international data alliance for children on the move

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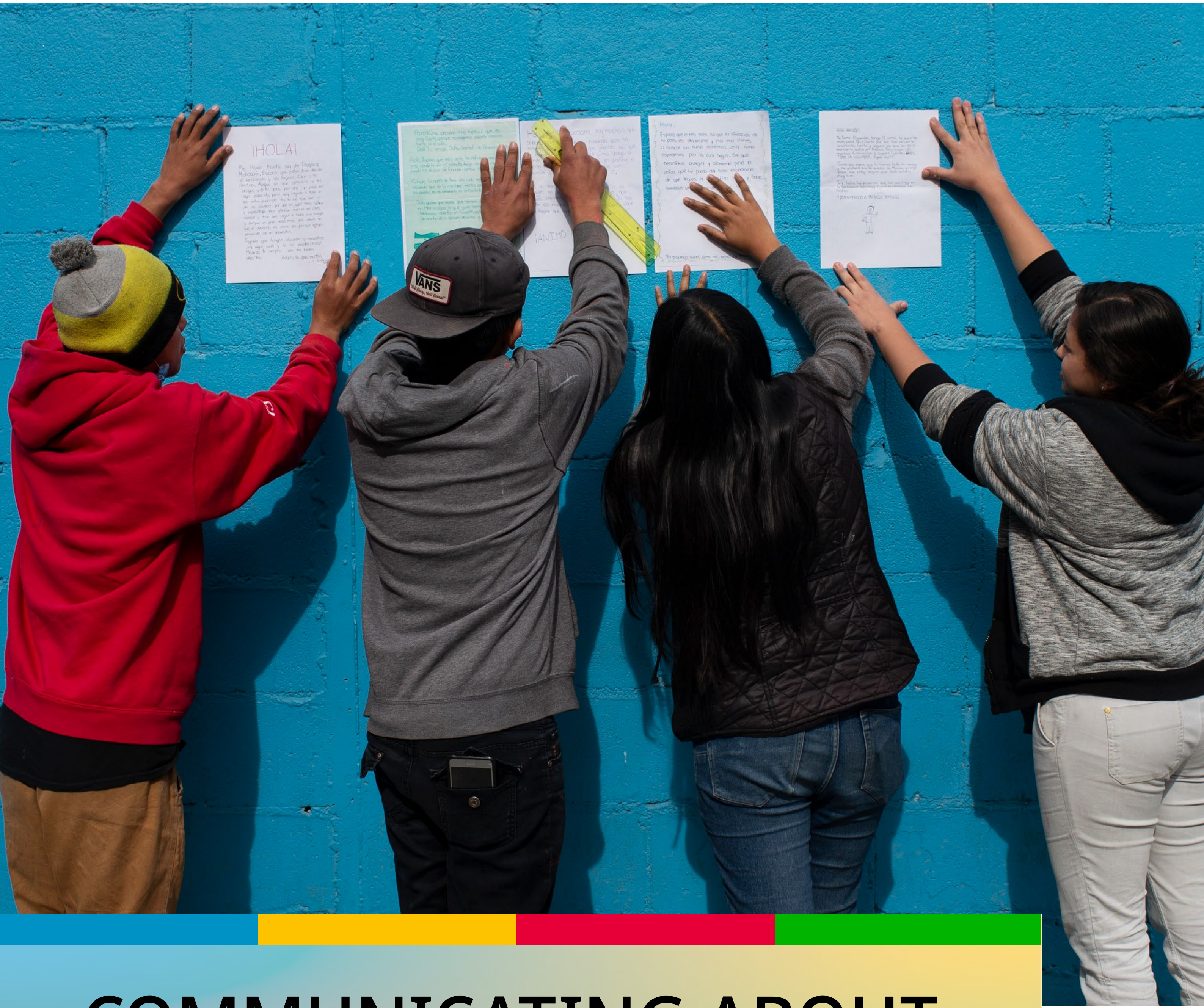

COMMUNICATING ABOUT MIGRATION STATISTICS

March 2026

eurostat IOM UN MIGRATION OECD UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency unicef for every child

FOREWORD

Accurate migration statistics are a cornerstone of the UN's human rights agenda, enabling policymakers to enact policies and programmes that uphold the principle of leaving no one behind. Yet critical gaps remain in the data underlying these statistics– particularly for the most vulnerable groups on the move, such as children. These gaps not only limit visibility and policy effectiveness but can also create space for biased narratives and misperceptions about migration experiences.

At the same time, when migration data are collected, analysed and transformed into statistics for public use, human rights, dignity and protection must be respected.

Moreover, better data alone do not automatically lead to better outcomes for people who can be among the most marginalized. How these data are analysed, interpreted and communicated by policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders can be just as important.

In an era where migration and displacement are on the rise, and can become deeply polarizing responsible and ethical communication of migration statistics is essential.

This Technical Report, a joint product of the UNICEF-led International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) and the United Nations Statistics Division, was developed with these considerations in mind. It provides National Statistical Offices (NSOs) with tools to ethically navigate the complexity of communicating migration statistics to non-expert audiences through narrative, data storytelling and context, while maintaining neutral language, transparency and statistical integrity.

In today's rapidly evolving, saturated information environment, NSOs must be proactive in ensuring that their data are contextualized, interpreted correctly and safeguarded against misinformation. As this document illustrates, several countries are already demonstrating how to fulfill this responsibility. More countries can draw from these examples to ensure that data and statistics stories are told ethically, reliably and transparently – especially when it comes to populations facing great risks of harm. By doing so, they can contribute not only to informed policymaking, but also to a more accurate and humane public understanding of migration, safeguarding the rights and dignity of all migrants, with particular attention to children and other vulnerable groups.

At the heart of this technical report is a vital reminder that behind every data point, statistic and report is a human story. Many of these data narratives belong to vulnerable populations on the move – including children – whose experiences are often underrepresented and whose protection needs are acute. The ways in which these stories are told have real-life consequences for the people behind them, and this should never be forgotten.

> "Every data set begins with a conversation with a child who must feel safe enough to speak or even identify themselves."
>
> – **Nawar Arouk**, youth activist who travelled unaccompanied as an adolescent refugee from Syria

– **João Pedro Azevedo**,
Chief Statistician and Deputy Director,
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About the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move

The International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) is a cross-sectoral global coalition that aims to improve data and statistics and support evidence-based policymaking for migrant and displaced children. With the European Union as its main donor and jointly led by Eurostat, IOM, OECD, UNHCR and UNICEF (Secretariat Chair), IDAC brings together governments (including experts from national statistical offices and migration- and displacement-related ministries), international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, academics, civil society and youth.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effective communication of migration statistics is crucial for evidence-based policymaking, public understanding and preventing misinformation. This technical report explores strategies for national statistical offices (NSOs) to enhance their communication practices, ensuring that migration data and statistics are clear, accessible and accurately interpreted by diverse audiences.

As migration debates grow increasingly volatile, fueled by rapid technological advancements and a diverse, data-literate audience – including policymakers, media, businesses, civil society and the public – NSOs are evolving to ensure statistics are interpreted within the broader societal context, reducing the scope for misunderstanding.

This publication outlines a multifaceted approach to enhance NSO communication strategies. After an introductory section:

- Section 2 emphasizes data storytelling, highlighting how narrative and context can clarify complex migration data, reduce misuse and bridge the gap between technical accuracy and public comprehension.
- Section 3 advances an 'end-to-end' approach to NSO communications activities, integrating stakeholder engagement throughout the statistical life cycle from identifying user needs to dissemination, with the aim of moving beyond 'broadcasting' to foster a deeper collaboration with users and respondents – before, during and after data collection.
- Section 4 recommends a 'whole-of-government' approach, stressing inter-agency and international cooperation to harmonize data by making use of international statistical standards to improve policy coherence across multiple policy domains.
- Section 5 focuses on ethical considerations, emphasizing a human rights-based approach, neutral language and transparency to maintain trust and impartiality.
- Section 6 turns to children, adolescents and youth, addressing the ethical and practical challenges in collecting and communicating their data, highlighting the importance of specific approaches to addressing communication questions when working with vulnerable or under-represented groups.
- Section 7 provides a practical guide for developing communication strategies using the SMART framework, where aims are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound.

By using the tools and guidance presented in this document, NSOs can strengthen the global evidence base on migration, support informed policymaking and enhance public dialogue. This requires balancing technical rigour with accessible data storytelling that reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding; fostering collaboration with multiple stakeholders; upholding ethical standards; and mitigating misuse.

A Quick Guide to Communicating about Migration Data: – 6 points to remember

Every country needs to communicate about migration data.

In today's world, all countries – regardless of their income level or stage of development – experience migration in some form and must therefore communicate about migration data at some point. Doing so ethically and carefully is essential. Migration is one of the most polarizing issues globally, and each country faces its own context-specific challenges. *Communicating about Migration Statistics* sets out the importance of NSOs leading communication about migration data, and suggests how to do this whether or not they have significant communications budgets, and how to do so with a human rights-based approach.

Tell the story of the data.

Migration statistics are not just numbers but represent elements of human stories. Data users will naturally translate data and statistics into their own interpretations of these stories – fitting them into their existing understanding of the world and using them to fill gaps or reinforce beliefs. Clearly communicating what the data do and do not say, why and how they were collected and how they should be carefully used in different contexts can improve public understanding and enhance their value in policy and public discourse.

Communication doesn't begin with sharing results – it begins before data collection.

Effective communication is needed at every stage of the data cycle. Governments need robust interdepartmental communication to harmonize approaches to discussing migrants and migration. Effective data collection efforts rely on clear communication processes. Data processing requires an understanding of how the end results will be used and interpreted, which in turn will be disseminated via communication with media and other public outreach activities. This publication outlines an end-to-end communications approach, emphasizing how coherent, coordinated activities can make the whole process more effective and impactful.

Cooperation is key.

Cooperation across teams and institutions can significantly improve the ability of NSOs to communicate effectively about migration data. In contexts where resources are limited, pooling communications capacity can enhance effectiveness for all involved. High-immigration countries may benefit from partnerships with key countries of origin to develop an improved understanding of migration drivers. Cross-departmental coordination and collaboration with other members of the national statistical system as well as local and intergovernmental agencies can also support a whole-of-government approach to communicating about migration data, helping to reduce duplication of work and harmonizing approaches.

Consider the individuals behind the data, and their rights and needs.

Recognizing that some groups have specific vulnerabilities and needs is critical. This technical report looks in detail at communicating about migrant children, adolescents and youth. A set of ethical guidelines is set out, but at their heart is the essential recognition that communicating about migration data is communicating about people.

Professionalize the communications approach.

Whether supported by a large communications budget or a small team balancing multiple roles, being strategic, thinking creatively and keeping up to date with emerging communication technologies can improve impact while saving time and resources. Technology, however, is no substitute for thoughtful planning and clear messaging. *Communicating about Migration Statistics* includes an introduction to developing a communications strategy in the context of statistics on migration and migrants, along with some practical tips for writing press releases and social media content. Technology also moves fast and tools such as generative AI are emerging that can be harnessed to develop and distribute lower-cost and more effective communications outputs. Regardless of the tools used now or in the future, it remains essential that communication outputs continue to be reviewed by both data and communications experts to ensure accuracy and effectiveness.

1. Introduction

International migration is one of the most polarizing and contested policy areas globally, with media and public debates often leaning heavily on statistical evidence. The demand for statistics comes not only from policymakers and rapidly changing media ecosystems, but also from businesses, civil society and an increasingly data-literate public.

NSOs are tasked with providing accurate and timely data, adapting to constantly advancing technologies for collecting, displaying and disseminating information to meet the needs of various stakeholders.

Effective communication of migration statistics is essential not only for informing policymaking but also for fostering public understanding and dialogue, helping to dispel myths and preventing the spread of misinformation.

Migration debates can be volatile, and releases by NSOs are often important components of these charged public and policy discussions. New or controversial data can heighten – or dampen – public concern, and can prompt political action and other societal responses that have real impacts on individuals and communities.

It is not, of course, the role of NSOs to shape public discourse. Recognizing, however, that statistics will be integrated into wider public debates – which NSOs do not control – is important. If statistics are produced to improve understanding, then communicating them in a way that anticipates and accounts for potential obstacles to understanding is critical.

Communication about international migration statistics requires careful consideration at all stages of the process – before, during and after data collection.

This technical report analyses key factors for NSOs to consider when communicating about international migration statistics, and presents practical approaches for developing effective communication strategies.

It focuses on the increasing use of NSO materials by non-expert users and recommends that, by working with the natural human process of making sense of the world through narrative, NSOs can enhance understanding of their statistics and help users avoid misinterpretation. The tools and guidelines are designed to work alongside the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.[1, 2, 3]

The report then describes how moving beyond a 'broadcasting' approach to a more collaborative 'end-to-end' model – where NSOs engage with users and data subjects throughout the entire process – can support both data collection and the dissemination of statistics. The importance of a 'whole-of-government' approach is highlighted, in which collaboration between local and national government departments and international organizations involved in migration data can help ensure clarity, coherence and efficiency, and deliver results informed by global standards.

This publication also examines ethical issues for NSOs to consider when communicating about migration, and takes a close look at approaches to communicating migration data on children, adolescents and youth.

It concludes with practical steps to developing a communications strategy and outreach tools.

2. Data storytelling

Why NSOs have always been data storytelling organizations

The United Nations has been producing recommendations on international migration statistics since 1953.[4, 5, 6] Until 2025, however, these documents focused primarily on definitions and technical challenges related to the collection, presentation and harmonization of migration data. They did not address processes related to communicating data or considering diverse audiences. The intended users of earlier recommendations were statisticians and policymakers. An underlying assumption was that the role of those producing migration statistics was to supply accurate data for policy assessment and decision making.

The communications landscape for data and statistics has evolved rapidly in the twenty-first century, however, along with the audiences using them.

Data and statistics are now communicated quickly across an array of media, using images, numbers and text to create understanding and meaning in complex policy areas such as international migration. This places a responsibility on the producers of migration statistics to provide explanation and context to prevent misuse and misunderstanding of these data, and to ensure a human rights-based approach that considers the human beings behind the data points.

A key change is the extent to which official data are demanded and used by communicators of all sorts, from journalists[7] and politicians[8] to civil society organizations and the wider public.

This means that those accessing and sharing migration data are no longer limited to technical experts, academics or professional data users, who in the past would have had to hunt down a printed dataset in an archive. Increasingly, data users are likely to be non-experts for whom locating even the most arcane information may be as simple as clicking a link and opening a spreadsheet.

This change requires statistical offices to step up efforts to ensure their materials are clearly understood by people with varying levels of familiarity with this complex subject. In effect, this means that statistical offices can no longer consider themselves technicians only – they are data storytellers.

NSOs should see the shift towards data storytelling not as a concern, but as an opportunity to embrace. This is not a radical view, and is now one widely endorsed by leading statisticians and statistical bodies.[9] In *The Fundamentals of Data Visualization* (2019),[10] Professor Claus Wilke makes this point well:

> *The need for a story may seem disturbing to scientists and engineers, who may equate it with making things up, putting a spin on things, or overselling results. However, this perspective misses the important role that stories play in reasoning and memory. We get excited when we hear a good story, and we get bored when the story is bad or when there is none. Moreover, any communication creates a story in the audience's minds. If we don't provide a clear story ourselves, then our audience will make one up.*

Throughout this technical report, we highlight that the entire statistical development process – from planning to data collection to publication and dissemination – necessarily requires creative thinking.[11] But storytelling in this narrow context of statistical communications does not mean spin, advocacy, embellishment or oversimplification. Storytelling – in the rigorous statistical sense – makes migration statistics usable and connects numbers to the questions people are looking to answer.

A clear narrative adds the context that experts know but audiences often lack: the denominators, baselines, trends and comparisons that make figures comprehensible and limit the scope for misinterpretation.

There is also a fundamental cognitive reason for storytelling: it matches the ways in which humans think and process information. There is now an extensive scientific literature showing that people naturally organize information into narratives, and that doing so aids comprehension, recall and judgement. For this reason, data storytelling improves salience and retention in users, helping them to see and remember the key signal (e.g., flows vs. stocks, gross vs. net, cohort vs. period, number vs. share) and not the noise.

In fact, statistical offices have always been part of a data storytelling process. The collection and provision of migration and population data have always been fundamentally situated within broader political and socio-economic narratives. Governments, academics, journalists and members of the societies these actors serve do not require migration statistics simply because they exist, but rather to help them assess and make sense of political, economic and social issues.

Sweden's Tabellverket – arguably the world's oldest systematically produced set of population statistics – was developed to help the country's leadership in the eighteenth century understand the military and economic strengths and weaknesses of the state in an era of industrialization, providing statistics so the state could assess its potential tax revenues and military personnel (see Sköld, 2004).[12]

The Tabellverket contributed to building a coherent story about the population of Sweden (i.e., it was of a certain size and demographic make-up, meaning it had certain relative strengths or weaknesses) from which political decisions could be made.

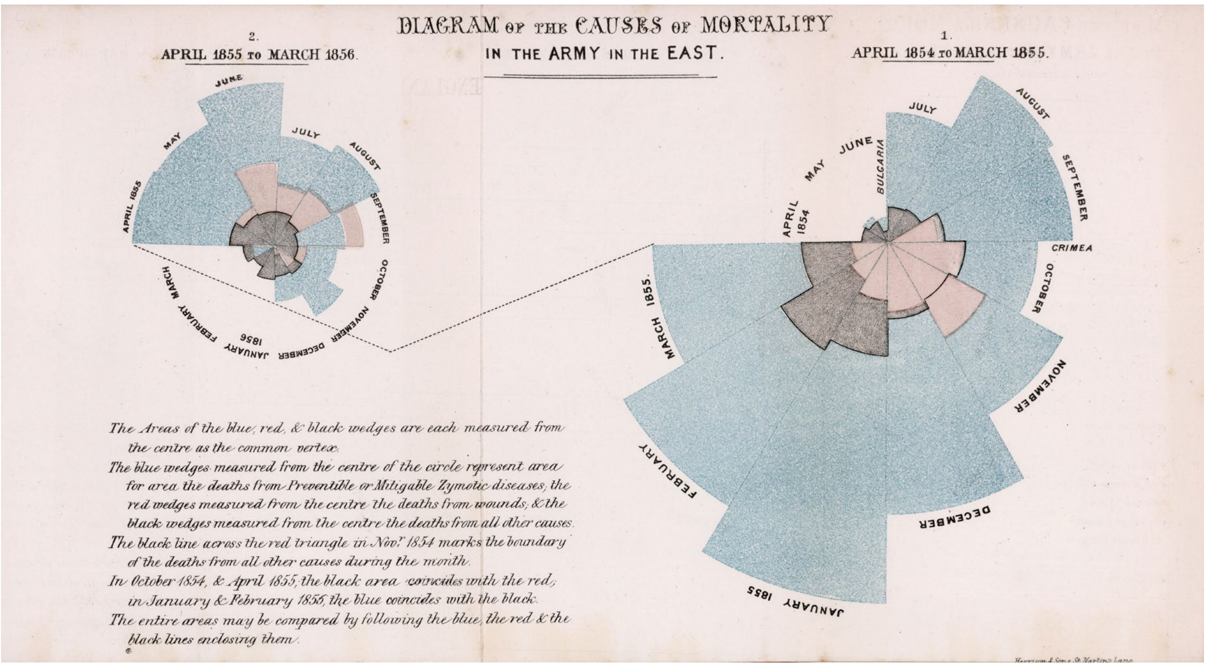
Statistician Hans Rosling argued[13] that when data from the first Tabellverket were interpreted, they told a story that reshaped Sweden's understanding of itself, leading to a downward reassessment of the nation's military capabilities, as well as the introduction of improved health care to reduce maternal mortality.

Similarly, other early examples of data storytelling – such as Florence Nightingale's data visualizations of mortality rates from communicable disease compared to battlefield injuries in a military field hospital (see Figure 1) – provided compelling evidence of the need to improve sanitary conditions in medical environments.[14]

In the specific context of migration, visual storytelling has long been a tool used by statisticians. Examples include maps showing the make-up of foreign-born populations, such as the map in Figure 2 produced by the US Census Office in 1898. Depicting the distribution of the foreign-born population of the United States of America in 1890,[15] the map underpins the modern notion of the country's origins as a 'nation of immigrants'.

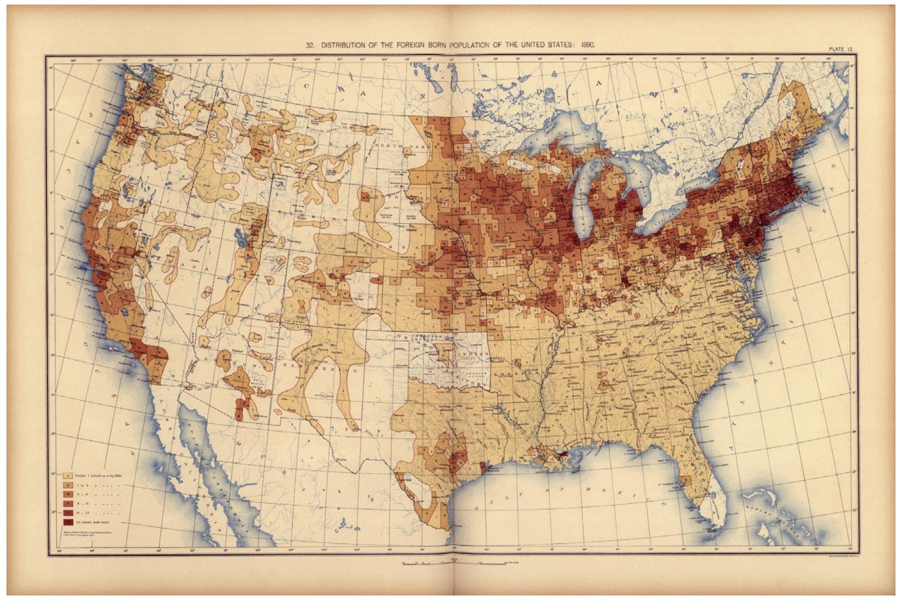
Other maps have been used to depict migration flows, such as the main emigration routes from Italy from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1920s (see Figure 3), helping to rapidly set the story of Italian migration in its geographic context.

Figure 1. Data visualizations of mortality rates from communicable diseases vs. battlefield injuries in a military field hospital



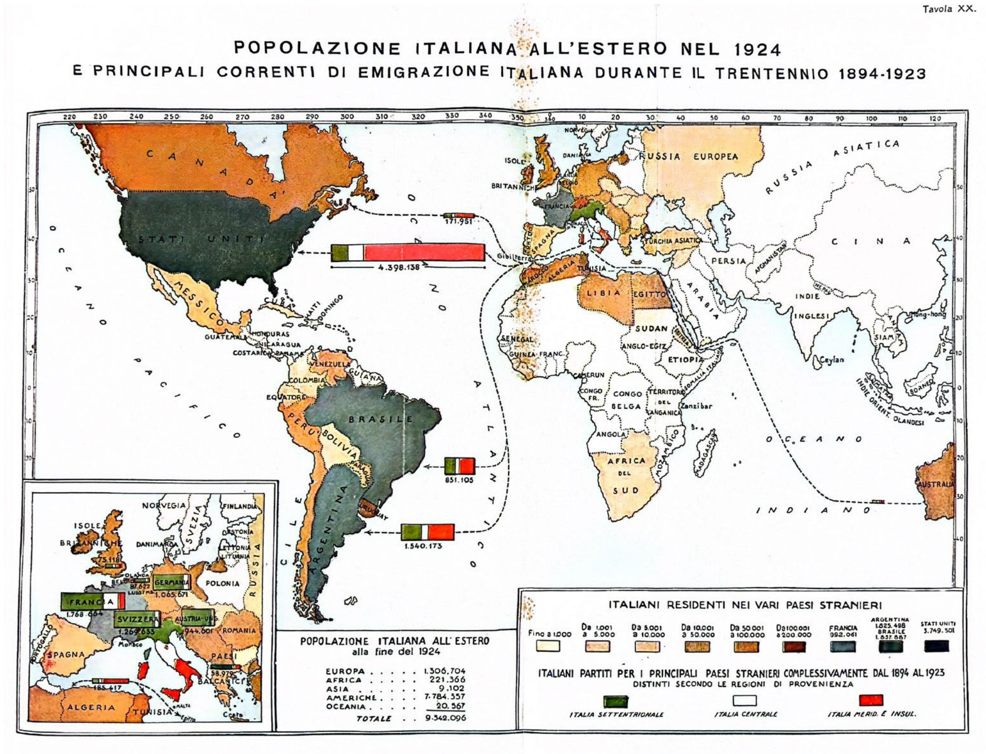
Source: The National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD: U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Health & Human Services, 2010.

Figure 2. Proportion of the foreign-born to the aggregate population: United States, 1890



Source: Statistical atlas of the United States, based upon the results of the eleventh census, 1898. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C. 20540-4650 USA dcu.

Figure 3. Italian population abroad in 1924 and main routes. From L'Emigrazione Italiana dal 1910 al 1923, il Ministero degli Affari Esteri dal Commissario generale dell'emigrazione



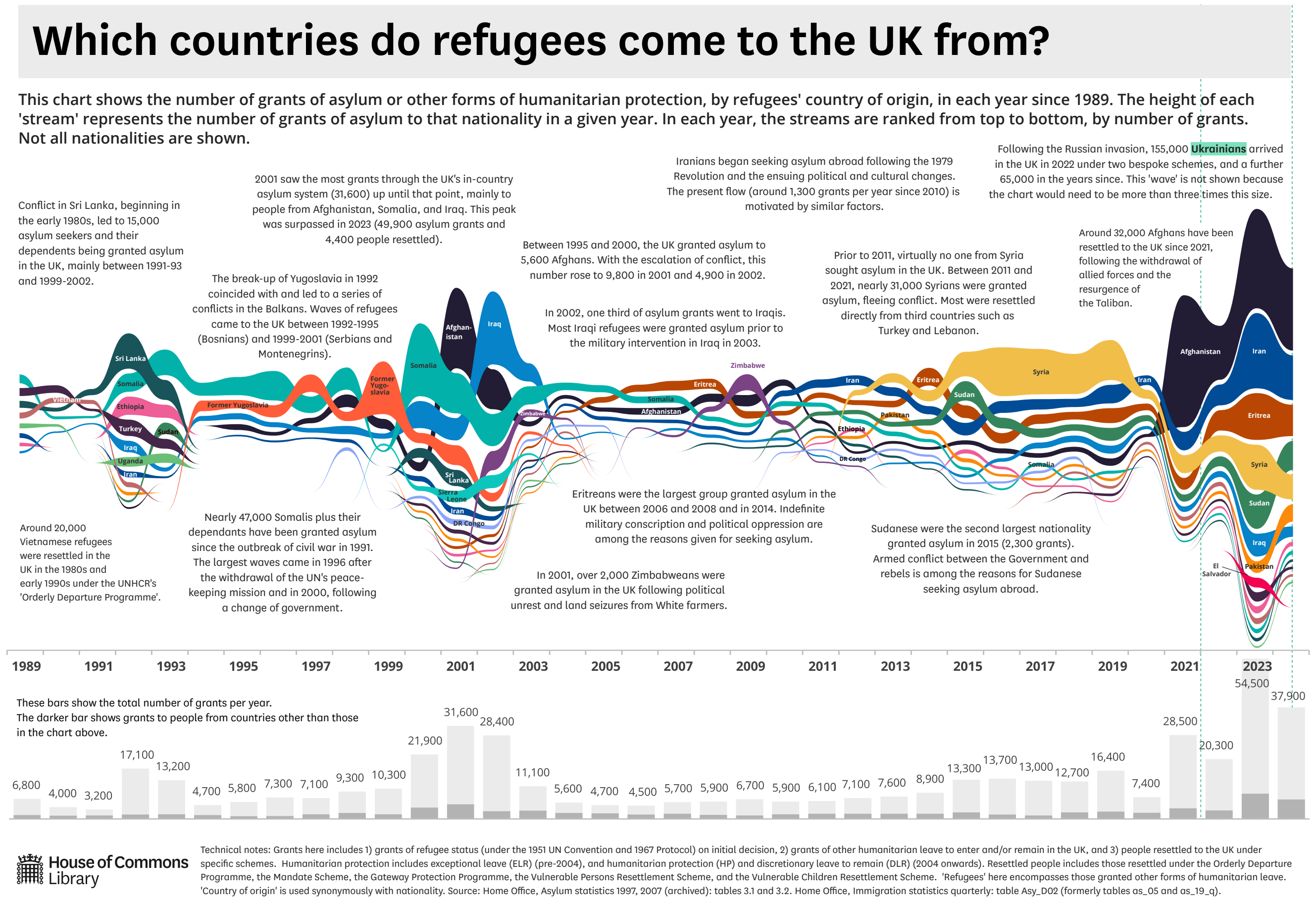
Source: Giuseppe de Michelis, L'Emigrazione Italiana dal 1910 al 1923. Roma: Commissariato Generale Dell'Emigrazione, 1926. Provided by the Library of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

More recent data storytelling about migration has used modern graphic design tools to bring information to life with a combination of text, numbers and visualizations. The infographic below (Figure 4)[16] from the UK House of Commons Library provides a visually engaging and highly informative depiction of refugee inflows to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from 1989 to 2024. The mixed approach is valuable: text or data alone would lack impact, while the visuals alone would be somewhat confusing. By bringing these elements together, however, the infographic tells a clear story of the United Kingdom's changing refugee inflows. This type of infographic is not appropriate for all situations, but it is a good example of how a creative approach can help tell the story behind the data.

While the benefits of data storytelling may be evident, investing in communications capacity at a time when many NSOs face stretched budgets and an array of competing demands on their resources may feel challenging. There are many ways to overcome these challenges, however, that may help develop both capacity and innovation, such as peer-to-peer partnerships with statistical offices in other countries which can bring benefits to both teams (see 'International statistical cooperation' in section 4 on Ghana Statistical Service's wide-ranging collaboration with the UK Office for National Statistics); collaboration with other government departments (such as the Government of Georgia's well-established State Commission on Migration Issues[17]); or, in appropriate circumstances, developing relationships and skills exchanges with other organizations in academia,[18] the private sector[19] or civil society.[20]

In some cases, additional resources may not be necessary at all: a shift in approach may be as simple as carefully considering the language contained in outputs, or using existing social media channels to reach the people who will use the materials produced or who are being surveyed.

Figure 4. Which countries do refugees come to the UK from?



Source: Kirk-Wade, E. *Asylum statistics.* House of Commons Library, 2025.

Innovation: Opportunities and risks

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools may offer some low-cost solutions for NSOs communicating about migration statistics, but this also brings additional ethical and practical challenges. The rapid development of AI makes it impossible to provide comprehensive guidelines on how NSOs should effectively utilize AI in the future; however, current technologies present both opportunities and risks.

As of mid-2025, AI tools are already powerful enough to undertake many of the basic communications tasks an NSO may need – such as drafting strategy documents and press releases or helping to identify key channels to reach particular audiences. Human intervention and review remain critical, however, both to provide accountability and to guarantee that the materials produced are accurate and appropriate. While the technology is moving fast, AI-related risks that NSOs must take steps to mitigate include: algorithmic bias in generative tools, which a particular challenge when using the technology to draft content; deepfakes, which may be used to promote fake data as official statistics; and the misuse of automated content.

AI searches and summaries have become key tools for members of the public looking for statistical information. While systems are constantly improving, these searches and summaries are imperfect, sometimes generating 'hallucinations' where information is misinterpreted or even invented.

Public data made available by NSOs will often be a critical resource for AI searches dealing with migration data and statistics, so ensuring that these data are clearly explained should help to prevent misinterpretation or misrepresentation in AI summaries.[21] Ensuring that correct official data can be easily found and understood on NSO websites can help people check the validity of any materials AI searches provide them, and offset some problems that may arise from AI hallucinations.[22]

Narrative, clarity and neutrality: The necessity of context and explanation

In its section on data accessibility, the United Nations Statistics Division's *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*[23] offers a critical recommendation on dissemination of statistics: Help users avoid mistakes.

NSOs that can 'tell a story' with (and about) the data they provide reduce the scope for misuse and misunderstanding of that data. This means telling people why and how the data were collected, what is or is not known about the respondents and explaining other factors that need to be considered to understand the data meaningfully.[24]

As outlined above, statistics published by NSOs are now vastly more accessible than ever before. In most cases, they are immediately available to everyone from schoolchildren to heads of state, through data portals and other government websites. Each of the individuals accessing these statistics will have differing levels of data literacy, different motivations for accessing them and different intentions about how to use (or misuse) them for their own purposes. Alongside this, every one of these individuals also has access to AI tools they can use to gather and interpret or visualize data, and to social media tools they can use to instantly broadcast their own interpretations of the data to audiences ranging from a few friends to millions.

Thus, how data and statistics are presented by NSOs from the outset is critical. A chart or data table presented with minimal supporting context creates greater possibilities for misunderstanding or misuse than one where, for example, confidence intervals and caveats are clearly and simply explained.

Telling the story of the data means that it is an NSO's responsibility to provide clarity about what the statistics do and do not say, and why this is the case. Explanation, in the form of narrative and visual storytelling, can contextualize the information provided (such as highlighting uncertainty or comparing one set of data with other relevant data) and ensure that it is as fully understood as possible, minimizing potential misuse or misunderstanding.

Guaranteeing neutrality is always a challenge. Just because a dataset is factually correct does not mean it is inherently neutral. To presume this overlooks two key issues: first, that additional information may be needed for a fuller understanding of those data; and second, that subjective decisions – such as what to include and exclude, or how to classify – can influence how the data are presented.

A responsible statistician will explain these underlying factors, how they may have shaped the data, and any unanswered questions, limitations or ways the data might lead to incorrect assumptions. One substantial challenge when presenting demographic and migration data dealing with millions of people is simply understanding scale – determining whether a number is, in relative terms, 'big' or 'small'. Without proper context, large figures can be misleading or overwhelming. Therefore, it is crucial to situate numbers alongside other relevant data and provide meaningful comparisons to aid interpretation.

For example, a chart showing that net international migration to a country declined from +100,000 per annum in Year A to +1,000 per annum in Year B may prompt a user to imagine that this represents a reduction in overall levels of migration.

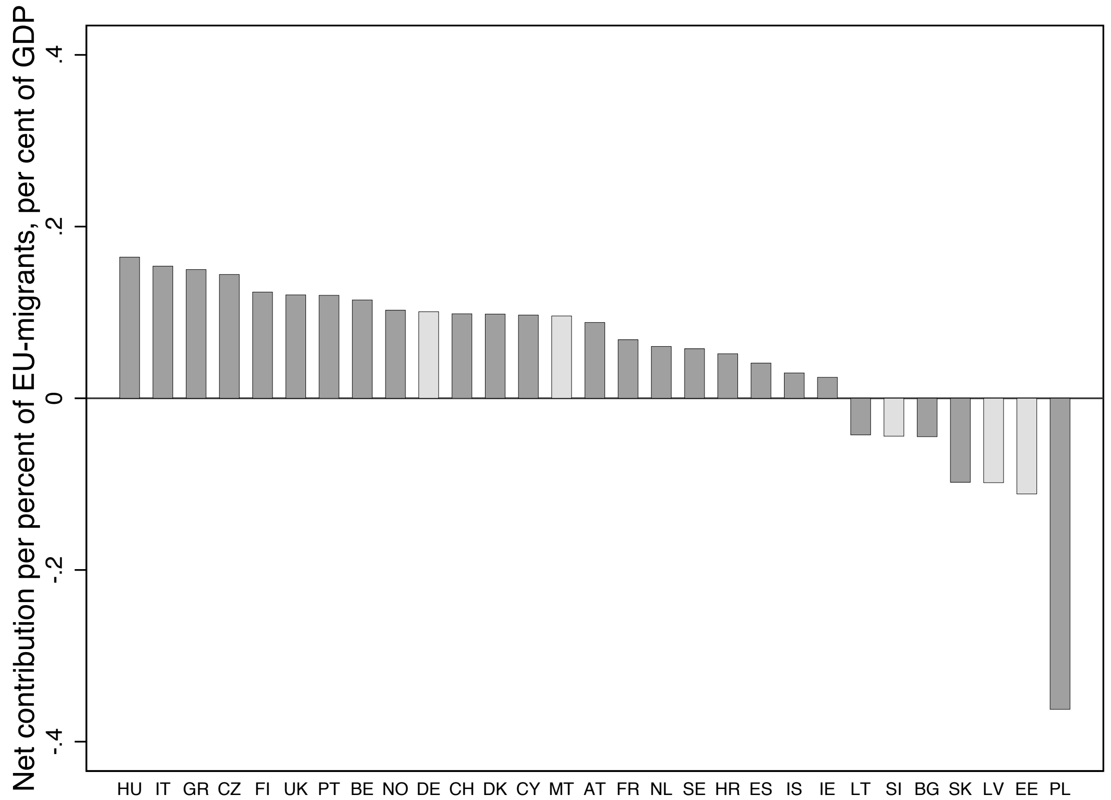
If, however, Year A saw immigration of 100,000 and emigration of zero, while Year B saw immigration of 1,000,000 and emigration of 999,000 then despite the decline in net migration, Year B would in fact show a dramatic increase in overall migration levels – both immigration and emigration – and the churn in the population may well be a more significant issue than the declining overall net migration.

Storytelling in relation to migration data goes beyond explaining how a figure was calculated. It also involves providing context on key aspects – such as the reliability of the statistics, who is included in the data and how they were selected, and whether alternative metrics support the findings. As illustrated with the example above, where available data only provide clarity on certain elements of a story, it is important that NSOs anticipate how the information provided may be interpreted and used, or the questions it leaves unanswered. Explaining these limitations and clarifying what data do not show, as well as what they do, can avoid misunderstandings.

Producers of migration statistics must recognize their role in the dynamic process of migration policymaking. Basic definitional elements are critical: the question of 'who counts as a migrant'[25] – and why this matters – often requires explanation. Are the statistics in line with global statistical standards? Is a particular figure a measure of the foreign-born population or foreign citizens, for example, and why is this relevant?

When research was undertaken in the late 2010s to compare the fiscal impacts of immigration when migrants were moving between European Economic Area countries, the researchers came up against a confusing finding: the overall data highlighted that "while EU migrant households are net fiscal assets in most of the countries included in the analysis", there was one very significant outlier – Poland, as shown in Figure 5 (Nyman and Ahlskog, 2018).[26]

Figure 5: Net fiscal effect per percentage of EU migrant households, per country, 2012–2015



Note: Lighter bars in figures on this represent countries with imputed migration status and should thus be interpreted with care.
Source: Nyman, P., & Ahlskog, R. Fiscal effects of intra-EEA migration. *REMINDER Project*, 2018.

At first glance, this chart appears to show that EU-born immigrants who had moved to Poland were extremely expensive for the state. A short narrative explanation for this anomaly, however, clears matters up quickly and simply:

> *The only country with markedly negative fiscal effects per percent EU migrant population is Poland, which is due to a disproportionately large share of elderly among people classed as 'migrants'. This is likely due to migration and territorial changes in the wake of World War II, and thus not a consequence of free movement in the EU.*

For clarity: while country of birth was the appropriate metric for what the researchers were measuring, it did not exclude the population of elderly Polish citizens who were affected by territorial changes after World War II. This included those born in parts of Silesia, Pomerania and East Prussia that were a part of Germany before the war – when these people were born – but were integrated into Poland afterwards. These elderly people were often classed as 'German-born' in their official documentation and thus, as residents of modern Poland, were considered 'migrants' by the country-of-birth metric even though many may have lived in the same town for their entire lives.

Telling the story of the data – such as the short narrative explanation provided by Nyman and Ahlskog – helps provide clarity and explain its limitations. This enables others to critically assess any normative conclusions drawn from the data.

The function of data in a modern communications environment, and the role of narrative

Data and statistics are communicated using images, numbers and text to create understanding and meaning in complex policy spaces like international migration. This places a responsibility on those producing migration statistics to provide analysis and explanation, context and clarity to prevent misuse and misunderstanding of these data, and to support a human rights-based approach that considers the human beings behind the data points.

Providing statistical materials in a form that encourages users to consider and engage with the humanity of the subjects of the data is important, as it can shape policy decisions and the experiences of migrant communities.

It would be problematic for debates about the impacts and management of migration to take place without numerical evidence. Among other problems, this would lead to heavily subjective debates, necessarily dependent on editorial choices about what information was and was not shared, and thus would skew towards particular assumptions about effective approaches to managing migration.

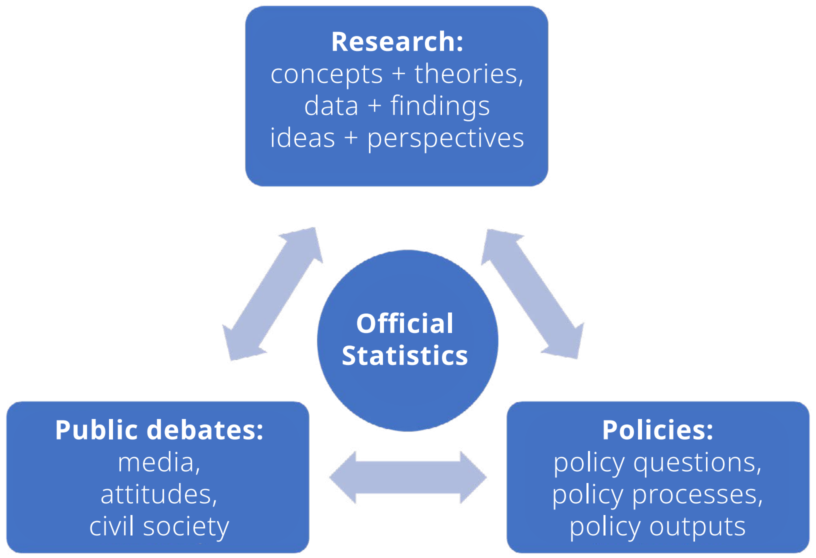
Likewise, a data-only migration debate is necessarily flawed. Far from being 'neutral', focusing exclusively on migration numbers without providing narrative context is, in effect, an editorial choice with potential political ramifications. As data visualization researcher William Allen explains in his consideration of possible challenges of large migration datasets and data visualizations:

> "*they obscure migrants' plural stories by collapsing similar data doubles into singular variables: employment status, nationality, passport held. These outcomes, intentional or not, matter for debates in policy and practice. Just as creating categories reifies certain identities and statuses, visual representations of these categories do much the same. The migrant becomes part of a mass.*" [27]

An important question for NSOs to consider is whether their presentation of the data is tacitly guiding debates towards certain normative conclusions, and, if so, what to do about this.

Producers of migration statistics must recognize their role in the dynamic process of migration policymaking. One way to understand this is as a 'triangular' relationship between research, public debates and policies (see Figure 6).[28] Understanding which factors within policy and public debates are driving demand for certain migration data – and how that information might be used or misused – can guide how statisticians display and contextualize those data.

Figure 6: Triangular relationships between research, public debates and policies



Source: Designed by the authors; adapted from Ruhs, Martin, Kristof Tamas and Joakim Palme (eds.), *Bridging the Gaps: Linking Research to Public Debates and Policy Making on Migration and Integration*, Oxford, 2019.

Building understanding rather than imparting information

Publishing accurate numbers and technical notes without narrative explanation to guide readers in correct understanding and use cannot be seen as responsible stewardship of migration data. Narrative explanations and graphical representations of published data, along with technical notes, serve to guide the user, bringing real benefits to understanding and stimulating users to interrogate and explore the statistical information further. Data storytelling helps to situate data within a narrative that highlights key insights and provides the necessary context.

Having more data is not inherently better. Reporting numbers without proper context can overwhelm audiences and undermine public empathy. This has practical implications, as research shows that people's perceptions of the scale and impact of migration significantly influence their preferences for migration policy.[29] This suggests that to effectively inform public debates and policymaking, NSOs should focus more on the quality rather than the quantity of statistics, prioritizing and actively promoting core statistics that are pertinent to questions in public debate, in line with global statistical standards.

Ensuring that these data are supported, as far as possible, with contextualizing explanations strengthens the global evidence base on migration.[30]

This emphasis on narrative and graphical representations does not supersede the fundamental importance of providing structured datasets. Rather, it acknowledges that these datasets must be situated in their proper context, with clear explanations to prevent misrepresentation, misunderstanding or misuse.

Statistical offices should adhere to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics,[31] maintaining professional independence, impartiality and accountability. One important aspect of this is recognizing political motivations or pressure to present data in particular ways. Decisions to highlight certain information while downplaying other data can fundamentally shape debates, so statisticians should apply their expertise to ensure data are presented impartially and transparently. NSOs should proactively exercise their professional agency to balance attempts to politicize migration statistics, ensuring that data dissemination supports informed and unbiased public discourse.

Is storytelling about migration data different to explaining other issues?

Much of the discussion about migration data storytelling outlined throughout this section could be applied to other policy issues in which data play a key role. There are, however, factors specific to migration debates that need to be considered.

Impacts on people and communities. The first critical factor, as discussed already, is that migration is a highly polarizing and emotive issue that is often depicted as a threat to communities and states. Relatedly, migration data can be used to stimulate or add to public concerns. Where there are concerns about migration, migrant communities or persons believed to be migrants may sometimes be targeted by hostile groups or individuals. As such, the publication and sharing of migration data needs to be undertaken with a recognition that it can have real-world impacts for individuals and communities.

Expectations of precision in high profile debates. There can be an expectation among media, policymakers and public users of migration data that measurements of migration flows and stocks will be precise. As such, discovering that there may be margins of error in the data or that information may simply not have been collected on a topic – particularly one that becomes a significant political or media story – can affect trust. As such, openness and transparency about the limitations of data sources, the reasons for these limitations and how they may affect the data are critical.

The challenge of stocks and flows. Helping people to understand the dynamic relationship between 'stocks' and 'flows', the different ways in which they are measured and their associated limitations are key elements of communicating about migration data.

Stocks: It should be made clear that stocks data are typically derived from censuses, registers or surveys, with counts relying on a definition of 'usual residence' which will often create questions about coverage (such as whether they capture the number of irregular migrants), timeliness (especially for censuses, which provide the most accurate but least timely estimates) and comparability across definitions (such as country of birth vs. country of citizenship).

Flows: It is helpful to explain the particular challenges in measuring migration flows. How do we define whether someone arriving in, or leaving, a country is a 'migrant'? The standard definition of an international migrant requires them to establish residence in another country for most of or at least 12 months, which is only knowable after the fact. As a result, early estimates are provisional and often revised as more information arrives. Using administrative data adds another layer of complexity because they capture events (e.g., a visa grant, a border crossing, a registration with a government agency), not migration as defined statistically: visas do not guarantee arrival, arrivals do not guarantee long-term stay, and departures are frequently under-recorded – making emigration flows especially difficult to measure.

Changing statuses. On top of this, people change status (such as from student to worker, temporary to permanent resident), move circularly and respond to policy shifts, so classifications can shift over time and previously published figures must be updated.

Thus, the processes of storytelling about migration data are not inherently different to the processes of storytelling about any other data, but the sensitivities and challenges are specific and will also be different across countries and time periods.

3. An end-to-end approach to communication

Communication about migration statistics must be viewed as a strategic and integrated process that extends throughout the statistical life cycle. It is not something limited merely to the dissemination of final products. This integrated approach requires careful consideration of communication needs at every stage of statistical production, from initial planning and identifying user needs through data collection and finally to dissemination and subsequent use.

This represents a broader view of statistical communication than the traditional 'broadcasting' perspective,[32] where the primary role of NSOs is the dissemination of final statistical products. By contrast, the end-to-end approach places communication at the heart of all NSO statistical work.

For example, building trust and sharing the objectives of the work with the communities and individuals being studied before field-based data collection takes place – to ensure they have provided informed consent for their information to be used and that they understand the importance of the work[33] – helps support better data collection, particularly from hard-to-reach or marginalized groups.[34] In this way, respondents are viewed as co-producers of knowledge, rather than merely the objects of research.[35]

At the other end of the process, it is critical to manage significant changes to long-established migration datasets transparently, ensuring that key stakeholders understand the nature and rationale of such changes, rather than causing people to lose access to critical information.

This special attention paid to communications at the beginning and end of the data life cycle is in no way meant to diminish the critical importance of the more established communication role in disseminating statistics. Rather, the shift in focus emphasizes the need to move away from the conception that communication about migration statistics is an add-on that comes after the technical work has been done, and towards a recognition that ongoing communication with a range of stakeholders is integral to the process of effectively generating and communicating migration statistics.

The statistical production life cycle

Producing official statistics involves five main steps: identifying users' statistics needs, collecting data, analysing the data, disseminating statistical findings, and continuous evaluation and improvement of the previous four steps. These five steps encompass the statistical production life cycle.

Traditionally, different divisions within NSOs handled all of these steps for their specific subject areas, including migration. While this approach ensured deep subject knowledge, it also led to siloed workflows that hindered collaboration and efficiency. This is especially problematic for migration-relevant data, which are often spread across multiple government departments (see section 4, 'A whole-of-government approach').

To address these challenges, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Statistical Division coordinated the development of a new approach: the Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM). Drawing from innovative practices in NSOs, the GSBPM shifts the focus from subject-based divisions to **function-based processes**, allowing the same procedures and tools to be applied across different subject areas:[36]

1	**Identify user needs** – Determine what statistics are needed, who will use them and whether they justify the cost of production.
2	**Design** – Plan how to produce the new statistics, including methodology and procedures.
3	**Build** – Develop tools and systems for the production of the statistics.
4	**Collect** – Gather data using predesigned methods, train staff and conduct pilot tests if necessary.
5	**Process** – Clean, edit and tabulate the collected data to prepare them for analysis.
6	**Analyse** – Interpret the data and prepare analytical reports.
7	**Disseminate** – Publish reports, create press releases and communicate findings through various formats, including websites and media.
8	**Evaluate** – Assess the quality and efficiency of each phase, ensuring continuous improvement of the production of statistics.

With regard to migration statistics, flows (i.e., entries and exits, or changes of usual residence during a period) tend to inform short-term operational and budget decisions, while stocks (i.e., people resident on a given date, by characteristics such as country of birth or citizenship) tend to support medium- and long-term planning. Given that relevant underlying administrative records sit in different departments (interior, labour, education, health, social protection, municipalities and finance), a function-based model like the GSBPM is well-suited to coordinate migration statistics production and should be applied by NSOs as a whole-of-government production line. This begins with cross-agency definition of needs; the harmonization of concepts and their definitions; and the integration of datasets, including administrative records, border entries, population registers and social security systems. This function-based approach replaces siloed work, improves data coherence and enables faster, reusable migration statistics for policy and communication.

With the exception of the 'process' and 'analyse' phases, all other phases of the GSBPM involve specific communications activity – before, during and after data have been collected. Identifying user needs requires continuous communication with users to map over time what they want from statistics (see 'Understanding user needs' below).[37] The 'design', 'build' and 'collect' phases also require ongoing communication with both respondents and users, mainly to improve response rates and ensure data are collected that can effectively meet users' needs. At the end of the statistical production life cycle, the 'evaluate' phase similarly requires communication with respondents and users to improve both data collection and statistics communication.

The GSBPM is complemented by the Generic Activity Model for Statistical Organisations (GAMSO), which describes and defines the activities that take place within a typical organization that produces official statistics.[38]

Defining key audiences: Who needs migration statistics?

A critical step in developing effective communication strategies for statistics is clearly defining intended audiences from the outset.[39] This is to ensure that official statistics are fundamentally 'demand-driven' – i.e., designed to meet the specific needs of various groups of users.

Different audiences have distinct needs, technical capabilities and ways of engaging with statistical information that must be considered throughout the end-to-end process. By identifying audiences early on, NSOs can tailor their data collection methods and communication strategies to meet the specific requirements of each group.

The United Nations *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems* identifies **seven main users of official statistics**:

1. **Government:** This includes the policy- and lawmakers in the national government and legislative assembly, as well as civil servants in central, regional and local governments
2. **International and regional organizations**
3. **Businesses**
4. **Media**
5. **The academic, research and education community**
6. **Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)**
7. **The public at large**

There are other ways of categorizing users. For example, the European Statistical Advisory Committee highlights the importance of identifying different types of users of statistics based on their needs rather than their occupation.[40]

The UK Office for National Statistics provides a more **actionable breakdown of statistics users** based on who they are, what they want and their behaviour and preferences:[41]

Expert analysts: academics, think tanks, policy analysts and other researchers

These are professionals who download spreadsheets to create their own charts and analysis. They want quick access to raw data (numbers rather than percentage changes), with clear links to historical data releases. They prefer underlying datasets to statistics and need data revisions and changes to methodology to be communicated clearly.

Information foragers: businesses, administrators and policymakers

These are users looking to enhance their understanding of migration patterns for practical business, administrative or policy purposes. This includes business analysts, policymakers, civil servants and local government administrators. This audience wants timely, easy-to-find data, often with a focus on local demographics and trends.

Inquiring public, journalists and communications specialists

These are occasional visitors searching for unbiased, trustworthy information on topical issues. They want visually engaging summaries and infographics that are easy to share. They prefer clear data points that verify facts and put numbers into context.

Building on these typologies, we can identify a range of users who are likely to need migration statistics. Across government, for example, several departments rely on migration statistics. Immigration, border and asylum agencies need timely information on flows (arrivals, departures, status changes) to manage caseloads, and stocks by legal status to administer extensions and evaluate visa compliance. Labour and finance ministries require stocks of foreign-born or non-citizen workers by sector and region, plus flows of work-related entrants, to calibrate skills policy and budgets and inform macroeconomic assessments, such as the fiscal impact of immigration. Education, health, social protection and housing use school-age and household flows to allocate services, and resident stocks to manage infrastructure. Local governments need municipal inflow trends and neighbourhood stocks to provide services and allocate housing and education resources. Foreign affairs and consular services depend on emigrant flows and stocks for crisis response and diaspora policy. Researchers, planners, media and civil society need harmonized statistics on flows and stocks to aid public understanding of migration and evaluate policy.

Moreover, migrant integration statistics are used by ministries of interior and integration, labour authorities and employer bodies, education and health systems, housing and urban planning agencies, justice and equality institutions, as well as municipalities, NGOs, treasuries, researchers and the media. Users require cohort-based indicators – employment and earnings, language acquisition and educational attainment, health status and health care use, housing quality and residential segregation, experiences of discrimination and civic participation – disaggregated by time since arrival and legal status, and benchmarked against native-born populations. Such statistics guide programme design and resource allocation, support the protection of rights and social cohesion, and enable robust evaluation of policy effectiveness.

In general, NSOs should aim to satisfy the needs of all these types of users. With this in mind, **common requirements across all users** are:

1. **Timely releases.** Ensure migration data and statistical analysis are updated regularly (e.g., monthly, quarterly, biannually or annually) and on time to meet the needs of both time-pressured expert users and those planning around new data releases.
2. **Clear, consistent formats.** Use consistent data formats and layouts to avoid confusion across all user types.
3. **Email alerts and notifications.** Provide email alerts or RSS feeds to inform users of new data releases, changes or updates.
4. **Mobile-friendly access.** Ensure that data summaries, infographics and key statistics are easily accessible on mobile devices.

More generally, two principles should be borne in mind when communicating about migration statistics: simplicity and clarity. Migration data are complicated. It is the job of NSOs to make the complex as simple and meaningful as possible while avoiding oversimplification or distortion of the data's meaning.

Simplicity in the communication of migration statistics involves distilling the information down to its most essential points without oversimplifying or losing the nuance of the data. It means avoiding jargon. Use everyday words rather than technical ones; for example, opt for 'population' rather than 'stock' in public-facing communications. Choose simple over complex graphs and avoid overwhelming the audience with too many figures. Focus on the key numbers and trends that are most relevant to the topic.

Clarity means presenting the data in a straightforward and unambiguous way. It requires choosing formats (e.g., charts, infographics or bullet points) that make the information easy to follow and comprehend. Clear communication avoids confusion and ensures that the message is conveyed accurately while reducing the scope for misinterpretation.

Understanding user needs

Before data collection begins, NSOs should engage with potential users of the data – including policymakers, researchers, businesses, civil society organizations and migrant communities – to understand their information needs and end uses. This engagement can help shape the design of surveys, questionnaires and administrative data systems to ensure that the collected data will be relevant and useful.

This communication should be continuous, enabling NSOs to research, map and monitor users' evolving needs over time.[42] Establishing and maintaining close relationships with users enhances trust, improves data usability and aligns statistical production with societal demands.

Considering the perspectives and concerns of migrant communities and individuals who will provide the data is also essential. This can be challenging, as migrants can be difficult to identify and can be highly diverse with respect to country of origin, educational level, socio-economic status, age, sex, and so forth. Yet early communication with these groups is essential to build trust and encourage participation, which is particularly important when collecting sensitive information. By explaining the purpose of data collection and how the information will be used to inform policies and programmes that may benefit them, NSOs can increase willingness to participate. Addressing privacy and confidentiality concerns through transparent communication about data handling practices serves to alleviate fears and encourages honest responses.

Modes of communication with users

NSOs must continuously assess who uses their statistics, how they are used and how well the statistics meet user needs. All these are served by effective ongoing communication with stakeholders.[43] By embedding the following communications methods into their work, NSOs can maintain close, dynamic relationships with users to ensure that statistics are relevant and useful. To achieve this, NSOs can employ various methods, each offering distinct advantages in fostering dialogue and understanding user requirements. These methods, drawn from statistical governance literature and practice, include stakeholder consultations, expert advisory groups, user surveys, digital engagement platforms, workshops and collaborative partnerships.

Stakeholder consultations offer a structured yet flexible mechanism for NSOs to engage directly with diverse user groups. These consultations can take the form of conferences (typically held annually), public forums, focus groups or targeted meetings with specific sectors (e.g., government agencies or NGOs) or individual users. These formats allow NSOs to gather rich, detailed qualitative insights into user needs and preferences. For example, Statistics Canada utilizes stakeholder consultations to refine its dissemination strategies.[44]

User forums, special advisory committees and expert groups provide additional opportunities for gathering feedback and insights from statistics users.

Special advisory committees or expert advisory groups offer a more formalized approach that can provide effective strategic oversight. Bringing together specialists from academia, industry and government can provide a diverse range of ideas

relating to statistical priorities and methodologies. These groups serve as a bridge between NSOs and technical users, ensuring that outputs align with cutting-edge research and practical applications. The UK's Office for National Statistics, for example, relies on its National Statistician's Expert User Advisory Committee to review data relevance and advise on long-term user needs.[45] Academic literature underscores the value of such groups in enhancing responsiveness while bolstering credibility, as they institutionalize user input into NSO decision-making processes.[46]

User surveys can form an effective complement to these qualitative approaches by enabling a systematic mapping and monitoring of statistics needs across a broad user base. Conducted periodically, these surveys can track a variety of indicators:

- ***Satisfaction with statistical products and services***. A measure of how users rate aspects like timeliness, accessibility and usefulness of statistics. This includes preferences for accessing statistics (e.g., online, phone, in person) and preferred formats (e.g., mobile, desktop, print).
- ***Website design and communication***. An evaluation of how easy it is to navigate the website and statistical databases of the NSO, as well as user satisfaction with data visualizations.
- ***Trust.*** A gauge of public confidence in official statistics, perceptions of independence from political influence, and overall satisfaction with the work of the NSO. While it is important for NSOs to maintain a level of political independence (that is, not allowing political pressure to bias substantive statistical analysis), it is also important for them to be perceived as independent and have the trust of the public they serve.

An example of this method is Eurostat's user satisfaction surveys, which are conducted at least once every two years.[47] While such user surveys can be expensive, NSOs from lower- and middle-income countries have nevertheless also invested in them, sometimes with external financial support. The Ghana Statistical Service has carried out user surveys since 2012, with financial and technical assistance from the World Bank.[48] The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics consulted widely in the development of its Strategic Plan 2023–2027, involving internal and external stakeholders.[49] The National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda[50] and the Philippine Statistics Authority have also conducted user satisfaction surveys, with the Philippine agency conducting them quarterly.[51]

Digital tools like Google Analytics (which are low cost) and media monitoring services (typically requiring more costly subscriptions) can also provide insight into which products have greatest reach. Digital engagement platforms such as online portals, social media and interactive dashboards facilitate real-time, scalable communication with users.

Workshops and training sessions provide an interactive setting for NSOs to educate users about available statistics while gathering insights into their needs. These events can target specific audiences – such as journalists or local government officials – and foster two-way dialogue. For example, the Ghana Statistical Service conducted training workshops for 160 journalists across the country, with the aim of equipping media personnel with the necessary understanding to report responsibly on migration and census-related topics.[52]

Finally, **research partnerships** with organizations such as universities, think tanks or international bodies enable NSOs to embed themselves within data networks and help to ensure that statistics have applied relevance. These partnerships can involve joint research projects, data-sharing agreements or co-designed statistical tools.

Communicating with data respondents

Migrants often constitute a significant yet statistically underreported segment of national populations. This is partly due to the challenges NSOs face in collecting information on this group, such as language barriers, distrust of government[53] or patterns of mobility.[54]

Considering the perspectives and concerns of the migrant communities and individuals who will provide the data is therefore essential. Early communication with these groups prior to data collection helps build trust and encourages participation, which is particularly important when collecting sensitive information. NSOs can increase respondents' 'buy-in' (and potentially improve participation rates) by explaining the purpose of data collection and how the information will be used to inform policies and programmes that may benefit respondents. Addressing privacy and confidentiality concerns through transparent communication about data handling practices alleviates fears and encourages honest responses.

Tailoring communication methods to the cultural and linguistic contexts of different communities can also increase engagement. This may involve translating materials into multiple languages, employing culturally sensitive messaging or involving community leaders as advisors or intermediaries. Offering support to respondents who may have difficulty understanding or completing surveys, such as through helplines or in-person assistance, can also improve response rates and data quality.

Special attention should be given to engaging hard-to-reach or vulnerable populations, such as undocumented migrants, refugees or marginalized communities. These groups may have even higher levels of mistrust or face additional barriers.[55] Partnering with other national government agencies, local government, NGOs, service providers, community groups or local leaders who have established relationships with these communities can facilitate communication and build trust. Trust is a prerequisite for higher participation rates and more robust datasets. Migrants may hesitate to share personal details due to prior encounters with authorities or privacy fears, which is why co-designing data collection tools with them is ideal.[56] Effective outreach can take many forms, from direct engagement with community leaders and forums to broader communication through media platforms, posters and informational materials. The choice of approach should be guided by careful consideration of the specific community context and cultural factors that may affect participation.

After data collection

Following data collection, communication efforts shift towards dissemination and engagement with data users, the "activity of making official statistics, statistical analyses, statistical services and metadata accessible to users".[57]

Maintaining communication with the communities from whom data were collected, however, remains important. Sharing accessible summaries of key findings with the communities involved demonstrates respect and appreciation for their participation. It also helps them understand how their contributions are being used. Soliciting feedback on the data collection process and communication strategies can provide valuable insights for future efforts.

NSOs must be transparent not only about the migration statistics they disseminate, but also about gaps in migration data and their limitations. Clear explanations of why certain migration information is unavailable – whether due to technical constraints, ethical considerations around vulnerable populations, or resource limitations – help build trust with users and support an appropriate interpretation of available migration statistics.

When changes are made to established migration datasets, NSOs should communicate these changes transparently to stakeholders in advance. This includes explaining the rationale for modifications and their potential impact on migration data continuity and analysis. Such openness helps maintain user confidence and prevents disruption to migration research and policy work that relies on these statistics.

NSOs should employ a variety of dissemination methods tailored to the needs of the audiences identified earlier. This may include publishing detailed reports, executive summaries, interactive data visualizations and raw datasets. Utilizing multiple channels – such as official websites, social media platforms, press releases, webinars and workshops – can enhance reach and accessibility.

During dissemination, statistical offices should anticipate potential misinterpretations or misuse of migration statistics. By providing contextual information, highlighting key messages and addressing common misconceptions, they can guide users towards accurate understanding. This might involve presenting statistics alongside historical trends, comparisons with other countries or proportionate scales to help audiences understand the significance of the numbers, as well as clarifying definitions of key terms (e.g., 'migrant', 'refugee', 'asylum seeker') to mitigate confusion and misrepresentation.

NSOs should monitor how migration statistics are used in media and public discussions. If inaccuracies or misinterpretations are identified, timely responses can correct the record and provide clarifications. Engaging in public dialogue through social media or other platforms can help address questions and contribute to informed debates.

By integrating communication throughout the statistical life cycle and focusing on the specific needs of various audiences, NSOs can enhance the effectiveness of their migration statistics and contribute positively to public understanding and policy development. An end-to-end communication approach ensures that data collection is aligned with user needs, respondent participation is maximized, data are presented effectively, and trust and credibility are strengthened.

4. A whole-of-government approach

> "The future of statistics is going to be all about partnerships. And a particular feature of partnerships is working with other countries, where we have something to learn from each other." [58]
>
> – **John Pullinger**, Former Chair of the United Nations Statistical Commission (Forty-sixth session)

On top of this end-to-end approach, it is also critical to apply a comprehensive or 'whole-of-government'[59] approach to communicating about migration statistics. This type of coordination must take place both vertically, which involves joint work up and down the governance hierarchy, from national to regional and local government; and horizontally, which aligns work across units at the same level, whether locally, nationally (cross-departmentally) or internationally.

The whole-of-government approach recognizes that migration is inherently a cross-cutting issue, spanning multiple policy areas which are typically overseen by different government departments and often implemented by local rather than national government.

A migrant's visa status may change from temporary to permanent. Some migrants go on to obtain the citizenship of their destination country. Migrants also marry, have children and die. All of these events may be recorded administratively, but such records are unlikely to all be held in the same place. Since administrative data are key for the production of migration statistics, NSOs need strong working relationships with all government departments and municipalities holding migration-relevant administrative records. At the national government level, this is likely to include departments responsible for economic affairs, international development, health, employment, immigration, security, education and social services. It is therefore essential for NSOs to coordinate with other national and local government agencies and stakeholders in collecting, analysing and sharing migration data, using consistent terminology and complementary approaches.

By fostering inter-agency collaboration, NSOs can address the fragmented nature of migration data, producing more coherent and reliable statistics that are better able to inform policy.[60] The benefits of this approach – improved data quality, enhanced policy coherence, resource efficiency and strengthened international alignment – are substantial and well documented in the statistical and governance literature.

Such coordination is particularly important for maintaining trust with migrant communities. When different government agencies use inconsistent or inappropriate terminology to describe migrant populations, trust-building efforts are undermined, which reduces the willingness to participate in data collection.

This coordinated approach should extend beyond the national government. The tenth principle of the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics is "International cooperation", stating that "Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to improving systems of official statistics in all countries."

International cooperation can be effectively conducted as a 'peer-to-peer partnership'. This emphasizes that the partnership is mutually beneficial, with staff across NSOs united in a shared goal of improving statistics and knowledge, and each partner learning from the other. Whether an NSO is from a lower-income or higher-income country, international cooperation is key. This applies especially to migration data. Because the fundamental nature of migration is international, all countries stand to benefit from international peer-to-peer partnerships through which skills and knowledge are shared.

International collaboration with other NSOs (such as for the production and sharing of mirror statistics), international organizations and regional data networks can help contextualize data, share best practices and develop skills and knowledge.

Across-government coordination

Migration data are often siloed. Government departments tend to collect information in relation to their specific mandates: border agencies track entries, labour ministries monitor employment, and education, health and welfare departments record service use.

A cross-departmental approach enables NSOs to integrate these often disparate sources and harmonize data definitions and methodologies in line with global statistical standards. Additionally, coordination among departments can reduce duplicate work, improve the integration of administrative data for a more comprehensive migration picture, produce statistics that feed into more coherent policymaking, and develop joint communication strategies to ensure consistent messaging. By serving as a central hub, NSOs can provide a statistical foundation that works across government departments.

In practice, **effective inter-agency collaboration on migration statistics could be aided by**:

- A **single cross-government mandate** (comprising technical working groups and perhaps a ministerial board) that aligns all members to common standards – such as the United Nations revised Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration and Temporary Mobility (2025) and the refugee/IDP frameworks (IRRS/IRIS) – so departments count the same things the same way;
- A **single portal or platform for data sharing** that links visa, border, population, education and administrative data;
- **Agreed process roles** using the GSBPM; and
- An **attempt to unify working calendars and outputs** (e.g., a shared release calendar, methods notes and revision policy) following UNECE guidance on data integration.

Several NSOs have adopted versions of these approaches. In the United States, the White House Task Force on New Americans once served as a forum for coordination across federal agencies, outreach and data sharing. Nigeria has established the interministerial Working Group on Migration Data Management.[61] Similarly, Djibouti has a dedicated interministerial mechanism – the National Coordination Office for Migration – that exists to govern migration and migration data, and has a national Technical Working Group on Migration Statistics.[62]

Chile's National Statistics Institute coordinates the Interinstitutional Table on Migration Statistics, a collaborative initiative composed of several government agencies that serves as a communication bridge around needs, progress and challenges related to migration statistics. Its objectives are to coordinate, provide technical guidance, systematize and promote the production, analysis and dissemination of official migration statistics, in order to support sound public policymaking with a human rights and gender focus. Through regular meetings, the initiative members map existing sources (censuses, surveys and administrative records), identify gaps and quality issues, and agree on common definitions, code lists and data-sharing protocols. The initiative is evolving into a formal Subcommittee on Migration Statistics, strengthening continuity and accountability. The value of this approach lies in reducing duplication, improving comparability and timeliness across government, and enabling a single, integrated set of migration indicators for policy and public communication.[63]

The Australian Bureau of Statistics collaborates with the Department of Home Affairs and other bodies to produce cross-referenced migration statistics, enabling cohesive policy on settlement and integration. The UK Office for National Statistics works with the Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions to reconcile administrative migration data with survey-based statistics, enhancing overall accuracy. The US Department of Homeland Security works with the Census Bureau to improve migration flow estimations.

The Uganda Bureau of Statistics collaborates with the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control under the Ministry of Internal Affairs to collect and analyse migration data.[64] More broadly, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics works with multiple government ministries and departments to deliver a range of surveys and censuses on, for example, the labour force, health and HIV prevalence (with the technical assistance of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). In 2025, the Ethiopian Statistical Service signed a memorandum of understanding with thirteen Ethiopian government agencies to improve the sharing of migration-related data.[65]

The Department of Statistics Malaysia has established a Technical Working Group comprising the Department and other relevant agencies, which serves as a platform for inter-agency collaboration and data integration to enhance the production of statistics on international migration in Malaysia. These efforts are supported by the Data Sharing Act 2025, which establishes a formalized and secure framework for the exchange of data among public sector agencies.[66]

Similarly, Mexico's International Mobility and Migration Group acts as an inter-agency coordination mechanism that aims to harmonize concepts, link administrative data sources and steer a common workplan.[67]

Effective intragovernment coordination also reduces duplication of work and improves efficiency. Collecting migration data is resource-intensive. It involves surveys, censuses and the compilation of administrative records, including border entries and exits. A whole-of-government approach allows NSOs to avoid duplicating departments' work and can lead to the production of novel and powerful datasets – though these may require substantial upfront investment. For example, Statistics Canada manages the Longitudinal Immigration Database on behalf of a federal/provincial consortium led by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. The Database provides detailed information on the socio-economic outcomes of immigrants after their admission, such as employment income and social mobility.[68]

International statistical cooperation

This coordinated approach should extend beyond national government, since international migration by definition involves at least two countries. NSOs can benefit from collaboration with neighbouring countries, main countries of destination and origin, and international bodies. For example, the NSO of Sweden knows if a person has moved to Norway because the Norwegian NSO shares these data, and vice versa.

Peer-to-peer exchange and learning is essential, and international bodies can play an important role in facilitating these peer-to-peer relationships. One notable example of this is Ghana Statistical Service, which has partnered with both the UK NSO in a statistical modernization programme,[69] and with the International Organization of Migration (IOM), as well as Ghana's interior ministry, to produce a thematic report on migration based on its 2021 Population and Housing Census.[70]

International statistical cooperation has several main objectives:[71]

- Producing official statistics for both national and international use;
- Harmonizing statistics across countries;
- Developing international methods, standards and systems;
- Improving the clarity and quality of official statistics;
- Disseminating national statistics internationally; and
- Building capacity for the production and use of official statistics in developing countries.

In practice, extending this whole-of-government approach to the international arena means aligning with international guidelines to improve statistics comparability, as well as pursuing bilateral data-sharing agreements, especially with the NSOs of neighbouring, destination or origin countries. Here data governance mechanisms such as shared processes and databases, or inter-agency committees to direct cooperation, are critical to support sustained collaboration.

This approach also involves forming relationships with key international organizations and entities, chiefly: the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS), the United Nations Population Division (UNPD) (which produces migration stock estimates), the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC),[72] Eurostat (for EU member states), the European Migration Network (EMN), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) (which covers Central Asia, Eastern Europe and other regions), the Africa Migration Data Network (AMDN), and economic commissions and regional groupings such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),[73] the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)[74] and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).[75]

In Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, regional organizations complement national systems by harmonizing methods, building capacity and publishing comparable data and statistics. At the United Nations regional level, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, through its population division the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre, prioritizes international migration as a core area of work,[76] produces the *Demographic Observatory*[77] with population and migration indicators, and operates tools and trainings such as REDATAM[78] to help national offices process and disseminate census and survey microdata. It also convenes the Statistical Conference of the Americas, the main platform for statistical cooperation in the region (which has included a working group on international migration). These initiatives help countries in the region produce more coherent, timely and comparable migration statistics, and communicate them consistently to policymakers and the public.

5. Ethics

Ethics, and the understanding that migration data are not just numbers – they are about people[79] – should be at the heart of any endeavour in communicating migration statistics. This human rights-based approach must guide all interactions with respondents, across agencies, and when disseminating migration statistics to public audiences.

The ethics of communicating migration statistics are inseparable from the ethics of collecting and processing the data. This includes ensuring proper consent, protecting personal information and maintaining data privacy – a challenge that is particularly acute when balancing the need to share detailed statistics covering migrants' characteristics (such as age, sex, citizenship, income or profession) against the risk of individuals being identified from these data. These considerations are particularly critical given the increasing use of alternative data sources[80] – such as private sector data providers – which may not adhere to the same ethical standards. NSOs must carefully evaluate how such data were collected and whether appropriate privacy safeguards are in place.

Mitigating agenda-setting and the role of information brokers

Government migration statistics may well be important indicators used in 'agenda-setting' processes[81] in which certain issues are made more visible to the public and therefore get politically prioritized.[82] NSOs must not be deliberate actors in agenda-setting processes relating to migration, as underlined by the specific expectation of impartiality outlined in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

Research into the ethics of communicating migration data generally focuses on the role of "information brokers", usually journalists[83] and politicians, often using data for "symbolic or legitimising" purposes,[84] rather than the statistical bodies providing the actual data.

In the past two decades, the landscape of information brokers with which statistical bodies interact has changed significantly.[85] This now includes macro-level information brokers such as search engines, content aggregators, social media platforms and more recently AI platforms, whose algorithms define what information is presented to users,[86] as well as micro-level information brokers in the form of bloggers, podcasters, social media users and 'influencers'[87] – effectively expanding the role of information brokers in migration debates to anyone who wishes to participate.

The ability of any journalist, politician, social media activist or other information broker to tell migration stories accurately and ethically – or to misrepresent data and distort public debate – ultimately depends on whether the data are available and how effectively they have been contextualized and explained.[88]

This places a responsibility on national and international statistical agencies to provide clear, well-explained data, using neutral and correct terminology to situate the statistical information in its context and clarifying the limitations of the data in accessible language.

Language choices in communicating migration statistics have both legal and ethical implications. Terms that imply criminality ("illegal migrant") and language that could stigmatize communities should be avoided. While terminology may vary across countries and contexts, the overarching principle should be to use neutral, fact-based language that maintains accuracy while respecting human dignity. Helpful resources include the IOM Glossary on Migration, which consolidates existing terms and definitions from key international migration law and framework instruments.[89] The United Nations Statistics Division has produced a technical review of concepts and definitions on international migration[90] which may also be useful. Several other international organizations provide further thematic or regional guidelines to support use of language, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,[91] the International Labour Organization,[92] the European Migration Network[93] and the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move.[94]

These glossaries all differ slightly in their areas of focus and audience, but they share a common broad, underpinning theme: that words should be used carefully and that metaphors (particularly disaster metaphors) tend to imply normative judgements and, therefore, are often problematic.

Ethical questions also arise from the choices NSOs make in how they release data. The United Nations *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*[95] highlights the following ethical dos and don'ts:

Don't prioritize one group/media organization over another:

- "If the NSO grants access to their statistics ahead of their publication, such pre-release access should be restricted to few participants in line with international recommendations on pre-release access in line with the pre-release access rules and principles. The details of that granted access should be recorded, together with clear justifications for the access. No indication of the results should be made public, and the statistics should not be given to any other party without prior permission for access. The list of recipients should be reviewed regularly and kept to a minimum."

Maintain separation in the sharing of migration statistics from government policy announcements:

- "Policy, press, or ministerial statements referring to official statistics should be issued separately from, and contain a prominent link to, the source statistics. The statements should meet basic professional standards of statistical presentation, including accuracy, clarity and impartiality. The lead statistician or analyst should advise on the appropriate use of the statistics within these statements."

Make corrections quickly and openly:

- "Scheduled revisions or unscheduled corrections to the statistics and data should be released as soon as practicable. The changes should be handled transparently in line with a published policy."

6. Children, adolescents and youth: Communicating about under-represented migrant groups

Not all groups are equally represented in migration statistics and communication. This may be a result of particular difficulties in collecting data about these communities, ethical challenges in reporting information about them, or combinations of these and other factors.

Significantly, there is a particular paucity of migration data covering children, adolescents and youth,[96] and there are often important and complex challenges in communicating with and about them. In this section we explore what this means for NSOs.

One major analysis[97] noted:

> *There is a growing awareness that not enough is known about the increasing numbers of children on the move who need protection from violence and abuse. The data gaps pertain to all groups of child migrants, but particularly to the most vulnerable of these including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, refugee children, those displaced within national borders and trafficked children.*

Just like any other migrant group, migrant children move for a number of reasons, usually alongside their families, and only a limited share will be vulnerable. Nevertheless, children make up a significant proportion of the world's displaced people.[98] At the end of 2024, the United Nations estimated that 48.8 million children were displaced by conflict and violence, either within their countries or across borders. Over 19 million of these were refugee and asylum-seeking children.[99]

Children on the move face a unique range of challenges which require targeted interventions, but are often overlooked in data collection efforts.[100] These challenges extend into communication with and about these people.

The end-to-end communications process in work with children, adolescents and youth

Before and during data collection: As previously noted, there are ethical and practical complexities involved in reaching and working with minors to address under-representation in data collection.[101] These challenges are particularly acute in the context of work with unaccompanied children whose parents or guardians cannot provide consent on their behalf. The diversity of situations from which young migrants may have travelled, their experiences in transit and the array of situations in which they may find themselves means that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to communicating with or about these groups.

Recognizing these complex situations, however, and the trauma that may have been experienced by these children, is an important ethical starting point. Finding ways to work with children without causing harm or retraumatizing those who have had frightening experiences requires expert guidance, and should never be undertaken without strict ethical controls and support systems in place.

Collaborating with agencies such as UNICEF or other official child protection bodies for advice on how to do this is vital. Guidelines such as those set out by IDAC[102] and the Responsible Data for Children initiative[103] can help NSOs manage this process. Additionally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child[104] is the overarching framework that sets out international rules governing the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children and seeks above all to protect the best interests of the child.

Most existing guidelines on data concerning migrant and displaced children focus primarily on technical aspects rather than on issues of communication. Nevertheless, they generally adhere to core principles of protection, anonymity and consent – principles that are equally as relevant to communication as to data collection and other elements of a statistical office's processes. The Ethical Research Involving Children[105] project provides an excellent example, as shown on the next page.

The International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children – General guidelines on research work involving children

1	**Ethics in research involving children is everyone's responsibility** The research community, including all who participate in undertaking, commissioning, funding and reviewing research, is responsible for ensuring that the highest ethical standards are met in all research involving children, regardless of research approach, focus or context.
2	**Respecting the dignity of children is core to ethical research** Ethical research is conducted with integrity and is respectful of children, their views and their cultures. Involving children respectfully, requires that researchers recognize children's status and evolving capacities and value their diverse contributions.
3	**Research involving children must be just and equitable** Children involved in research are entitled to justice. This requires that all children are treated equally, the benefits and burdens of participating are distributed fairly, children are not unfairly excluded and that barriers to involvement based on discrimination are challenged.
4	**Ethical research benefits children** Researchers must ensure that research maximizes benefits to children, individually and/or as a social group. The researcher bears primary responsibility for considering whether the research should be undertaken and for assessing whether research will benefit children, during and as a consequence of the research process.
5	**Children should never be harmed by their participation in research** Researchers must work to prevent any potential risks of harm and assess whether the need to involve the individual child is justified.
6	**Research must always obtain children's informed and ongoing consent** Children's consent must always be sought, alongside parental consent and any other requirements that are necessary for the research to proceed ethically. Consent needs to be based on a balanced and fair understanding of what is involved throughout and after the research process. Indications of children's dissent or withdrawal must always be respected.
7	**Ethical research requires ongoing reflection** Undertaking research involving children is important. Ethical research demands that researchers continually reflect on their practice, well beyond any formal ethical review requirements. It requires ongoing attention to the assumptions, values, beliefs and practices that influence the research process and their impact on children.

The **Responsible Data for Children principles** for the handling of children's data provide a complementary suite of guidelines, but with more of a focus on the use of data. The principles, summarized here, call for researchers collecting and using data about children to ensure they meet the following criteria:

- **PARTICIPATORY**
  Engaging and informing individuals and groups affected by the use of data for and about children.

- **PROFESSIONALLY ACCOUNTABLE**
  Operationalizing responsible data practices and principles by establishing institutional processes, roles, and responsibilities.

- **PROPORTIONAL**
  Aligning the breadth of data collection and duration of data retention with the intended purpose.

- **PROTECTIVE OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS**
  Recognizing the distinct rights and requirements for helping children develop to their full potential.

- **PURPOSE-DRIVEN**
  Identifying and specifying why the data are needed and how the intended or potential benefits relate to improving children's lives.

- **PREVENTION OF HARM ACROSS THE DATA LIFE CYCLE**
  Establishing end-to-end data responsibility by assessing risks during the collection, storage, preparation, sharing, analysis and use stages of the data life cycle.

- **PEOPLE-CENTRIC**
  Ensuring the needs and expectations of children, their caregivers, and their communities are prioritized by actors handling data for and about them.

Additionally, it is critical to ensure that the child has access to qualified advocates who can relay concerns about consent or any other issues, and that the child's welfare and anonymity across the data life cycle are prioritized ahead of any data collection objectives.

While the processes may be more challenging than adult data collection, recognizing the importance of addressing data gaps relevant to refugee and migrant children, adolescents and youth should provide some increased motivation to do so.

External communication: How data about migrant and displaced children are collected and the effectiveness with which they are communicated can be expected to have an impact on policy outcomes. IDAC notes that:

> *Reliable, timely and accessible data and evidence are essential for understanding how migration and forcible displacement affect children and their families and for putting in place policies and programs to meet their needs.*

Effective communication is a core component of making these data accessible and, by extension, supporting the policy-making process. Put simply, by telling the story of these data – sometimes in a manner that will bring them to public and political attention – NSOs play a critical role in the process of protecting migrant and displaced children.

In the section above, summaries were provided of two sets of guidelines, dealing firstly with general ethics for research related to children, and secondly with ethical considerations pertaining to the collection and use of data about children. In considering the challenges of external communications activities involving the dissemination of these sorts of data, it is worth looking at a third set of recommendations, this time from UNICEF,[106] outlining what **ethical reporting about children** should look like. While these are aimed more at journalists than NSO staff charged with communications activities, they also provide important parameters that should be adhered to throughout any communications activities involving children:

1	The dignity and rights of every child are to be respected in every circumstance.
2	In interviewing and reporting on children, special attention is to be paid to each child's right to privacy and confidentiality, to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from harm and retribution, including the potential of harm and retribution.
3	The best interests of each child are to be protected over any other consideration, including over advocacy for children's issues and the promotion of child rights.
4	When trying to determine the best interests of a child, the child's right to have their views taken into account are to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
5	Care must be taken not to publish a data story or an image which might put the child, siblings or peers at risk, even when identities are changed, obscured or not used.

Emotive data stories relating to vulnerable migrant children are common,[107] often highlighting the scale of displacement crises affecting the world's children. Some data stories may also directly affect the protection of these children: stories questioning the validity of some asylum seekers' assertions that they are children – as part of their claim for asylum[108] – are commonplace. The charged nature of discussions relating to children, therefore, need to be tempered by moderate language and careful provision of data, and will often benefit from a coordinated whole-of-government approach to ensure that enforcement messaging from one government department does not undermine child protection efforts from another.

Summary: A set of principles for NSOs in communicating migration statistics about children

As discussed throughout this section, a number of recommendations already exist to support ethical research and data collection involving children, while other guidelines exist governing expectations for journalists and media organizations covering migrant children, adolescents and youth. Specific guidelines for NSOs, however, on communications activities involving these groups have not – until now – been specifically provided. The five key points below provide some basic considerations for this sort of communications activity. They should not be seen as comprehensive or as substitutes for other ethical guidelines, but as a set of starting points and basic expectations:

Do no harm: There is significant need for high quality, disaggregated statistics about migrant children, adolescents and youth, but the collection and communication of data about these groups must be undertaken in a way that does not contribute to harming them.

Anonymize: The communication of data collected about migrant children, adolescents and youth must never compromise their anonymity or lead to/participate in the identification of individuals or their families.[109]

Ensure consent: Where data about migrant children are collected and communicated, consent should aways be provided both by their carer or responsible adult and by the child, if they are competent/able to do so. Even if a child's parent or responsible adult provides consent, the child's own assent (or refusal) to participate in research must be considered. Where a carer or responsible adult is not present or not able to provide informed consent, or where the best interests of the child are not served even if the consent of the responsible adult is given, activities involving the collection or communication of data about children cannot be considered to be ethically sound. Where consent is not possible, but data collection is critical, robust measures to protect the child's interests – both in the collection and communication of the data – must be in place.

Children should have the same rights as adults over how their data are used: This should include the right for them, or a responsible adult, to be consulted over communications activities that may use their personal data. They should also have the right to access their personal data; request rectification; object to processing; and have their personal data erased. An individual's right to erasure is particularly relevant if they gave their consent to processing when they were a child.[110]

Protect migrant children from data misuse: The collection, processing and communication of migrant children's data should never be instrumentalized for political, commercial or religious purposes.

Involve children where you can: When children can be involved in communicating about the data they are a part of, they can take a greater sense of ownership and understanding of it.[111]

7. Developing a communications strategy

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration emphasizes that the collection, analysis and dissemination of disaggregated migration data is crucial for strengthening the global evidence base on migration. For NSOs, taking a strategic approach to communicating about migration statistics is key to ensure that the most user-relevant and complete data are collected, and that the statistics produced are effective in reaching and informing different audiences. By thoughtfully planning how to communicate within the existing policy and media landscapes, NSOs can address ethical and contextual factors, engage effectively with users and contribute meaningfully to public discourse and policy development. Crafting a comprehensive communications strategy enables NSOs to systematically consider all necessary factors, ensuring a coordinated and effective approach rather than relying on ad hoc methods.

There are a variety of resources available from the United Nations[112, 113, 114, 115] as well as the public sector[116] and the private sector[117] to guide the process of developing a communications strategy. NSOs that already have an overall strategy for their broader statistical production may choose to develop an extension specific to the migration context. While their particular elements may differ, each strategy should ideally consider the following:

PLAN

1	**Rationale:** Clearly define why this communications work is necessary. Understand the purpose behind the initiative.
2	**Aims:** Establish specific, realistic objectives for your communications activities. Determine what the organization hopes to achieve.
3	**Context:** Analyse the external environment in which the communications will occur. Consider the political, social and media landscape, public concerns, potential misinformation and prevailing attitudes towards migration.

AUDIENCE AND MESSAGING

4	**Messages:** Determine the key points that the audience should understand after engaging with the communications materials.
5	**Audience analysis:** Identify who has the influence or authority to help achieve the desired outcomes. Understand their needs and how best to reach them.
6	**Channels:** Select the communication tools and media that will effectively reach the target audience. This could range from localized efforts like community posters or webinars to broader initiatives like press releases or social media campaigns.

OUTPUTS AND DELIVERY

7	**Approach:** Develop a strategic plan for disseminating the content. Outline the specific actions required to ensure the messages reach the right people in the right places.
8	**Resources required:** Identify all materials and resources needed to execute the strategy, such as online platforms, printed materials, press releases, images and videos.
9	**Timeline:** Create a detailed schedule that outlines when each action will occur. Include deadlines and allow for contingencies to address potential issues.
10	**Risk analysis:** Anticipate possible challenges and plan how to mitigate them. Consider what could go wrong and how to respond.
11	**Spokespeople:** Choose credible and persuasive individuals to represent the organization. Ensure they are well prepared to communicate the messages effectively.
12	**Approval process:** Establish clear procedures for approving the strategy and its components. Determine who needs to sign off on actions and materials to avoid delays.

EVALUATION

13	**Defining success:** Before implementation, specify the outcomes that will indicate the communications activities have been successful. Set measurable goals.
14	**Post-campaign assessment:** After execution, evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. Determine whether the objectives were achieved, using predefined metrics to assess performance.

By adopting a strategic approach to communication, NSOs can enhance the effectiveness of their migration statistics and ensure that their efforts contribute positively to public understanding and policy development. A well-crafted communications strategy aligns objectives with audience needs, utilizes appropriate channels and includes mechanisms for evaluation and adaptation. This enables NSOs to navigate the complex landscape of migration discourse proactively and responsibly.

Practical considerations in developing a communications strategy: The SMART approach

Importantly, a communications strategy should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). This generic framework for strategic planning is consistently used in both government[118] and private sector communications teams.[119] It sets important boundaries for the communications work to help ensure it is effective and properly considered, and that the results of communications activities can be assessed.[120]

Specific

The 'aims' section of a communications strategy cannot be vague: General aims – such as (a) "to improve public understanding of migration statistics" or (b) "to tackle disinformation about migrants" – do **not** offer measurable outcomes. More specific objectives are more likely to support the development of effective interventions in public debates on migration. In the case of aim (a), a plan to use communications activities to "improve public understanding of migration statistics" cannot be undertaken without having certain things in place first:

- a clear definition of what is not understood and needs to change;
- a proposal for how to use communications activities to achieve this change; and
- a metric to assess whether these communications activities have successfully contributed to the intended outcome.

So, the aim should relate to the proposed specific outcome and how communications activities will help to bring it about. For example, if the issue that is poorly understood is the role of migration in population decline, an aim might be: "To use traditional and social media channels to highlight the relationship between emigration and population change."

The strategy, however, should also articulate how achievement of this aim will be assessed (in the 'Defining success' element) and why this matters in the first place (in the 'Context' element). See 'Measurable' and 'Relevant' sections below for further discussion.

Similarly, aim (b) "to tackle disinformation about migrants" does not specify:

- what the disinformation is;
- how you intend to tackle it; and
- which people you are referring to.

For example, if the issue is inaccurate reporting that people from country X are responsible for a surge in crime, then an appropriate aim could be: "To support accurate reporting of crime statistics through communications that clarify the true drivers of the increases – emphasizing that it is not attributable to migrants from country X".

These aims will need to be supported by other specifications elsewhere in the strategy, including establishing which groups are most likely to be affected by the misinformation and how to reach them (part of the 'Audience analysis', 'Channels' and 'Defining success' elements).

NSOs will also need to set out the justification for the work in the 'Context' element; an outline in the 'Approach' element of what the specific communications activities might be, such as press releases, poster campaigns, social media posts or journalist briefings; and an inventory in the 'Resources required' element of what will be needed in order to successfully deliver these.

Measurable

As outlined in the 'Specific' section above, any communications strategy must be grounded in aims that can be demonstrably achieved. This requires identifying metrics that can confirm achievement or show where efforts fell short and lessons can be learned. After implementing communications activities, assessing how well they succeeded in their objectives (as outlined in the 'Post-campaign analysis' element) is essential to ensure resources were used appropriately.

Much of the time, communications outputs will produce straightforward outcomes that an NSO can measure without too much cost or complexity – such as the number of news articles mentions, changes in web traffic to particular pages, or shares of social media posts. But in some situations (if resources allow), more complex analysis – such as using surveys or other instruments to measure changes in public attitudes or awareness of issues – may also be helpful to understand a campaign's impact.

Achievable

For a strategy to be effective, it must be simple, clear and understood by everyone responsible for implementing or approving it. This often means keeping it brief and focused, with a limited number of aims – ideally between two and four.

When multiple communications aims are identified, it may be appropriate to consolidate overlapping ones into a smaller, more coherent set. Where aims are too distinct to be combined, separate, targeted strategies may be developed, each with its own scope of work. This approach facilitates monitoring of what has been achieved and what remains outstanding.

The time frame for implementing the strategy – and the period for which it remains applicable – should be clearly defined and explained (see 'Time-bound' section below).

Achievable goals should be grounded in a clear understanding of associated risks. The 'Risk analysis' element should identify potential challenges and outline measures to address them. This is particularly important for communications on sensitive topics such as migration, where political or social repercussions may have real-world consequences. Setting out anticipated risks in advance enables teams to make informed decisions about whether and how to proceed.

Sign-off (which the 'Approval process' element would cover) ensures that a strategy is understood by NSO leadership and that communications teams have the protection of knowing that their actions are formally sanctioned. When strategies are well defined and proposed actions are clearly articulated, those responsible for approval should provide sign-off in a timely manner or delegate this responsibility to others who can do so. This prevents delays and ensures that communications processes function efficiently and as intended.

Relevant

Most outputs produced by NSOs are intended for broad use and designed to be applicable across multiple contexts and audiences. Strategic communication, by contrast, focuses on reaching specific groups for defined purposes (see 'Specific' section above). In developing a communications strategy, audiences should not be framed in vague terms such as "the general public", but should instead be identified with precision (as outlined in the 'Audience analysis' and 'Channels' elements).

Understanding the intended audience – and the reasons for reaching them – is essential for developing effective communications products (part of the 'Approach' and 'Resources required' elements; see also 'Developing communications products' section below). There is no one-size-fits-all content capable of reaching every audience equally well. Communicating data to policymakers via international media outlets will be very different from engaging domestic or local media audiences with data on the integration of migrant communities in a particular city.

Different channels also carry distinct advantages and trade-offs. Paid advertising and 'earned media' generated through public relations campaigns each involve varying costs and benefits. Likewise, while social media can be a highly effective route to reaching certain audiences, it also presents risks: carefully crafted messages can be warped or misrepresented by actors with political or other agendas.

Time-bound

While there are some useful rules of thumb for developing communications products (see below) that can help streamline their preparation, there is no magic formula guaranteed to deliver the desired results. Securing effective media coverage, producing engaging and sharable social media content, or ensuring that materials are taken up by policymakers and thought leaders in public debates often requires both creativity and good timing.

Timing involves two key dimensions: being on time and choosing the right time. Establishing a clear schedule (contained in the 'Timeline' element) to ensure deadlines are met and to allow for contingencies is critical, as is ensuring spokespeople are available and well prepared with the necessary briefing materials to ensure they are credible and persuasive.

It is equally important, however, to ensure timeliness – communication materials should reach audiences when they will be most useful to them and therefore most impactful. This requires aligning strategies with specific periods or events and maintaining efficient approval procedures. High-quality materials that are released past the point of strategic use represent wasted effort and resources. If delays result from poor planning, inadequate review time or slow sign-off, these processes should be examined and improved for future activities.

Developing communications products

Developing effective communications products requires balancing clarity, accuracy and accessibility across a range of formats and channels. Across all formats, products should be designed to convey information clearly, engage audiences effectively and uphold the credibility of official statistics.

Website materials

There are already excellent guidelines on how to share official statistics through data portals and other official websites, available in 'Chapter 11 Dissemination of Official Statistics' in the United Nations *Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems*.[121]

A guiding principle behind website design is that information should not only be available and accessible (i.e., able to be used by a wide range of users), but also easily findable. This requires that websites be properly structured and labelled, have consistent wayfinding (e.g., clear page titles that match link text, 'breadcrumb trails' and clear 'you are here' indicators), local navigation (e.g., showing 'related content' in a sidebar) and effective search functions.[122] Alongside this, many NSOs around the world have experimented with different ways of communicating data, including employing a number of data journalists to help find new and innovative ways of reaching diverse audiences.

Some such recommendations are offered by the UK Office for National Statistics, including "Speak to people in their own language", "Embrace uncertainty and all the possibilities it brings" and "Use real examples to create narratives rather than making assumptions".[123]

Not all of these suggestions will be appropriate to all NSOs in all situations. The broad theme of data storytelling, however, is a core role of NSOs and a means to support understanding, consistent with the points made throughout this report.

Press materials

The United Nations Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems notes[124] that:

> *"An NSO should pay special attention to the needs of the media given the importance of their role in transmitting statistics to a mass audience and the important roles they can play in image-building activities of an NSO.*
>
> *It is important that the media are informed of all statistical releases in advance, and that they receive or can get access to the relevant data in a format that they can easily use. The data should be clearly described to prevent any misinterpretation so that any report based on them will be as balanced and accurate as possible. By using official statistics in a news story, the media can help build public confidence and trust in the NSO and increase awareness of its statistics and methods."*

While much media coverage may draw from data downloaded directly from data portals or other official websites, it may also be necessary to produce specific materials for the press.

One of the most common tools in reaching out to journalists is the press release. Although there is no universally agreed format, an effective press release should resemble the type of news story that one would hope to see published. It should be concise – no longer than a standard news article – and structured so that the most important information appears first. Ideally, a reader should be able to stop after any paragraph and still come away with a clear understanding of the essential message – but the more they read, the better they will understand. Including quotes that reinforce key points or offer brief, accessible analysis adds credibility, clarity and a human voice.

A recommended **format for a press release** would be as follows:

- ✔ **Note with publication/embargo time**
- ✔ **Headline (in large text):** This should be a single sentence that very simply (and compellingly) states the key point of the release. The purpose of the headline is to encourage the recipient (journalist) to read on, and to set the tone of the forthcoming content.
- ✔ **Opening paragraph:** One or two sentences containing the most important and compelling information to be communicated. An effective way to craft this is to imagine how the key message would appear if the news story were summarized in a single paragraph by a publication.
- ✔ **Paragraph 2:** The second paragraph can either elaborate on the information presented in the opening paragraph by providing clarification or additional context, or it can be used to introduce the second most important point of the release.
- ✔ **Paragraph 3:** Further explanation or clarification.
- ✔ **Paragraph 4:** Quotes from an authoritative person within the NSO. These should reinforce key messages or offer analysis in simple, conversational language. Quotes serve three purposes: they add a human voice, lend authority to the story and provide precise wording that helps ensure the intended message is conveyed clearly.
- ✔ **Paragraph 5:** Space for further explanation or clarification.
- ✔ **Paragraph 6:** Space for a second quote.
- ✔ **End** with contact details for the press team, editors' notes and relevant links.

Making press content compelling

One of the main challenges in producing content for media is making it engaging without sacrificing nuance or accuracy. NSOs must take particular care not to prioritize attention-grabbing narratives over factual integrity. Migration stories are often already contentious, and efforts to make them more appealing to journalists may not always be a good idea. Clear and accurate – if somewhat unexciting – is always preferable to compelling but misleading. When content concerns children or other potentially vulnerable groups, their best interests must always take precedence over impact. That said, several principles can help strengthen media engagement. The root of the word 'news' is 'new', and highlighting the fact that information is new or current is key to attracting coverage. News organizations are also drawn to material that is surprising, counter-intuitive, concerning, valuable or relevant to people's daily lives. If a press release reflects any of these qualities, it may be more likely to be well received by journalists.

Balancing newsworthiness with caution and moderation, however, is important. There is little point expending effort and resources on press releases that do not generate coverage – but content that provokes inaccurate, inflammatory or exaggerated reporting can be far more damaging than no coverage at all.

Producing social media content (posts, images, video, audio/podcast)

Like traditional media, social media offers significant opportunities for NSOs – but also presents distinct risks. It provides a way to reach audiences directly, without the filter of journalistic interpretation, and can therefore be a valuable channel for sharing information. Assuming that social media content will be interpreted as intended, however, is unrealistic. Social networks can be volatile, polarized and unpredictable environments where messages can be misunderstood, taken out of context or deliberately distorted. Unlike most traditional media, social media content may be anonymous and unaccountable.

As with the production of traditional media content, there are no hard and fast rules about what makes good social media content, but several practical guidelines – adapted from the UK Office for National Statistics[125] – can improve clarity and accessibility for **text-based social media posts**:

- ✔ Use plain language and write content as simply as possible, explaining more complicated terms where required so that the content is accessible to all.

- Use the active voice instead of the passive voice ("we collected data" instead of "data were collected").
- Use contractions if applicable ("don't", "we've", "can't").
- Ask questions.
- Address the user as "you" ("You can read our full release here").
- Refer to the organization as "we" and "us".
- Put the need-to-know information first, typically a key statistic.
- Structure content clearly – for example, include line breaks and bullet points.
- Cut unnecessary words.
- Avoid puns, metaphorical language, acronyms and jargon.
- Include links and hashtags when relevant.
- End with a call to action (for example, "find out more" or "read our thread"), particularly for reposts.
- Provide context around basic statistics.

For video or image-based content, a more informal tone is generally expected. This can, however, create challenges for NSOs, whose authority depends on maintaining professionalism and neutrality. Light or playful content may attract attention but can also invite criticism or undermine credibility. It's always a good rule of thumb not to post any content unless the risks involved (and the potential value) have been carefully considered and the material has been reviewed and signed off. Although this can make social media activities undertaken by NSOs cumbersome and time-consuming, it also provides reputational protection.[126]

A recurring challenge for NSOs is determining the appropriate level of interaction with users. Social media teams should maintain discipline and an authoritative tone, and engage only within agreed parameters. This does not mean never responding to questions or comments, but rather doing so with caution.

It is also important to recognize that once content is released on social media platforms, it can be reused, reinterpreted or repurposed by others. Comments, shares and reposts may rapidly reshape the message, sometimes in misleading or even hostile ways. In a subject area as complex and polarizing as migration, such risks are commonplace.

Moreover, social media platforms and not inherently politically neutral spaces. Like traditional media, they are owned and operated by entities with specific interests, business models and algorithms that may prioritize or deprioritize content based on opaque commercial criteria. This presents a familiar challenge for NSO communications teams in deciding how to allocate resources and design outputs to reach key audiences effectively.

Understanding the use of different platforms by key stakeholders, respondents and other users is important. Platform selection should be based on a clear assessment of audience reach, potential benefits and associated risks.

Finally, generative AI tools can be useful in drafting communications materials, compiling lists of relevant journalists or coming up with ideas for how to best present data – particularly for NSOs with limited communications resources. All AI-generated content, however, must be checked for accuracy, reviewed for ethical compliance and revised by humans before release. AI models may contain inherent biases, so human judgement and oversight remain indispensable.

Risk assessment and crisis communications tips

1	**The best way to avoid problems is to anticipate them.** Before embarking on any activity related to migration data – from data collection to developing visualizations and publications, through the publication and dissemination process and beyond – consider how the content being produced could be used problematically, either deliberately or through misunderstandings. This requires communicators within NSOs to adopt the perspective of those who might seek to distort the data against the NSO, specific people, communities or other bodies. Anticipating potential risks enables preventative or mitigating actions (see below).
2	**Focus on clarity and moderation to prevent data being misunderstood or exaggerated.** Journalists have a job to do, which involves telling stories in compelling ways. If migration data can be made to look 'more exciting' than they are, then there is a strong chance that journalists will present them in this way. Similarly, politicians and, increasingly, social media influencers may also wish to 'hype' data to make a political point or simply to generate attention for themselves. While such behaviour cannot always be prevented, communications materials should be presented in a moderate way with clear explanations of data limitations. This allows NSOs to issue clarifications and limit the spread of misrepresentation when it occurs.
3	**Be as specific as possible.** Ambiguity and inconsistent terminology in describing migration data invites misinterpretation. Where data about migration or migrant communities are unspecific, people will commonly fill gaps with their own 'imagined migrants'[127] – often conflating very different groups, such as high-income labour migrants, refugees or irregular migrants. Precision in definitions and language is essential to prevent misleading narratives about migration patterns and communities.
4	**Avoid being dragged into public disputes over data.** The role of an NSO is not to be the arbiter of who is right and wrong in a public debate. Attempting to correct specific individuals in media, social media or policy debates can often lead to accusations of bias or politicization. Instead, focus on presenting data and the relevant limitations and caveats clearly and avoid any appearance of taking sides. This can be particularly challenging in dealing with 'fact checking' stories, which are commonly efforts to call out misinformation; in these situations remember that there may well be perceptions of bias on the part of the fact checkers, as well as the people or bodies whose claims they are checking. Responses should remain strictly factual, focusing only on what the data do or do not show.
5	**Prepare Q&A documents and other explanatory materials to support any controversial or complicated materials.** Sometimes publishing these documents is useful, but other times they may simply be 'if asked' materials provided to people within the communications team to answer difficult questions.
6	**Acknowledge and correct mistakes promptly and transparently.** Do not attempt to hide errors. While the immediate impact of admitting to making mistakes can be a short-term loss of confidence, the long-term impact of being exposed for actively hiding errors or misleading the public or government is vastly more damaging to trust.
7	**Do not amplify misinformation.** Avoid reposting or linking to problematic content, even when attempting to correct it. Sharing misinformation – regardless of intent – can inadvertently increase its visibility and spread. Instead, issue clarifications independently, without reproducing or drawing attention to the original false content.

8. Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to communicating about migration statistics – how NSOs choose to do this will inevitably depend on the specifics of the situation.

Nevertheless, the suggestions and recommendations set out in this document should provide guidance to help ensure that the work undertaken by NSOs in communicating about migration data is both ethical and effective.

Migration is a polarizing and complex issue. NSOs are encouraged to help prevent misunderstandings and misuse of data, ensuring that approaches to communication incorporate the whole life cycle of the data and are coordinated across government.

At the heart of this technical report is a fundamental principle: Migration data and statistics are recorded elements of human lives. The more an NSO can ensure data stories are told accurately, and that the individual elements are clearly contextualized, the better they will be understood – which, ultimately, is the purpose of the production and sharing of statistics.

A final reminder of key points and recommendations:

Effective communication matters. Communicating about migration statistics clearly and accessibly is essential for evidence-based policymaking, public understanding and countering misinformation.

Tell the story of the data. Explain what the numbers do and do not show, why and how they were collected and their limits and uncertainties, so users can understand them easily and interpret them correctly.

Communication about migration data is an end-to-end process. It begins before data collection and continues through processing, release and evaluation. Engagement with users and respondents throughout the statistical life cycle is critical.

Cooperation is key. Cross-government and international coordination can improve the coherence, timeliness and comparability of data, reduce duplication and support a whole-of-government approach.

Ethics and impartiality underpin trust. Protect the subjects of the data; use neutral, fact-based language; avoid terms that are loaded or may imply value judgements about policies, people or communities; ensure statistical releases are kept separate from policy announcements; and handle revisions transparently.

People are at the centre. Communications should recognize the people behind the data and apply specific safeguards for vulnerable groups, such as children, adolescents and youth.

Design for users. Segment audiences by their needs and interests rather than treating 'the public' as one homogeneous group; prioritize simplicity and clarity; make sure materials are released in a timely fashion, with consistent formats and designed for the technologies that audiences will use.

Use social media and generative AI prudently. Follow plain-language guidance, maintain an authoritative tone, institute sign-off and risk checks, and ensure there is human review of AI-generated content.

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