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Migration statistics: Social and economic impacts with respect to the labour market

Session 5. Long-run Issues: Measures to improve efficiency

From documentation of the problems towards finding solutions

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Summary

This paper considers some recent efforts to improve the comparability and coverage of international migration statistics. It argues that collaboration between data suppliers and users and policy officials, underpinned by EU legislation and supported by an injection of financial and human resources at national and EU level, is the key to achieving improvements in the data.

Background

EU policy on asylum and immigration has been developed at inter-governmental and Community level, whilst the data used to inform this policy development have been (and will continue to be) produced at national level from a wide range of sources. The demand for migration statistics, increasingly driven by the EU policy agenda, seems to have never been higher but variations in data quality and definitions have created a basic problem for EU officials wishing to inform policy makers,using harmonised data on migration in the EU. Contradictions thrown up by the policy tensions resulting Member States' resistance to the development of common policies have often thrown practical barriers in the path of those wishing to build an EU-wide network of data suppliers. The result has been that alongside the policy importance of the topic at national and EU level, the aim of improving data quality has often been a poor cousin to the imperative of providing figures to support various policy initiatives. The long hard grind of improving the system and the scientific concerns of demographers and statisticians have seemed until recently to take second place to the immediacy of changing needs for up-to-date figures.

In EU decision-making and policy circles, there is now a recognition that the apparently contradictory needs for data which are both as reliable and as timely as possible need to be reconciled and that priority must be given to improving statistical data on migration. The latest official recognition of this is evident in the action plan under the Hague Programme, agreed on 31st May between the Council and the Commission.[1] The action plan includes specific points on measures to improve the common analysis of migratory phenomena in all their aspects (reinforcing the collection, provision, exchange and efficient use of up-to-date information and data).

With respect to statistics, action is being taken in two key ways. Firstly there are moves which could help to make possible the development of a robust statistical system, with the proposed introduction of legislation on statistics.[2] The legislation will greatly increase the potential for the production of Community statistics. Secondly the legislation will be supported by a comprehensive body of work on data sources and definitions, which has been comprehensively updated and consolidated in the work of the THESIM project, led by Michel Poulain[3].

Documentation of the data problems

Attempts to improve international migration statistics and to improve comparability at the international level first appeared within the discussions of the International Statistical Institute more than a century ago (Herm, 2005 forthcoming). Now, within the EU, there are signs that we are moving towards a solution to some of the well documented problems of data sources and definitions, lack of harmonisation and comparability, fully rehearsed elsewhere and in other papers in this seminar. As a result of sustained and intensive research efforts during the past fifteen years, there is now a high level of awareness of the problems in both the scientific and policy communities. On the other hand, although a whole patchwork of projects has been carried out on various aspects of the problems relating to definitions, data quality and gaps in the system, much of this work was carried out by individuals or single teams of researchers, funded by different parts of the European Commission and/or national authorities. Consequently, the possibilities of gleaning useful and reliable data from particular existing sources have been explored sometimes more than once, some projects have repeated work carried out previously, whilst many of the findings have not been collated in such a way as to move forward the agenda of finding viable solutions. In fact, at times it has seemed possible that the scientific community could continue indefinitely with this work, documenting an infinite variety of gaps and inconsistencies in both data and the national and international systems for decades to come. Thankfully, this situation is beginning to change, with

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[1] Plan d'action du Conseil et de la Commission mettant en oevre le programme de La Haye visant a renforcer la liberte, le securite et la justice dans l'Union europeene (9246/2/05 REV2).

[2] Proposal for a REGULATION (EC) No .../.. OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of [...] on Community statistics on migration and international protection.

[3] THESIM (Towards Harmonised European Statistics on International Migration) is a project funded by the European Commission's DG Research under the FP6 Programme. The project team is led by Michel Poulain at UCL (Louvain-la -Neuve)

improved co-ordination of activities and an increased willingness on the part of policy-makers to acknowledge and tackle the data problems.

A step forward

The THESIM project represents a step forward in practice from the dismal and dispiriting task of documenting the problems. It is an example of how the academic community, national officials and EU policy makers can develop strong collaborative working links and take action to improve the current situation. The final report of the project, which will be submitted to the European Commission at the end of June 2005, represents real progress, not least because in addition to bringing together data suppliers and users at the national and EU level, it has also involved the creation of a strong international network of key academic experts on migration statistics in the EU.

In addition to a comprehensive set of overview reports on various topics, including the history of international attempts to improve migration statistics, 25 country reports have been prepared, each of which documents in detail the sources of international migration data, related administrative procedures and registration systems in each of the Member States of the European Union and the national systems for producing statistical data on migration. The information covers all identifiable aspects of the system in each country and assesses the capacity of the national system to produce statistics which will meet the requirements of the forthcoming EU Regulation on migration statistics. Most importantly, it identifies for each country, for all data types covered by the Regulation, the data sources which can meet the legislation's requirements and those which have the potential to do so. The project team has carried out an impressive task in little over a year, completing a substantial amount of intensive work in all countries. The final report will be an invaluable tool to help national officials and the European commission to implement the Regulation and any subsequent implementing measures. It will provide up-to-date information for national and EU officials in Eurostat and in the DG Freedom, Security and Justice and for the European Migration Network. Dissemination plans include ensuring that everyone working in the field will have access to the report's finding and recommendations. The intention is that the report, once accepted by the Commission, will be published and widely distributed throughout Europe during the second half of 2005 to data suppliers and users. It contains scientific considerations and practical proposals for the collection of all types of migration data, in conformity with the requirements of the forthcoming legislation.

PROMINSTAT PROJECT

Another EU-wide initiative led by the ICMPD (International Centre for Migration Policy Development) is the PROMINSTAT project (Promoting Comparative Quantitative Research on Migration and Integration in Europe), which has been submitted to the FP6 programme. PROMINSTAT is designed to build on the activities of the collaborative network which now exists across Europe and to draw on the strengths of a network of 19 partners with expertise in migration and integration issues. The hope is to develop further the progress made in the COMPSTAT project (Comparing National Data Sources in the

Field of Migration and Integration), which created in 2001/2002 an online database of information on migration and integration for 8 countries. As has been done in the THESIM project, the network will also update descriptions of national data collection systems, in this case on the wider field of migration and integration.

Hope for the Future?

The whole body of work funded by the Commission is culminating in the creation of the basis to now make progress in a real sense, to move towards creating a European system for the production of up-to-date and comparable data.

On-going monitoring of problems with migration data will continue to be important, as will the invaluable contribution of user feedback, but these recent initiatives demonstrate the importance of moving on from simply carrying out investigations into what is wrong. Progress will only be made if further work in this field continues to take account of the limitations of the system as well as the limitations of the data. The work of Eurostat is at the core of the problem. It has to meet two needs, the immediate and often changing policy needs of the EU institutions and the on-going work to provide public information in the form of community statistics.

Finally, we can see that the new emphasis on transparency in the policy field is being matched by improved availability and increased use of the data, improving the quality of user-feedback. In order to build on this, data suppliers in general and Eurostat in particular need to be actively monitoring policy developments and user needs and to anticipate future demand for new variables. For this to be effective, active collaboration between the statisticians and the policy makers is needed, together with a requirement on Eurostat to produce and disseminate reliable timely data. In order to do this work in a rigorous, consistent and timely fashion, the immediate priority must be to provide Eurostat and national data suppliers with further resourcing, both financial and human (see Kraler in THESIM recommendations, 2005 forthcoming).