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REPORT

on migration of skilled workers and its effect on national development

Committee on Social Affairs and the Environment

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PART B: EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

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(The) potential benefits (of international migration) are larger than the potential gains from freer international trade.

Kofi Annan, "International migration and development: Report of the Secretary-General", 18 May 2006

Managing migration more effectively has become a top policy priority for most developed and developing countries. This is especially relevant today in view of the prospects of continued international migration, driven by the ageing of OECD populations, increased labour shortages in many developed countries and persistent gaps in income and standards-of-living differentials across developed and developing countries (OECD, 2006).

There is a growing consensus that migration, if well managed, can generate important benefits not only for migrants themselves, but also for countries of origin and destination. To do so, the nexus between migration and development should become more coherent. The international debate on migration issues has considerably evolved recently in this direction.

Of the many questions raised in managing migration, one that has traditionally attracted much attention is the international mobility of highly skilled and skilled workers, and how this impacts upon development, generally referred to as the "brain drain" problem. As the concept itself already suggests, this phenomenon has predominantly been viewed in a negative light.

Indeed, the Joint Africa-EU Declaration on Migration and Development, adopted by EU and Africa governmental representatives in Tripoli on 22-23 November 2006, recognises "*that selective migration approaches in developed countries could constitute an additional threat to African social and economic development*" and shows concern "*about the loss of heavy investments made by African Governments in training and human resource development in priority sectors and the negative impact of the brain drain of these sectors*".

There is no international consensus on the real impact of the migration of (highly) skilled workers for the countries of origin, with renowned experts and institutions publishing studies with contradictory conclusions. The brain drain debate is still marked by a considerable amount of confusion and frustration, especially due to the lack of reliable statistical data and the lack of impact assessment studies on the potential policy recommendations to address the brain drain phenomenon.

The Global Commission for International Migration (GCIM)¹ goes further and states that "*the notion of 'brain drain' is [...] a somewhat outmoded one, implying as it does that a migrant who leaves her or his own country will never go back there. In the current era, there is a need to capitalize upon the growth of human mobility by promoting the notion of 'brain circulation', in which migrants return to their own country on a regular or occasional basis,*

¹ The GCIM is an inter-agency group composed of experts from the IOM, UNCHR, WB, ILO, WHO, UNAIDS.

sharing the benefits of the skills and resources they have acquired while living and working abroad. As also recommended [...], countries of destination can promote circular migration by providing mechanisms and channels that enable migrants to move relatively easily between their country of origin and destination (GCIM, p. 31). The commission recommends governments and employers to *jointly review current barriers to the mobility of highly educated professionals, with a view to removing those which are unnecessarily hindering economic competitiveness* (GCIM, p. 79).

The answer to the question whether the migration of professionals is a loss or a benefit for the relatively less developed countries depends on the level and point of view of the analysis (Wets, 2007). At an individual level, migration of skilled people is not only an indisputable individual human right, but also seems to be a win-win situation, except when individuals can not work on the level of their qualifications (brain waste).

At national and regional level, there are incontestable positive effects of migration of (skilled) workers for the countries of origin: reduction of unemployment, positive role played by diasporas, positive effect of remittances, stimulation of new generations to invest in education. However, migration of skilled workers can represent a considerable loss for the countries who have invested heavily in education, and the situation can be dramatic in specific countries and sectors.

The debate comes down to a question of thresholds: there is a lower limit under which society suffers the consequences of any skilled and highly skilled migration, because there is no replacement capacity (brain desertification). Above this threshold migration can be positive until the number of migrant workers reaches the upper limit, above which emigration of highly skilled professionals again becomes problematic because the replacement capacity has been drained. Between the two limits, it is possible to talk about brain transfer, brain circulation and even brain gain. Above and below the thresholds, it is better to talk about brain drain. For every country, for every region and even for every sector, the picture is different (Wets, 2007).

The health sector may be used as an example in different parts of the world. The migration of professional personnel has a major impact on the health sector in sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2000, for example, nearly 16 000 African nurses have registered to work in the UK alone. Only 50 out of 600 doctors trained since independence are still practising in Zambia. And it is estimated that there are currently more Malawian doctors practicing in the northern English city of Manchester than in the whole of Malawi (GCIM, 2005, 24). Also Zimbabwe's brain drain has hit the medical profession particularly hard. More than 80 per cent of doctors, nurses and therapists who graduated from the University of Zimbabwe medical school since independence in 1980 have gone to work abroad, primarily in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, according to recent surveys. (The Observer, Sunday August 10, 2003).

Different calculations of the upper threshold mentioned in the previous paragraph¹ based on econometrical analysis of OECD data conclude that a moderate “brain drain” of between 5

¹ Docquier, Lohest and Marfouk (2007), Stark (2001).

and 10% of the skilled population has more positive than negative effects on the countries of origin. In most countries skilled emigration is situated within this 5 to 10% bracket. But a large proportion of poor countries are confronted with much higher skilled emigration figures.

The loss of qualified people surpasses 80% in small countries like Guyana, Suriname and Jamaica, among others. The situation is also alarming in sub-Sahara Africa and in Central America. Countries like Mozambique, Uganda or Ghana lose almost half of their base of highly qualified labourers to the OECD countries (Docquier, a.o., 2007).

Conclusions and recommendations of the co-rapporteurs

Brain mobility does not automatically translate into "brain drain". In a globalised world, in the context of ageing OECD populations, increased labour shortages in many developed countries and persistent gaps in income and standards-of-living differentials across developed and developing countries, brain mobility will have, in principle, more benefits than adverse effects at international level.

However, at national level, the picture might be very different. There is outstanding evidence of dramatic situations in particular countries and sectors, where the economic and social development of entire countries is put in danger. These situations can not be ignored or overshadowed by the overall beneficial effects of enhanced brain mobility at international level.

It is the obligation of policy-makers to draw a reliable picture of the consequences of migration of skilled workers for national development, in specific countries and sectors. In this context, the support of migration research networks in developing countries, as planned in the framework of the ACP Migration Facility, will contribute to giving the necessary tools to Southern-country policy-makers.

It is therefore the obligation of policy-makers to respond swiftly to the sometimes devastating effects created by massive emigration of educated people.

With the legitimacy of elected parliamentarians from the EU and ACP countries, your rapporteurs have tried to contribute to this international effort by providing a pragmatic and dispassionate analysis of the available data, and, even more importantly, giving concrete policy recommendations to countries of origin and destination to mitigate the negative effects of skilled migration (brain drain, brain desertification, brain waste) and to maximise the positive effects (brain gain, brain circulation, brain capital, remittances, co-development and the role of diasporas).

Your rapporteurs have approached this task bearing in mind that the objects of the discussion are human beings with cultural ties, families and individual aspirations and not merely economic good, and assuming that it is an inalienable right of individuals to move abroad (moreover, attempts to limit this right when addressing brain-drain phenomena have proved ineffective and extremely costly).

The benefits of well-managed international migration can be enormous, but this can be effective only if carried out in a spirit of true partnership for development, where developed countries move definitively away from the defensive, pro-security migratory approach and

developing countries move away from relying only on external resources to address internal deficiencies.

Recent developments in the international debate of migration and development look promising, including the very fact that migration and development now appear inextricably linked (which marks a change from three or four years ago). It is necessary to remain vigilant, however, to avoid that "migration and development initiatives" conceal into attempts to hijack development funds to solve immediate migratory pressures.

International migration is one of the big challenges of the XXI century. The potential benefits, as mentioned earlier, are enormous. The consequences of failure would also be enormous, both in terms of individual suffering and in terms of nations condemned to permanent underdevelopment.