Economic and Social Council

Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians

Sixty-fourth plenary session
Paris, 27-29 April 2016
Item 7(b) of the provisional agenda
Circular Migration

Summary of comments on the report on *Defining and measuring circular migration*

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

The present note summarizes the comments by members of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) on the report on *Defining and measuring circular migration*. The secretariat carried out an electronic consultation on the report in January-March 2016.

A total of 43 replies were received, from 40 countries and three international organizations. The comments showed broad support for the report and its proposed definition of circular migration. Two countries expressed concerns: Hungary suggests further discussion of the definition and Germany emphasises the need for practical guidance. This document summarizes the detailed comments received from countries and organizations.

The Conference is invited to

• express its views on the report;

• ask the Task Force to review in detail the comments and suggestions made, and reflect them in a revised version of the report;

• ask the Task Force to discuss the definition of circular migration at the forthcoming UNECE-Eurostat Work Session on Migration Statistics on 18-20 May 2016, including the need for developing practical guidance;

• agree that the revised report will be submitted to the 2016 October CES Bureau meeting for final approval.

Please recycle

I. Introduction

1.   The present note summarizes the comments by members of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) on the report on Defining and Measuring Circular Migration, which was sent for electronic consultation in January-March 2016.

2.   The Task Force on Measuring Circular Migration will consider the material presented in this document for revising the report. The Task Force consists of members representing Mexico (Chair), Israel, Italy, Norway, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Eurostat, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Swedish Migration Agency and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

II. Summary

3.   The following countries and organizations responded to the electronic consultation among the members of the Conference of European Statisticians: Albania, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Mexico, Montenegro, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, the Eurasian Economic Commission, Eurostat and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

4.   Of the 43 countries and organizations responding to the consultation, 41 considered the report ready for endorsement at the CES plenary session. Many countries expressed support for the recommendations and welcomed the initiative to define circular migration.

5.   Several respondents expressed concerns in relation to the limitation of the definition of circular migration to long-term migration, that is, migration for a period of stay of at least 12 months. Others commented on the difficulty of operationalizing the definition. In this context, Hungary suggested discussing this issue further at the UNECE-Eurostat Work Session on Migration Statistics (18-20 May 2016) and Germany emphasised the need for further work on practical testing of the definitions.

6.   Sections III and IV present a summary of the detailed comments received.

III. General comments

A. Approach taken in the work

7.   Canada mentioned that the chosen definition would facilitate the measurements and comparability between countries and over time and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia saw the report taking the most appropriate approach to unify the different proposals.

8.   Canada and Switzerland commended the Task Force for making distinctions between the need for conceptual definitions and practical limitations related to measurement and providing important background information on the topic.

9.   Croatia noted the significant challenges in developing statistics on circular migration and stated that the report is an important point for future work.

10.   The United States noted the quality of the report given the complexity of the topic. They commented that the conceptual definition could have been approached in a more clear

way and that a better rationale could have been provided for selecting the statistical definition that does not, in their view, characterize precisely the circular migration as defined conceptually.

B.   Proposed statistical definition for circular migration

11.   Australia, referring to the link of the proposed definition with the UN and EU definitions of international migration, noted that this allows the share of circular migrants in the total number of international migrants to be assessed. Sweden reported that the proposed statistical definition is compatible with their available data

12.   Albania, Canada and OECD expressed concerns with the 10-year reference period. OECD noted that since 10-year data are aggregated it does not provide any indication on the recent evolution of circular migration. Canada had two suggestions. First, for the definition to refer more generally to a reference period of 10 years rather than the "past 10 years", and second, to consider the possibility of suggesting two time frames (periods of observation) for measuring circular migration (5 years and 10 years). Similarly, Albania suggested that an alternative of five years instead of 10 years could be more appropriate for short-term migration and that this could be investigated further through case studies.

13.   Croatia, the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation commented that the statistical definition as proposed in the report can be considered as the proper basis for the statistical measurement of circular migration Colombia and Spain remarked that given the difficulty of establishing a single definition of circular migration this option is good as a first approach. Ireland commented that the fact that the definition for long-term circular migrants does not limit the circularity to a closed set of countries may be useful for determining economic migrants.

14.   Portugal and Switzerland noted that it is important to stress the difference between circular emigration and circular immigration since both sending and receiving countries will be responsible for the statistical operationalization of the concept, as well as the production of statistical information. Switzerland suggested to mention in the conclusions chapter if a split by direction of migration flows of circular migration is recommended.

15.   The United Kingdom commented that a statistical definition is welcome as it maintains a distinction between migrants coming for any purpose of relevance to policy, and any migrant that should be counted, given that the United Kingdom's statistical remit is to account for all migrants so far as is possible.

16.   The United States remarked that the proposed definition represents return migration plus one move, which is not necessarily circular, as compared to four cross-border movements. They understood that this decision was necessitated by data limitations, but commented that the report does not make this reasoning clear enough.

17.   Germany expressed uncertainty of whether the definition will provide sufficient practical guidance for deciding whether an individual migration case is either circular or non-circular. Mexico suggested that it may prove useful to validate the applicability of the definition through a one-time survey in which complete migration histories are collected and the results compared to those obtained using administrative sources.

18.   Albania, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States and OECD expressed concern that the definition is narrowed to long-term migration and excludes other kinds of circular mobility, such as a sequence of movements with at least one short-term migration or seasonal migration. Italy noted that though the duration of stay is typically applied to international migration in order to distinguish short-term from long-term migration, the 12 months criterion cannot be easily transferred into the concept of circular migration. Albania noted that if one of the migration episodes is missing, it might be very difficult to verify that the time length of the duration for the first two times is at

least 12 months. Portugal, United States and OECD pointed out the policy relevance of short-term circular migration and thus the need to include it in the definition. Hungary stated that the proposed definition covers only a small subgroup of migrants. They noted that the conceptual definitions in chapter 2 of the report refer to short-term migration and a substantial understanding of the phenomenon would be lost by restricting the definition to the 12-month criterion. The United States suggested that further discussion on short-term circular migration be included in the conclusion section.

19.   Hungary suggested the examination of the applicability of the following definition in addition to the current one:

> *A short-term 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 the duration of stay (abroad or in the country) of at least 3 months and with total duration of stay (abroad or in the country) of at least 12 months in the aggregate level within the past 10 years.*

20.   Hungary proposed that the results of Italy and Sweden (or other countries) be analysed with this alternate definition as well.

21.   Lithuania called for further extensive discussions of the definition of "circular migrant" as in its view the proposed definition does not provide a clear-cut and uniform understanding of whether a person should be a usual resident of the country or not.

C.   Implementation

22.   Italy referred to the two case studies that show that circular migration can be measured using the administrative data sources that are already exploited by the National Statistical Offices to provide migration statistics. In line with this statement, Australia reported that they have undertaken significant work to link permanent migrant data with census and other large administrative data sources such as tax data and that work has begun looking at linking temporary migrant data with census data.

23.   Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Malta, Poland, Romania, Spain, Tajikistan, United Kingdom and the OECD noted the challenges in operationalizing the definition and that it would take much longer to achieve harmonised concepts and practical implementation.

24.   Czech Republic, Malta, Romania and United Kingdom each commented that in their countries migration history of individuals would be statistically difficult to follow from available administrative data sources.

25.   Bulgaria and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia noted the importance of international coordination and agreements on migration for implementing the proposed statistical definition.

26.   Germany commented that the report provides a good methodological approach, but doubted its readiness to serve as a commonly agreed master plan for introducing better migration statistics. They asked how common standards and practices could be achieved and what help countries should expect when trying to implement parts of the report.

27.   Poland noted that population registers should ensure the possibility of analysing the individual person migration history and that additional work on consistent methodology is needed, especially in the context of a free movement of people within the EU. Armenia noted that population registers are not fully implemented in all countries and that the definition should be tested with survey or census data.

28.   Tajikistan observed that the report was prepared based on examples in European countries and that more information, training and legislation would be needed in the CIS and Central Asian countries in order to implement these concepts fully. In light of these

difficulties in implementation, the United Kingdom noted that it is important that the paper does not suggest any obligation for countries to collect this information.

29.   Armenia and Portugal suggested that tests using other sources should also be undertaken in this chapter as further elaboration is needed. Portugal was of the opinion that the work should go beyond the definition of a concept in general. They noted that the final proposal should be drawn after testing using various other sources since otherwise it will only be relevant and implementable in some countries (those with central or regional resident population registers).

30.   Colombia, the Republic of Moldova and the United Kingdom each noted that they do not currently publish official figures on the circular migration. Colombia reported that they have has plans to develop such estimates whereas the United Kingdom stated that they do not have such plans because there is no stakeholder need and the data would not be straightforward to collect.

31.   New Zealand suggested clarifying the data source requirements for the statistical measurement of circular migration. Poland welcomed the report's proposal on population registers as a main data source for circular migration.

32.   Tajikistan noted the need to make the report available in all UN languages. The United States provided several specific editorial changes to improve the clarity of the report.

IV.   Comments by chapter

33.   A summary of comments by chapter are given in the following subsections:

A.   Introduction

34.   Canada noted the benefits of circular migration and observed there may also be high costs associated with it (especially social costs) and that high frequencies of circular migration may be symptomatic of individuals having difficulties to integrate the labour market or to find adequate training. Therefore, Canada suggested that the report should address only conceptual and operational difficulties of measuring circular migration, and not enter into qualifying circular migration subjectively as done in Item 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*). Similarly, Tajikistan remarked that the benefits of circular migration are not clearly shown for destination countries.

35.   Switzerland and the United States commented that the chapter is a good summary of the concept of circular migration and the challenges of its statistical measurement.

B.   Existing concepts and definitions

36.   Australia noted that they would also be able to provide statistical evidence on circular migration based on the suggested definition (2.2.3 paragraph 21).

37.   Armenia remarked that though the many existing concepts and definitions in use and in literature are somewhat confusing, subchapters 2.3.2 and 2.3.3 regarding practical use and case studies help to clarify the phenomenon. Latvia suggested including analysis on how the definition of circular migration corresponds to special groups, such as diplomatic, naval and military personnel and their families.

38.   Czech Republic commented that the report should consider the findings of the EMS study, which show an absence of any harmonised approach in EU member states in

definitions of circular migration and that EU member states do not differentiate between temporary and circular migration.

39.   Sweden, Switzerland and the Russian Federation commented that the chapter provides an impressive and important overview of the different concepts and definitions that have been used to describe circular migration. Sweden highlighted the need to create a common definition.

40.   Switzerland noted that chapter 2.3 provides informative background information about why data on this type of migration are needed.

41.   Ukraine observed that in the 1998 United Nations Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration there is no definition of return migrants.

42.   Germany commented that the problem appears to be unifying diverging national definitions into a common international one and that the paper does not provide a convincing strategy for dealing with this problem.

C.   Dimensions of circular migration

43.   Czech Republic and Switzerland commented that this was a good and thorough analytical chapter and Romania agreed with the chapter from the theoretical point of view. The United States also noted that the chapter was clearly written.

44.   Germany remarked that the report provides alternative definitions (dimensions) and does not clearly indicate which dimensions are preferred.

45.   New Zealand was of the opinion that paragraph 66 was too complicated and should be rewritten. In addition, New Zealand observed that the 'developmental impact' described in section 3.5 is considered as a dimension of the definition and measurement of circular migration and is not generally considered as a statistical dimension for the measurement of international migration. They also noted the importance of assessing any developmental impacts as a result of migrant settlement outcomes (e.g. from circular migration or other types of migration) to inform policymaking and that migrant settlement outcomes and subsequent developmental impacts require integrated datasets of border movements and population surveys of the receiving country.

46.   Armenia, Lithuania, Sweden and Switzerland agreed that the five dimensions are important for defining and measuring circular migration and noted that in many cases not all can be captured. Armenia highlighted that need for prioritization in these cases. Sweden noted that developmental impact is the hardest to describe given its importance.

47.   Tajikistan noted that the term "pendulum migration", proposed in para 50 of the report, is mainly used to account for internal migration to work or study. Tajikistan also noted its view that the migrant could be defined as circular when he or she returns to the country where the migration loop started.

48.   The Russian Federation commented on the usefulness of the visual illustrations of the difference between return and circular migration. They also suggested further description of the differences between the developmental impact of return, circular and labour migration.

D.   Key issues for a statistical definition of circular migration

49.   Australia observed that the suggested statistical definition in Table 2 includes "the reporting country". Since this was often referred to as Country A in other sections of the report to identify the country for which circular migration was being assessed, Australia suggested possible clarifications in Table 2. (1) To distinguish from return or temporary migration, more than two border crossings have to take place "in the country for which

circular migration is being calculated" or (2) The country for which circular migration is being calculated (i.e. the reporting country)".

50.   Austria suggested reformulating 4.1. Table 2: Statistical definition of periodicity and repetitiveness: *more than two border crossings* to *three or more border crossings* for clarity. They also noted that the definitions section should address the fact that the censoring of data for fulfilling 12 months of minimum stay reduces the effective period of observation.

51.   Italy commented that the adaptations of the statistical definition of circular migration split by direction of migration flow could lead to misunderstandings (even if it is provided only for the purpose of data collection and reporting). According to the definition in the report, 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 at least 12 months. Similarly, 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 at least 12 months. This means that if the persons undertook four movements over the past 10 years (A to B, B to A, A to B, B to A) he or she can be considered at the same time as a circular immigrant (two immigrations) and as a circular emigrant (two emigrations).

52.   Germany observed that for practical purposes countries would choose options that are possible rather than those which are preferable. Czech Republic noted that there is limited available data for statistical definition – only duration stay and periodicity of moves.

53.   The Russian Federation observed that it is difficult to collect data retrospectively (for the 10 years prior to the reference) and that it is only possible to begin to gather information in the initial year and continue collecting that for future years.

54.   Sweden supported the use of the reporting country as the starting point. Sweden and Switzerland supported the clear distinction between the conceptual definition and statistical definition.

55.   The United States commended the word-by-word breakdown of the conceptual definition to justify the statistical definition. They expressed preference for including concepts like "developmental impact" and "purpose for move" in the conceptual definition since these are not included in the statistical one.

56.   Sweden observed that the report does not describe the differences between stock and flow and asked if either was more interesting than the other.

E.   Operationalization of the definition

57.   Armenia, Colombia, Lithuania and Switzerland commented that this is a very informative and important chapter to learn about possible data sources and to understand better the possibilities of capturing data on circular migration from population registers. Colombia noted the importance of assessing data availability for adopting the definition of circular migration. Lithuania observed these analyses would be very useful for NSOs as well as researchers for measuring circular migration. Switzerland noted that the difference in approaches shows the challenges of applying the statistical definition when confronted with the given data situation in a particular country.

58.   Australia proposed to add *Passport* in Table 3 under Data source, Border Control as it is one of the main sources of information. In addition, they suggested possibly including data linking as a data source itself (though the report refers to this later). New Zealand noted that in Table 3 the use of population registers usually provides linkages to information on income, qualification and education and is a longitudinal data source. The

United States questioned the difficulty of including income or education on a Census, given that many already ask these questions.

59.   Bulgaria suggested that legal restrictions and privacy issues connected to linking data at individual level should be taken into account.

60.   Spain and Germany each observed that based on the case study data, the phenomenon of circular migration does not seem to be very prominent. Germany was of the opinion that the effort and the expected costs are high, but the additional insight may be limited. For example, they asked the benefit of knowing that in country X z_1% of all migrations cases are circular, whereas in country Y it is z_2%?

61.   New Zealand commented that in section 5.1 there needs to be clarification about the specific data requirements that enable statistical measurement of circular migration and that a minimum requirement is the availability of individuals' linked travel sequences over time. Switzerland suggested that the fact that the availability of a personal identification number (PIN) is a requirement when using administrative data sources should be noted more explicitly in the report since without a PIN, different migratory movements of one particular person cannot be linked over time. One possible alternative is the use of specifically designed surveys that capture the entire migration history of a person within a certain period.

62.   New Zealand also noted the limitations of using cell phone data. They were of the opinion that while it is possible to identify overseas numbers among domestic numbers, immigrants to a country are likely to obtain a new cell phone number in their new country. New Zealand noted that this data source will not provide indicative measures of resident population changes due to international migration.

63.   Poland suggested further development of the Italian case study as it remains a little bit unclear how exactly migration history of a person is tracked (e.g., does the ISTAT use the individual ID number of persons who migrate for statistical purposes?).

64.   Lithuania proposed further discussion on the estimation of circular migration from the register-based census since more and more countries will be carrying out such censuses in future years.

65.   The Russian Federation suggested further clarifying what data describe the impact of development and, accordingly, what information should be included in the documents to obtain visa or work permit in order to obtain information about the impact of development.

66.   Switzerland observed that the overlap between circular immigrants and circular emigrants is not visible in the data tables from the two case studies. Lastly, Switzerland noted that the last sentence in paragraph 135 should read: "The exact results from Sweden are displayed in tables 12 to 15." (and not "…tables 5 to 8").

67.   The United States suggested the expansion of various parts of the data source section. For example, noting that border data needs to measure individual not migration events, adding examples of surveys which include questions which could be used to measure circular migration, noting the possibility of using year of 1st entry and year of most recent entry to implicitly measure circular migration.

F.   Conclusions

68.   Romania agreed from a theoretical point of view with the proposed definition, but considers that the methodology should be further developed if the report suggests the implementation of this definition.

69.   Lithuania supported the proposal for the future work on the measurement of circular migration (particularly cross-tabulations)

70.   Sweden noted that the Task Force should have discussed cross-tabulations, as information on this issue would be a great help to NSOs in building up statistics to describe circular migration.

V.   Points for discussion

71.   The Conference is invited to:

- express its views on the report;

- ask the Task Force to review in detail the comments and suggestions made, and reflect them in a revised version of the report;

- ask the Task Force to discuss the definition of circular migration at the forthcoming UNECE-Eurostat Work Session on Migration Statistics on 18-20 May 2016, including the need for developing practical guidance;

- agree that the revised report will be submitted to the 2016 October CES Bureau meeting for final approval.

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