



Can Migrants, Countries of Origin and Countries of Destination All Win from Circular Migration?¹

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Introduction

Different stakeholders in the migration debate often mean different things when they use the term 'circular migration'. For some, it means a not-much-altered reiteration of the guest-worker schemes of an earlier age. For others, it is simply return migration. For still others, it is part of a sophisticated a livelihood strategy that repeatedly supplements limited employment and earnings prospects at home. And for some, it is the manifestation of a truly transnational existence where time is divided between two or more countries that are equally 'home'.

Some think of circular migration as the completion of a single round-trip between the home and host country. But a more dynamic conception is of a cycle rather than a circle, in which mobility is natural and sought after by migrants, countries of origin, and countries of destination. The policy challenge of circular migration is to identify the conditions attaching to it that can bring about the 'triple win' envisioned in the question posed in the title of this note.

The extent of circular migration

It is impossible to come to a very accurate, agreed estimate of the number of circular migrants. Neither census data nor the kind of administrative data used to measure the entry and (much less accurately) the exit of migrants, tourists, business visitors, international students, and so forth are

¹ This paper draws extensively on [Circular Migration: Trends, Policy Routes and Ways Forward](#), a policy brief by Dovelyn Agunias and Kathleen Newland, published by the Migration Policy Institute in April, 2007. The paper can be accessed at www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/MigDevPB_041807.pdf

able to capture the movements of many kind of circulating migrants—especially those that hold legal permanent residence rights in two or more countries.

There is evidence, however, to suggest a rising trend of temporary migration programs, a trend which prevails in most of the major labor-importing countries in Western Europe, North America and the Gulf. In the OECD countries as a group, temporary migration has increased annually by 9 percent. The fact that more people are admitted as temporary migrants does not, however, guarantee that they circulate. Some may find ways to convert their status to permanent residence, while others may overstay their visas and remain without authorization.

Overview of the issues

Both departure and return may be either temporary or permanent, creating four permutations of circular migration--each of which has a different impact on the migrant, his or her home and host country, and on development.

The permanent return of permanent migrants (that is, those with permanent residence rights in the country of destination) may represent the reversal of a long-standing brain drain. Members of the Irish diaspora in the 1990s returned in substantial numbers to Ireland in the 1990s and helped to take its fledgling software industry to competitive heights. The International Organization for Migration has implemented formal programs to help highly qualified nationals repatriate; for example, the Return of Qualified African Nationals (RQAN) program helped more than 2000 expatriates in 41 countries repatriate to Africa between 1983 and 2001,

The permanent return of temporary migrants may also be fruitful. For example, Korean managers and workers in turn-key project in the Middle East during the 1970s acquired project management and industrial skills that were applied to the large construction projects in the Korean industrialization drive a decade later.

A number of developing countries benefit from the temporary return of permanent migrants. Indian and Chinese software engineers in California's Silicon Valley are perhaps the best known examples of settled migrants who return regularly to their countries of origin for business purposes. Both IOM and the UN Development Program have programs that facilitate short term return of highly qualified emigrants --Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) and Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) respectively.

Temporary return of temporary migrants may signal that migrants do not find return to their home countries sustainable, and feel compelled to migrate again. In the 1990s, about 60 percent of the Filipinos who left their country on temporary contracts had been abroad before.

The 'triple-win' of circular migration describes an outcome in which countries of origin and destination and migrants themselves benefit. But these stakeholders have different goals. Governments of migrant-receiving countries see in circular migration a way to make their labor

markets more flexible and to fill jobs that are unattractive to native-born workers without incurring the high social (and, often, political) costs of integrating newcomers on a permanent basis. Many of them also have an interest in promoting development in countries of origin.

The migrants' home countries may see circularity as the price they must pay in order to gain access for their citizens to the labor markets of richer countries. More migrants mean more remittance flows, some relief from the pressures of unemployment at home, a source of work experience and perhaps training that can be useful in the home country's development, and a growing number of citizens with dense networks of contacts abroad. But some countries of origin may not be so interested in circularity; they may in fact prefer to have their nationals remain abroad, sending money home and advocating for the home country in the adopted one.

The migrants face a more complex set of goals: on the one hand, circular migration allows them to move more easily between home and host countries, thereby facilitating the maintenance of family ties and oversight of their economic and other interests in their countries of origin. Current visa regimes often thwart the desire to return, locking people in with the fear of not being able to get back to the destination country. But many circular migration schemes focused on temporary labor supplies give migrants no choice of when and under what circumstances to return, and offer little recourse for migrants who are treated unfairly by their employers. Very few circular or temporary programs for less-skilled migrants, even if they involve stays of quite long duration, offer the possibility of family unity.

Permanent return to the country of origin is desired by many migrants and encouraged by many countries of destination. Most programs focused on permanent return, however, have either been costly, relying on economic subsidies to encourage return, or have been coercive. Greater policy thinking needs to be devoted to ways of making return both attractive and sustainable—in other words, to stimulating the conditions that have arisen spontaneously in several countries as economic development has taken hold. Cooperative efforts by countries of origin and destination, to more thoroughly integrate labor market and development planning at both ends of the migratory relationship, are most likely to achieve progress toward this end.

Circular migration is only likely to be successful (in that all parties participate at a meaningful level, and comply with the conditions of circulation) if it meets the goals of all parties: migrant workers, their employers, their families, and governments on both sending and receiving sides. From the point of view of the migrants, voluntariness of return is key, as is the protection of their human rights and rights as workers while they are abroad. The conditions that are conducive to success include:

- Flexible (multi-year and multi-entry) visas, with the possibility of access to permanent residency and citizenship for some migrants
- Admission and stay not linked to one employer
- More emphasis on positive incentives to encourage return rather than punitive ones to discourage stay

- Construction of positive links between enterprises and institutions in countries of origin and destination so that migrants can move productively between them
- Active participation by the private sector
- Continual monitoring and evaluation of programs to ensure that they are reaching their goals

The largest stumbling blocks in the way of an expansion of circular migration are 1) the deep cynicism of policy –makers and the public alike that circular migration proposals can indeed produce circularity; and 2) the disincentives to return to their countries of origin that migrants from very poor countries have—particularly if precarious economic conditions are accompanied by problems of corruption, conflict, and lack of public safety. Migrants are unlikely to see return programs as being in their interest as long as there is no change in the conditions that propelled them to leave in the first instance.

Gender issues in circular migration

The classic temporary migration programs of the 1960s and 1970s were heavily male-dominated, with jobs concentrated in low-skilled, physically demanding jobs on farms and in factories. A much higher proportion of today's migrant workers are concentrated in service industries, both high-end (like banking and medical care) and low-end (like house cleaning and personal care to the elderly). These 'post-industrial' jobs are much more likely to be held by women, and this is one of the factors that explain the rising proportion of migrants working in the OECD countries who are women—now over half. Programs that are set up to encourage circular migration should cover the female-dominated service sectors as well as the traditionally male-dominated ones.

Issues of protection of their human and labor rights are central for all migrant workers, but especially for those who work in personal services that are less visible to the public eye, such as domestic work, child care and elder care, home health care and so forth. These workers are more likely to be female. Some countries of origin, of which the Philippines is the most advanced, have established far-reaching consular assistance programs to assist workers abroad; the Philippines also licenses recruitment agencies and certifies (or in the case of persistent problems, de-certifies) employers who wish to hire Filipinos on a temporary basis.

Roles for Civil Society Organizations

The organs of civil society have many crucial roles to play with respect to circular migration. Businesses are well-placed to design and promote innovative ways to encourage circularity, and to press policy makers to establish the necessary legislative frameworks for it. They can also help to protect workers, even while pursuing their own interests. One example of such private sector activism occurred in the framework of the Free Trade Agreement between Jordan and the USA. The National Textile Association, a trade group of American textile mills, filed a complaint under the labor chapter of the US-Jordan FTA in September 2006. As a result, violations of workers' rights were identified, penalties were issued, and some establishments were closed.

Advocacy and diaspora groups as well as other community-based organizations have connections with migrant communities that make them effective actors in communicating the possibilities for circular migration. They also have an important role to play in independent monitoring of circular migration programs, to ensure that the rights and interests of migrants are indeed respected and protected. National and local media (including the ethnic press) also have the means to inform the public about the terms of circular migration.

With information and understanding of circular migration phenomena so imperfect, the role of the Academy (including universities, think-tanks, governmental research departments, etc) in analyzing and explaining patterns of movement is fundamental.

NGOs are often the first line of defense for migrants who are stranded, trapped in abusive employment situations, or isolated, and who may wish to return home. Governments should work with them to increase protection of migrants. National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have an important role to play in meeting the humanitarian needs and, in many cases, the protection needs, of international migrants.

Questions and topics for discussion

Which policy measures can encourage circular migration and enforce its terms?

Is there a tension between the goal of integrating migrants and that of providing more opportunities for circular migration?

Does circular migration operate differently for low-and moderately skilled migrants than for highly skilled migrants?

What do migrants stand to lose/gain if circular migration is defined as a norm?

How would more use of engineered circular migration schemes affect other civil society actors?

What frameworks are most conducive to the acquisition of valuable skills by migrants who are intending to return home?

What conditions are conducive to permanent, sustainable return of migrants to their countries of origin?

Paper reviewed by:

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