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Five Steps Toward Better Migration Data

Patricia A. Santo Tomas and
Lawrence H. Summers, Co-chairs
Michael Clemens, Project Director

May 2009



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Report of the Commission on International Migration Data
for Development Research and Policy

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May 2009



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Members of the Commission participated in a personal capacity and on a voluntary basis. While the report of the commission reflects a broad consensus among the members as individuals, not all members necessarily agreed with every word in the report. This text does not necessarily represent the position of any of the organizations with which the commissioners are affiliated, the Center for Global Development, or the Center's funders and board of directors.

*Summers's affiliation at the time of co-chairing the commission

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Few doubt that people who migrate from a relatively poor to a relatively rich country improve both their well-being and that of their families. Evidence is also gradually accumulating that migrants make the communities and the countries they left behind better off—through remittances, return investments, and new norms and ideas they bring and send to their home communities. In that sense, international migration is a development phenomenon.

That international migration advances development and is an unstoppable characteristic of today's global economy is a point that has been driven home by two CGD books—one from 2005 by John McHale and non-resident fellow Devesh Kapur and one from 2006 by non-resident fellow Lant Pritchett—and by an impressive set of working papers from research fellow Michael Clemens. Their work confirms that migration will have a major role in shaping global development in this century. Current and future economic crises, epochal demographic shifts, large and growing international wage gaps, increasingly global economic systems, and climate change all mean that people will be on the move in numbers and ways we have not seen before.

At the same time, their analyses and those of others have illuminated the shortcomings of current data, both within and across countries, on who migrants are, where they are, where they came from, and when they moved. Many countries do not collect, do not publish, or do not standardize detailed data on migrants. The strange result is that today it is possible to systematically measure cross-border movements of toys and textiles, of debt, equity, and other forms of capital, but not cross-border movements of people. Our patchy statistics on international migration amount to an enormous blind spot.

The poor state of migration data has limited analysis of how to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of migration for sending and receiving countries and, as a result, has stunted global understanding and domestic political discourse on a critical development issue. Part of the problem is that international migration is a politically sensitive subject everywhere—from Nigeria and Mexico, which receive migrants respectively from Burkina Faso and Guatemala, to the United States, Europe, and the world's other affluent countries and regions. Political sensitivity is both a cause and result of the data limitations with which analysts and policymakers cope.

Yet managing our increasingly global community in the interests of people requires understanding all the ways we are connected across sovereign borders.

Experts in international meetings have been pointing out these deficiencies since the 1890s, with only limited progress. In the 21st century, we can no

longer wait for the slow evolution of institutions and politics to provide good data. Policy has little chance of responding appropriately to today's reality if the most basic facts of international migration are not widely available and openly assessed around the world. Good statistics are a classic global public good: everyone wants the best statistics, but individual countries and agencies have little incentive to bear the financial and political costs of creating them.

Recognizing this problem, in May 2008 we convened a blue-ribbon group that included some of the world's top experts on creating and using migration data. We asked them to specify a handful of practical and politically feasible priority actions that could be taken in the next few years—by existing institutions and at low cost—to greatly expand the quantity and quality of migration data available to policymakers and researchers. Crucially, we asked them to name exactly which organizations should carry out each recommendation.

Their five recommendations meet the test of political feasibility and technical practicality at reasonable cost. The first is particularly simple, clear, and resounding: every country's census should ask about each person's country of birth, country of citizenship, and country of previous residence. This would

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Five Steps Toward Better Migration Data

1. What Brought Us Together and What We Found

International movements of people are one of the greatest forces that shape and are shaped by global development. The wages of equivalent workers typically differ between rich and poor countries by an order of magnitude more than the prices of goods or capital do, suggesting that the movement of people can cause great economic change (Clemens, Montenegro, and Pritchett 2008). Remittances to developing countries rose by 800 percent between 1990 and 2008, to over US\$280 billion (World Bank 2008). But the development impacts of migration involve more than just money. Human movement responds to and shapes environmental change; it responds to and shapes political change; it responds to and shapes the needs and lives of families—it is the human face of globalization.

The data on international migration that countries now collect and publish are so limited, however, that we know much less about how much and what kind of migration is happening in today's world than we know about international trade and investment flows. This leaves us unable to answer some of the most basic questions about how the movement of people interacts with the development process. Although all migrant destination countries actively regulate and shape this movement, we are setting migration policies in the dark. We remain largely ignorant of how those policies might maximize gains and minimize costs of migration for migrants, for those who remain in poor countries, and for those in destination countries.

The current lack of data—the biggest blind spot in our view of the world economy—leaves us unable to answer crucial questions. How will increasing skill-selectivity in rich countries' immigration policies affect already tenuous professional services in the countries migrants come from? How much return migration or back-and-forth migration occurs today, and what if anything should governments do to shape those movements? Are levels of irregular migration affected by opportunities for legal migration?

While many other questions could be asked about migration—such as how migrants fare in their destinations, why and when they move, what workers rights exist in destinations, and so on—we focus here on the effects of migration on sending countries' development prospects. Without the most basic data on who moves and how they move, we cannot even begin to address these questions, and we default to setting our policies by anecdote and

The data on international migration that countries now collect and publish are so limited that we know much less about migration than we know about international trade and investment.

The bottom line is

Statistical Institute recommended the standardization and open dissemination of data on stocks of foreigners in each country (Falkner 1895). In 1901, the same body pleaded for international standardization in the definitions of 'temporary' and 'permanent' migrant (Kraly and Gnanasekaran 1987). Not long thereafter, a fresh call for improved migration statistics became one of the earliest acts of the League of Nations. In October 1922, a meeting at the League's new International Labor Organization asked all its member states to collect and disseminate annual counts of immigrants as well as emigrants—disaggregated by sex, age, occupation, and country of last residence—and to establish uniform definitions of different types of migrant (ILO 1922).

Lack of better migration data is the greatest obstacle to forming policies to maximize the benefits of migration.

Similar meetings continued into the 1930s, and researchers of the period lamented that "migration statistics, even those of recent date, [were] very incomplete and, for not a few countries, are altogether wanting" (Ferenczi 1929: 55). Following the Second World War came decades of meetings again asking governments to collect and publish better migration data. The United Nations' 1953 recommendations on the collection of migrant flow data—including standardization in definitions of 'temporary' migration—were mostly ignored (Simmons 1987). The UN followed up in 1976 with renewed recommendations on the standardization of statistics, including those on migrant stocks, but they likewise were "not ... implemented widely" (Bilsborrow et al. 1997: 3). A decade later, Levine, Hill, and Warren (1985: 2) regretted that even the United States, which receives more international migrants than any other rich country and has ample capacity to track them, knew "remarkably little about the composition and characteristics of the flow of new arrivals."

As the 20th century came to an end, the UN concluded that "statistics needed to characterize migration flows, monitor changes over time and provide Governments with a solid basis for the formulation and implementation of policy [were] very often lacking"; even in Europe, not a single country had fully adopted the 1976 recommendations (United Nations 1998: 23, para. 3). A new set of recommendations followed in 1998. But sadly, most governments have ignored these repeated entreaties—based, as they have been, on unenforceable appeals for the common good. As the 21st century opened, the United Nations (2004: 216) observed that statistics on migration were still inadequate:

Less than 40 per cent of countries and areas have provided some migrant stock data since 1985, while the response on flow data is even more scarce. Statistics on international migration suffer from a lack of harmonized concepts and definitions across countries. There is . . . a lack of coordination among various agencies . . . at the national and international levels.

Today the United Nations (2007) continues the hard work of urging governments to include, at the very least, comparable questions on international migration on their 2010 census forms—such as questions about country of

birth, country of citizenship, country of residence one year ago or five years ago, and year of arrival in the country.

Several recent initiatives have made laudable progress toward better data.

2.2.1 Tabulations of empirical data

- The United Nations Population Division has created the “Global Migration Database,” which includes all publicly available tabulations on the international migrant stock by sex, age, and country of birth and citizenship.² The database was created in partnership with the United Nations Statistics Division, UNICEF, UNDP South-South Unit, the World Bank, and the University of Sussex. The Population Division has also published a separate database, “International Migration Flows to and from Selected Countries,” which compiles data on immigration and emigration flows in 15 countries.³
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008) has published the “Database on Immigrants in OECD countries,” an extensive set of tabulations providing information on the sex, age structure, occupations, fields of study, and other traits of the foreign-born population of 28 destination countries.⁴
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has compiled annual data on refugee stocks, flows, and characteristics, including sex, age, and country of citizenship covering more than 150 countries. In addition, UNHCR maintains a database on monthly asylum applications submitted in 37 industrialized countries by country of citizenship.⁵
- The Migration Policy Institute has created the MPI Data Hub, which compiles a large number of existing tabulations of migrant stock and flow data.⁶
- The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has developed a regional database on the international migrant stock.⁷
- Eurostat, working in cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and the UN Statistics Division, collects and disseminates data on migration flows and migrant stocks as part of a Joint Annual Questionnaire on International Migration. The use of an agreed joint questionnaire reduces the burden on national data

² <http://esa.un.org/unmigration>

³ Accessible through <http://www.unmigration.org>

⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/els/migration/DIOC>

⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics.html>

⁶ <http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub>

⁷ <http://www.eclac.cl/Celade/proyectos/migracion/IMILA00e.html>

suppliers and increases comparability among statistics published by different organizations.

- Eurostat also collects and publishes harmonized statistics on asylum applications and decisions.

2.2.2 Tabulations based on estimates

- The World Bank developed tabulations of the foreign-born in OECD countries by country of birth, level of education, and sex for two points in time (Docquier and Marfouk 2005; Docquier, Lowell, and Marfouk 2007).
- The OECD has produced “International Migration Data,” which contains standardized flow statistics for permanent migration by category of entry; it covers 18 OECD countries and roughly 80 percent of permanent migration into the OECD zone.⁸
- The United Nations Population Division compiled the “Trends in Total Migrant Stock” database, with quinquennial estimates of the international migrant stock by sex for all countries and territories in the world from 1960 to 2005.⁹
- The Development Research Center on Migration, Globalization and

Thailand, Ecuador, and Egypt. Several countries have added modules on migration and remittances to censuses and household surveys, including Costa Rica, Ghana, Fiji, Albania, Guatemala, and Moldova (Schachter 2008).

- The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has worked to improve sending-country efforts at collecting migration microdata in Egypt, Colombia, Guatemala, Tajikistan, Bangladesh, Albania, Moldova, Serbia, and many other countries.
- The Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) and Eurostat's "Push and Pull Factors of International Migration" project has made available detailed microdata on over 11,000 migrants and non-migrants from Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Senegal, and Ghana. Interviews were conducted both in the origin countries and in the destination countries of Spain and Italy.
- The World Bank has worked to include migration modules in several household surveys in countries such as Ghana, Albania, Bulgaria, Tanzania, and Tajikistan; it has also supported specialized surveys in Tonga and surveys of the Japanese diaspora in Brazil.
- Eurostat added a special immigrant module to its 2008 Labor Force Survey, which will generate anonymized individual data on immigrants and their children in EU countries.
- The Integrated Public Use Microdata Series–International (IPUMS–International) project at the University of Minnesota has brought together and standardized millions of anonymized individual records from the censuses of 35 countries, many of which contain data on country of birth and previous residence.¹¹

2.2.4 International standards and guidelines

- The UN's Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration (1998) provides a detailed framework for the compilation of statistics on migration flows including suggestions for standardized definitions of migrant types and guidelines for the collection and tabulation of data on migrant stock, especially via censuses.
- The UN's Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses (2007) gives detailed standards and guidelines for the collection and tabulation of census data relevant to international migration, such as country of birth and country of previous residence.

¹¹ <https://international.ipums.org/international>

- In 2007, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU adopted Regulation (EC) No. 862/2007 on migration and international protection statistics.¹² Under this regulation, EU Member States must supply to Eurostat harmonized statistics on asylum, migrant stocks and flows (inflows and outflows), acquisition of citizenship, and measures against unauthorized migration.¹³ The main disaggregations for these statistics are age, sex, citizenship, country of birth, and countries of destination and origin. The European Commission funded the project THESIM (Towards Harmonized Statistics on International Migration) to review national data availability and statistical definitions, and to assess the steps necessary for national compliance with the new regulation (Poulain et al. 2006).

2.3 Migration

The above efforts are a major advance and the Commission applauds them. They all exhibit limitations, however, that constrain their impact on research: often either they yield aggregated tabulations that prohibit detailed analysis of migrants' movements, or they cover a limited geographic area, or they generate data that are incommensurable in different ways with data from other sources. Here are just a few of the crucial policy questions we often cannot approach even with recently improved migration data:

Causes of movement

- How much return migration and temporary migration is there?
- Should destinations adopt measures to encourage return migration, and how?
- What common traits are shared among people who leave, among people who go back, and among people who move back and forth?
- How many unauthorized migrants are there, and what are their characteristics?
- How will climate change shape migration patterns (Kniveton et al. 2008)?

There remain crucial policy questions that we often cannot approach, despite recent improvements in migration data.

¹² <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2007:199:0023:0029:EN:PDF>

¹³ See the work of MIMOSA (Migration Modelling for Statistical Analyses), PROMINSTAT (Promoting comparative research in the field of migration and integration in Europe), and ILMAS (Implementation of Legislation on Migration and Asylum Statistics).

Various national, bilateral, and multilateral actors deal with national population censuses. The United Nations Statistics Division is the main global focal point through its role of setting standards, providing capacity building, and collecting data. The United Nations Population Fund coordinates census support at the country level. The World Bank is an important funding source for census projects. In addition to strengthening the multilateral system, the Commission believes that there is significant scope to mobilize actors outside the United Nations system to provide census expertise, to build capacities at the national level, and to conduct census-based research. However, the Commission believes that the role of the United Nations in setting standards, collecting data, and providing global estimates is unique and may require additional support.

1. N	Presence of Question		Subject of Question				
	Birth	Citizenship	1 year		5 years	Both	
2000 census round							
None	22 (12%)	57 (32%)					
Partial	15 (8%)	23 (13%)					
Complete	140 (79%)	97 (55%)	34 (19%)	64 (36%)	15 (8%)		
Total	177	177	177	177	177		
2010 census round (as of November 2008)							
None	6	*					
Partial	4	*					
Complete	38	*	10	28	7		
Total	48		48	48	48		

Source: UN Population Division. Data as of November 2008. "None" signifies no question on the census, "Partial" signifies that the question is asked only in 'yes/no' form or about groups of countries (e.g. "Africa", "Latin America"), and "Complete" signifies that the question is asked in a way that allows a separate response for each other country in the world. *Asterisk 2th

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The Commission agrees that there is enormous scope for broadening the use of administrative data on visas, work permits, and population registers where available, to greatly enrich understanding of the characteristics of international migrants. Doing so requires closer cooperation between ministries in charge of migration and national statistical offices.

Why?

Essentially all countries already collect a wealth of administrative data on foreign citizens. However, since the information is not disseminated, no country takes full advantage of this storehouse of knowledge to better understand migration processes. Releasing data on visas, border control, residence, and work permits, on consular registers, asylum seekers, and apprehended irregular migrants in particular can offer rich portraits of migrant flows and stocks in fine detail and at minimal additional cost. Although the difficulties to be faced for extracting statistical data from these data sources are real, such sources can help produce timely and detailed statistics on movement. As mentioned below, they may also yield valuable anonymous data on individual migrants (microdata). Bilateral and regional cooperation is also essential since it is not uncommon for origin-

Smuggling and Trafficking in Central and Eastern Europe. A report by the United States government (GAO 2006: 18-21) points to work by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as a model for systematic collection of administrative data on human trafficking.

Who?

Mining this rich vein of migration-relevant data requires closer cooperation between ministries in charge of migration and national statistical offices. There are tremendous gains to such cooperation: the agencies that regulate migration have rich data and close links to policy formation, and national

nical feasibility of the more global exercise the Commission recommends. Some technical issues remain to be addressed, including working around the possible imperfections in some countries' LFS data, especially in the coverage of non-nationals, and deciding on data storage and interface details to adequately address all countries' requirements for confidentiality and data security. The Commission believes that these issues can be addressed, and that

migration and development. When a country shifts its migration policy away from family-reunification visas toward skilled-worker visas, for example, as the United States and the European Union are likely to do in years to come, what is the effect on the skill mix of people who move? There are few sources

following September 2001. There are feasible ways to resume production of this public good while maintaining strict standards of confidentiality. These methods, successfully employed by census bureaus around the world, include the anonymous reporting of data on a limited number of traits for each individual, the restriction of reporting to a representative sample rather than all individuals, and the use of random perturbation methods to further enhance privacy while maintaining broad statistical accuracy for most uses. The same methods could be extended to include temporary migrants as well, and could

countries of destination (Italy and Spain) (Schoorl et al. 2000).¹⁸ However, the lack of an appropriate sampling frame to perform the stratification will continue to be a limiting factor unless future population censuses include key questions to identify migrant households.

Implementing this recommendation in countries with a lower prevalence of migration in the overall population may, then, require the minor effort of adding one or two questions to the national census on the migration history of each household. This would help identify areas to oversample in the search for migrant households. To identify areas rich in emigrants, surveys could ask, for example, "How many of your children have lived outside the country at any point in the past, or live outside the country now?" To identify areas rich in immigrants, surveys could ask, "How many people living in this household were born in another country?"¹⁹ Such information would make better migration surveys possible at a lower cost by generating a narrow sampling frame to facilitate targeted migration surveys.

The Commission suggests the following basic questions as a candidate list of desirable, tested, feasible questions to include on any household survey seeking to gather better information on linkages between migration and development. The list is not exhaustive, and some commissioners feel that some questions deserve higher priority than others, but many commissioners believe that a core set of migration-related survey questions should correspond roughly to this list:

1. Previous residence: How many years have you lived in this village/town/city?
 - a. When you came to this place, from which province/district did you move? (If moved from abroad, record name of country.)
 - b. In which province/district were you born? (If born abroad, record name of country.)

2. Returned migrants: In the past 5 years, did you ever migrate to another country for at least 3 months for work, to seek work, or to live?
 - a. In which year was your most recent migration to another country for work?
 - b. To what country and city did you migrate the last time?
 - c. How many months did you stay in that country this last time?
 - d. What was your main occupation while in {country}?
 - e. What was your main occupation before migrating?

¹⁸ A joint project of Eurostat and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute: <http://www.nidi.knaw.nl/web/html/pushpull>

¹⁹ The most useful exact form and wording of each of these questions would vary in different settings.

Longer-term efforts must focus on developing countries for at least two reasons. First, virtually all countries of the world are migrant countries of origin, destination, and transit to some degree—and around half of all migrants from developing countries live in other developing countries (Ratha and Shaw 2007). If we focus research too much on more developed destination countries because of their statistical strengths, we will miss important parts of the development story. Second, even in cases in which the principal migration destinations are more developed countries, it can be difficult to get a complete picture of emigration from an important origin country simply by combining disparate destination-country data. Filipino workers, for example, go in large numbers to Saudi Arabia, the United States, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Standardization of those countries' migration data can be very difficult; in the long run, a rigorous picture of such movement is best established by statistics collected uniformly in the Philippines.

An important first step in this process of building lasting institutional capacity is the convening of national taskforces in each developing country. Such taskforces bring together national policymakers, statisticians, researchers, and migration specialists to discuss their common interests in having better migration data and to decide which steps should take priority.

In most settings, the initial job of such a taskforce should be to commission or prepare a National Migration Data Report, to catalog the disparate sources of existing administrative, census, and survey data pertinent to migration, from governmental and sometimes non-governmental sources. Perrin and Poulain (2008) present a model of such a report for the Ukraine.

The five recommendations will only go so far. Long-term improvement requires greater statistical capacity in developing countries.

in itself generate new data in the short-term, it will help to make migration policymakers more aware of the dynamics of migration and will help to make a case for addressing data gaps over the long term through investments in research capacity and data compilation systems.

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