Improving statistics on international labour migration at the global level: Standards, data availability and global estimates

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Statistics on international labour migration are among the most challenging data to produce. International migrant workers represent a small share of the population and comprise a wide diversity of groups, making it not only difficult to define statistically but also difficult to capture in data collections not specifically designed for this purpose. Regular data sources including population censuses, household surveys and administrative records usually provide only a partial picture of international labour migration in a country. As international migration becomes more integrated as a catalyst for development in global accords including the UN Global Compact on Migration, the SDG 2030 agenda, and the ILO Fair Migration Agenda, the need for comprehensive, reliable and regular statistics on the different groups of migrant workers has become more pressing.

The ILO, as the UN specialized agency devoted to promoting social justice and decent work, has since its founding in 1919, promoted the rights of migrant workers through the setting of international standards for the governance of labour migration and protection of migrant workers[1]. Towards promoting evidence-based policy making, the ILO has further established a global programme of work to improve the availability and quality of labour migration statistics at national, regional and global levels. Key areas of work include statistical standard setting through the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS); annual compilation of a core set of official national statistics and indicators for global dissemination; preparation of global and regional estimates on international migrant workers; and technical assistance and capacity building targeting producers as well as users of international labour migration statistics. This paper provides an overview of ILOs programme of work[2] to close the data gap on international labour migration for informed policymaking.

The 20th ICLS Guidelines on statistics of international labour migration

International statistical standards on labour related topics are prepared by the ILO through a consultative tripartite process that culminates with their submission for endorsement by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS). In 2018, the 20th ICLS endorsed the *Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration[3]*, which provide the first set of internationally agreed recommendations to support countries in developing their official national statistics on the topic.[4] The Guidelines specify the objectives and scope of the

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[1] See: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/standards/lang--en/index.htm
[2] More information is available at: https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/labour-migration/
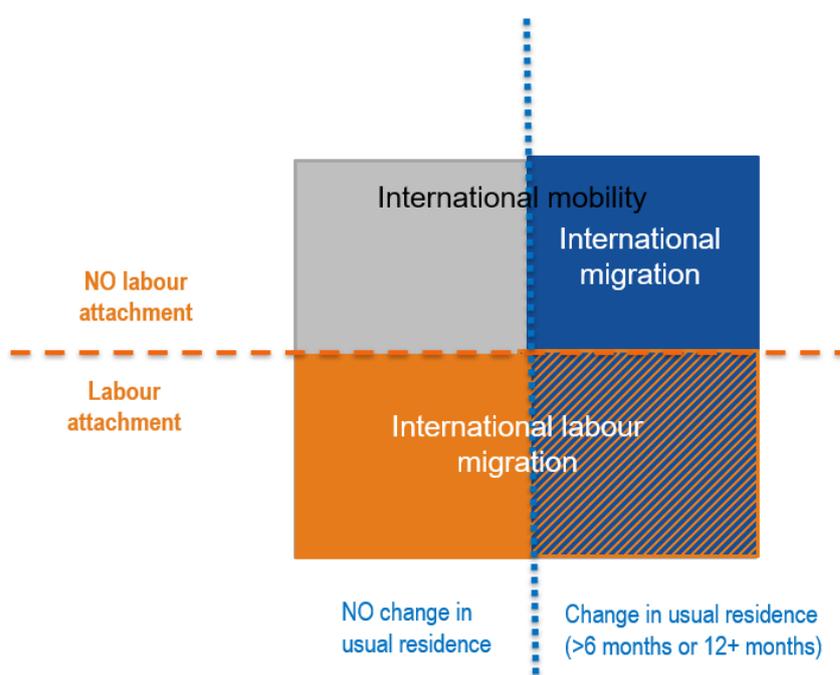[3] See: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_648922.pdf
[4] The development of these Guidelines by the ILO followed the outcomes of a review of the Employment Statistics Programme endorsed in 2008 by the 39th Meeting of the United Nations Statistics Commission, and of the

statistics; the main concepts, definitions and classifications; the data sources and priority data collection items; as well as the core indicators and tabulations to prioritize. As the first set of internationally agreed Guidelines on the topic, they also identify key measurement issues requiring further development and call on the ILO to collaborate with interested partners to promote the implementation of the Guidelines and generate good practice for wide dissemination.

The scope of the 20th ICLS Guidelines is coherent with the recently revised UN conceptual framework on international migration and international mobility statistics (2021)[5], but further complement the UN framework by focusing on the set of statistics required for the fair and effective governance of international labour migration. To this end, the 20th ICLS Guidelines place emphasis on the set of statistics and indicators needed to assess the magnitude, patterns and process of international labour migration; to shed light on the socio-economic characteristics of migrant workers; to monitor their working conditions and equitable treatment; and to study the relative status of the disadvantaged groups of international migrant workers that are of specific policy concern. The Guidelines further promote recognition of international labour migration as an integral part of labour market statistics.

Graph 1 – Relationship between the ICLS Guidelines international labour migration and UN framework on international migration and mobility statistics

The 20th ICLS Guidelines situate international labour migration as a subset of international mobility[6] where it refers to "*all movements that cross international borders and involve a labour attachment in the country of destination*". The main element to determine whether a person is an international migrant worker or not is the concept of *labour attachment abroad*. This concept is operationalized differently for stocks and flows reflecting the different stages of the labour migration process. In the case of stocks, labour attachment abroad refers to being engaged in the *labour force* (as employed or unemployed) in a destination country, thus maintaining coherence with labour market statistics. In the case of flows, it refers to entering the destination country with the purpose to work. A conceptual framework to reconcile labour migration stocks and flows is further outlined in the Guidelines. Additionally, to support integration with population statistics, the ICLS Guidelines distinguish between international migrant workers who change country of usual residence, and those who do not, such as frontier workers. Graph 1 summarizes the relationship between the UN framework on statistics on international migration and mobility and the 20th ICLS Guidelines on international labour migration statistics.

The 20th ICLS guidelines further identify three groups or components of international labour migration, for which separate statistics are required to support monitoring and policymaking.

- International migrant workers: international migrants (foreign-born or foreign citizen) who are either (i) in the labour force of the country where they are usual residents, or (ii) have labour attachment in a country where they are not usual residents.

- For-work international migrants: persons who entered the country for the purpose of work. The intention to undertake or seek work must be present and declared at the time of entry in the country (official immigration registers, other documents…)

- Return international migrants: current resident (native-born persons or citizens) who previously were international migrant workers in another country.

A fourth group recognized in the Guidelines as of critical relevance for future methodological development are "Citizens or native-born persons working abroad".

Following the ICLS mandate, ILO is currently working with selected countries across the different regions of the world on the implementation of the 20th ICLS Guidelines through different sources, including population censuses, administrative records and household surveys, to develop measurement methodologies, accumulate evidence, document case studies and generate good practice with a view to support wider implementation through knowledge sharing as well as further refinement of the Guidelines.

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[6] The UN conceptual framework defines international mobility as all movements that cross international borders within a given year.

The International Labour Migration Statistics database and the main available indicators

Since 2018, the ILO carries out an annual global compilation of a core set of indicators on international labour migration to disseminate the latest national data available through its International Labour Migration Statistics (ILMS) database[7]. The ILMS database is a unique global repository of 64 indicators on stock and flows relating to international labour migration. Table 1 list the main indicators and relevant disaggregation variables. The indicators on stocks and flows of international migrant workers allow to describe their numbers and sociodemographic characteristics, their situation in the labour market and employment patterns, their main origin and destination countries and the magnitude of inward migration flows. The characteristics of international migrants can be compared to that of non-migrants for most of the indicators. The indicator on inflows of nationals returned measures the annual return migration by main countries of previous residence. The remaining indicators relate to emigration, describing the number of nationals residing abroad, and the magnitude of outward migration flow of nationals. The database is populated through the compilation of tables submitted annually by National Statistical Offices and relevant ministries. Where possible, the data compiled is completed with indicators produced by the ILO from household survey datasets made available by countries.

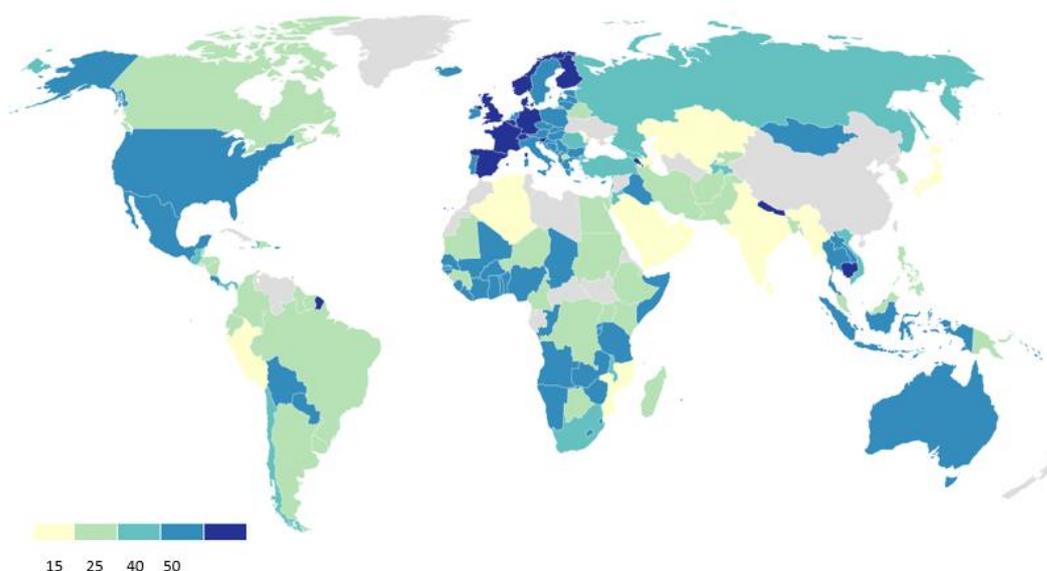**Table 1 – Summary of the indicators available in the ILMS database**

Main indicators	Disaggregation variables
Working-age population	Place of birth or citizenship, sex, education, age
Employment	Place of birth or citizenship, sex, education, age, economic activity, occupation, status in employment
Unemployment	Place of birth or citizenship, sex, education, age
Labour force	Place of birth or citizenship, sex, education, age
Mean nominal monthly earnings	Place of birth or citizenship, sex
Migrant specific indicators	
Working-age migrant population	Sex, top 5 countries of origin
Employed migrants	Sex, top 5 countries of origin
Inflow of working-age migrants	Sex, education
Inflow of employed migrants	Sex, economic activity, occupation
Inflow of nationals returned from abroad	Sex, country of previous residence
Stock of nationals abroad	Sex, country of residence
Outflow of nationals	Sex, country of destination, education
Outflow of nationals for employment	Sex, country of destination, education, economic activity, occupation

As of January 2023, 168 countries had reported data to the ILMS database. Countries have different level of data availability from countries reporting a wide range of indicator, such as Armenia (64 indicators) and Fiji (63), to countries reporting only one indicator (see Graph 2). Household surveys are the main sources of data disseminated, followed by Population Census. Data from administrative sources is limited and mainly consist in flow indicators. The availability of data has been increasing over the years, due to countries' efforts in

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[7] https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/

strengthening their different data sources and improving the quality of the information available, with support from ILO and other key partners. However, data gaps remain important as many countries are not currently reporting information on basic indicators, such as the number of international migrants in the working-age population or the number of international migrants in employment, and flow indicators continue to be scarce. A limited number of countries report information on inflow of return international migrants, stock of nationals residing abroad and outflow of nationals for employment abroad.

Graph 2 – Data availability in the ILMS database (as of January 2023)

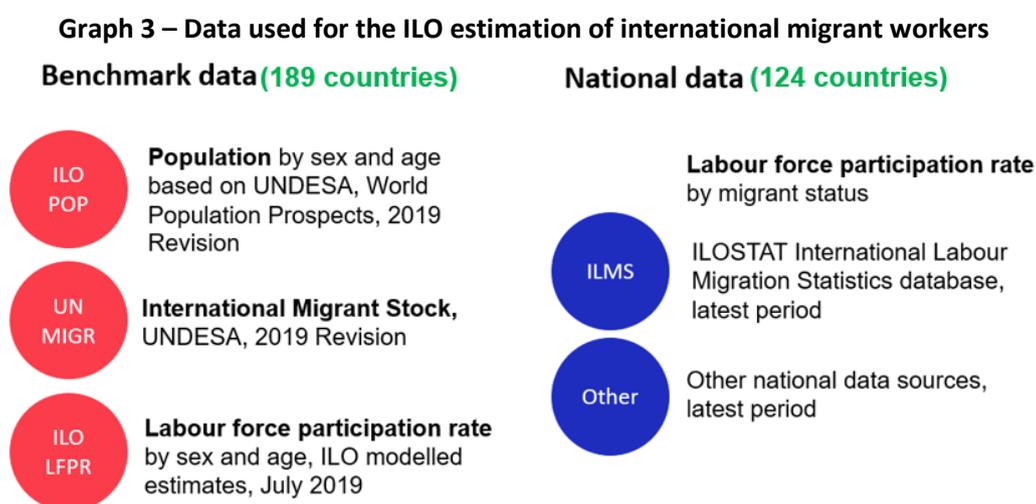**The ILO Global and regional estimates of International Migrant Workers**

The ILO has further produced and published global and regional estimates on international migrant workers in 2015, 2018 and 2021. This includes global estimates of the stock of international migrant workers along with their distribution by sex and age group, and by sector of economic activity, as well as stock estimates by sex at regional and sub-regional levels. The global and regional estimates provide unique and detailed information on the stock of migrant workers around the world and recent trends for high-level advocacy and informed policymaking at the regional and global levels. The results are disseminated in the form of a detailed report[8].

The ILO global estimates on international migrant workers are produced using a combination of data (Graph 3) that includes estimates of the total population and the total stock of international migrants prepared by UN DESA (World Population Prospects[9] and International

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[8] 2021 report: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_808935/lang--en/index.htm; 2018 report: https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_652001/lang--en/index.htm; 2015 report: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_436343/lang--en/index.htm
[9] https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/

migrant stock dataset[10] respectively) and modelled estimates of the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of the working-age population prepared by the ILO (ILO modelled estimates), that constitute the benchmark data available for all countries included in the global estimation (189 countries in the latest edition of the estimates based on 2019 data); and, additionally, national data on LFPR of international migrants, that are available only for a limited number of countries (124 countries in the latest edition). The latter data are compiled by the ILO based on a variety of official national sources, in particular national labour force surveys, submitted by countries and made available in the ILO International Labour Migration Statistics (ILMS) database. These existing country-level data are re-estimated to ensure consistency with the benchmark data and account for limitations in coverage of national data sources. In countries where national data are not available, the labour force participation rate of international migrants are imputed using methodologies that have varied across the past three editions of the estimates due to different thematic focus and different data availability. In 2021, the cross-product ratio of the international migrant status and the labour force status was the parameter used for estimation[11].

Graph 3 – Data used for the ILO estimation of international migrant workers
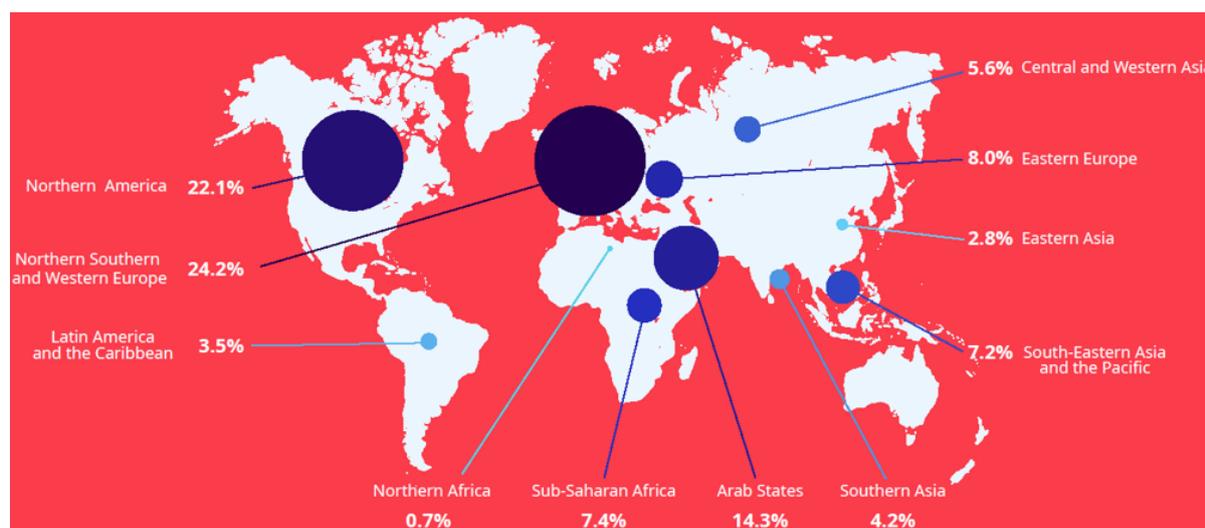

Source: ILO Global and regional estimates of international migrant workers, 2021

The 2021 edition of the ILO report, that has 2019 as reference year, put the estimate of international migrant workers at 169 million, representing 62% of all international migrants and 4.9% of the global labour force. 58% of international migrant workers are men. The majority of international migrant workers (86%) are prime-age adults, aged 25 to 64 years old, and they are mainly employed in services (66%). Graph 4 shows the estimated sub-regional distribution of international migrant workers, and the importance of Northern Southern and Western Europe and Northern America as destinations.

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[10] https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock
[11] The methodology is detailed in Chapter 2 of the 2021 report.

Graph 4 – Sub-regional distribution of the international migrant workers in 2019

Northern America 22.1%

Northern Southern and Western Europe 24.2%

Latin America and the Caribbean 3.5%

5.6% Central and Western Asia

8.0% Eastern Europe

2.8% Eastern Asia

7.2% South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific

Northern Africa 0.7%

Sub-Saharan Africa 7.4%

Arab States 14.3%

Southern Asia 4.2%

Source: ILO Global and regional estimates of international migrant workers, 2021

The next edition of the ILO report will be published in 2024. The estimation methodology is currently being reviewed for improvement in the next edition, to take account of newly available data, the high demand for more disaggregated information and the importance of alignment with ILO estimation methods for selected headline labour market indicators. Potential improvements will include the use of more input data from the 2020 Population Census round, additional distribution information at the sub-regional level estimates, and estimates of international migrant workers in the care economy.

ILO technical assistance and capacity building programme

To build capacity and promote knowledge sharing, the ILO implements a technical assistance and capacity building programme that includes an annual course on *Measuring and Analysing Labour Migration*, implemented through the ILO International Training Center[12]. The course is primarily targeted to official producers of labour migration statistics from countries and key stakeholders at national, regional and global levels, including users from government, media, research and academic institutions, and development partners. This annual course is complemented with capacity building courses tailored to meet specific regional and country level needs, as part of development cooperation projects and/or partnerships including with national statistical offices[13], sub-regional and regional organizations ILO provides direct technical assistance to national statistical offices through its Global Technical Team in Statistics, that includes Statisticians in headquarters and Regional Labour Statisticians covering Africa, the Americas, Arab States and the Asia and Pacific Region.

Final remarks

International labour migration has been increasingly recognized in the international development arena as a catalyst that can accelerate progress towards achieving inclusive, sustainable development. At the same time, without managed, fair and ethical migration and

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[12] See: https://www.itcilo.org/courses/e-learning-measuring-and-analysing-labour-migration
[13] See: http://www.ilokostat-ilms.net/?ckattempt=1

decent work policies that are grounded on evidence, international migrant workers remain a group at high risk of exploitation and abuse, and the potential of labour migration to benefit international migrant workers and their origin and destination countries cannot be harnessed. Towards promoting evidence-based monitoring and policymaking in labour migration, the ILO has established a comprehensive programme of work to support the development of statistics on the different components of international labour migration, through methodological development and statistical standard setting, continuous official national data compilation, preparation of global and regional estimates, and technical assistance and capacity-building. Further developments, advocacy, and investments are needed by all main stakeholders in origin and destination countries, including by official data producers and users, social partners, researchers and development partners to improve the availability and use of data on international labour migration for evidence-base monitoring and planning.