

# The Programme of the United Nations Statistics Division on the Development of International Migration Statistics\*

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## Introduction

This report presents the activities of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) in the area of international migration. The presentation covers activities in: 1) the development of standards and methods; 2) international compilation and dissemination of national data; and 3) technical cooperation and assistance to countries. The report also reviews some of the lessons learned from working with countries, such as issues countries face when collecting international migration statistics, and the future activities of the Statistics Division in the field on international migration.

## 1. Development of standards and methods

The United Nations Statistics Division issues guidelines and recommendations on concepts and methods to help countries in the collection and dissemination of their data. The recommendations are developed with a view to improving the quality of data and promoting the application of common definitions and concepts by countries to enhance the comparability of data at the international level. The recommendations evolve from a process involving a review of national practices and a series of consultations with international and national experts, culminating in an expert group meeting to review and comment on the draft recommendations. The expert group is composed of representatives from national statistical offices, research and academic institutions, as well as international organisations. The use of expert groups is part of an ongoing dialogue with countries, researchers, and national experts to ensure that the recommendations are both relevant and pragmatic.

The latest revision of the set of recommendations on international migration, *Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1<sup>1</sup>*, was published in 1998. The *Recommendations* result from collaborative work between the UNSD and the United Nations Population Division, and among others, the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), national statistics offices, the United Nations regional commissions, and organisations, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations publication, Sales No. E.98. XVII.14.

The document reviews new international definitions and relevant data sources; and proposes a revised taxonomy of inflows and outflows of international travellers.<sup>2</sup> The *Recommendations* also present a framework for the compilation of flows statistics, giving particular attention to the compilation of policy-oriented statistics from existing data. In addition, the *Recommendations* give emphasis to the topics of asylum seekers and refugees, and present definitions of relevant concepts and recommended tabulations.

A handbook on the collection and compilation of international migration statistics will be produced as a practical guide on how the recommendations can be adapted for implementation at the national level. The handbook, which is scheduled for 2005, will address the feedback and concerns received from national statistics offices, experts and other users of the *Recommendations*, on the applicability and relevance of the recommendations. The experiences of countries and feedback are being compiled through workshops, expert meetings, and other forms of communication.

## **2. Compilation and dissemination of global data**

The main vehicle for the Statistics Division's dissemination of international migration statistics is the United Nations *Demographic Yearbook* (DYB), a 54-year old publication that presents population and vital statistics for countries in the world. The DYB is a unique international source of population and vital statistics, published annually, for over 230 countries or areas in the world. The DYB also includes a detailed set of technical notes and footnotes explaining the sources, availability, timeliness, quality, reliability and coverage of the data presented. The data included in the *Yearbook* are generally obtained from a series of questionnaires that are completed by national statistics offices.

The international migration statistics are collected through three of the six DYB questionnaires: 1) 'International migration and travel statistics', an annual questionnaire; 2) 'Population census'; and 3) 'Population census-economic characteristics'.

The first is a regular annual questionnaire<sup>3</sup>, and the flows data are obtained from three tables:

- (1) Major categories of international departures and arrivals;
- (2) Long-term emigrants and immigrants by country of intended long-term residence or by country of last-long term residence, and
- (3) Long-term emigrants and immigrants by age and sex.

The sources for this type of yearly information are usually border collection and population registers.

The second questionnaire supplies data on:

- (1) Native and foreign born population by age and sex;
- (2) Foreign-born population by country of birth, age and sex;
- (3) Foreign-born population in the country for less than five years by country of birth, age and sex; and
- (4) Population by country of citizenship and sex.

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<sup>2</sup> The proposed taxonomy replaces one that was presented in *Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration* (Sales No. E.79.XVII.18).

<sup>3</sup> This questionnaire was not sent to countries in 2002 as the international migration data collection procedures (including the questionnaire on "International Migration and Travel Statistics") are currently under review.

The sources of data for the second questionnaire, as well as the third, are population censuses, and the questionnaires are dispatched to countries when it is known that the country has conducted a census.

The third questionnaire provides data on economically active foreign-born population by occupation.

### **3. Technical support and assistance to countries**

Another activity of the Statistics Division (UNSD) is to provide countries with technical support in the collection and compilation of data and in training statisticians on the application of the United Nations principles and recommendations on statistical concepts and methods. The Statistics Division also responds to requests from national statistics offices to provide technical assistance and advice.

In this context, the UNSD is, in collaboration with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), organising a 'Workshop on Improving the Compilation of International Migration Statistics' that will be held 15-17 September, in Geneva. The main objective of the workshop is to guide statisticians in the use of the recommendations. Participants will be introduced to the framework for compiling international migration statistics from available data sources as laid out in the United Nations *Recommendations on Statistics of International Migrations, Revision 1*; review the requirements for and uses of international migration statistics; and explore ways to produce more complete and timely statistics to meet the growing demand for informed policy and decision-making.

The Statistics Division also seeks opportunities to collaborate with United Nations regional commissions and other institutions, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in organising workshops, and to inform of and elicit feedback on the relevance of United Nations standards and methods for compiling statistics in countries.

### **4. Lessons learned and future activities**

The Statistics Division is currently reviewing the DYB system. The aim of the review is to ensure that the official national statistics reported to the United Nations through the *Demographic Yearbook* system remain comprehensive, relevant, timely, and readily accessible to interested Member States, researchers, libraries and the public at large. On the basis of this review, an Expert Group Meeting will be held, 10-14 November 2003, in New York. The Experts will recommend actions to be taken to improve the content and coverage of data collection, and for enhancing the *DYB* and related outputs in content and form.

As part of the DYB review, the process of collection and dissemination of international migration statistics is being appraised. The review has been initiated to address the low levels of response in the last three decades; in particular for flows data, and the difficulty in interpreting and comparing the data from countries. The major shortcomings of the data provided, usually common to international migration data, include incompleteness of the information over time, as well as lack of comparability of the definitions and data sources among countries.

The low response levels for flows data is due to the fact that collection of these data is usually more difficult, as no single source of data can produce all the information required for the needs of the users. To obtain a comprehensive view of the international migration processes, the combination of different data sources that refer to different types of data collection (border data, permits, registers, etc.) is needed.

An in-depth analysis of the data collected by the Statistics Division, reveals also that for those countries that do provide international migration data, the most common problem was the difficulty to fit their national data into the framework that was given by the United Nations DYB questionnaire. The categories were too few and not representative of those used by the countries. In particular the definition of international migrant often did not reflect the national definitions.

The United Nations Statistics Division is committed to working in collaboration with interested agencies and national statistical offices that have experience in this field, to assist countries in need of developing a system for collection and compilation of international migration statistics. There are several organisations involved in various aspects of international migration statistics, and better coordination among agencies will eliminate overlaps or duplications and help countries greatly in accessing the support that they require.

The Statistics Division invites countries and institutions to provide feedback on problems they face when collecting and compiling data on migration. These comments will be addressed in the preparation of the above-mentioned handbook.