

Gudrun Biffl and the OECD

Gudrun Biffl has been Austrian National Expert in the OECD's Expert Group on Migration for a full 40 years. The Expert group - known under its French acronym, SOPEMI, from *Système d'observation permanente des migrations* - was established in 1973. The core of SOPEMI has always been a group of widely-renowned national experts (correspondents) who prepare annual reports on the migration development in their countries. The original membership of SOPEMI consisted of eleven OECD member countries. In the following years, several more joined the group, and Austria joined in 1977. Gudrun was thus one of the first members of the group. She is also one of the longest-serving experts, together with UK correspondent John Salt. Upon the occasion of her 30th anniversary as correspondent for Austria, a small ceremony took place at the OECD in presence of the Austrian Ambassador.

The role of the Expert group has been to provide the OECD member countries with a mechanism for the timely sharing of information on international migration, the collection of migration statistics as well as the improvement of their comparability, and to serve the basis for the publication OECD annual report on international migration. Over time, the SOPEMI group has developed into a key source of up-to-date and first-hand information on past, current and emerging developments regarding migration. This domain has been a key priority area for the OECD ever since the organisation's establishment more than 50 years ago, as the membership of the OECD included both key sending and receiving countries of migration.

The core of Gudrun's work for the OECD was always to be one of the leading members of the expert group, which collected systematically information on migration trends and policies in the OECD member countries in order to identify emerging problems in international co-operation. The type of information that might be included in the report has been steadily refined over the years. In an attempt to enhance the comparability of national reports, during the 1980s the OECD Secretariat prepared a 'grid' outlining the main topics deserving attention. Gudrun was always very reactive in responding to this, and also proposed new and emerging issues to the Secretariat. Gudrun certainly had her 'pet topics' – irregular migration, free mobility, posted workers, gender issues, etc., but the list of topics of specific expertise is a long one.

As the process of international migration evolved and more countries joined SOPEMI, the scope of the annual report broadened. Today the network is a unique institution, global in scope. The basis for the annual SOPEMI report has always been its standard statistical tables on immigration, emigration and labour stocks and flows. Since the beginning, Gudrun has provided and co-ordinated the data collection for Austria. Her vast network in Austria was particularly useful in this context. Who would have managed to collect and get sense of the Austrian statis-

tics if not Gudrun? Gradually a wider range of data have been collected and presented and major attempts made to improve comparability between countries. The inclusion of the four settlement countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) in the 1980s raised issues of comparability, especially in relation to the conceptual distinctions of migration movements (foreign-born/foreigners; permanent/temporary migration; family reunification/accompanying family) between participating countries and the set of statistical tables compiled. Although from the outset there were attempts to generalise, the preponderance of the case by case descriptive presentation continued. The growing number of countries within SOPEMI and the convergence of migration interests between countries required improvement of migration statistics as well as of their comparability. Gudrun has always been a supporter of this approach, and her help in obtaining comparability for the Austrian data was crucial.

Austria is a country in Central Europe, and few Austrians represent its position and history better than Gudrun, who has always been up-to-date not only of the developments in Austria, but also on the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, perhaps, she became friends with the SOPEMI experts from these countries, whose ‚integration‘ into the group has been close to her heart ever since the fall of the Iron Curtain. But Gudrun integrated virtually everybody. She did this with great joy and ease. Not only because her ‚culture generale‘ is very impressive, but also her linguistic skills – Russian, Hungarian, Spanish – not to mention her native German, English, and French *bien sûr!*

Gudrun Biffl was also during several years Austrian representative to the Working Party on Migration, one of the longest-standing working parties in the OECD. This is not surprising: Gudrun was ‚Ms Migration in Austria‘ in many positions, both nationally and internationally. She contributed to the organisation of a number seminars co-organised by the OECD, for example on immigrants and the labour market, on the labour market integration of immigrant women, on the link between migration and trade, and on migration in Central and Eastern Europe. All of this culminated in the joint organisation by the OECD and Gudrun in the Austrian Chancellery on „Migration, free trade and regional integration in Eastern Europe“. What a fitting topic for Gudrun!

In addition to her contributions to the Expert group, Gudrun also provided her rich expertise for a number of reports, for example the 2013 evaluation of the Austrian labour migration system. And in her work, she always values the work of the OECD. Gudrun is a great Ambassador, both for Austria and for the OECD work on migration.

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