

**UN TASK FORCE ON  
KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS RELATED TO INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION**

**Terms of Reference**

**Background**

The United Nations Statistics Division, under the guidance of the United Nations Expert Group on Migration Statistics, has initiated the work on revising the 1998 [Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1](#) (referred to as *the 1998 Recommendations* thereafter)

One of the fundamental elements in the revision is the definition of international migrant/migration. *The 1998 Recommendations* defines an international migrant as “any person who changes his or her country of usual residence” and a person’s country of usual residence is “that in which the person lives, i.e., the country that the person has a place to live where he or she normally spends the daily period of rest.” (para. 32) The same *Recommendations* clarify that “the change of country of usual residence necessary to become an international migrant must involve a period of stay in the country of destination of at least a year”. (para. 36). The extent of the duration of stay abroad is what makes the statistical definition of ‘migrant’ different from the one of ‘visitor’. International migration, as defined in the *1998 Recommendations*, is therefore basically a factual change of country of usual residence, without any reference neither to the individual characteristics of the person such as country of birth, citizenship or holding the permission for legal stay in the hosting country, nor to the reason(s) for the change of country of residence. The *1998 Recommendations* elaborate further the duration element, when the concepts of “long-term migrant” and “short-term migrant” are defined (Box 1). For long-term migrant, a period of at least 12 months residence in the country is required, while a requirement of 3 months but less than 12 months duration of stay is used for short-term migrant. A key distinction between the two concepts of ‘migrants’ is that a short-term migrant does not become part of the usual resident population in the destination country.

The duration element has also been incorporated into the UN recommendations for censuses, which is closely related to the work on international migration. In 2008 when the [second revision Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses](#) (referred to as [of the UN Census Recommendations](#)) was published, a duration element was incorporated in its definition of usual residence. Broadly comparable to the definition of long-term migrant in *the 1998 Recommendations*, a general threshold of 12 months was adopted in this revision. Countries however were given two options in their census data collection when defining usual residents – one is based on most of the last 12 months (6 months and one day) and the other one based on a criterion of at least 12 months. The second option is also recommended in the UNECE and Eurostat Recommendations for the 2010

population censuses.<sup>1</sup> The same definition is used for the 2020 round of census, by both the United Nations at New York<sup>2</sup> and the European statistical community.<sup>3</sup>

The 12-month duration criterion has been consistent with a number of statistical frameworks, including the System of National Accounts 2008<sup>4</sup>, the Balance of Payments<sup>5</sup> and tourism statistics<sup>6</sup>. Up until now, the definition of international migrant as stipulated in *the 1998 Recommendations* has supported to a certain degree comparability across countries.

### **Revising and incorporating key concepts and definitions related to international migration**

More than 20 years have passed since *the 1998 Recommendations* have been published. People move more easily than 20 years ago. Modern communication technologies and the increased convenience of travel have favored new forms of movements across countries (e.g., circular short-term migration); and free movements within a region raise new measurement challenges even for countries with relatively developed statistical systems.

Changes in the patterns of cross-border movements may have an important impact on the conceptual framework currently used for international migration and the related definitions. Recent discussions on the relevance of concepts and the applicability of their definitions have raised some critical questions. For instance, is the concept of international migrant and its usual residence-based definition still relevant and sufficient for national policy purposes? Do we measure - and how - the number of people who move frequently and/or live in a country for short periods for studying or working purposes?

New migration patterns have already triggered various statistical initiatives. In responding to the growing importance of repeated migration between countries by the same person, a statistical definition of circular migration has been endorsed by the Conference of European Statisticians of UNECE.<sup>7</sup> Border and seasonal workers who do not necessarily meet the duration requirement of an international migrant are considered policy relevant and now part of the framework in measuring migrant workers.<sup>8</sup>

How countries measure international migration has also changed over the past 20 years. Many of the European countries are moving towards integrated population registration systems. On one hand, this move improves the efficiency of national statistical systems in producing data; on the other hand, data generated from such system have limitations that are common to any statistic based on administrative

---

<sup>1</sup> Economic Commission for Europe and Statistical Office of the European Communities, Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2010 Censuses of Population and Housing. United Nations (New York and Geneva, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Principles\\_and\\_Recommendations/Population-and-Housing-Censuses/Series\\_M67rev3-E.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Principles_and_Recommendations/Population-and-Housing-Censuses/Series_M67rev3-E.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/2015/ECECES41\\_EN.pdf](https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/2015/ECECES41_EN.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, IMF, OECD, United Nations and World Bank, 2009, para. 1.48

<sup>5</sup> *Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Washington, D.C., IMF, 2009, para. 4.114

<sup>6</sup> *International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics 2008*. United Nations and World Tourism Organization, 2010, glossary of terms

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/2016/ECECESSTAT20165\\_E.pdf](https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/2016/ECECESSTAT20165_E.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Newly adopted Guidelines concerning statistics on international labour migration, available at [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_648922.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_648922.pdf)

record. The registration and deregistration rules may “dictate” how international migrants are captured by the system.

Another challenge, or opportunity, for measuring international migration is associated with non-traditional data sources that emerged in the past few years. These new data sources may not be fit for a statistical observation of the 12-month duration of stay (as prescribed in the current *1998 Recommendations*), whilst offering almost real-time snapshots of migration-related phenomena. The timeliness of the information on migration is however an aspect which need to be tackled, especially considering that information is nowadays spread (and demanded) at much higher speed than in the past. How can we take advantage of the timeliness of these new data sources without biasing the statistical information on migration? Should the definition of migration be revised in a way that non-traditional data sources can be a realistic option?

Finally, despite continuous efforts made at the international and national level to promote the adoption of the *1998 Recommendations*, widespread application of the Recommendations by countries has not been successful. The *1998 Recommendations* were often seen as a theoretical framework that is difficult to operationalize.

### **Objectives and Tasks**

The objective of the Task force is to advance a proposal on a conceptual framework that includes key concepts related to international migration (covering both stocks as well as flow data) and their definitions. An important aspect of the conceptual framework will be to link the migration process with population change, including those of immigrant populations, which typically refer to usual resident populations born in another country or with foreign citizenship. The final output of the Task Force is intended to be a (short) document to be used in the overall revision of the UN *1998 Recommendations*. Given the logical association between the definition of migration and the definition of population, the proposal by the Task Force may also include a definition of population other than ‘usually resident’.

The proposal should respond to key policy interests (taking into consideration the 2030 Agenda), taking advantage of the work carried out by the Task Force on ‘Data and indicators set on international migration’ and building upon the outcome of a global consultation on concepts and definitions which are relevant to all countries. In doing so, care should be taken to find common ground in terms of the types of migration data needed, and to balance the perspectives of countries with different levels of statistical development.

Acknowledging the challenge of concepts and definitions that would be applicable to all countries, the proposal should strive to be not only relevant to national policy making, but also promote international comparability across countries and across different international statistical frameworks, covering both the demographic domain and other areas for which the concepts of population and migration are relevant (such as System of National Accounts, labour force, Balance of Payment and Tourism). The draft proposal should be based on the input from a global consultation to be carried out.

The Task Force reports to the UN Expert Group on Migration Statistics.

### **Task Force Membership and Main Duties**

The Task Force should possibly be composed of a reasonable balance of representatives from both 'receiving' and 'sending' countries, experts and relevant international organizations. Eurostat and UNSD will jointly coordinate the work of the TF.

Task Force members are asked to contribute actively to the work of the Task Force, such as preparing the questionnaire for the global consultation; analyzing its results; identifying key concepts related to international migration; revising the currently associated definitions or developing new definitions.

### **Draft Work Programme**

<u>May-October 2019</u>	Global survey aiming to identify relevant features for the definition of international migration.
<u>October 2019– June 2020</u>	Work on alternative or refined definitions of relevant migration concepts.
<u>June-October 2020</u>	Global consultation on a draft document on concepts and definitions that will feed into the revision of the 1998 Recommendations..
<u>October -November 2020</u>	Updating the draft document following global consultation. Additional consultation rounds may be necessary.
<u>SUBMISSION TO the March 2021 UNSC COMMISSION by UNSD</u>	