

## 18 Brain drain and the potential of professional diasporic networks

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Brain drain has long been regarded as a major problem for the countries of the Global South, which has been compounded in recent years by the intense global competition for skilled labor. Various schemes designed to make 'staying at home' more attractive for skilled emigrants have failed to address the problem. Recognizing that in the era of globalization the prevention of the transnational mobility of skilled workers is neither possible nor desirable, a more radical alternative to the problem of brain drain has been proposed that relies heavily on the idea of 'diasporic networks'. This strategy is based on the assumption that recent developments in technology and globalization now make it possible for skilled workers to emigrate yet remain connected, through various networks, to their country of origin, and still make a contribution to its social and economic development. This chapter discusses this 'diaspora option', and asks to what extent it represents a way forward in arresting the brain drain problem. It argues that the potential of this policy option cannot be fully realized unless professional diaspora networks are underpinned by a range of support mechanisms in which education plays an important role in preparing people to develop the capacity for working in transnational spaces in ways that are both systematic and productive.

The process that has come to be called 'globalization' is exposing a deep fault line between groups who have the skills and mobility to flourish in global markets and those who either don't have the advantages or perceive the expansion of unregulated markets as inimical to social stability and deeply held norms.

(Rodrik 1997, p. 12)

In his eloquent statement, Rodrik suggests that the current dynamics of the global economy have accentuated the asymmetry between two categories of people: those who are highly skilled workers, who can take their skills where they are most wanted, and those for whom mobility is at best uncertain, elastic and often hazardous. This suggests that it is no longer useful to consider migration as a generalizable phenomenon. Patterns of transnational mobility vary considerably, and depend markedly on the

changing nature of not only the skills of the people who wish to move but also the global labor market and the nature of work itself. Despite relatively free movement of capital, no country now welcomes mass migration, but insists on being highly selective. Unskilled migrants and refugees are discouraged, often in ways that are highly punitive, whereas 'business' migration is welcomed, especially in areas where there is a shortage of skills. Most of the OECD countries now have developed policies and programs to attract skilled workers, mainly from the developing countries (OECD 2001).

This has compounded the problem of 'brain drain' that the poorer countries of the Global South have long had to endure. International organizations such as International Labor Office and UNESCO are not unaware of this problem, and have proposed a range of policy solutions to address it. Their solutions have included bilateral agreements, tax schemes and other strategic investments to make 'staying at home' more attractive. But, realizing that such policy solutions do not always work, they now propose a more radical alternative that relies heavily on the idea of 'diasporic networks'. They suggest that developments in technology and globalization now make it possible for skilled workers to emigrate yet remain connected, through such networks, to their country of origin, and still make a contribution to its social and economic development. In this chapter, I want discuss the idea of professional diasporic networks, and ask to what extent these represent a way forward in arresting the problem of 'brain drain' from the Global South to the Global North. I want to argue that the potential of this policy option cannot be fully realized unless diaspora knowledge networks are underpinned by a range of support mechanisms, in which education plays an important role in preparing people to develop the capacity for working in transnational spaces in ways that are both systematic and productive.

Though a contested term, the idea of 'brain drain' is widely used to refer to a one-way flow of highly skilled people who move from their country of origin to another country, often in search of a better job, pay or living conditions. Scholars such as Salt (1997) argue that the term 'brain drain' has been used synonymously with the movement of human capital where the net flow of expertise is unidirectional rather than modal. According to Giannoccolo (2004), the use of the word 'brain' alludes to any skill, competency or attribute that is a prospective asset, whereas the word 'drain' refers to the intensity with which the most talented people leave their country of origin at a substantial rate to pursue their careers elsewhere.

For several decades now, brain drain has been viewed as an intractable problem undermining the developmental efforts of the poorer countries of the Global South. Many of these countries invest heavily in educating their citizens in anticipation of their support for development projects only to find that they are unable to prevent many of their skilled workers

from pursuing professional careers abroad. Skilled workers leave 'home' for a wide variety of reasons, some personal others professional, including the fact that the poorer countries often do not possess the physical or economic infrastructure in which graduates are able to use their skills and knowledge. It is estimated that about one-third of all scientists born and educated in Africa, for example, work in foreign laboratories, a massive drain on both talent and investment that poorer countries can ill afford (*Economist* 2002)

Various policies have been introduced by developing and developed countries alike to stem this flow, ranging from imposing strict restrictions on visas to offering attractive salaries to those prepared to return (see Johnson and Regets 1998). So far, however, they appear to have made relatively little impact, especially in the context of an intense global competition for skilled labor. It is now widely admitted that the global circulation of skilled workers cannot be prevented even if it were considered desirable. As a result, attention is now being paid to the ways in which this movement might be turned into a developing country's advantage. One of the more promising lines of thinking revolves around the idea of 'professional diasporic networks'.

The idea of 'professional diasporic networks' suggests the possibility of creating infrastructures around which emigrants are able to actively participate in the development of their country of origin without having to physically live there. Such an approach accepts that emigration of skilled workers, broadly defined as those in possession of a tertiary degree or extensive specialized work experience, is inevitable, but insists that the developing countries can nonetheless utilize their skills and knowledge. In this way, a 'professional diasporic network' emerges as an expression of a direct relationship between knowledge and development. International organizations, such as UNESCO, have accordingly promoted the creation of such networks, working with a new discourse of 'knowledge for development'.

To understand how this so-called 'diaspora option' (Meyer and Brown 2003) has become a realistic possibility, it is important to consider how the contemporary processes of globalization are transforming the traditional concepts of migrancy and transnationality. Indeed, several researchers (for example, Papastergiadis 2000) have pointed out that 'migration' may no longer be an accurate term to understand the mobility of skilled workers. This is so because migration has the connotations of permanency or long-term stay, whereas their movement tends today to be intermittent and short-term, and involves multiple points of identification. For many such workers, a single homeland can no longer be considered as the unique reference for defining their socio-cultural identity. Their identity now depends on how they view, maintain, activate and reproduce their relationship with their country of origin, conditioned by their use of new

information and communication technologies and their transnational networks, both personal and professional.

One of the salient characteristics of the contemporary globalization processes is the intensification of the flows of capital, goods and services, as well as ideas, cultural symbols and people. As Castells (1999) argues, globalization has changed the spatial organization of the world from a 'space of places' to a 'space of flows.' These flows are mainly organized through networks of the most varied kinds, such as intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), transnational corporations, NGOs, and diasporic communities (Held and McGrew 2000). It is with an understanding of these flows that we can begin to understand how economic, social and cultural relations associated with brain drain are assuming new forms and have varied outcomes, and therefore require new policy responses.

Global networks are facilitated mostly by the developments in transport and communication technologies that have engendered a "much more compressed view of space and time" (Carnoy 2002: 3). Nowadays we can observe an increasing material integration of space obtained through rapid forms of mobility. These forms, both physical and virtual, bring "different time zones together and connect them in real time" (Aneesh 2006). Furthermore, connections promote and strengthen social networks and eradicate barriers to international mobility. Thus, networks can be seen as catalysts in lowering the barriers as well as promoting the movement of highly skilled workers but still retaining the possibility of connections across national boundaries.

New transport and communication technologies not only foster the conditions for extensive migration, but also, and perhaps more importantly, "allow the constitution of a production and management system spread all over the world yet working on real time and working as a unit through the combination of telecommunications, fast transportation, and computerized flexible production systems" (Castells, 1999: 47). However, while new forms of production and management are widely diffused in the global economy, "they do not include all territories and do not include all people in its workings" (Castells 1999: 132). To be more precise, dominant sectors in developed and developing countries are connected to the hegemonic networks of the global economy in an ever-changing hierarchy in which positions are not fixed, but are determined according to the market 'value' of what they produce and to their influence upon the global processes of production and consumption. At the same time, "segments of countries and regions" are disconnected from this global economy (Castells, 2000).

Concomitantly, the processes of integration in the current wave of globalization entail both new forms of labor and economic practices around the world. Aneesh (2006) contends that these forms of labor become a part of the networks of capital integration. As mobility of different types becomes a common feature, the global mobility of labor, and particularly of highly skilled workers, increasingly depends on networks. In the same way the

possibility of individuals to be recruited in certain occupations depends on their capacity to operate through networks. Also, the economies of states and territories (local, national or regional) depend increasingly on global flows created and maintained by groups of individuals through social networks.

Hence, in the hope of utilizing and benefiting from these flows and networks, individuals are forced to expand their understanding of globalization and must work outside the confines of set geographical regions. Accordingly, brain drain can no longer merely be defined in terms of geographical boundaries, especially in a context of a global economy that neither is totally global nor can be considered completely national (Aneesh, 2006). Rizvi (2005: 189) argues accordingly that "in an age of globalization, the key issue has become not where people are physically located but what contribution they are able to make to the social, cultural and economic development of the countries with which they identify". This implies that brain drain cannot simply be measured through a set of economic data, constructed around national categories, because that tells only part of the story. In addition to an understanding the economic affects of transnational flows, it is also necessary to comprehend how brain drain reconstitutes the nature of cultural and political relations, as well as of professional identities, that span across national boundaries.

What this account suggests then is that "the development effects of migration not only entail remittances and investments, but also include an important socio-political dimension. Through such social and political investments, migrants can contribute to shaping a better societal climate in countries of origin in general" (Haas 2005: 5). Despite this recognition, most recent literature on brain drain continues to focus exclusively on its economic effects. Most recent studies debate, for example, the effects of remittances on the economic growth of less-developed countries, overlooking the importance of considering social and cultural considerations as well, and of elaborating how social networks are central to understanding the changing dynamics of skilled mobility.

Networks have of course always been central to and have provided avenues for the migration process itself. In his historical overview of immigration into the United States, Tilly (1990) emphasizes that it is the "networks that migrate". "By and large", Tilly says, "the effective units of migration were (and are) neither individuals nor households but sets of people linked by acquaintance, kinship, and work experience." Networks connect migrants across time and space. According to Boyd (1989: 641), "once begun, migration flows often become self-sustaining, reflecting the establishment of networks of information, assistance and obligations which develop between migrants in the host society and friends and relatives in the sending area. These networks link populations in origin and receiving countries and ensure that movements are not necessarily limited in time, unidirectional or permanent". Social networks play a crucial role in helping

migrants find jobs and accommodation. But they are also important in circulating goods and services, and in providing continuous sources of social and economic information, as well as psychological support. They guide migrants into or through specific places and occupations. In this way, migration can be conceptualized as a process of network building.

Of course, the formation and operations of particular migrant networks are deeply affected not only by information and opportunities but also by their social position and power. Aiawa Ong (1999) has shown, for example, how middle class emigrants from Hong Kong, in contrast to working class ones, use different kind of networks for different kind of purposes in arranging their movement and resettlement abroad, and in retaining links with Hong Kong. According to Shah and Menon (1999) high occupational groups rely more on networks of colleagues and professional organizations and less on kin-based networks. Gender relations are also deeply implicated in the formation of networks and in the ways they are accessed, managed, sustained and utilized to derive social and economic benefits.

This discussion suggests that there is considerable variety in the forms of relational and structural arrangements embedded within migrant networks. As Vertovec (2002: 3) notes, "social ties in pre-migration networks are related to factors affecting which people migrate, the means of migration, the destination (including locality, accommodation and often specific job) and future prospects for physical and occupational mobility". He quotes Meyer (2001) in suggesting that "connections with earlier migrants provide potential migrants with many resources that they use to diminish the risks and costs of migration: information about procedures (technical as well as legal), financial support, job prospects, administrative assistance, physical attendance, emotional solidarity".

Migration theorists have long recognized that migrants maintain contact with people in their countries of origin through correspondence and the sending of remittances. Yet early sociologists of migration focused largely upon the ways in which migrants adapted themselves to their place of immigration through processes of assimilation and integration. But this research always assumed nation-states to be self-contained, with fixed cultural borders. Even the theories of multiculturalism worked with a similar assumption, even if they rejected the idea of assimilation. However, with globalization has come the realization that the cultural boundaries of nation-states were never entirely fixed and have become increasingly porous; and with advances in technologies, the logic of assimilation of people into spaces that are somehow largely immutable has become increasingly hollow.

This has led to a new approach to migration studies that recognizes the links migrants often maintain to people, traditions and causes outside the boundaries of the nation-state to which they have moved. As Vertovec and Cohen (1999) indicate, this new approach underscores the numerous ways

in which transnational networks today are different and more intense than their earlier forms. There have emerged, they argue, new patterns in transnational mobility, by which people now create and circulate in transnational communities, or what Appadurai (1996) calls 'diasporic spaces'.

According to Portes (1997: 812), these spaces comprise "dense networks across national borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, an increasing number of people are able to live dual or even multiple lives. They are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both". This transnationality is of course enhanced by newer, cheaper, and more efficient modes of communication and transportation, which enable "globally 'stretched' patterns of activity" (Vertovec 2002: 4) affecting a variety of social relations across the diaspora. These relations include various forms of economic exchange, political mobilization, cultural communication, information sharing, and the formation of professional links.

This is not to deny that various forms of transnationalism have always existed through chain migration, regular communications among split families, sending of remittances, as well as transnational labor markets. However, there is something new about the contemporary labor practices, which GATS/WTO and numerous professional associations are now seeking to 'internationalize', that is, develop guidelines for training, accreditation, ethics and standards (Robertson 2006). The transnationalization of the labor market has encouraged new services for labor recruitment, movement and job placement. These services have been provided by specialist agencies that take care of bureaucratic rules and regulations that surround the recruitment of highly skilled people. In the IT industry, Khadria (2001) notes, the agency work known as 'body shopping' is often sanctioned by governments and corporations alike, precisely at a time when the pejorative idea of 'people smuggling' has been applied to those who arrange the movement of refugees and unskilled people.

This illustrates how the networks utilized by skilled workers often tend to be of a different nature, and have different outcomes, than those characterizing low or unskilled workers. The differential networks characterizing various kinds of workers influences, first of all, the ways in which skilled migrants are recruited. Higher education is a foremost source of skilled migrant networks. Indeed countries like Australia have increasingly sought to align their educational and immigration policies. Ziguras and Law (2006) have shown how Australia now views international students as attractive migrants who are not only prepared to invest in their own higher education but also play an increasingly important role in ensuring the continuing supply of new student-migrants.

My own research (Rizvi 2005) indicates that networks developed by international students often serve to encourage colleagues and friends from the home country to join them in Australia. They also attract other skilled people to enter the migration stream through their own ad hoc networks of colleagues and project collaborators, and through, as I have already noted, the work of recruitment and relocation agencies. This movement has been accelerated by the intense global competition for particular skills. In the area of IT, for example, until recently worldwide opportunities and competition for skilled workers were stimulated by the globalizing nature of the work that was fluid in terms of skill requirements, was not linked to particular cultural contexts, was dominated by the English language; and was based on on-the-job experience as the most important means of acquiring human capital or becoming multi-skilled. As Iredale (2001: 13) points out, it thus involved a high degree of mobility across spaces and had considerable potential for return migration and investment. Importantly, also, transnational networks of such skilled workers do not merely represent bi-national patterns of movement. As Vertovec (2002: 7) notes, "they regularly entail the mobility of workers throughout an international arena". It is possible, for example, for a Hong Kong IT worker to work, at one time or another, in mainland China, the UK and the USA as well as in Hong Kong. This suggests a pattern of 'brain circulation' rather than brain drain.

Under the conditions of 'deterritorialization' (Tomlinson 2000), the international mobility of skilled people is both a consequence of and a necessary stimulus to sustain the processes of economic and cultural globalization. The increasingly globalized knowledge economy demands that there be circulation of knowledge workers and brokers. This is as important for the developed countries as it is for the developing economies. If this is so then it is suggested by a number of recent scholars, such as Meyer and Brown (2003), that for the developing countries to benefit from the knowledge economy, the physical location of people is immaterial, so long as the developing economies are able to draw upon their expertise, regardless of where they live.

Meyer and Brown call this the 'diaspora option', underlining the need to create links through which skilled emigrants could still be effectively and productively connected to their country of origin. They argue that a crucial advantage of the diaspora option is that "it does not rely on a prior infrastructural massive investment, as it consists in capitalizing already existing resources. It is thus at hand for any country which is willing to make the social, political, organizational and technical effort to mobilize such a diaspora" (Meyer and Brown 2003: 3). It is with this recognition of networks resulting from skilled-worker circulation that many analysts and policymakers have tended to look beyond the discourse of 'brain drain', and to consider notions of the globalization of human capital and to think of the professional labor market as both flexible and globally

mobile. This has led to the popularity of the notions of brain exchange and brain circulation.

The idea is to accept the fact that many skilled workers want to migrate for personal, familial and career development, but their skills can nevertheless be utilized to support the development aspirations of their home country. Indeed, diasporic knowledge networks are deemed crucial to realize such aspirations. A number of schemes have thus emerged over the past decade or so, developed both by international organizations and by transnational networks of expatriate professionals, to forge a new 'knowledge for development' so that skilled emigrants can continue to play an effective and productive role in their home country's development, even without any physical temporary or permanent return.

It is argued that this can be facilitated by what Meyer and Brown (2003) call 'distant cooperative work' within the professional diaspora networks. Although some networks of this kind have existed in one form or another in the past, attempts are now being made to make them more systematic, dense and productive. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), for example, supports many such initiatives with a program called TOKTEN (Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals). TOKTEN has created databases of people and assists skilled expatriates to engage in various development projects. Another form of diaspora knowledge networks involves on-line mechanisms for information exchange and recruitment among occupational professionals. For example, Siliconindia.com has been created to enable IT workers and businessmen of Indian background to remain connected with each other and contribute to the developments in India.

From the point of view of the developing countries, the diaspora option has several advantages. It enables a country to have access not only to their skilled citizens no matter where they reside but also to the socio-professional networks in which they have become inserted abroad. Their transnational networks can be useful in attempts to build a locally based enterprise by connecting them to a far-reaching 'research and technico-industrial web'. The resultant long-distance networks among local and foreign-based professionals can provide important channels throughout which run flows of capital, skill, managerial know-how and information. Such knowledge networks can also direct considerable foreign investment towards the developing countries, as has been the case in India. Much of India's recent economic growth has arguably been facilitated by IT workers in the United States, who have helped create India's vast IT industry by encouraging American companies to outsource some of their work.

Put in these terms, the diaspora option emphasizing 'brain circulation' seems highly promising. However, while it is true that the notion of 'brain drain' needs to be re-thought, the idea of brain circulation does not escape many problems of its own. For such circulation is often characterized by its sporadic, exceptional and limited nature. As Teferra (2003) points out,

most networks have a short life span, and fail to become systematic, dense and productive. Among those in the network who have not had extensive opportunities to travel and live abroad there remains a great deal of resentment towards those who have; and the attitude of emigrants towards their own country of origin often appears arrogant and patronizing. But beyond these social and technical problems, there is a more fundamental issue: that the transnational space within which brain circulation takes place is not a neutral one, but is characterized by uneven distribution of opportunities and asymmetrical flows of power.

The notion of brain circulation appears to rest on an assumption that the new knowledge economy is potentially less exploitative of developing countries than was the old economy. While it is true that the globally integrated knowledge economy requires the development of greater transnational collaboration, and mobility among skilled workers, it is still based on modes of capital ownership and production that are inherently unequal. The substitution of the concept of brain drain with brain circulation does not solve this problem. Under the conditions of globalization and deterritorialization, it is clear that the notion of 'brain drain' needs to be re-conceptualized in more contemporary terms, because issues of global inequalities now presents themselves in markedly different ways. Inequalities are no longer linked to the modernist conception of national development but are located within patterns of transnational flows not only of capital but also of people, information and skills. These flows reshape social identities, and require not only new ways of thinking about relations between globally mobile skilled workers and their social obligations to their communities but also about the ways in which the potential of professional diasporic networks can become sustainable and more effective in addressing the problems of global inequalities surrounding the production and utilization of knowledge.

For this to happen, the networks themselves need to address the issues of asymmetries of power, and the unidirectional flows of knowledge. If the diaspora option is a more contemporary policy response to the problems of global inequalities, then professional diasporic networks cannot simply be viewed as a way of contributing to further capital accumulation but as a serious attempt at addressing the question of whose interests are served by the globally-oriented labor market. This important task cannot be adequately undertaken without recourse to an international education that helps high skills diasporic workers to understand how contemporary processes of globalization have altered the landscape in which they work, and that it may now be transnationally organized but only under social conditions that are inherently unequal. Workers located within the diasporic networks need to recognize that while the volume and speed of intercultural exchange has increased at an unprecedented rate, creating greater possibilities of trade, transfers of technology and cultural cooperation, globalization has also created new forms of inequalities and

that the global labor market is as harsh on the poorer communities as were the local economies.

Never before therefore has there been a greater need for intercultural understanding and communication, predicated not on essentialist conceptions of cultures, but based on a need to explore the dynamics of professional interactions across national boundaries. New ways of thinking about economic and cultural exchange are necessary, involving conceptions of others and ourselves that are defined relationally, as complex and inherently dynamic products of a range of historical processes and the contemporary cultural economies of global interconnectivity. Epistemologically, all cultural understanding is comparative because no understanding of others is possible without self-understanding. If this is so then it is important for networks to understand their own social conditions of work relationally and reflexively. Just as corporations are encouraged to become learning organizations then so too must professional diasporic networks. Without such a commitment they are unlikely to be sustainable and realize the potential they clearly have for working productively for the developmental aspirations of their country of origin.

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