

MIGRATION STATISTICS – WORK BY ILO TO UPDATE THE GUIDELINES ON STATISTICS OF INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MIGRATION

Prepared by the Secretariat

This document complements the note for the discussion on migration statistics (ECE/CES/BUR/2023/OCT/9) and provides information about an ILO initiative to revise the “Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration”. The note summarizes the main revisions proposed by ILO, regarding the main concepts and definitions of international labour migration and mobility, and the plan proposed to finalize the revised Guidelines and publish them by mid-2025.

I. BACKGROUND

1. In October 2018, the 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) endorsed the *Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration*¹ (hereafter called “Guidelines”) to help countries improve the knowledge base by providing a core set of common concepts, definitions, and initial measurement guidance on which to base their national statistics programmes on the topic. Since then, several developments with implications for the Guidelines have taken place in the international statistical recommendations on closely related domains. This includes the recent adoption by the 2023 United Nations Statistics Commission (UNSC) of an updated conceptual framework and indicator set for statistics of international migration and international temporary mobility.

2. Since 2018, the ILO, together with partner countries and organizations, advanced work to test and validate the Guidelines through continued conceptual development, documentation of country case studies and survey pilot tests. The ILO further undertook a review of country practices, covering the main sources being utilized for statistics of international labour migration. This work generated evidence to further specify the type of guidance needed in the Guidelines. It also has served to identify gaps and areas requiring refinement and clarification.

3. Based on the results of that work, the ILO prepared a set of revisions to be considered to the Guidelines and proposed to undertake in 2024 additional consultations with the ILO Technical Working Group on International Labour Migration Statistics with a view to finalize the text of the revised Guidelines for publication in 2025. The revisions to the Guidelines proposed are presented in a document² recently made public for discussion at the 21st International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in Geneva on 11–20 October 2023.

¹ [Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration](#) (ICLS/20/2018/Guidelines)

² [Recent global developments and proposed updates to the 20th ICLS Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration](#) (ICLS/21/2023/Room document 17)

4. This note summarizes the main revisions proposed by the ILO to the Guidelines, regarding the main concepts and definitions of international labour migration and mobility, and the plan proposed to finalize the revised Guidelines and publish them by mid-2025.

II. MAIN CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS IN THE 2018 GUIDELINES

5. The Guidelines specify three main components of international labour migration, for which separate statistics are required to support monitoring and policymaking (para. 2):

(a) **International migrant workers:** international migrants (foreign-born or foreign citizen) who are either (i) in the labour force of the country where they are usual residents, or (ii) have labour attachment in a country where they are not usual residents (para. 14).

(b) **For-work international migrants:** international migrants (usual and non-usual residents) who entered the country [...] for the purpose of undertaking or seeking employment, as documented or declared at the time of entry in the country (para. 22).

(c) **Return international migrants:** current residents who were previously international migrant workers in another country, as residents or non-residents of the country in which they worked, with a minimum cumulative work experience of 6 months (para. 23).

6. The Guidelines also draw attention to the fact “that international labour migration may take the form of international labour mobility” to include within the scope of the statistics “temporary or short-term movement of persons across countries for employment-related purposes” (para. 1).

7. In defining the above three components of international labour migration, the Guidelines expand the interpretation of *international migrant* to include not only persons who change country of usual residence (as per the 1998 United Nations Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration), but also those who do not change country of usual residence. This is done consistently across the three components of international labour migration, with the aim to include within scope groups of workers undertaking short-term moves, such as frontier workers, seasonal workers and other workers crossing international borders for short periods of stay at a time. The aim of this extension was to ensure that statistics made visible the situation of these workers for monitoring and to inform policy, following the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (UN, 1990)

III. REVISION OF 1998 UN RECOMMENDATIONS OF STATISTICS OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GUIDELINES

8. As part of the revision of the 1998 Recommendations of Statistics of International Migration, rev 1 (on which the Guidelines were partly based), the UN Statistical Commission in 2023 approved the *Conceptual frameworks and concepts and definitions on international migration*, that introduced several important changes with implications for the Guidelines. Most relevant are (a) the expansion of the recommendations to situate international migration as a sub-set of international mobility, (b) the new recognition of international temporary mobility and, (c) the inclusion of concepts, definitions, priority indicators and related guidance, to generate separate statistics for both, international migration and international temporary mobility, based on a unified conceptual framework of international mobility (see paras. 10-12 in doc. ECE/CES/BUR/2023/OCT/9)

IV. VALIDATION OF 2018 GUIDELINES AND ISSUES IDENTIFIED

9. Since 2018, the ILO implemented a programme of work with the aim to validate the Guidelines, document practices, identify gaps, and areas for revision and update. This work revealed a few issues with the definitions of the three components included in the Guidelines. These issues were presented and discussed with the ILO technical Working Group on International Migration Statistics during its 4th Meeting on 17-19 November 2020. The conceptual issues identified also introduced challenges in measurement documented through the pilot tests and in the context of technical support to countries on survey implementation.

10. The main issue was identified regarding the concept and definition of **international migrant workers** as included in the Guidelines, that brings together two separate categories: (a) those usually resident, and (b) those not-usually resident, from the perspective of country of measurement. The numerical exercises revealed that including the two groups under one single definition can lead to problems of double counting international migrant workers, as the categories are not mutually exclusive. This issue arises due to the conflation in the reference populations. Labour force statistics are produced with respect to the resident population. As a result, residents of a country, employed in a neighbouring country are counted as part of the resident labour force and thus as current sub-group (a) (resident) international migrant workers if they are foreign born or foreign citizens. At the same time, they would also be counted as current sub-group (b) residents working abroad because their job is located in a neighbouring country (ICLS 2023, paras. 45-47)

11. Other issues were identified with regard to the definitions of **return international migrant worker** and **for-work international migrants** (ICLS 2023, paras. 48-54)

V. PROPOSED REVISIONS OF THE 2018 GUIDELINES AND TIMEFRAME

12. The ILO has prepared a draft revised text of the 20th ICLS Guidelines (see annex I in [ILO 2023](#)) that aims to address the key issues identified and reflect the recent developments in related statistical standards, and accumulated experience. The draft revised text will be discussed at the 21st International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), in Geneva on 11-20 October 2023.

13. The revised text includes the following definitions:

(a) **International labour mobility**: all movements of persons that cross international borders and involve a labour attachment in the country of destination.

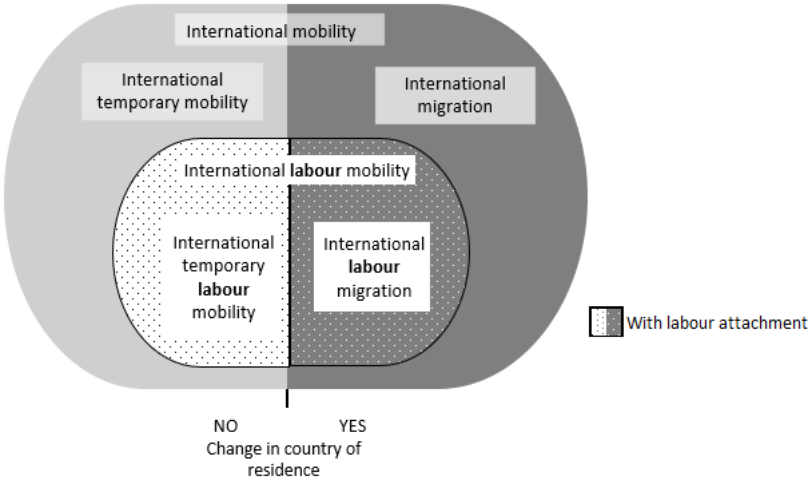
(b) **International labour migration**: all movements of persons across international borders that involve a labour attachment in the destination country and result in a change of country of residence,

(c) **International temporary labour mobility**: all movements of persons across international borders that involve a labour attachment in the destination country but do not result in a change of country of residence.

14. As such, international labour mobility and its components, are a sub-set of international mobility and its components, as shown in diagram 1.

Diagram 1

Conceptual relation between international mobility and international labour mobility



Source: ILO 2023. [Recent global developments and proposed updates to the 20th ICLS Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration](#) (ICLS/21/2023/Room document 17)

15. The text proposed for the revised guidelines also provide concepts, operational definitions, measurement and reporting guidance to support countries in developing statistics on stocks and flows for the following priority groups of international workers, and/or selected sub-groups, as relevant in the national context:

<i>A. International labour migration</i>	<i>B. International temporary labour mobility</i>
<i>Stocks</i>	
A1s. Immigrant (migrant) workers	B1s. Non-resident workers
A2s. Emigrant workers	B2s. Residents working abroad
A3s. Returned international migrant workers	
<i>Flows</i>	
A1f. Inflow of for-work migrants	B1f. Inflow of for-work non-residents
A2f. Outflow of for-work migrants	B2f. Outflow of for-work residents

16. Owing to the substantial scope of the revision, ILO proposed to undertake during 2024 an additional round of consultations with the ILO Working Group on International Labour Migration Statistics, to address and clarify any potential ambiguities and finalize the text of the revisions, with a view to publish the revised Guidelines by mid-2025 at the latest.

17. The proposed timeframe will also serve to consider and integrate any additional major changes stemming from the ongoing revision of the UN 1998 Recommendations of Statistics of International Migration, rev 1. and the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses rev. 3, due to be completed in the period 2024-2025.

VI. REFERENCES

ILO. 2018. [Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration. 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians](#) (ICLS/20/2018/Guidelines)

ILO. 2023. [Recent global developments and proposed updates to the 20th ICLS Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration](#) (ICLS/21/2023/Room document 17)