Collecting data on international migration : a challenge in developping countries

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International migration the weakest area in demography in both developping as well in more developped world. At the same time it is among the hottest topic for policymakers and has hight priority in policy development of many countries. During decades there have been a lot of effort devoted to improve the situation. Among those are the UN work on recommendations on statistics in the field of international migration, various initiatives to improve data availability and the current situation in developping countries, in single countries or by groups of countries.

In our contribution we intend to discuss how to improve the data collection on international migration in developping countries and to ensure the optimal use of all available data on migration for developping policy. In order to provide effective support to policies migration data, as all others should meet the conditions that could be put into five key words : availability, reliability, comparability, timeliness and policy relevance.

Our knowledge that we would like to share is based on large experience in this field. We have been involved in work for harmonisation of data on international migration in Europe and participated in the last revision of the UN recommendations. We have produced data assessment reports and recommendations on international migration statistics for Balkan and Caucasus countries, for Ukraine and Moldova including the framework for the IOM Extended Migration Profile. We supported by consulting the MEDSTAT project that aimed improving the data collection on international migration in the Mediterranean area, including North African and Middle East countries. We are also involved in sub-saharian Africa within the Rabat Process, the COMESA and we produce for IOM a guide for collecting data on intenrational migration in Central-Western Africa as well as the Migration Profiles for Mauritius, Madagascar, Seychelles and Comoros. Through all these actions we collected a large experience related to the possible improvements for data collection on international migration.

How to improve data collection on international migration ?

Basically there are two types of tools for collection migration data : statistical data collection and registration of administrative procedures related to migrants and migrations. As far as the statistical tools are conserned, the possibilities to collect suitable migration data are limited to two main types of data collection activities : population censuses and sample surveys that collect data from a sample of households or individuals.

The advantage from using the population censuses is related to the fact the usual place of residence is identified to every enumerated person. Questions on the country of citizenship and the country of birth help to identify the population with foreign background. Questions on the place of residence one or five year ago or at the time of previous census give the possibility to estimate cummulative effect of in- and outmigration flows during the concrete period between two censuses. Questions on emigrated persons could be added to census questionnaire that could, however, be asked only from household's members still in the country of origin.

Sample surveys can be organised to collect migration data through specific moduls attached to any household labour force survey or by ad hoc survey explicitly foreseen to collect migration data. However, the sample surveys too are limited in terms of their ability to capture the migration phenomenon, and this by two reasons. First, because international migrants are relatively rare in the population from which the sample is derrived, and secondly, it is difficult to cover emigrants and emigrations because having this status they do not appear any more in the population from which sample is extracted.

Several administrative databases exist in most developping countries and could be used to produce interesting statistics related to international migration. These databases include the following non exhaustive list :

1. The population registration system and/or the database covering the delivery and validity of IDcards to Nationals and/or the electoral database.
2. The bordercrossing database recording all entries and exits of the country through national border gates.
3. The visa database covering all visa requests and visa issued to foreigners.
4. The residence permit database including all documents and records related to the permission given to foreigners to live in the country n a longer term compared to the maximum period of stay allowed for tourism, business or family reasons.
5. The workpermit database giving the authorisation to work in the country to foreigners
6. The database recording naturalisations and other way for acquiring the citizenship of the country
7. The database managing asylum requests, internationally displaced persons and refugees living in the country.
8. The consular registers including all expatriated that are registered in their consulate in a foreign country.
9. Other databases related to education, health and social security where foreigners might be identified.

Advantages associated to the use of administrative databases to produce statistical data on international migration are the following :

1. These database are considered being exhaustive as far as the population concerned is considered.
2. The use of these database is often at no cost except some additional computerisation costs needed to produce the requested tables.

3. These databases allow a contunuous update of the statistical figures and their timeliness allow to follow quick changes in migration flows or characteristics of migrants.
4. The content of these database is mostly dependent on documents and not on self-reporting and accordingly the reliability of these data could be better compared to answers given in censuses and surveys.

Problems encountered for the use of administrative databases to produce statistics on international migration

1. The main problem is related to the reduced cooperation between Ministries and Institutions managing these databases and the National Statistical Institution.
2. More concretely major disfficulties are faced when exchange of individual data is needed between different administrations and more specifically from Ministries to Statistical Office.
3. The data quality of these administrative datbases could be limited because the complete coverage is not ensured, the administrative rules are not structly followed or from a different viewpoint the database are not cleaned systematically to exclude double-counts, dead or emigrated persons or to complete missing data.
4. The absence of skill in the field of statistics is often common in various ministries and if some statistical tables are produced internally these are mostly oriented to the control of the activity of the given Ministry.
5. From the side of the Statistical Office the possibility to use administrative data is often seen as a disturbance and an additional work and most of them prefer to put their effort exclusively on censuses and surveys.

Recommendations to enhance the data collection in the field of international migration statistics

The main recommendations have been identified already some years ago by the GMFD

1. As far as censuses are concerned include questions on migration and, if possible, a module to capture emigration.
2. Initiate a Household Migration Survey aiming to collect detailed information on emigrations, emigrants and return migrants. An alternative consist in introducing an emigration module in regular survey like the LFS.
3. Develop a national strategy for using more effienciently the existing administrative databases for producing statistical data in the field of international migration.
4. Ensure the most effective cooperation between Ministries managing the administrative databases and the Statistical institution. Therefore favour the exchange of individual data between them or detach a statistician from the Statistical Office to work within each Minsitries in charge of interesting databases.
5. Settle a National Task Force involving all Ministries and the Statistical Office to support the data collection, the analysis and interpretation of statistical figures and to disseminate their results and conclusions for policy support.

6. The production and the regular updating of a Statistical Compendium related to international migration or more broadly the preparation of a National Migration Profile may be considered as the optimal way to use statistical data for developing a migration policy.

The presentation will include a large number of concrete examples and suggestions for improving the data collection on international migration based on our fiield experience.