

Conference on Refugee statistics 7-9 October. Antalya, Turkey

The importance of Official Refugee statistics.

by

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1. Introduction

Some few introductory word about the purpose of this conference. The perspective is to improve refugee statistics by including refugee statistics more visible as a part of the family of official statistics, both at the national and international level.

Official statistics is claimed to have a high quality and be professional . Quality is not reached automatically by putting the label official statistics on refugee statistics. Quality is only reached by dedicated work using professional statistical methods. International comparability is only reached after international agreements have been recommended and negotiated as international principles. The implementation is not as automatic. Statisticians

Allow me also some few words about the process before this seminar to better understand the reason for this conference, the format and the purpose and the outcome we hopefully will get.

Statistics Norway had established a project contact with UNHCR and I see that this was the explanation why colleagues in Statistics Norway linked me to UNHCR and Tarik with a request if I would be willing to take the floor at the UN statistical commission (UNSC) 2014 under the program item next year's agenda and propose to put refugee statistics on the agenda UNSC 2015. The UNSC is perhaps the UN General Assembly for official statisticians and gather many many countries and international organisations.

I did this with pleasure, since I was soon convinced that refugee situation is a global problem that has increased in volume and importance and that the topic has not received the proper international concern among official statisticians.

A friendly cooperation between UNHCR and Statistics Norway was established and together we convinced UNSD to put this topic on the agenda for UNSC 2015. A document presenting the status and challenges for refugee statistics was written as a joint report from UNHCR and Statistics Norway.

The UNSC received the report with enthusiasm and gave some signals as regards the way forward, The goal will be to improve refugee statistics. The tool is to use the concept and

principles for official statistics. And a practical milestone will be to write and disseminate new guidelines and principles. The way forward has to be taken by step and this conference is the first step.

Since the present situation for refugees is dramatic and needs urgent actions some may say that a slow and step by step approach for statisticians should not be top priority. I accept this concern but a dedicated process with a clear focus on the user's need for improved statistics is our best contribution to this severe global problem – the refugees.

Our approach is to build brick on brick a complete system based on definitions and classifications, collection of data, estimation and dissemination. Statistics on refugees should in all countries be consistent with other vital statistics and also consistent at the international level. This means that mirror statistics should show no discrepancies, This may sound modest but is an unrealistic demanding ambition.

Official statistics should be made by the use of scientific and professional methods. It should be useful for evidence based decision making. For the practical use it is important that users have confidence that no political interference is allowed to influence on the statistics. There are some recent examples of misconduct in official statistics and internationally there has been put emphasis on quality declarations and quality monitoring.

Refugees and refugee statistics will be a phenomena that is closely linked to severe conflicts – even wars. This underlines how important and difficult it may be to guarantee that statistics is produced in a professional way and that political inference has no effect on the statistics. The building of a system for refugee statistics that also includes international cooperation in a way that prevents from national misconduct is important but again demanding and even unrealistic.

Public trust is important and relates to both trust in the quality of statistics but also that data on individuals are treated in full accordance with the principles of confidentiality. In the sensitive area on refugees we anticipate that data is extremely sensitive and misuse will have very negative consequences. Data protection is a key word. Official statistics should guarantee that international data on migration flows is handled with care in full respect for confidentiality and privacy.

2. Key building bricks in official statistics

I have introduced the concept of a system for official statistics and that this system is constructed by linking together several elements.. Refugee as a phenomena is an international incident – refugees are individuals that migrate from one country to another. The cause for migration is of a nature that classifies the individual to be a refugee. International law has a precise definition.

The international component is clear. In many cases it may be difficult to measure properly refugees measured in the out – country. Then accordingly we have to measure out migration by observing it as the sum of in migration to other countries by adding in migration to other countries. The internationally need for a consistent accounting system across borders should hopefully from the beginning be accepted as an objective – even it may take some years before this objective is reached.

Migration statistic is basically a part of population (demographic) statistics. Units may be individual, household and families. Since refugees may live in split families this last part is important and difficult and should be discussed.

The risk population for out migration is the rather well defined national population but for in migration the risk population is the rest of the world – a not very precise measured risk population..

The precise definition of who is to be defined as a refugee, is of course crucial. Let us divide the approach in two possible paths. First the legal approach. There is international law and national laws and administrative routines.

If we as statisticians follow the strict legal definition this means that people that claim that their cause for migration is feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence or other circumstances seriously disturbed public order, but their case is not accepted by receiving authorities will not be statistically counted as refugee. To follow such a principle will have consequences for statistics.

We cannot fully rely on statistical surveys that are based on reporting by the individual themselves.

The group of individuals that claim to be refugees but are rejected should also possibly be subject to statistical measurement and follow up.

How to design a statistical system and define the relevant quality criteria ?

The definition of a refugee should be:

1. Operational – observable
2. Relevant,
3. Comparable over time and between nations

The definition has to be taken in consideration of possible or available data sources. There is limited value of a theoretical perfect definition if it is impossible to measure, Without data – no statistics.

We should also foresee that different data sources like registers, census and special surveys may establish different definitions of practical reasons – but it should be an objective to gain comparability as far as possible.

Refugee statistics is not only a matter of counting of the number of refugees but statistical description of characteristics of the refugees is quite crucial. The collection of the full set of variables for this description is an activity that not should be forgotten.

This can be done simultaneously in the survey or census. If we rely on administrative data there are two major concerns – other background data registered as an integrated part of the administrative process. This is fundamental.

For statistical descriptions of the life story of refugees after moving – is dependent on how the national statistical system is constructed. If it is survey based (including census) it is dependent on how and when the refugees are included in the statistical population (e.g. the sampling frame)

Refugees are an overwhelming problem with severe consequences for quality of life. It is limited what official statistics can contribute in the describing what goes on – we have to be humble in this respect. But we also have a responsibility to contribute as good as we can.

I will also add one topic that is outside our main focus and that is a statistical description of the refugees and society. This is to some extent a reflection based on recent discussion in receiving countries. How are the refugees taken care of, what are the resources spent, who are the actors in the receiving sector. Guidelines that give practical recommendation and give international comparability is a clear objective.

3. National and international coordination

One of the quality aspects of official statistics is comparability and this is gained by consistence and coherence. At the national level this means that refugees is included in vital statistics in a consistent way. Level of living (Quality of life) for refugees should be measured in a comparable way with other statistical sources.

Consistence at the international level means as we have said earlier that the flows from one country to another are measured properly. This means that out migration from one country to another have the same magnitude independent of if it is observed from receiving or donor country.

To gain this we need internationally agreed definitions and methods and that the definitions and principles are followed, This is based on experiences not an easy task.

To gain this we need a system for the international cooperation with a clear governance structure. Actors and arenas (meeting places) and decisions and monitoring,

At the international level we identify UNHCR and UNRWA as special international bodies with a clear responsibility directed towards refugees. The responsibility is care taking and not statistics but the involvement gives a user perspective that guarantees the user perspective in the production and dissemination of refugee statistics.

National Refugee bodies are established in many countries and they may cooperate with UNHCR at the international arena and with authorities taking care of civil registration and statistical offices at the national level.

National statistical institutes are linked together by membership in international official statistical organizations. There are several but the most general in country coverage and thematic is UN Statistical commission (we here neglect the difference between national members and national observers) . UNSD is the secretariat for UNSC.

In the meetings of the UNSC there is also active participation from other international organizations

One purpose is to define and coordinate cooperation and responsibilities between these actors. Most of international statistics on refugees is the responsibility of UNHCR. One purpose is to build a clear bridge between international activities and national statistical Offices. UNSC assisted by UNSD has to be operational in this effort. A cooperation and division of work and responsibilities between UNHCR and UNSD should be discussed.

Official statistics has to discuss and establish recommendations for all elements in the production process. I mention data collection and quality checking and data editing, Estimation methods is of course crucial. This has to be professional and scientific.

Let me also add dissemination as a crucial part of the whole package.

Official statistics is not based on ad hoc solutions but on a system of all these components that give statistics that is predictable and professional. Transparency about methods and principles etc. is crucial .

Key challenge is how to best incorporate statistics on refugees within the national statistical systems and how these in turn can contribute to better international statistics on refugees.

5. Priorities for the system of refugee statistics

I will not finalize the priority process but only present some key items on the priority list

For each item it is a question on ambitions both at the national and international level.

1.How often do we need statistics

2.How timely

3.Regional specification, country and region in both in and out country

4. Create a permanent system that should be prepared for the handling of rapid changes in refugee flows. We should add that the rapid and dramatic changes in refugee flows make it rather unrealistic to be prepared for all the changes. Crisis has to be managed as an extraordinary case.

5. Integration with civil registration and vital statistics

A separate register for refugees? This is hopefully not necessary if a well functioning system for civil registration with refugees as one status or component. (Unclear terminology. Register and archive)

Alternative solutions as census and special surveys-

6. Social variables and data for Research

7. Resources and activities in the handling of refugees

6. Conclusions

The path forward should have the clear aim of producing user relevant statistics about refugees and asylum seekers. Hopefully also about internally displaced persons. The first step is to meet and create an professional environment – meeting place for statisticians with relevant competence and dedication. We need such conferences also in the future. The participant will have different background. How to organize it has to be discussed – we should be flexible but someone has to be responsible so we need some clear guidelines.

One output is planned to be a handbook that is instrumental in improving the quality of refugee statistics both at national and international level. The format of UN International Recommendations (...for Refugee statistics IRRS may be a choice)

Some of the guidelines and recommendations may have the aim of functioning as international standards or classifications.

UNSC has to play a role as the main coordinator – a bridge between UNHCR and NSOs

A last but complex challenge is funding. This I leave for another day