be beneficial to all involved, if occurring voluntarily and linked to the labour needs of countries of origin and destination.
F. P. Vadean, and M. Piracha (2009), IZA	The repeated back and forth movements between the home country and one or more countries of destination.
Swedish Committee on Circular Migration and Development (Statens offentliga utredningar 2010/2011)	Back-and forth mobility, which can promote development in both countries of origin and destination, as well as benefit migrants themselves.
European Migration Network (EMN, 2011) / European Commission	A repetition of legal migration by the same person between two or more countries.
P. Wickramasekara (2011) and The Global Union Research Network (GURN) / ILO	Repeated migration experiences involving more than one emigration and return. It should be distinguished from ‘one-shot’ migration involving one emigration and permanent return, which is better termed as ‘return migration’.
F. Constant, O. Nottmeyer and K. F. Zimmermann (2012), The Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA)	The systematic and regular movement of migrants between their homelands and foreign countries typically seeking work. Circular migration should be differentiated from the one-time emigration or out-migration and the eventual permanent return migration.
D. Posel and C. Marx (2013)	Having dual household membership.
J. Schneider and B. Parusel (2015)	A flexible form of repetitive movement between different destinations.

C. Circular migration in national and international policy discourse

1. Benefits and developmental impact of circular migration

23. The Global Forum on Migration and Development (2008) describes circular migration as “*a fluid movement of people between countries, including temporary or more permanent movement which, when it occurs voluntarily and is linked to the labour needs of countries of origin and destination, can be beneficial to all involved*”. This definition highlights the “triple-win” assumption and links circular migration to both voluntariness and the purpose of work. The same definition is also used by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in its “Key migration terms” glossary.⁴

24. The benefits of circular migration have been highlighted by others as well. According to the European Commission (2007), the advantages of circular migration lie above all in the transfer of skills between the countries in question and in the reduction of the permanent outflow of knowledge and skills from developing countries (“brain drain”). They state that “*Circular migration is increasingly being recognised as a key form of migration that, if well managed, can help to match the international supply of and demand for labour, thereby contributing to a more efficient allocation of available resources and to economic growth.*” IOM and other members of the Global Migration Group state that, from a country of origin’s perspective, circular migration “*can allow for the acquisition of new ideas, technologies or land-use practices that can then be replicated in the community of origin through the transfer of ideas, training and capacity building activities*” (GMG 2010).

25. Newland (2009) explores the human development implications of circular migration – both where it occurs naturally and where governments work to create it. She discusses various conceptions and definitions of circular migration, and concludes that circular migration is not intrinsically positive or negative in relation to human development; its impact depends upon the circumstances in which it occurs, the constraints that surround it and the degree of choice that individuals can exercise over their own mobility.

26. IOM (2013) looks at the developmental impact from the point of view of labour mobility and cross-border skill-matching. The paper provides a brief overview of recent international and regional labour mobility and establishes the linkages between labour mobility and development in both origin and destination countries as well as at the regional and global levels. The paper also looks at policies to enhance the developmental impacts of labour mobility at all levels. IOM recognizes that protecting the rights of migrant workers is integral to realizing the potential of migration for development.

2. Promoting circular migration

27. The Global Commission on International Migration⁵ (GCIM, 2005) argued that governments and international organizations should formulate policies and programmes that maximize the developmental impact of return and circular migration. While it did not propose a clear definition of the concept of circular migration, GCIM wrote that “*the old paradigm of permanent migrant settlement is progressively giving way to temporary and*

⁴ www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/about-migration/key-migration-terms-1.html and IOM (2011).

⁵ The Global Commission on International Migration was set up in 2003 by the Secretary General of the United Nations and the governments of Sweden, Switzerland, Brazil, Morocco and the Philippines. The mandate of the Commission was to place international migration on the global policy agenda, analyse gaps in current policy approaches to migration, examine inter-linkages with other issue-areas, and present recommendations to the United Nations Secretary-General, governments and other stakeholders.

circular migration” and that the Commission “*underlines the need to grasp the developmental opportunities that this important shift in migration patterns provides for countries of origin*”.

28. For the European Commission (2007), circular migration means multiple migrations between a country of origin and an admitting country, normally within the context of the temporary recruitment and employment of workers. They describe circular migration as “*a form of migration that is managed in a way allowing some degree of legal mobility back and forth between two countries.*” They add that circular migration exists when people residing abroad receive an immigration and residence permit for a limited period for working, studying and/or training, if they relocate their main place of residence and their main sphere of activity back to their country of origin once their permit has expired.

29. In the European Union, circular migration has been primarily understood as a migration phenomenon that should be promoted through the creation or expansion of a specific legal framework as well as via specific projects or programmes. The European Commission (2007) has proposed various ways to promote circular migration:

“(...) A distinction could be drawn between, on the one hand, putting in place the legislative framework that would facilitate circular migration and, on the other, the possibility of developing circular migration schemes. Such schemes would enable migrants to enter the EU to work, study or perform other activities for a set period of time”.

30. The European Commission acknowledged, however, that there are different definitions and forms of circular migration and that the European Union must clearly stipulate which form of circular migration it intends to facilitate. The concept the European Commission uses has a clear enforcement dimension.

31. Based on the statements issued by the Commission, the Justice and Home Affairs Council of the EU proposed on the following wording of a basic definition of circular migration (Council of the European Union, 2007):

“Circular migration could be understood as the temporary, legal movement of people between one or more member states and particular third countries, whereby third country nationals take up legal employment opportunities in the EU or persons legally residing in the EU go to their country of origin.”

32. In 2014, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament adopted a directive on seasonal employment (European Parliament/Council of the European Union, 2014). It provides for, among other things, a simplified and uniform procedure for the admission of seasonal workers from third countries, a maximum stay (which shall be fixed by the Member States to be not less than five months and not more than nine months in any 12-month period), the facilitation of re-entry, and regulations on the working conditions. While the preamble explicitly refers to circular migration (Recital 34), the (non-binding) provisions on facilitated re-entry of third-country nationals to the EU as seasonal workers are the only element that actually addresses circularity. Many seasonal workers may stay in EU Member States for rather short periods of time; they may thus be seen as engaging in cross-border and/or short-term mobility, not migration in the sense of a change of their usual place of residence.

33. Wickramasekara (2011) looks at circular migration from the point of view of the rights of migrants. The paper examines the evolving forms of circular migration and their implications for a rights-based approach to labour migration and protection of the rights of migrant workers. It reviews the challenges posed by circular migration programmes and their variants, for the trade union movement and other stakeholders concerned with protecting the rights of migrant workers. This is expected to contribute to the on-going

debates within the trade union movement and civil society, the International Labour Organization and beyond..

III. Dimensions of circular migration

34. Based on existing literature, as summarised above, and the international policy discourse on circular migration, the following five dimensions need to be considered when defining and measuring circular migration:

- (a) Repetition of move (frequency)
- (b) Directionality
- (c) Time
- (d) Purpose or reason for move
- (e) Developmental impact useful.

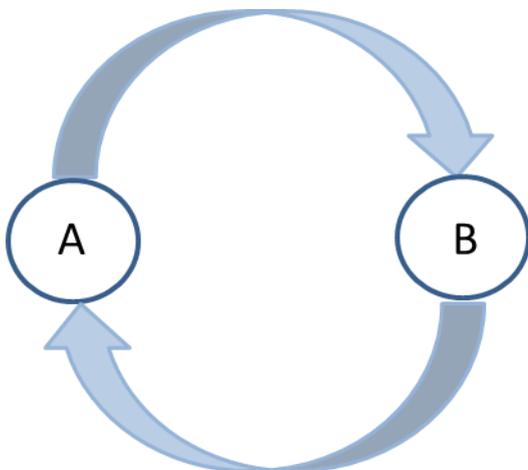
A. Repetition of move (frequency)

35. One of the major questions concerning circular migration in the context of repetition is how to distinguish circular migration from return migration and if this distinction even needs to be made. Circular migration is a form of return migration; however, return migration is not necessarily circular. To distinguish the two concepts, the concept of “circular” could be replaced with “pendulum”, which illustrates the back and forth nature of circular migration. An additional consideration is whether or not an individual who has made only two moves (Country A → Country B → Country A), but who intends to move again, can be called a circular migrant. Here the concept of “loop” is defined to describe the movement of a migrant.

36. A migration loop is defined as a sequence of crossings of international borders that begins and ends in the same country (figure 1). If the full migration history of a migrant is comprised by only one loop (e.g., A→B→A) that person is defined as a return migrant rather than a circular one. Therefore, more than one loop is necessary to qualify as a circular migrant. Moves not considered to be part of migration are excluded (e.g. tourism, cross-border workers, business travel).

Figure 1

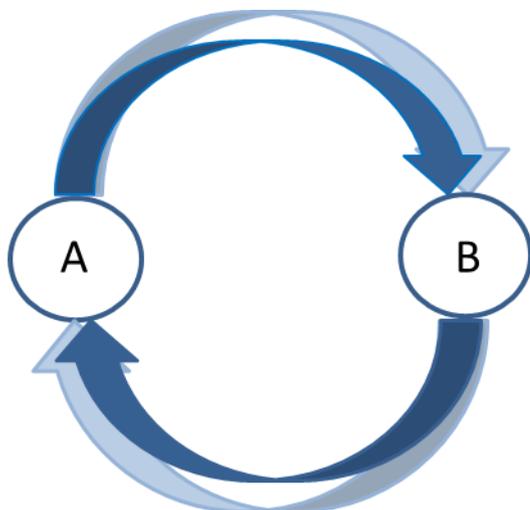
Return migration and full migration loop



37. Figure 2 illustrates the simplest case of circular migration. Here the migrant has left country A twice and returned twice, creating the sequence $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$. This sequence consists of at least four moves and completes at least two “loops”: at least two distinct moves away from and two distinct returns to a country of origin.

Figure 2

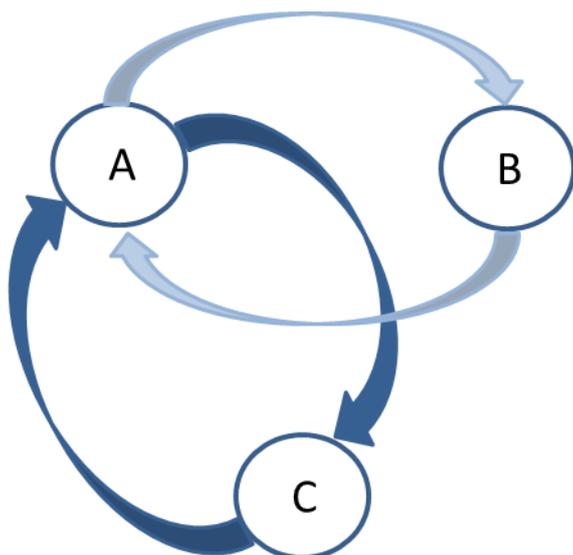
Simplest depiction of circular migration



38. Depending on the country perspective, what is defined as circular migration from the point of view of one country may not be circular migration from the point of view of another country. For example, a sequence $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$ would lead both countries to consider the individual a circular migrant (see figure 2). However, the sequence $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A \rightarrow C \rightarrow A$, composed again of two full loops, would leave country A counting the migrant as a circular one but neither country B nor C would define the person as a circular migrant (see figure 3). In fact, many countries may only record sequences (OUT)-IN-OUT-IN-OUT.

Figure 3

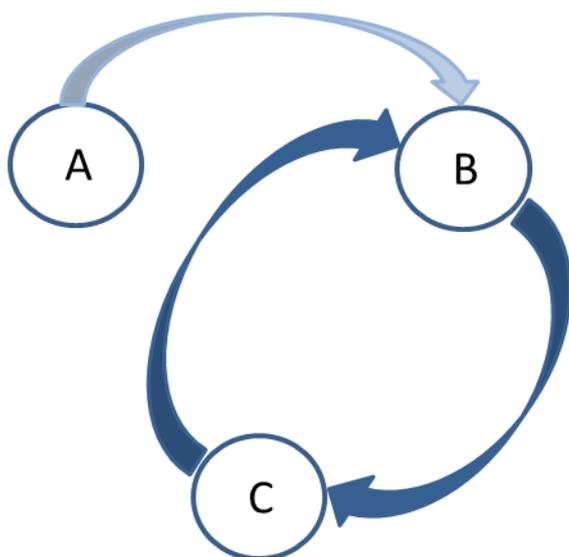
Alternative depiction of circular migration



39. This problem relates to the challenges with differentiating circular migration from return migration. For example, in the case of a migrant moving from Tajikistan (A) to Kazakhstan (B) to the Russian Federation (C) to Kazakhstan (B) ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow B$), from the point of view of Kazakhstan this person should be counted as a circular migrant (immigrated to same country more than once) (see figure 4). However, this person is simply a return migrant, having only completed one migration “loop”. He/she has not lived in at least two countries more than once.

Figure 4

Example of return migration



B. Directionality

40. Directionality is related to the direction of moves and it would require the identification of a country of origin; however, directionality is not a necessary consideration for the definition of circular migration. Repeated movement from a specific country of origin is not central in the definition of circular migration, as this would create too much complexity. Repetition of movement and completed loops are more important.

41. There are several ways to define the country of origin. It could be the country of birth, or the country of citizenship, or the country of (previous) usual residence of a migrant who may never return to his/her birth country but crosses international borders enough times to be classified as a circular migrant anyway.

42. Directionality does determine circular migration in scenarios where circular migration depends on the country perspective, as discussed above. It also plays a role in cases where it is necessary to distinguish between internal and international migration. This issue becomes apparent in particular when deciding whether intra-EU migration should be considered international. From a statistical perspective, intra-EU migration is considered migration and it should thus be included in the measurement of circular migration. Migration data could meaningfully be disaggregated between the EU and non-EU countries however. Moreover, when considering the developmental impact of circular migration, it makes sense to make the country of origin explicit.

43. While it may not be possible to include directionality in the statistical definition, the developmental impact suggests that directionality should be an important aspect of the conceptual definition.

C. Time

44. “Time” refers to both the duration of stay of the circular migrants and to the time period over which the circularity is assessed.

45. The time dimension of circular migration adds complexity to the definition. On the simplest level, the duration of stay abroad or in the country of origin is not considered. Thus, any move of any duration would meet the simple criteria. Complexity can be increased by setting criteria for duration of stay or setting a limit for the time period during which moves are counted. While time limits and minimum periods of stay may make any definition somewhat more complex, they facilitate the analysis of statistical sources, as many countries may not capture short visits statistically, especially within areas of free movement such as the EU.

46. The time threshold for duration of stay is perhaps less relevant for the conceptual definition, but critical for the statistical definition. Short-term migrants are deemed policy relevant, thus separate types of circular migration should be proposed for the statistical definition.

47. To distinguish from short-term visits, a criterion for duration should be set. A minimum stay of three months (or an intention to stay for three months) in a country of destination (or away from a country of origin, if split among several countries) fits the United Nations definitions of a short-term migrant. Therefore, it is a natural minimum stay criterion for circular migration. The duration dimension is also important when distinguishing between short-term and long-term migration.

48. Moves should be restricted to a ten-year period of observation as a maximum threshold. To analyse how this possible restriction would affect the number of circular migrants, it is included in the country tests covered in section 5.2 of the full report.

49. While the 3-month minimum stay criterion coincides with the United Nations recommendations for short-term migrants (3 to 12 months), it does not correspond with the 12-month criterion used by Eurostat (“long-term” migration by the United Nations definition). Thus it is necessary to adopt clear guidelines for the classification by duration of stay.

D. Purpose of move

50. Difficult-to-measure dimensions such as purpose of move should be excluded from a statistical definition of circular migration, though the conceptual definition could refer to them.

51. While the reason for migrating is not a critical dimension for the statistical definition of circular migration, it becomes a very important piece of information for policymaking purposes, as depending on the types of circular migration, different support programmes and measures could be designed by governments and other relevant stakeholders. Therefore, the dimension “purpose” can be used to divide circular migration into subcategories. For example, because the acquisition of human capital plays a big role in development, to assess developmental impacts countries may wish to collect information on whether circular migration is for work, study, training or for other purposes. Thus, if available, the “purpose of move” could be included in tabulation of circular migration data.

E. Developmental impact

52. There are several benefits to circular migration. It provides gains to countries of both origin and destination, as well as to the migrants themselves. Circular migration can alleviate labour shortages in countries of destination and increase their economic production. In countries of origin, it can provide unemployment relief and both financial and human capital (in terms of skills and resources brought back to the country), as well as mitigate population loss due to emigration. Individual migrants also benefit via increased income, greater work experience, and the development of their human capital.

53. These “multiple layers” of impact of migration – macro-level, meso (or community) level and individual migrant level – make capturing data on the developmental impact through a single estimation method particularly challenging. Some attempts to describe the developmental impact of migration have been made in the past, though most of them required conduction of complex multiple surveys⁶.

54. Furthermore, these developmental benefits of circular migration are conditional on the legality of migration and its temporary character: if migrants are moving irregularly and work informally, they expose themselves to high risk of labour exploitation and trafficking and receive much smaller financial gains from migration than expected. Further, as time goes by and migrants continue working abroad for protracted periods, they may start bringing their families to the destination countries, turning circular migration into a more permanent form. Alternatively, migrants may start losing ties with their families back at home, stop sending remittances, and even start new families in destination countries, which results in a phenomenon of “families left behind or abandoned” and related high social cost of migration.

55. In other words, for circular migration to act as a positive factor of development, a number of enabling conditions should be created in both origin and destination countries. Considerable awareness raising work should be carried out with migrants and their families and supportive measures need to be introduced to address all possible risks and maximize positive outcomes.

56. In short, this dimension is difficult to measure. By expanding the “purpose” dimension to include all types of moves, not just employment-related, parts of this dimension could be indirectly included. It would be too restrictive to include legal migrants only. Therefore, all circular migrants should be included in the statistical definition irrespective of status. It is acknowledged, however, that irregular migrations are not normally captured in official databases, which makes a differentiation between legal and irregular migration difficult or impossible.

IV. Key issues for a statistical definition of circular migration

A. Conceptual and statistical definitions of circular migration

57. The majority of definitions concerning circular migration can be called “conceptual definitions”, meaning that their main objective is to describe circular migration within a broader policy context and in terms of its impact on the various parties involved, not necessarily to promote comparability across countries or over time.

⁶ See, for instance, IPPR’s report on their work in 2009 available from www.ippr.org/publications/development-on-the-move-measuring-and-optimising-migrations-economic-and-social-impacts

58. To overcome drawbacks of conceptual definitions when developing frameworks for statistical observation, other types of definitions, which would allow consistent monitoring of circular migration and measuring of its progressive evolution – or what are known as “statistical” definitions – need to be developed. Unlike conceptual definitions, the statistical definitions clearly stipulate the parameters of human mobility, which have to take place for it to be counted as a case of circular migration.

59. Table 2 presents key differences between conceptual and statistical definitions of circular migration, based on the criteria used to differentiate among the various possible types of international migration. As emerges from this comparison, conceptual definitions

Table 2
Conceptual and statistical definitions of circular migration⁷

Criterion	Conceptual definition	Statistical definition
Change of residence and its duration	–	+
	The assumption is that migrants keep their primary residence in one country while temporarily going to another country (excluding short visits)	“Migration” is taken literary to mean a change of usual residence of at least 3 months (short-term) or of at least 12 months (long-term)
Periodicity and repetitiveness of movement	+	+
	To distinguish from return or temporary migration, at least two loops have to take place (out-in and out-in)	To distinguish from return or temporary migration, more than two borders crossings have to take place
Directionality	+	–
	Importance of link to the country of origin (CO): either leaving from and returning to the CO, or leaving for the CO and returning back to the country of destination	Can take place between any two countries and countries may change over time
Purpose	+	–
	Primarily economic, such as employment, study, business	No specification
Development impact	+	–
	Important to be mentioned	Not included as hard to count
Legal status	–/+	–/+
	Not the key focus, but legal migration has higher potential for bringing positive impact	Not the key focus but has been identified in some contexts (EMN)
Spontaneous/facilitated	–/+	–/+
	Can be differentiated by this criterion but not a key one	Can be differentiated by this criterion but not a key one

Note: The plus and minus signs indicate whether the dimension should be included in the definition. Plus means it is necessary to include the dimension, minus means it is not necessary. Plus/minus refers to the dimension being optional.

⁷ International Organization for Migration (2015)

primarily focus on the qualitative parts of circular migration, such as its purpose or development impact. The statistical definition prioritizes criteria, which have been stipulated in the United Nations Recommendations on International Migration Statistics, in particular through the notion of change of residence and duration of residence.

B. Proposals for a definition of circular migration

60. The distinction between conceptual and statistical definitions stems from the need to describe accurately what we would like to measure on the one hand, and on the practicalities of such measurement, on the other hand. For example, although the statistical definition of circular migration cannot take into account developmental impacts, a conceptual definition of circular migration should acknowledge, if only as possibilities, the developmental impacts; impacts which are known to be hard, if not impossible, to directly measure.

61. It is clear that a country may have specific policy purposes that would translate in an ad-hoc definition of conceptual migration. However, it has been considered appropriate to identify a single conceptual definition that is as close as possible to policy needs and, at the same, not far from a realistic statistical implementation. Such a definition should also be able to capture both “managed” and “spontaneous” circular migration.

1. Conceptual definition

62. The definition proposed by the European Migration Network (EMN) in its Glossary⁸ can be considered a suitable candidate for a common conceptual definition of circular migration:

“[a] repetition of legal migration by the same person between two or more countries.”

63. As described above, some dimensions of circular migration are difficult to measure, which may hinder a wide use of the concept and thus its international comparability. The EMN definition is simple and well known to European policymakers. However, it still requires additional steps to become a statistical definition. For this, an analysis of the EMN definition by its components is provided below.

64. The first word, “repetition”, indicates that the phenomenon must repeat over time. However, such definition does not give guidance about the time period of reference. Are few repetitions of migratory events spread over the lifetime of a person enough to qualify that individual as a circular migrant? A common-sense interpretation would rather refer towards a higher frequency, given by the number of migratory events within a time period shorter than a lifetime. A period of ten years has been considered long enough to allow the deployment of circularity and short enough to exclude cases of no interest from a policy perspective, such as persons whose repeated migrations are quite distant in time. The time period should be rolling, in the sense that it should refer to the latest ten years from the reference time.

65. The second word of the EMN definition, “legal”, introduces one of the dimensions considered for circular migration. While this qualification meets the requirement of “managed” migration, i.e. migration organized in a legislative and/or policy framework, it would neglect some spontaneous forms of circular migration, which may even occur

⁸ See EMN Glossary at : ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/glossary/index_a_en.htm

outside a legal framework. The restriction to legal migration would also complicate statistical measurement, because migrants are not always surveyed by their legal status. Furthermore, the international definition of migration does not include any qualification of legality. For these reasons, the statistical implementation should not include such a requirement.

66. The use of the word “migration” instead of “moves” or “mobility” implies that any change of country must satisfy the requirement of duration of actual and/or intended stay defined in the international recommendations. These identify international migration as a change of the country of usual residence with duration of stay of at least 12 months in the country of destination, and exclude travels related to recreation, holiday, visits to relatives or friends, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimage. However, international recommendations also allow for changes of residence of shorter duration, namely for periods between 3 and 12 months, labelling them as “short-term” migrations.

67. Inclusion of short-term migration in the definition of circular migration is supported by the policy interest in short-term international moves. On the other side, such inclusion would complicate the nesting of circular migration in the ordinary international migration statistics that cover moves of at least 12 months. If circular migration would only consist of moves whose duration abroad is at least 12 months then it would be possible to tabulate it as a subset of overall international migration and to assess its weight.

68. There is a latent confusion between “circular” and “seasonal” migration. The latter is defined in international recommendations only with reference to work as the purpose, identifying seasonal migrant workers as “persons employed by a country other than their own for only part of a year because the work they perform depends on seasonal conditions”. Therefore, to be qualified as “seasonal”, a migration must be short-term (i.e. a stay abroad of 3 to 12 months), done for the purpose of work and during a specific period of the year (most likely recurrent). Repeated seasonal migration could then be seen as a special case of circular migration if short-term migration is accepted as form of circularity.

69. The words “by the same person” in the EMN definition suggests that a migration must be linked to an identifier of the corresponding migrant and stored over time. Although collecting individual migration trajectories would provide the ideal information, this is hardly achievable. From a statistical perspective, a compromise must be reached between fulfilling data needs and the cost and burden of the related data collection.

70. The last part of the EMN definition, “between two or more countries”, gives enough flexibility to deal with the complexity of migration trajectories in the real life. On the one hand, specifying “two or more” does not limit circular migration to simple pendulum migration (back-and-forth migrations) between two countries and allows the frame to be enlarged to more composite migration patterns. On the other hand, it opens the challenge to define the borderline of circularity. Again, the statistical implementation must find an equilibrium between the completeness of the set of migration patterns and the feasibility of data collection.

2. Statistical definition

71. Following the considerations expressed on the conceptual definition, the general statistical definition proposed for circular migration is the following:

A circular migrant is a person who has crossed the national borders of the reporting country at least 3 times over the past 10 years, each time with duration of stay (abroad or in the country) of at least 12 months.

72. This definition identifies all persons with migration patterns such as immigration-emigration-immigration and emigration-immigration-emigration. It has minimum

requirements, as it only needs to link migratory events to the persons. It is tied to the international definition of migration, which looks at durations of stay of at least one year, and therefore it allows assessing the share of circular migrants in the total number of international migrants. It does not limit the circularity to closed sets of countries: a trajectory $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A \rightarrow C$ is as circular as the trajectory $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A \rightarrow B$, when seen from the perspective of the reporting country A. What is relevant here is the perspective of the reporting country only: circularity is meant to be a repeated stay in the same place (the reporting country), regardless of which is/are the other place(s) lived.

73. In principle, three migratory events do not necessarily identify circular migration behaviour, as it may be commonly understood. Closer to the intuitive idea of circularity may be the concept of loop, intended as a sequence of migrations originating from and returning to a specific country. Under this conceptual framework, circular migration would then be a series of at least two international migration loops made by the same person.

74. Translating this definition based on loops into statistical practice would mean simply adding one migratory event to the three already considered in the proposed statistical definition. For instance, from the perspective of the reporting country A, a series $A \rightarrow X \rightarrow A \rightarrow X \rightarrow A$ ⁹ shows two completed loops and it is based on the sequence emigration-immigration-emigration-immigration, thus four migratory events; likewise, series $X \rightarrow A \rightarrow X \rightarrow A \rightarrow X$ also shows two completed loops and is based on the sequence immigration-emigration-immigration-emigration, thus again four migratory events. Considering that the measurement of circular migration is in its infancy and there is still much uncertainty about the size of the phenomenon, it has been preferred to propose a wider definition and possibly to infer a stricter one (based on loops) from the tabulated data.

75. For the purpose of data collection and reporting, the following adaptations of the statistical definition of circular migration split by direction of migration flow can be used:

(a) A circular immigrant is a person who has immigrated more than once to the same country over the past 10 years when the duration of each stay (in that country or abroad) is of at least 12 months.

(b) A circular emigrant is a person who has emigrated more than once from the same country over the past 10 years when the duration of each stay (abroad or in that country) is of at least 12 months.

76. The definitions above may help identify circular migrants even when a migration is missing from the individual records of a person. For instance, if a person with usual residence in the country has two immigrations over the past 10 years, but no emigration is recorded, it can be speculated that (s)he has experienced a migration trajectory such as immigration-emigration (missing)-immigration, if there are reasonable elements to support the assumption that each duration of stay respects the required time length.

77. It could be noted that the sequence “long-term immigration – short-term emigration – long-term immigration” (an interruption of the duration of stay in the receiving country shorter than 12 months) and its inverse form (“long-term emigration – short-term immigration – long-term emigration”) would be captured as circular immigration/emigration while not meeting the requirement of three long-term migrations as

⁹ Meaning leaving from A to X, returning to A, then again going to X and returning to A, X being an unknown country.

in the general definition. It is important to avoid such inconsistency by assessing that the time spent abroad (observed or estimated) is of long enough duration¹⁰.

78. The broadness of the proposed statistical definitions is a potential source of inconsistencies in mirror statistics referring to circular migrants. For instance, the sequence A→B→A→C identifies a circular emigrant for country A, but no circular immigrant for countries B or C. Again, the perspective of the single reporting country has been prioritized.

79. To meet the policy needs for information on shorter durations of stay, and in accordance with the United Nations recommendations on migration statistics, which explicitly identify the additional category of short-term migrants, corresponding extensions allowing for short-term migration are identified for the statistical definition of circular migration, as follows:

(a) A circular short-term immigrant is a person who has immigrated more than once to the same country over the past 10 years, when the duration of each stay (in that country or abroad) is of at least 90 days but less than 12 months.

(b) A circular short-term emigrant is a person who has emigrated more than once from the same country over the past 10 years, when the duration of each stay (abroad or in that country) is of at least 90 days and less than 12 months.

80. The definition of circular short-term migrants still leaves unaccounted those migrants who have experienced repeated movements, but whose durations of stay are such that they cannot be included in the circular migrants proper (i.e., long-term), or in the circular short-term migrants. For instance, a person who experienced the migration chain “immigration (3 months of duration) – emigration (12 months duration) – immigration (12 months duration)” would not be caught by the above definitions. These are “circular mixed-term migrants”. A clear rule of allocation is then necessary to allow for a correct international comparison. It should also be noted that their short-term migrations usually would not appear in international migration statistics.

V. Conclusions

81. Although intuitively clear, the concept of circular migration is challenging when it comes to finding a statistical definition that applies to the variety of migration trajectories concerned. To meet the target of statistical measurability that should allow the production of the first internationally comparable figures on circular migration, a general statistical definition is proposed, as follows:

A circular migrant is a person who has crossed the national borders of the reporting country at least 3 times over the past 10 years, each time with duration of stay (abroad or in the country) of at least 12 months.

82. This definition is tied to the international definition of migration, which looks at durations of stay of at least 12 months, and thus allows the share of circular migrants in the total number of international migrants to be assessed. To meet the policy needs for information on shorter durations of stay, and in accordance with the United Nations recommendations on migration statistics, which explicitly identify the additional category of short-term migrants, corresponding extensions allowing for short-term migration are identified for the statistical definition of circular migration.

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, from an international statistical perspective, the person leaving for a period shorter than a year would not be considered changing the country of usual residence, and therefore the second entries/exits would not even be counted as new migration.

83. Two countries, Italy and Sweden, tested the proposed definitions with empirical data (see full report for details). While the results are encouraging, broader experimental use is needed to understand better the practical challenges and opportunities in producing the statistics. Inputs from policymakers could also help fine-tune the definitions. A publication of internationally comparable experimental statistics on circular migration may be an efficient way to improve knowledge on this topic and its measurement.

84. Additional information can be linked to circular migration statistics to enhance their use. The work here has focussed only on the measurement of the overall size of circular migration, without entering into the details of the most appropriate cross-tabulations. This may be a task for a future expert group on circular migration.

VI. References

85. The list of references to publications cited in this document can be found in the full report, available at: www.uncece.org/index.php?id=40939#/.
