08 September 2003

Challenges and effective approaches to national, regional and international migration data collection, sharing and management

Focusing on short term and practical solutions

IOM International Dialogue on Migration: Workshop on Approaches to Data Collection and Data Management, 8-9 September 2003, Geneva

Discussion Paper

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing awareness of the different forms of migration – regular and irregular, voluntary and forced – and the impact of these movements on different sectors in origin, transit and destination countries. With international migration moving to the forefront of policy issues worldwide, there is a corresponding awareness and interest in migration data issues. A variety of migration data is available and is being used more or less systematically, despite the fact that migration-related information and statistical data is neither complete nor fully comparable. It is important to note that this situation exists despite the fact that several important and recognized initiatives, such as the UN Recommendations of Statistics on International Migration, have been put forward and in some cases tested.

Lack of credible data on migration can lead to policy-making and trend assessment based upon incomplete or inaccurate information. Can governments and other users afford to risk making important policy decisions based upon untrustworthy data?

Credible data is indispensable for developing, monitoring and evaluating policy and legal issues in the field of migration. This paper focuses on some challenges and effective approaches to national, regional and international migration data collection, sharing and management. The paper will provide an overview and be practical in its approach. It is intended as a general starting point for discussions at this workshop and to provide a contextual basis for the more case-oriented breakout sessions.

2. The framework

Each state has its own system of data collection, application and sharing of relevance to its constituencies, legislative and policy frameworks and traditions. Data may come from a variety of sources, be collected by different bodies and be used for a range of purposes.

Sources most often used for collecting migration data include: population registers, registers of foreigners, records of issuance of residence and work permits, records of issuance of entry and exit permits, records of processing of requests for asylum, records for regularization, border statistics, censuses and household surveys and apprehension and deportation records. Collection bodies typically include a variety of government departments, IOs, NGOs, employment/recruitment agencies, educational institutions and any other institution dealing with migrants. The use of data within migration-related activities ranges from policy making and programme decisions on labour migration, asylum and integration, counter trafficking measures, security and other issues to meeting the myriad of complex social, economic, demographic and political needs within a country or internationally.

A fundamental challenge to the application, sharing and management of migration data is how to analyze the variety of statistical indicators available without having a common reference to a globally established and recognized terminology. This can be particularly relevant among countries with similar migration perspectives (e.g. those primarily countries of origin) or complementary migration perspectives (e.g. countries with similar or related migrant flows).

As mentioned earlier, the range of information and statistical data available on migration is neither complete nor fully comparable – and indeed in many cases it is limited and not timely. In spite of these limitations, governments are coming to recognize the importance of data, and some form of

migration information and statistics are being collected, shared and used by most States. However, some countries lack resources and capacity to begin developing effective data management programmes.

Apart from the bilateral and other exchanges of information between States, a variety of international organizations collect or compile international migration data. Many collect data related to a specific migration theme – for example the UNHCR is the lead agency for data on refugees and asylum-seekers, and the Global IDP Project holds most of the global data on internally displaced persons. Organizations such as IOM collect special migration data from their own activities (in the case of IOM on e.g. trafficking, return migration and migration health).

Other organizations, such as the Inter-Governmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugee and Migration Policies in Europe, North America and Australia (IGC), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and Eurostat, as well as the UN as a whole, while not the original collection points for data, compile data from a variety of sources at national or local levels and use the data to identify and monitor trends.

Migration is not static. The geographic origin, direction and the nature of flows continue to change and new migratory flows emerge. These characteristics bring new challenges to the process of producing, collecting, using and sharing migration information, challenges that are being met in a variety of ways nationally, regionally, internationally.

3. Towards a common understanding of the need for and use of data

Migration policy can be made with or without data. How effective would these policies be if made based only on anecdotal information and impressions?

Data is like a streetlight – it provides light but is not always very enlightening. There is certainly an element of truth in this, in that it illustrates the ever-existing ambiguity of data. On the one hand, there is an obvious need for data for administrative and political purposes, while on the other hand there is an inherent risk of possible misuse and abuse of that very same data (e.g. data can be very impressive, but not very convincing).

Managing migration using data implies being able to determine what subcomponents constitute migration (e.g. categories of migrants), and how to most effectively obtain relevant information (e.g. reporting systems). An effective management of migratory trends implies, in addition, that policies and strategies are based upon knowledge of the reality within these flows. Thus, it is of crucial importance that the collection and sharing of migration data is built upon shared principles, which ensures a degree of trust and confidence in the data.

Analysing national data and information in conjunction with data and information from other States can, in some cases, further improve the effective management of migratory movements. Such data is often critical in providing insight into cross-border trends, emerging patterns, or in suggesting areas for common actions, or in a more general application, when describing, monitoring and evaluating national policies.

In the UN Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, a series of categories are suggested to form the basis of international migration statistics collection. The categories serve as indicators and guides for data collectors in compiling and sharing migration data. Most governments apply different or additional categories based upon their own legislation, regulations, administrative purposes and traditions. There is no single instrument or tool commonly used today for collecting data on international migration.

Data is often gleaned from a multitude of sources not specially designed for migration-related analysis. Moreover, many governments have only recently begun to include migration concepts in their domestic legislation. In addition, since migration data is often considered to be sensitive, States sometimes prefer not to share data even with institutions at the national level, which further restricts a comprehensive analysis. In spite of these hurdles, a key challenge for governments is to capture specific national and regional migratory trends using meaningful statistics and relevant terminology.

In developing the mechanisms and tools for data collection that would be most meaningful to the particular needs of a government, certain choices will need to be made. For example one could use broad, composite definitions of data categories, which may have more limited use for end-users, or tables with numerous specific categories, enhancing the use of the data but presenting a complex picture of the actual situation and challenges for national implementation. The collection of migration data depends not only on existing legislative requirements, but also on the administrative systems responsible for compiling the data – both of which vary from one government to the next.

In light of these differences, full regional or international comparability of migrant categories is not a realistic target in the short or medium term. While full comparability is a long-term proposition, Governments should not, however, be dissuaded in the short-term from working toward the development of common language or engaging in dialogue and information exchange. It is through open communication that international migration concepts can be better understood and clarified.

The collection, sharing and management of migration data is a process which needs time, resources and priority and which is approached very differently country-by-country and region-by-region. It is an ongoing process. It is not something formed or catalyzed by single events. However, it is also a process requiring an understanding of the reasons for collecting and sharing data and how this can help to better manage migration.

In the short-term, and due to the ever-increasing need for migration data, simply collecting and sharing the migration data already available should continue to be pursued. Governments should not wait for a comprehensive approach to be created before embarking in individual areas.

One successful and very operational approach to this issue has been to develop a general model based on a minimalist format (instead of trying to meet complex standards) and based on existing national statistical infrastructures.

Some basic precepts of such an approach would include the following:

- ➢ Analysing and understanding the reality of migratory trends should be based upon data.
- ➢ Data collected should reflect recognised needs – in other words producers and users should be connected.
- ➢ A minimum set of official data for the whole country should exist – and, to the extent possible, be made available to the public.

➢ Data should be timely, consistent and objective and, wherever possible, approximately comparable.
➢ Data should be collected and processed according to some well-known and well-accepted principles and formats – preferably on the basis on databases/registers directly from the primary (and original) source.
➢ A mechanism for validating the quality of the data should be developed and applied.

4. Challenges for the future: What can be done?

Numerous activities have been suggested, promoted and/or implemented with regard to increasing migration data collection, sharing and management at the national/regional and international level.

There is no one solution or structure that will "solve" the existing information and data gap on migration.

Overall, a continued dialogue on migration terminology and the exchange of concepts and existing data would contribute towards building clearer global understanding. Dialogue would also help build a better appreciation for and commitment to the need to enhance and improve migration data collection, sharing and management and to promote and shape coordination and cooperation between and among States and regional/international organizations.

Improving data availability and the effective use of data starts with examining the primary source of the data. In this regard, a common theme recurring in various conferences and programs on migration data is the need for building and/or reinforcing the capacity of data management at the national level – sometimes with assistance indirectly facilitated, or directly provided, by regional and international organizations or other States with experience in data management. Another recurring theme is the role of regional and international organizations in the collection and sharing data on migration.

IOM – among other IOs – has taken an active role in a number of (mainly) regional processes on migration data management. The following summarizes some lessons learnt from these activities and identifies some prerequisites that would be needed in order to establish effective migration data management systems focussing on short-term, immediately applicable solutions.

- A very important step is to create or enhance an already existing network of focal points on migration data among core national governmental agencies, and designate one of these agencies to coordinate the collection, sharing and management of the data. Supporting mechanisms and coordination creates a framework, where the involved institutions move towards a common understanding of the data available. Often the involved institutions are both producers and users of the migration data, and the network would thereby also offer a framework for the development of a producer – user nexus.

- Experience shows that defining a minimum set of five to ten recognizable and aggregated overall data migration indicators is a good starting point. These would be collected, collated, and shared regularly at the national (and later regional) level using an agreed-upon format (e.g. data on asylum applications, labour migration, irregular migration, etc).

- Statistical indicators to be shared at the regional level should be outlined taking into account already existing national data used internationally. The creation of an agreed-upon Data Sharing

Mechanism would be a valuable next step, allowing for easy and facilitated sharing of data within agreed-upon minimum formats (with data being shared using simple templates) along principles generally applicable throughout the region.

- In practical terms, the data shared in the Data Sharing Mechanism is shared electronically according to an agreed-upon frequency and using a common and recognised template. As a possibility, the Data Sharing Mechanism could also serve as service for the institutions and parties involved in the process and can also be used for requests, queries and consultations in and between countries participating in the mechanism. The more informal and flexible the Data Sharing Mechanism set up is, the more effective the Mechanism would seem to be. Upgrading and inventing new IT-platform(s) may be a long-term derivative from collecting and sharing migration data – however starting with the existing statistical infrastructure would – for most States – suffice.

Creating or enhancing statistical infrastructures can often be obtained using a limited number of resources within a limited timeframe. An important prerequisite, however, is that any such process is built upon national ownership.

5. Key challenges for consideration and discussion with focus on short-term solutions

- ✓ Migration policies will be formulated whether data is available or not.

- ✓ Better they be formulated on the basis of data rather than in a void.

- ✓ Better they be formulated on the basis of recent rather than historical data.

- ✓ Better to connect producers and users rather than focus on each element in isolation.

- ✓ Better they are formulated in reference to data from other countries.

- ✓ Better to begin work with existing fragmented data than waiting for an ideal system to be set up.

- ✓ Better to continue a dialogue on the need for and use of migration data than to keep the existing status quo situation and accepting the current information and data gap.

- ✓ Better data is based upon recognised and recognisable principles rather than on arbitrary case- by-case methods.

- ✓ Better to cooperate and coordinate with neighbouring and otherwise-related countries than think that migration is only a national issue.

- ✓ Better to prioritise a common understanding of a minimum format for the exchange of data rather than wait for standards to be implemented.

- ✓ Better to recognise the need for a long-term common data collection approach in the field of migration rather than hope that time would solve the information and data gap on migration – ideally by defining a generic approach based on a minimum format.