International Workshop on Methodological Challenges for the Study of Return and Circular Migration

TEMPER Team

The International Workshop on Methodological Challenges for the Study of Return and Circular Migration took place in Madrid in January 2015. The event was part of the TEMPER project (temperproject.eu), which aims at providing empirical information that allows a better assessment of the feasibility of temporary and circular migration programmes as a credible option to manage migration to the EU.

The event, organised by the coordinator of the project Dr. Amparo González-Ferrer (Permanent Researcher at the Population Department of the Spanish National Research Council, Madrid), focused on the conceptualisation and operationalization of return and circular migration in different statistical sources. Representatives of international organisations and national statistical offices contributed with presentations on the scope and limitations of data on circular and return migration (EUROSTAT, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Senegal), as well as experts on international migration from Argentina, Colombia and Ukraine.

1 This report has been elaborated thanks to the generous contributions of the following speakers and participants: Giampaolo Lanzieri (Eurostat), Antonio Argüeso (INE), Alicia Maguid and Marcela Cerrutti (CENEP), Oleksiy Pozniak and Iryna Maidanik (Ptoukha Institute), Nicoleta Caragea (NIS), Cheikh Tidiane Ndiaye (ANSD), Enrico Tucci (ISTAT), Ilka Steiner (UNIGE), Tomas Johansson (Statistics Sweden), Silje Vatne (Statistics Norway), Jean-Pierre Cassarino (EUI), Inmaculada Serrano and Amparo González Ferrer (CSIC), Samir Farid and Giambattista Cantisani (MED-HIMS), Michael Collyer (UoS), William Mejia (UTP), Ramón Mahía and Anda David (UAM) and Cris Beauchemin (INED).
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I. Challenges in defining and measuring circular migration and first empirical examples with Population Register data in EU countries

The interest in measuring return and circular migration mainly derives from the increasing policy attention to circulation as a potential new way of managing migration, which might serve the best interest of the migrants, their countries of origin and their countries of destination. However, in the European context, EU policy documents have never provided a clear definition of circular migration that permits to measuring in a precise manner its incidence and characteristics. Researchers and practitioners involved in this workshop discussed the major challenges in agreeing on a common definition, which should be measurable with the statistical sources currently available and, at the same time, policy relevant. The participants emphasized the need for any definition of circular migration to be as inclusive as possible, but also strict enough to be meaningful in different contexts and easily distinguishable from other types of migration already defined.

First, circulation automatically refers to the idea of repetition. However, if circular migration is something different from repeated migration, it is important to specify how they differ from each other. Repeated migration refers, according to the International Organisation for Migration, to “the movement of a person who, after having returned to his or her country of origin, again emigrates”, regardless of whether the country of destination is the same one as in previous migration or not. Thus, one way of distinguishing repeated migration from circular migration would be to add the condition of the same destination as in previous emigration.

Second, a feasible measurement of circular migration is also conditioned by current statistical systems. The main statistical sources at hand to measure circular migration are population registers, where information on migrations is based to a greater or lesser extent on voluntary registrations and de-registrations made initially by migrants themselves, and sometimes further corrected or completed by the statistical offices. However, the country of destination is often not declared/required in these sources. For instance, in Norway, 33% of
emigrations in 2013 had an unknown country of destination with an even higher percentage among emigrations of foreign-born individuals. In Spain, the country of destination was personally reported only in 13 per cent of all records; for the remaining 87 percent, destination was imputed by the Statistical Office. These numbers clearly illustrate the notable difficulty in measuring circular migration if the country of destination is expected to be taken into account in the definition.

Third, the concept of repeated migration does not make reference to the frequency of successive moves, and there is no specification either on the length of stay abroad (or at origin) for each migration spell. But according to Giampaolo Lanzieri (EUROSTAT) and most of the attendants, the frequency of movements and the length of stay abroad are the two crucial dimensions for the statistical definition of circular migration. It would be necessary to define a minimum period of time elapse between each migration, and the total period of time over which repeated migration needs to occur to be considered as part of circular migration (within one year, three, five, ten or thirty?). However, information on durations of successive stays is not always available in population registers. If short stays following repeated migrations cannot be identified, the reported incidence of circular migration will be underestimated.

In practice, in most cases, registrations and de-registrations in population registers only include information on changes in usual residence, which means stays abroad of intended/actual duration of 12 months or more. However, in some cases, like the Norwegian or the Swiss studies presented during the Workshop, thresholds of only 6 and even 3 months are included. Regarding the period of time over which repeated migrations will be considered part of the same cycle of circular migration, the different studies presented during the Workshop also differed substantially. In the Swedish and the Norwegian analyses, repeated migrations over forty years were considered as potential components of circular migration, while in the Swiss study individuals’ repeated migrations were followed and counted only during five years. The different criteria and the implications on incidence are clear.
Apart from these difficulties, the term circular migration has appeared in the Commission policy documents almost exclusively referring to migration from third countries to the EU. However, any statistical definition of circular migration should be applicable to certain moves regardless of the origin/destination countries, even if distinctions between intra-EU and extra-EU circular migration might be possible, desirable and policy relevant. Moreover, circulation is expected to be higher precisely among citizens of the EU who face no legal restriction to move between the EU Member States and whose countries of origin and destination are relatively close to each other.

However, the studies presented during the Workshop suggested that the overall incidence of circular migration, according to the information available in the Population Registers and regardless of the exact definition utilized in each case, was quite low even when restricting to the experience of EU citizens from neighbour countries.

Examples:

- In Italy, only 34,000 persons (9,000 nationals and 24,000 non-nationals) in the register during 2005 and 2013 had emigrated from Italy more than once. The immense majority (87%) participated in only 3 movements.

- In Sweden, only 1.1% of persons in the register during the period between 1969-2009 had crossed the Swedish border at least three times for periods of stay of 1 year or longer. The correspondent percentage among the foreign born increased up to 6.1%. however, the highest proportion of many migrations (7 or more) was found among people born in other Nordic countries (1.2 %).

- In Norway, only 13% of the persons in the population register between 1971 and 2011 had emigrated from Norway more than once. The correspondent percentage is 9% among immigrants.

- In Switzerland, it was found that 23% of adult German citizens who immigrated during the period between 2002 and 2007 had immigrated more than once during
the five years following their first arrival. However, even among this group of young European neighbour citizens with no legal restrictions of movement, 39% of the cohort stayed in Switzerland during at least five years.

II. Are large-scale surveys a good alternative to study return and circular migration? Examples from previous studies focused on migrant populations from third countries to the EU

Large-scale surveys are more flexible tools than population registers and census data for defining and measuring both return and circular migration. They allow to use several different definitions, from more restrictive to more encompassing ones, and to explore their implications on the actual measurement of both phenomena in terms of incidence and characteristics of the individuals who participate in this type of migration movements. Moreover, as Jean-Pierre Cassarino (EUI, Italy) emphasized during the presentation of his theoretical framework for the analyses of return based on the idea of migration cycles, large-scale surveys allow, for instance, to distinguish between return and expulsion or removal, and to measure the relative incidence of voluntary, non-voluntary and forced return migration.

Despite their greater flexibility, the main quality requirement from surveys is to be based on samples that are statistically representative of their targeted population. But representativeness requires adequate sampling frames, which can only be based on pre-existent register or census data. Thus, if our Population Census and Registers do not include information on overall patterns of return and circulation, or the information they contain is not of good quality (out of date, incomplete for certain groups, etc.), the quality of survey research will equally suffer. Among the previous migrant survey experiences presented during the Workshop, three of them made a special effort to collect representative samples of migrants who had returned from different EU countries to Senegal (MAFE Survey), Morocco (ETS Survey) and Ecuador (NOPOOR Survey).
Cris Beauchemin (INED, France) described the multiple challenges involved in the construction of representative samples of a rare population (return migrants) that is especially hard to find due to the lack of direct sampling frame. MAFE-Senegal utilized the micro-data from the 2002 Census to select census areas with both high and low prevalence of migration, and within each area three strata made of households with non-migrants, current migrants and returnees, respectively. Originally, a limit of two returnees per household was agreed. But the relatively small samples of returnees obtained in Senegal – especially of returnees from Europe (approximately 100 individuals) – led to suppress the limit of 2 returnees per household in the other two MAFE countries: Ghana and DR Congo. However, the final numbers of returnees did not grow substantially. C. Beauchemin also noted that areas of high incidence of out-migration do not necessarily are areas of high incidence of return, which renders particularly uncertain following this strategy to find and interview returned migrants in their countries of origin.

Using the final samples of returnees, MAFE found that less than 25% of Senegalese in European destinations had returned after spending 10 years there, whereas this percentage increased to almost 50% among the Ghanaians and did not even reach 10% among the Congolese. In addition, the different incidence of return between migrants in Africa and European destinations clearly pointed to the crucial role of both distance and immigration policies in hampering or promoting spontaneous return and circulation.

Michael Collyer (University of Sussex, UK) presented the challenges and main results of the Migration and Skills Survey of the European Training Foundation carried out in Armenia, Georgia and Morocco, with particular attention to the difficulties of the sampling strategy for returnees. The population of interest for the returnees survey was defined as anyone who left the country aged 18 or over, had at least three months’ experience of living and working continuously abroad and returned no more than 10 years previously. Given the specificity of this population, a proper sampling frame was not available. For this reason, the initial nationally representative sample of non-migrants was complemented with a snowball sample: if a return migrant was present in houses selected for the non-migrant survey, a maximum of one returnee per household was interviewed using the return migrant
questionnaire. Households were asked about the presence of further returnees in the same neighbourhood and the sample developed in this way.

The final result was a sample of approximately 1,400 returnees in each of the three countries. In Armenia 41 percent of them had migrated and returned more than once, and could then be considered as circular migrants; in contrast, the corresponding percentage decreases to 23 and 18 percent in Georgia and Morocco, respectively. In addition, preliminary analyses tend to suggest the overall outcome of migration was more successful the longer the stay abroad and, additionally, longer migration experiences were associated with more successful returns as well. These results questioned the idea of higher benefits associated with shorter migration periods, which was supported for the Armenian case.

Finally, Ramón Mahía and Anda David (UAM, Spain) discussed the challenges of designing and conducting a survey among returnees in Ecuador (focused on return from Spain) within the EU-funded NOPOOR project on poverty. The target population were return migrants of Ecuadorian nationality, with a last migration spell of at least 1 year in Spain and living in Ecuador for at least 1 year. After multiple attempts, it turned impossible to obtain a random sample from the National Institute of Statistics in Ecuador, and the researchers had to re-design a strategy for non-random sample of recent returnees from Spain living in the Pichincha province, where they represented less than 0.3% of the population. A snow ball sampling from a core of different migrant profiles was followed, complemented with some additional strategies like participation in workshop for reintegration of returnees, distribution of leaflets and website. Despite of these multiple efforts, the initial goal of 1,000 returnees was not achieved. The final sample was of 450 returned migrants and preliminary analyses tended to point to a positive selection into return in terms of objective wellbeing but also subjective one.

An alternative option consists of very large and representative household surveys that include return migrants without any special effort of over-sampling. William Mejía from the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira, Colombia, presented the Andean Survey Network on Migrant Households and Remittances (ENAMIR) conducted in Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador and
Peru in 2013, as well as one previous wave in Colombia in 2008 (ENMIR). The aim of ENAMIR is to provide a periodical and cheap tool to assess changing trends in migration flows (including return) and remittances. The 2013 wave in Colombia surveyed 21,093 households, of which only 1,876 had some migratory experience, and of which only 1,167 completed the full questionnaire. Among these, only 434 households had some return experience (from any world destination), which already announces serious limitations for very detailed or sophisticated analyses of return determinants and dynamics.

Samir Farid and Giambattista Cantisani presented a second example of this sort of very large and representative household surveys in countries of origin: the ‘Mediterranean Household International Migration Survey’ (MED-HIMS), which resulted from the European Commission’s MEDSTAT Programme launched in 2008. One of its main aims was collecting representative data on the determinants and consequences of international migration and mobility in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Return migrants are included in the two surveys carried out so far within the program: Egypt and Jordan. MED-HIMS prioritised large samples but did not exclude the possibility of stratification to oversample migrants and/or returnees in those countries where migration and/or return are concentrated in some regions. In Jordan the target sample was 60,000 and certain regions were migrants and returnees were known to concentrate were also oversampled. In Egypt there was no stratification by regions since migrants come from all over the country. 90,012 households were surveyed in total, and the number of return migrants interviewed was 5,085 which, in contrast to the ENAMIR case, would clearly allow for specific analyses.

III. Conclusions

1. The lack of a common and measurable definition of return and circular has seriously hampered so far an evidence-based policy.

The actual feasibility of promoting temporary and circular migration as a different and better way of managing migration between third countries and the EU crucially depends on, first of
all, clearly defining the phenomena of interest and, secondly, producing the tools to measure them in the most precise and updated manner. The lack of a common and measurable definition has seriously hampered so far the collection of empirical evidence that permits to quantify the incidence of return and circular migration nowadays. But also, and equally important, it has damaged the possibility to identify possibilities for its potential encouragement among current and prospective migrants, as well as the existing barriers and obstacles for such encouragement.

A first step consists, thus, in adopting common and measurable definitions for both phenomena, for which the ongoing work of the Eurostat-UNECE Task Force on Circular Migration\(^2\) constitutes a major landmark. However, specific efforts from the different national and international statistical agencies to take into consideration the reality and peculiarities of return and circulation in the design and implementation of their statistical tools are also required. When doing so, three main issues need to be considered: a) the identification of origin and destination countries, b) the minimum duration of the stays in both origin and destination following each migration and, c) the total period of time over which the incidence of return and/or circular migration wants to be measured.

2. Difficulties and limitations to measure return and circular migration in existing data sources.

Definitions need to be made on the basis of what needs to be known; however, it is equally important to take into account what can be feasibly measured with the existing data sources. The presentations during the Workshop made clear the multiple divergences and difficulties when measuring return and circular migration in practice. In the last round of censuses, for instance, some information on individuals’ previous countries of residence one, five or ten years ago, was collected. Unfortunately not all countries included the question referred to the three points in time, and not all countries detailed the specific country of residence for each point (sometimes, like in the Argentinean example, only a general

\(^2\) [http://www.unece.org.net4all.ch/?id=32321](http://www.unece.org.net4all.ch/?id=32321)
reference to “living abroad” is available). And something similar happens with population registers, which rarely identify the country of destination for emigrants, and frequently prevent the measurement of short-term migrations.

3. Relatively low incidence of circular migration according to the information available in most population registers.

With the only exception of the recent German migrants to Switzerland, the available studies utilizing several population register data suggested a quite low incidence of repeated migration (none study included a proper measurement of repeated between same origin and destination, i.e. circular), even among neighbour countries and EU citizens, and considering time frames of almost 40 years. This finding poses serious questions on the quality of official statistics currently available to adequately measure what seems to be understood as ‘circular migration’ in the EU policy documents, but also suggests as very relevant to investigate about such low incidence (if true).

4. Non-EU experiences...

The aforementioned limitations of censuses and population register data for properly measuring return and circular migration are especially serious when focusing on non-EU migrants. Some recent survey experiences in different countries of origin have illustrated how difficult still is to construct large and reliable samples of returnees and repeated migrants. Moreover, the major limitation in many cases relates not only to the limited information to identify returned and circular migrants in official population statistics but also to the difficulties in accessing micro-data of censuses and population registers in order to properly design sampling strategies. However, the evidence available from the existent surveys suggests that spontaneous return to non-EU countries is relatively large and, in some cases, even circulation (or at least repeated migration) seems to be relatively common. If real progress is to be made in designing better migration policies for the benefit of all parties involved real cooperation needs to be promoted and reinforced, not only with migration officials, but also with the statistical agencies and research communities of the affected countries.