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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

From 19 to 21 January 2020, the second International Forum on Migration Statistics (IFMS) took place in Cairo, Egypt. As the only global meeting focusing specifically on how to improve data and statistics on migration, the Forum promotes dialogue across a range of actors. The IFMS is jointly organized by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). This second edition of the Forum was hosted by the Egyptian Government under the auspices of the African Union (AU), building on the first Forum hosted by OECD in Paris in January 2018.

The conference involved over 700 participants from 99 countries, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders. There were six plenary and 50 parallel sessions involving experts and organizational leaders in the area of migration data and statistics. The sessions focused on a range of topics across six themes:[1]

1. Strengthening data for policy

2. Capacity development and financing

3. Data collection and innovation

4. Measuring progress on the SDGs

5. Cooperation and data governance

6. Improving the availability of data on migrants in vulnerable situations

[1] Paper and panel proposals were assessed by the IFMS 2020 Programme Committee on the following criteria: Full application according to the submission guidelines; Importance of the topic to advancing the statistical agenda on migration and its impacts; Credential and experience of the session organizer and proposed panelists (session) or of presenter (paper); Gender balance of proposed panelists; Adequacy of available experience and knowledge on the topic allowing exploration of the proposed issues in sufficient detail and with reference to concrete examples; Complementarity of the topic with other accepted session proposals, to allow for a diverse and well-balanced programme.

Sessions under these themes explored issues around data and statistics on various aspects of migration, including migrant health, public opinion, integration, labour migration, migration and the environment, migration and development, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and forced displacement.

Highlighting the theme of "Capacity development and financing", IOM, AU and Statistics Sweden, in collaboration with OECD and UN DESA, also organized a workshop on "Strengthening migration data capacities in Africa: Supporting the 2030 Agenda, Agenda 2063 and the AU Migration Policy Framework for Africa". The workshop was held in Cairo one day after the Forum, on 22 January 2020.

The Forum, which took place at a time of intense global attention on migration issues, recognized the need for timely, accessible, accurate, reliable and comparable data and statistics on migration to reflect the rich complexity of population movements and to inform decision-making, policy formulation and public discourse. Momentum for improving migration statistics has never been stronger, and calls for better data from states and the international community have become more vocal in recent years. Both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) have played a significant role in boosting this momentum. Meanwhile, data have become a priority for the UN system as a whole; a UN Data Strategy is now under development and will be finalized in 2020. Data is central to the work of the IFMS partners; for example, IOM is finalizing its first-ever data strategy to set out objectives and key priorities in this area.

KEY MESSAGES

The commitment to improving migration data and statistics is growing at national, regional and international levels; overall the evidence base continues to expand, and the available information is often being used in innovative ways. Many presentations during the second edition of the Forum highlighted successful initiatives to exploit existing migration data, often from administrative sources, either to generate new official statistics or to adjust and complement existing figures.

It is clear that the landscape of migration data and statistics is changing rapidly, bringing new sets of opportunities and challenges. Many sessions highlighted that the volume and variety of available digital information are growing at an unprecedented rate, and that today large quantities of data relevant to migration are being produced by private entities. Machine learning and artificial intelligence techniques offer possibilities to gain new insights on migration, and new forms of data, including call detail records and other communications metadata, are opening up possibilities for the timely monitoring of population movements. If solutions to practical and ethical issues around data collection, access and privacy can be found, these new data sources have great potential to inform public policy formulation and decision-making on migration.

The Forum showcased promising examples of how new data and technological innovation have been used to address specific and persistent data gaps, for example, those related to population displacement in times of disaster.

Many participants underlined the need to create incentives for new public-private partnerships to help explore ways of using new data sources effectively. Such collaboration can help to explore ways of using new data sources effectively. Public-private partnerships will be essential for advancing the collection, analysis and management of new data sources while building a robust data infrastructure and governance framework to address issues around data security, privacy and ethical standards.

Reflecting on the history of work on migration data and statistics, many participants noted that the challenges faced today are similar to those of years past. Moreover, many of the recommendations offered to address these challenges also remain the same. This reality shows that while there are many exciting ideas and examples of progress, there has been a lack of systematic, sustained and ultimately transformative action in these areas. Given that most traditional migration data are still produced, held and used by countries, action is required in particular at the national level. Political engagement is needed to catalyze action on data, which in turn will only come with greater understanding of the benefits of improving migration data on the part of states and other actors, including donors.

Finally, as the number of initiatives to improve migration data around the world increases, it becomes both more important and more difficult for actors to follow all that is happening and to learn from each other, especially for national statistical offices (NSOs). The opportunity for practitioners to learn directly from each other can help catalyze more rapid and meaningful progress in this area. Peer-to-peer learning among migration data practitioners from around the world, in particular for those in NSOs and elsewhere in government, is key. More platforms and networks are needed to allow practitioners' voices to be heard and help them learn from the experiences of their peers.

THE WAY FORWARD

In the coming months, IOM, OECD and UN DESA will organize a number of follow-up events in the margins of upcoming meetings on data and statistics, including the annual session of the United Nations Statistical Commission in March and the 2020 World Data Forum in October. There will also be efforts to capture and disseminate the vast amount of knowledge presented at IFMS 2020.

By creating additional spaces for exchange of ideas, the Forum's organizers hope to encourage ongoing dialogue over the two years between IFMS 2020 and IFMS 2022, helping to establish building blocks for meaningful and sustainable progress on migration data and statistics over the coming years and decades.

Forum participants noted nevertheless that significant data gaps remain in certain areas. Many are long-standing gaps related to basic data and statistics on migration, such as information on the number of migrants living in a population at a given moment (stocks), as well as the annual number of migrants moving between countries (flows). Comparable data are not readily available on many important aspects of migration at the global level. For example, participants highlighted urgent needs for migration data disaggregated by age and sex; for data on indicators of health, well-being and areas of sustainable development disaggregated by migratory status; for better comparative and longitudinal data on migration and the environment; and for standardized data on human trafficking; among others. Many participants noted that relevant migration data are often available within countries, but that they often come from disparate sources with no systematic means of sharing across platforms. The need for sub-national data on migration was often mentioned, given that the impacts of migration, and programmes and policies addressing these, are today highly localized.

Many sessions underlined that beyond data collection, how migration data are used is significant. Several speakers highlighted that migration data are not just numbers; they offer valuable insights and have individual stories behind them. To help convey these narratives, skillful communication of migration data is key. Effective analysis of migration data can help to address country-specific needs and adopt evidence-based policies across domains of migration governance. Further, the responsible dissemination of migration data and related analyses, including through awareness-raising, advocacy and meaningful engagement with media actors, is needed to communicate complex issues and dispel misperceptions about migrants and migration.

In recent years, there has been much interest in addressing migration data issues through specialized capacity building (often also termed capacity development). Capacity building in the area of migration data and statistics has become a focus for many actors, in particular international agencies and regional bodies. Unfortunately, this work has sometimes led to duplication of effort and poor coordination of activities. Carried out with limited resources, it is not clear how effective these efforts have been. Moving forward, there is a need for greater coherence and comprehensiveness on migration data initiatives: all involved actors should coordinate their activities and build partnerships, working together to ensure an effective and sustainable approach to capacity building.

https://www.iom.int/ifms/

For general inquiries about IFMS 2020 please write to:
IFMS2020@iom.int