

## Bringing back the know-how – migrants and technology transfer

*Returning migrants often transfer technology to their home countries, but under certain conditions. This can be a contribution to development, but also an opportunity for individual promotion.*

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While abroad, migrant workers generally come into contact with techniques and technologies that are more advanced than in their home region. This is particularly true of those who have good specialized skills in their field – the ones known as “brains”. Their departure is no doubt partly for financial reasons, but they are also motivated by the chance to put their skills to work in practice, with equipment and a human environment that are better than they could ever dream of back home. Most never return.

However, one migration trend in recent years has been the increase in the number of unqualified workers involved. This development dates back to around 1980, the time when most of the receiving countries started applying the brakes to immigration or tightening up the conditions.

### Uncertain return

Apart from refugees, two types of migrant may be distinguished.

On the one hand, there are those who are useful, even essential, to the receiving countries and are recruited to fill labour shortages in some fields. Countries like Canada have drawn up a list of occupations for which the door is open (informa-

tion technology, for instance) and of others for which it is closed. The open door is mostly for well-qualified workers only.

On the other hand, there are those who are “not needed”. These form the majority. Enticed by the siren song of higher wages or simply by the prospect of a job in the country of destination, they resort to unofficial means of getting there. As the traditional host countries have now adopted restrictive policies on legal immigration, and are mainly interested in admitting qualified workers on a temporary basis to make up for skills shortages in the domestic labour force, this means that unskilled or under-skilled migrants have to use illegal migration networks run by private recruiters.

Many of these workers are clandestine. They sometimes seek political refugee status when they are in fact economic refugees, and they accept low-grade jobs. It should be noted in passing that such migrants do, in fact, have utility value for employers in the receiving country, as they prevent upward pressure on wages in occupations that the locals would not take up unless the pay and working conditions were seriously improved (truck driving, for instance).

A survey conducted in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka in 1993 showed that the great majority of would-be migrants

are of rural origin, are poor, are semi-skilled or unskilled (92 per cent in the case of India) and are women.<sup>1</sup> All in all, "unqualified workers, often without education ... are the numerically most important group ...".<sup>2</sup>

As undocumented, these workers are likely to return sooner to their country of origin, either under constraint (expulsion) or because they intended to emigrate for only a limited period or because they failed to find a job. Those who emigrated legally also sometimes return home after a while, but this is less frequent. The motivation to return decreases when one has built up entitlements, one's children are growing up, one is paying into a pension scheme or one has bought a house.

Discussions with migrants lead to the conclusion that many of those who came over "for a time" in fact stay for good. Nevertheless, they continue to send money back to their families (see articles by Judith van Doorn on page 48 and by Dominique Demol, on page 54). Despite everything, though, some of them do go home. So it is worth asking the question: if they are less skilled when they emigrate, and they come into contact with more advanced technologies when abroad, do they transfer technology when they return, to the benefit of their countries of origin? The answer is basically "yes" – but with some reservations.

### **What they know and who they know**

First, we must define our terms. A migrant who brings back the consumer items that are usual in the host country – household electrical goods, for instance – is carrying techniques, not technology. This certainly includes the material objects themselves, but also an understanding of how they work and the ability to maintain them or to adapt their use to new situations. So the real question is: do migrants transfer skills to their home countries, making it possible to understand and master the use of the techniques with which they have become acquainted?

Targeted research on international migration generally shows that migrants do make a contribution to the development of their countries. Much of the research emphasizes a qualitative aspect of this: migrants put their home communities in touch with international networks.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, apart from the financial remittances considered elsewhere in this publication, the "capital" transferred by migrants is of two types: know-how and "social capital".

Know-how is a collection of skills and behaviour patterns that migrants can use and capitalize upon personally after their return to their home country. For those of the first generation, know-how is more often acquired through practice than through theoretical training, unless they have the opportunity to receive vocational training for adults. The know-how may include technical competences, language skills, experience with certain machines or managerial and organizational techniques.

This contribution has also been shown to exist in the case of South-South migrations, as some of these are towards countries that are more industrialized than the countries of departure. Thus, most of the migrants from landlocked Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire – which has a coastline and ports and is technically more advanced – are rural illiterates who had been engaged in subsistence farming. In Côte d'Ivoire, they learn about industrial cultivation in the coffee, cocoa, pineapple and banana plantations. They no longer work to survive but to show a profit. Some of them become producers themselves, adopt modern production methods (economies of scale, fertilizers, pesticides, improved seed, tractors, management of labour and finances, planning). Some learn small-scale trades such as masonry, electrical wiring, port work or industrial stockbreeding. Many of them speak French. When they return to their villages, those who learned small trades set up shop and become self-employed. Others, who have also managed to save up some money, create small enterprises and may even take on staff.

But most silver linings have a cloud. All of this can have negative effects on local employment, because the use of capital-intensive techniques increases, thereby pushing down demand for the unskilled workers who are in the majority locally and are the breadwinners for many families.

### Broadening horizons

However, this transmission of know-how should not be overestimated. For one thing, by no means all low-skilled migrants work with advanced technologies – precisely because they end up in undemanding jobs.

Cases in point are the young Filipinas who go into domestic service in the Gulf States or the African garbage collectors in the countries of the North. Some of them may get an opportunity for training, but this applies more to second-generation migrants, and they are precisely the ones who are less tempted to go back.

Account should, however, be taken of a certain number of informal learning experiences resulting from the discovery of a different way of organizing life, work and society. Transferred back home, this understanding brings with it a conviction that change is possible. Migrants therefore become an innovatory force. Whether such innovations are better than the local practices that they replace is not for us to judge. Back in 1956, the Greek author T. Saloutos noted that migrants returning to Greece brought with them new ideas about Western democracy and economic liberalism.<sup>4</sup> It is not certain that the introduction of such novelties, which stem from a particular context, is desirable in societies that have their own characteristics, but this is not a debate that we will take up here.

In addition to these learning experiences, many migrants build up an external network of relations that may be regarded as social capital. This is “a set of specific resources that can be mobilized within groups, networks and organizations”. It is also “the wealth that can be drawn from social relations”.<sup>5</sup> This wealth

flows from the interpersonal relations and social bonds established with people, or from knowing which door to knock on for what – institutions or development non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for example. Such knowledge makes it possible to call upon finance, training and specialists when putting new infrastructure or technologies in place.

Social capital of this kind can be useful while in the host country, but it is also a resource when the immigrant returns home. Through access to this social capital, returning migrants can broaden horizons in their country of origin. Also, given the power that can be gained from access to financial resources, it may pave the way for them to take over the leadership of their communities. So the benefits do not necessarily go to the community. Sometimes, they go to individuals, particularly when they have learned how to use the right levers for investment, enterprise creation and trade. Thus, in Madagascar, returning migrants have invested in import-export trades, such as in used cars. Also, a growing number of young graduates of foreign universities have gone into business, with the aid of agreements reached with companies while they were abroad.

This begs a much wider question – what is development? The sum total of individual successes or a collective process?

### Even if they don't come back ...

As may be seen, the technology transfers that may be induced by migration are certainly a bonus for the migrants' communities of origin, opening up access to new knowledge, techniques and contacts. Some of these advantages can be gained even if the migrants do not return. More and more often, migrants are trying to organize within the host countries in order to contribute to the development of their regions of origin, not just by sending funds but also through “projects”, including technology transfer. In Kayes, for instance, Malian immigrants in France financed the installation of photovoltaic equipment for the

electrification of the region (see article by Dominique Demol on page 54).

More generally, migrants within the European Union have set up a Coalition of African Organizations for Food Security and Sustainable Development (COASAD) whose aim is to provide expertise to the countries of origin in Africa. Jean-Pierre Madjirangué Madjibaye, the Permanent Secretary of the African-European Civil Society Forum, argues that assistance should now move beyond the direct transfer of funds to encompass the provision of expertise for African development. "Finance is not always the issue. Many Africans in Europe have good expertise and contacts that they can place at Africa's service," Madjirangué maintains. As he points out, the African diaspora in the West also includes engineers and technicians. So in future, COASAD intends to "initiate lobbying and advocacy activities vis-à-vis governments and the European Union for food security to be made a priority in the next negotiations between the European Union and the ACP group of associated African, Caribbean and Pacific countries".

For the moment, these are more intentions than realities, but they do illustrate the notion of social capital, as described here, in the very broad context of its application to whole countries. Indeed, a number of European NGOs have already

recognized these migrant associations as partners.

However, as we have demonstrated, none of this is automatic. Not every migration leads to the acquisition of technology and not every transfer is necessarily a good thing for the migrants' communities of origin. Much will depend on the conditions for the migrants in the host countries, on the conditions for their return and on whether a migrant's own attitude is more or less individualistic. Ethics is always part of social realities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Christian Workers' Movement: *Challenge of the times: Challenge to join hands in solidarity to liberate the migrant workers in the South Asian region*, Brussels, Solidarité Mondiale, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre George: *Encyclopédie Universalis, V<sup>o</sup> Populations (Géographie des)*, 1985, Vol. 14, pp. 1059-1060.

<sup>3</sup> Re migrants in the United States and Europe, see for example the bibliography given in Nyberg-Sorensen et al.: *The migration-development nexus. Evidence and policy options*, Geneva, International Organization for Migration, July 2002.

<sup>4</sup> T. Saloutos: *They Remember America: The story of repatriated Greek Americans*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1956.

<sup>5</sup> Savina Ammassari and Richard Black: *Harnessing the Potential of Migration and Return to Promote Development*, Geneva, International Organization for Migration, Aug. 2001, p. 29.

