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International migration,  
internal migration, mobility  
and urbanization:  
Towards more integrated  
approaches

**Ronald Skeldon**  
*Maastricht University*

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17 route des Morillons  
P.O. Box 17  
1211 Geneva 19  
Switzerland  
Tel.: +41 22 717 9111  
Fax: +41 22 798 6150  
Email: [hq@iom.int](mailto:hq@iom.int)  
Website: [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)

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## Background<sup>1</sup>

That migration is the most problematic of the population variables is taken as given. Unlike the unique events of birth and death that define an individual's lifetime, migration can be a multiple event. Its measurement depends entirely upon how it is defined in time and across space. How long does a person have to reside at a destination in order to be defined as a migrant? How far does that person have to travel in order to be so defined? The first is normative, often following multilateral United Nations recommendations with "12 months or more", or "less than 12 months and with the intention to remain for longer than 12 months" the "accepted" norm. The second is a given by the existing divisions of the world into States, in the case of international migration, and the division of those States into political and administrative political divisions, in the case of internal migration. Examples of such divisions are states, provinces, districts, parishes, and so on. As most migrants move over relatively short distances, the smaller the unit used to define "a migration event", the greater the number of migrants captured by the data-gathering instrument. For example, in India in 2001 and using the data on last place of permanent residence, some 42.2 million people were classified as having moved across a state boundary (Government of India, 2001). When the smaller unit of the district is taken we find that 76.8 million people had moved from one district to another within their state of enumeration. Finally, some 181.8 million people had changed residence within their district of enumeration. All these national estimates for internal migration in India are valid with each providing not just a different number of internal migrants but also a different perspective on migration. The composition for the flows generated using the smallest units is different in terms of gender, education and occupation characteristics, for example, compared to those for the larger units. One of the few available global estimates of internal migration gave a figure of 740 million around the year 2009 (UNDP, 2009:1) was compiled generally from an aggregate of the data for the largest units for each country and can thus provide but a partial picture of internal migration.

Longitudinal analyses can be complicated by the creation of new, or the dissolution of old, units at both international and local levels as well as changes in the boundaries of these spatial units, which can cause problems in comparing similar units across time, particularly at local levels. Further complications arise through the system of registering populations where they live: whether on a strict *de facto* basis, where they are found on census or survey night, or on a *de jure* basis, where they usually live at the time of the census or survey. The former captures, or should capture, a much greater range of short-term movements compared with the latter, which should only include longer-term residences.

Despite all the problems inherent in the collection of migration data, significant progress has been achieved over recent years. The compilation of a world origin-destination database, developed originally at the University of Sussex and now much extended and maintained by the United Nations Population Division and the World Bank, has provided the framework for a more precise measurement of global international population movement (Parsons et al., 2007; UN DESA, 2015). These data showed that about 3 per cent of the world's population lived in a State or territory not of their birth and that that proportion had not changed significantly since the 1990s. In 2017, for example, the number of international migrants was estimated at around 258 million (UN DESA, 2017: 1). However, this number has to be treated with great caution. This paper will raise some of these issues and then will go on to examine internal migration, arguing that it is the city that articulates integrated patterns of population movement. As the systems of internal and

<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly modified and updated version of a paper first given at the Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Cities, Human Mobility and International Migration, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, New York, 7–8 September 2017, available at: [www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/events/pdf/expert/27/papers/II/paper-Skeldon-final.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/events/pdf/expert/27/papers/II/paper-Skeldon-final.pdf). It is reproduced here with their kind permission.

international migration evolve and change, so too, does the nature of the linkages between them, which are explored in this paper. Finally, the paper raises other forms of short-term mobility that emerge from essentially urban cultures and economies.

## International migration systems

Quite apart from issues surrounding the variable quality of migration-related data across the world, three systemic weaknesses in the data on international migration exist that need to be kept in mind in any interpretation of the data. These relate to:

1. the specific destinations and origins of the migration;
2. underestimating the volume of international migration; and
3. the developmental context in which the migration takes place.

While the global origin and destination database does provide basic information on the global patterns of international migration, perhaps its major limitation is that it is constrained by the unit that generates the data: the State. Migrants move from country A to country B, which they do because they move from one administrative unit to another, but in reality, they do not, because they move to very specific parts of country B from very specific parts of country A. The evidence for destinations is stronger than for origins. In the United Kingdom in 2015, some 13.5 per cent of the total population was foreign-born. However, that proportion increases to 41 per cent of the total population of central London, which accounted for 37 per cent of the total number of foreign-born in the country (McNeill, 2017). Comparing the populations of other large cities in the main destination countries around the world, we find similar patterns with a much higher proportion of foreign-born and/or foreign citizens in the largest cities than in the country as a whole. For example, in 2010, the population of the United States was 12.7 per cent foreign but the populations of New York and Los Angeles were 36.8 and 35.6 per cent foreign-born respectively. In Canada, the proportions of foreign-born in Toronto and Montreal in 2011 were 49 and 33.2 per cent respectively compared with a national proportion of 21 per cent (World Cities Culture Forum, 2014; also IOM, 2015). Although international migrants can be found spread across destination countries, they do tend to focus on urban areas and usually on the largest cities in each country. International migrants are a significant component in maintaining the populations of large cities in the developing world as well as providing key elements in the labour force of these urban economies. Thus, discussions of urbanization in the developed world now have to take into consideration international migration and not just the movements within their own borders.

The evidence to support specific origins of international migrants is more problematic. While data to support areas of concentration in origins are convincing, these areas need not be the largest urban areas of the country concerned. For example, migration from Pakistan or Bangladesh to the United Kingdom mainly come not from the largest cities but from small towns in quite isolated agricultural regions in these countries, in Mirpur and Sylhet districts respectively. Collecting information on origins essentially has to come from origin countries themselves depending upon local knowledge on where people are known to be leaving in large numbers. Destination countries cannot feasibly collect sub-national origin data through their census and surveys, given the sheer number of potential origins, even in cases where the number of origin states to any destination is limited. Perhaps all that could be possible would be to identify the migrants by country of birth and whether they were from the largest city or not. However, in an era in which skilled migration has emerged as a key component in international flows, it seems intuitive that “the skilled” will have been prepared in urban areas as it is there that the main educational institutions of a country are to be found. Thus, rather than a series of state-to-state

flows, the reality is likely to be primarily one of movement among cities. The urban origins of international migration have yet to be truly mapped.

The second of the three notes of caution on data on international migration is that the 258 million is an underestimate, not so much because many migrants were somehow “missed” out of enumeration systems but because of the importance of return migration as an integral part of international migration systems. Return migrants are clearly registered in their country of birth and hence as non-migrants. The question is, of course, how important is return? The simple answer is that we do not know but that almost certainly it will vary from flow to flow with the incidence of return being lower for poor rural areas or states where conflict-induced migration is more prevalent. Economic historians have generated convincing evidence that return rates of 30 to 40 per cent were common during the Great Migration across the Atlantic from Europe to the Americas in the nineteenth century (Baines, 1991; Nugent, 1992; Hoerder, 2012). With the developments in the technologies of transportation since that time, it might be reasonable to expect return rates to be greater, although any such statement has to remain a hypothesis only at this stage and will have to be considered in the context of other forms of mobility that have emerged in recent years and will be discussed below. It is also known that the skilled migration systems are characterized by a high degree of “churn” or turnover within relatively short time spans, in which return migration will be an unknown part (Skeldon, 2018a). Thus, the total number of people who have moved internationally is going to be significantly larger than the simple stock figure of 258 million given in the global database for 2017. Pertinent to the earlier discussion is whether return migrants who might have originated in small towns and rural areas return to their specific origins or to regional or national urban centres.

The third cautionary point relates to the common division of the world into global “north” and “south” with the data showing the importance of so-called south-south flows. However, like the migration itself, the level of development of countries changes over time. Many of the countries in the so-called “Global South”, particularly among those in eastern Asia, have emerged as dynamic advanced economies that have come to challenge those in the “Global North”. Simple global binary divisions distort the underlying realities and more nuanced divisions are required in order to make sense of the links between migration and development.

## Internal migration systems

The issue of the global database on international migration underestimating the number of international migrants was raised above. However, that underestimate pales into insignificance if we try to examine all migration or both internal and international migration. Most migrants move within the boundaries of their own country as internal migrants. Thus, the key questions are how to measure internal migration and how many internal migrants exist in the world. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) came up with the global estimate of 740 million internal migrants, an estimate they admitted was “conservative” (UNDP, 2009). Clearly, the more populous the country, the greater the number of internal migrants, and in the large, populous countries, UNDP took the largest of administrative units, states in India or provinces in China, for example, to define internal migration. However, as seen in the introduction to this paper, to go down to districts or townships as the migration-defining spatial unit would markedly increase the number of migrants so defined. Hence, the search for a meaningful and consistent definition of a global estimate for the number of internal migrants is largely illusory.

It is not only the spatial units used to define migration that are problematic but the questions asked to derive length of residence at the destination raise other problems. Few countries around the world have registration systems that record changes in usual place of residence and

the migration data are generated through retrospective instruments that collect the relevant information through one or more of three questions: birthplace; place of residence at a fixed time in the past, generally one year or five years ago; and last place of usual previous residence before coming to present place, generally asked in association with another question on length of time since moving from that last place of usual previous residence. The volume of internal migration collected varies markedly by which question has been asked. Birthplace, on which the international migration above is based, generates the least satisfactory and lowest estimates but is the easiest to ask to provide a reliable answer. The last place of usual previous residence provides the best estimates of most recent migrant flows, although its utility depends upon the detail of information collected on the length of residence. If that is collected by year up to five years, the question can provide useful information on short-term movements, even more so if the data collected specify residences of less than one year by month. However, this level of detail can be impacted by respondent error and memory lapse and is more complicated to ask in the field, and the middle question using a single question on place of usual residence at a specific time in the past is perhaps the best compromise solution. A useful calibration of various methods is available from the 1992 National Migration Survey of Thailand (Chamratrithirong et al., 1995). Using a fixed point of five years before the census gave a national estimate of 8 per cent of the population having moved to a destination within that time period. However, using a last place of usual residence from six months to five years gave an estimate of 14.6 per cent as having moved in that period. Applying a yet finer one-month to five-year definition further increased the proportion of the population that had moved within the period to 22 per cent. These data confirm the findings of a large number of micro, anthropological-type studies of migration across the developing world that show that very significant numbers of people move for short periods of time and over quite short distances (Skeldon, 1990). The idea that most people do not move or are fixed at a specific location might be appealing but it is wrong. Mobility is an inherent characteristic of all populations unless specific policies or other factors are in place that limit or control that mobility.

Nevertheless, some peoples appear to move more than others and in different ways from others, which appears to be closely linked with the level of development in each country, which, in turn, is linked with the distribution of the population in each country. Despite all the difficulties with the measurement of internal migration as sketched above, considerable progress has been made towards the construction of analytical models that allow the comparison of patterns across space. See, particularly, the work of Martin Bell and his colleagues, which shows that certain systematic trends and patterns can be identified irrespective of the scale of the data and the type of question applied (Bell et al., 2015a, 2015b; Rees et al., 2017 and an overall summary in Bell et al., 2018). However, the search for comparable numbers is but part of the challenge: the types of migration captured also vary depending upon the scale of the data-gathering units. For example, in a country such as India, migration using small-area data is dominated by movements for marriage, with a very different gender balance and educational characteristics compared with migration generated from the large spatial units of the state which are still dominated by more educated migrants and a greater male dominance.

## Urbanization, transitions and linkages between internal and international migration

Central to the consideration of internal migration is the sectoral pattern by urban and rural. Not all countries provide origins by sector and the boundaries between the sectors often change to make longitudinal comparison problematic. Boundary changes, not just sectoral but also of the basic spatial units themselves, have proved to be an extremely difficult problem to deal with that has to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Again, local knowledge is key in order to make any necessary adjustments and avoid drawing misleading results. Nevertheless, the overall trend has been a redistribution of population from rural to urban areas. This “urban transition” has become



one of the key indicators of development, always accepting that rural-to-urban migration has not been the only, or even the dominant, internal flow in any country at certain times during the transition to an urban society. Rural-to-rural, urban-to-urban and urban-to-rural flows also play a role, although as populations become concentrated in urban areas, migration out of and within the rural sector declines as movements within the urban sector come to dominate. Movement up the urban hierarchy from smaller to larger urban places has been significant through the urban transition with the emergence of the megacity a common pattern. A number of developed economies have also seen fluctuations with phases of “counterurbanization” occurring, although this reversal appears itself to have been reversed with the reinvention of the central parts of industrial cities in many parts of Europe perhaps associated with the shift towards economies based increasingly on information technology and where the largest cities are the centres of innovation (Champion, 2001).

This transition to urban societies and the associated shifting patterns of migration has also been associated with the transition to low mortality and low fertility to the extent that migration, both internal but increasingly international, accounts for demographic support in so many parts of the developed world.<sup>2</sup> Sustained fertility decline ultimately impacts upon migration through changing age profiles of populations, generating decreasing numbers in the cohorts most likely to migrate. The data for both Japan and the Republic of Korea clearly illustrate this trend, where the annual flows of internal migrants declined from 8.3 million in 1970 to 5.1 million in 2010 and from 9.5 million in 1990 to 8.2 million in 2010 respectively.<sup>3</sup> Evidence from the United States is also clear, where the population is becoming “more rooted” (Cooke, 2018:116), and for the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe, with a few exceptions, where internal migration has declined, albeit with variations (Champion, Cooke and Shuttleworth, 2018, Champion and Shuttleworth, 2016; Bell, 2015a; Skeldon, 2013). Demographic shift is not the sole deterministic factor in this equation, perhaps accounting for about one fifth of the decline (Bell et al., 2018), but the supply of that ultimate resource, population, provides the context in which other factors operate. The changing nature of the economy towards one based upon information technology has already been raised, but the nature of the housing market and changing personal tastes that have seen the emergence of other forms of mobility, to be discussed below, are also likely to be important.

In this changing matrix of migration, the cities are enduring destinations. Internal rural-to-urban and urban-to-urban migrations are augmented by international migration, and probably from primarily urban origins, with many of relatively short duration. Traders have circulated among cities for centuries but also established depots for the collection and distribution of goods around which communities of longer-term migrants evolved, often intermarrying with host populations. In areas colonized by foreign populations, cities were the gateways for settlers, the centres of administration and the hub for the generation of capital that funded the railways and roads that facilitated the penetration of the hinterland. International migration generated internal migration across the Americas, Australasia and large parts of other continents impacted by colonialism. In origin countries, migrants from rural areas to cities continue their migration overseas after periods of residence sufficient to accumulate capital for the move. Or, once direct links have been established between a village or small town, direct migration from these specific origins to overseas destinations can take place but it is generally through the largest cities, which are the links to transportation systems to overseas destinations. Where large numbers of migrants enter into “gateway” or “arrival” cities (Saunders, 2010), not only will some move on into the hinterland but others, perhaps the majority, remain in the city and “push” prior migrants or native

<sup>2</sup> It is not simply the direct contribution of the number of migrants to a population but, with higher fertility than the native population of developed countries, their contribution to the number of births is also a factor. For example, in England and Wales in 2017, where the foreign-born represented about one eighth of the population, births to foreign-born mothers accounted for 28.4 per cent of all births (United Kingdom, Office for National Statistics, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Figures from the Annual Statistical Yearbooks of the National Statistical Offices of Japan and the Republic of Korea.

populations out towards the periphery, in a process of extending suburbanization, or to other parts of the country. Hence, international migration is linked to internal migration and internal migration is linked to international migration in complex, ever-changing and evolving patterns of human movement (for more detailed assessments of these linkages in Asia and more widely, see Skeldon, 2006; King and Skeldon, 2010; Lozano-Ascencio, Roberts and Bean, 1999).

## New mobilities

While migration is seen as a change in the usual place of residence of an individual, that is rarely a single, simple movement. People move on and back; they move over the short-term as well as for longer-term sojourns. As was made clear from the start of this paper, the instruments we use to capture the movement of people can only capture a part of the whole process of mobility. In the discussions of migration, and of migration and development in particular, the focus on the minority of those who move, the international migrant, has produced a very partial and deceptive, and arguably distorted view of the whole process. The more recent inclusion of internal migration into the equation goes in the right direction, especially in the realization that the “two” migration systems, at least to the extent that they can be separated, act in concert as suggested above. Yet, one other form of mobility, mainly international but also internal, needs to be introduced into the discussion: the movement of tourists.

Tourists are not generally considered to be migrants as they do not bring about any redistribution of population. They are short-term movers for recreational purposes who go home after a few days or weeks at the most. Yet, the emergence of the “gap year” and programmes for working holidaymakers has extended this category into a grey area that begins to overlap with other circular forms of mobility. It has emerged as one of the largest industries in the world, accounting for one in eleven jobs worldwide and 7 per cent of world exports (UNWTO, 2015), and is particularly important for the populations of small islands and marginal areas, which otherwise have few other resources. It also has links with migration both into and out of areas. It attracts into an area the skilled required to manage the hotels and all the accompanying services and recreational activities demanded by the visitors. Conversely, mass tourism, by increasing property prices and putting pressure on non-tourism-related industries can “push” people to leave. The example of Venice illustrates the case, with a population decline of almost 30 per cent from 367,000 in 1970 to 261,000 in 2011, even if it experienced a slight increase to just under 265,000 by 2014.<sup>4</sup> Venice is perhaps an extreme example but many of the UNESCO World Heritage sites are under pressure from the influx of tourists, who need specialist services and this results in increasing prices for local populations that may lead to both the immigration and the emigration of people. The key point is that this form of short-term mobility impacts on other types of population movement in a variety of ways.

It can be argued that tourism or travel for recreational purposes is not new. The importance of pilgrimage in every major part of the world and throughout history has taken people out of the confines of their towns and villages to participate in a broader community. What is new is that from the late 20th century, the scale of the activity has become a mass appeal as it has developed not just in Europe, North America and Australia but also among the emerging new middle-income groups in Asia, Latin America and parts of Africa. From 435 million tourist arrivals in 1990, the annual total increased to 1,186 million in 2015 and 1,235 million in 2016 (UNWTO, 2015, 2017). These are not measures of individual tourists but of arrivals who spent at least a night in the destination country. Thus, a single individual taking several holidays a year or visiting multiple countries will be registered multiple times. Also, the figures include a proportion (14% in 2015) who entered for “business and professional” purposes, suggesting an overlap

<sup>4</sup> Data from national statistical sources, at: <http://population.city/italy/venice/>

with the skilled migrant system raised earlier in the paper. The majority of these short-term visitors will have been for business meetings, conferences, professional training courses and so on. Despite these difficulties with the data, the basic points are simple: tourists are an integral part of development around the world and are linked to other forms of population movement. One of the linkages is most commonly ignored: if only a tiny fraction of the number of arrivals enter legally but stay on to become irregular migrants, significant numbers of people are involved. Tourism as a channel for irregular migration cannot be discounted.

The marked increases in global tourism from the last decade of the 20th century have been associated with two main trends: first, the emergence of “budget airlines” that provided low-cost travel regionally and increasingly transregionally, and second, a change in tastes. Migration has been associated historically with the diffusion of ideas about what to consume, which were essentially about “things” (Trentmann, 2016). At a certain level of development, tastes change, to the extent that “events”, rather than material things per se, are seen as more desirable and tourism emerges to fulfil this role. Thus, mobility becomes a central part of consumer culture and short-term circulation begins to substitute for longer-term “migration”, which was originally envisaged by Zelinsky (1971) some decades ago in his hypothesis of the mobility transition, even if not entirely in the way originally envisaged (Skeldon, 2018b). Whether this trend is a factor in the decline in internal migration in the developed world outlined earlier in this paper must await future research but it further emphasizes the interlinkages between different types of mobilities. Tourism is embedded in a complex matrix of other forms of human movement, thus making it difficult for policy makers. Migration policy, complicated enough as it is, cannot be separated from policies that contribute to the emergence of other forms of human movement and the interrelationships need to be appreciated if effective approaches are to be introduced to “manage migration”.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to review the various instruments that are used to measure migration. It reviewed the macro-level data for the study of international migration supplied through the United Nations Population Division and what it included and excluded. Particular attention was given to urban destinations and urban origins of international migration and the need for subnational data and analyses. The paper then went on to look at internal migration, again, assessing the various instruments, with attention being drawn to the importance of measuring short-distance and short-term circulation. The tendency to consider international migration separately from other forms of mobility persists and the argument was made that human mobility is best conceived as a system that integrates internal and international migration within a single framework. Finally, attention was given to mass mobility in the form of tourism, which has significant linkages to other forms of internal and international migration and needs to be built into the global framework of migration, and particularly into the debates on migration and development and on policies to manage migration.

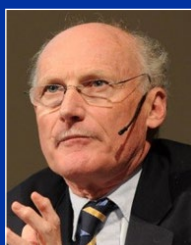
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**Ronald Skeldon** is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Sussex, Professor of Human Geography in the Graduate School of Governance, Maastricht University, and a member of the Migration Research Leaders' Syndicate established by IOM to support the development of the Global Compact for Migration. From June 2009 to March 2011 he was seconded as a Senior Research Fellow to the Department for International Development (DFID) in London. Trained at the Universities of Glasgow (BSc Hons) and Toronto (MA; PhD), he worked in Papua New Guinea for the Australian National University and throughout the Asia and Pacific region for the United Nations. For 14 years, he was on the faculty of the University of Hong Kong and was, from 1996 to 2000, an independent consultant based in Bangkok working primarily for international organizations. He joined the University of Sussex in 2000 and was a core member of the DFID-funded Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty between 2003 and 2009. He has published widely on issues of migration and development.



International Organization for Migration  
17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland  
Tel.: +41 22 717 9111 • Fax: +41 22 798 6150  
E-mail: [hq@iom.int](mailto:hq@iom.int) • Website: [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)