Brain Drain and Its Adverse Impact on the achievement MDGs and Poverty Reduction

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The focus area of this article will be on the impact of the brain drain, particularly on the development of Africa. It discusses the contradictory nature of unethical recruitment policies of donors and their development aid.

In a simple outline form, my comment is that the problem of brain drain is a binding constraint to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and is undoing the efforts of both donors and aid receiving countries. The Brain drain is, and will be, a serious policy coherence challenge to donor countries whereas for developing countries it will be another additional development challenge in the efforts of getting out of the vicious cycle of poverty. To solve this problem, my suggestion is that the central object and purpose of donor policy should be poverty reduction through the achievement of the MDGs. In other words, any policy that may have a direct or indirect adverse effect to the achievement of MDGs and poverty reduction programmes should be reconsidered to ensure coherence among development aid and domestic policies of donor countries. To elaborate my comments, I shall limit myself mainly to the case of brain drain due to unethical recruitment practices in donor countries and its detrimental impact on the achievement of MDGs and poverty reduction programmes. To further justify my arguments, the effects of EU Blue Card (a residence permit for highly qualified professionals in EU) on brain drain is taken as incompatible to the EU policies and efforts towards the achievement of MDGs in Africa unless strict counteracting actions are taken. These arguments on the negative effects of EU Blue Card, mutatis mutandis, apply to the US Green Card.

Ensuring coherence of two or more policies entails significant task of analysis of both the intended and unintended consequences of policies. It requires a clear understanding of the objectives of policies and sees what incompatible results they may have and try to ensure synergy among them. As many development economists such as Harvard professor Ricardo Hausmann point out, disparity in the development of countries is mainly attributable to education, science and technology—a factor that determines their product as 'rich or poor country good'. Human resource development is considered as main reform agenda and capacity building programmes of many African countries. The MDGs heavily banks on trained professionals particularly in sectors which are facing a critical shortage of trained human resource such as health and education. If this is true, then how could least developed countries grow fast while their human resource (that is needed for the expansion and utilization of education, science and technological advancement) is depleted by migration of their most skilled professionals? Moreover, if trained professionals of poor countries are actively recruited by the developed countries, then how could public investment in education have the expected return to accelerated development efforts? Is this a tension between several policies of donor countries with different objectives?

Facts about brain drain clearly demonstrate that indeed brain drain remains a serious concern for developing countries. Even if the data on brain drain is still inadequate, however, there are some estimates. The World Bank average estimates 70,000 skilled Africans migrate to EU and USA every year. The main feature of immigration to the USA, Canada and EU could be characterized as overwhelmingly a case of brain drain. Only less than 1% of the total migrants to USA are with school of less than 12th grade. Of the total African migrants to USA, 74% are highly educated professionals. Indeed this fact makes it abundantly clear that uneducated African migrants to USA are insignificant. Ten years ago there were 1600 medical doctors in Zambia, only 400 are left now. This includes newly trained physicians. On the average 160 physicians leave Zambia per year. In Kenya, 90% of the nurses and doctors migrate to Europe and USA per year. Ethiopia has lost 75% of its skilled professionals within 10 years in 1980-1991. Exodus of medical and health service professionals have increased at an alarming rate, denying African countries to maintain their efforts to meet the MDGs in health programmes. Brain drain is a threat to the quality of medical care and drains the capacity of medical education and institutions of higher learning. The issue of brain drain should be seen against the background that Africa with its 10% of World population is a victim of 25% of the World diseases. However, it has only 3% of the global health workforce.

What is then the cause of brain drain? Brain drain could happen due to push or pull factors or mix of both. Hence, more than 30% of the highly educated Africans leave Africa for better opportunity and security. Most the African migrants are the most educated ones in their country of origin and those capable of spending some amount of money for their travel. As there are push factors such as lack of security (war, persecution and poverty) in Africa that facilitate brain drain, there are also pull factors from the side of the donor countries such as better opportunities, quality of life and policies. Some donor countries are notoriously known for their pull factor-unethical recruitment schemes that attract highly skilled personnel in critical sectors such as health services.

Brain drain plays a negative role in the efforts toward sustainability and capacity building. What is given by one hand through capacity building programmes is taken away by the other hand due to unethical recruitment or recruitment of expatriate consultants. This is indeed an example of lack of policy coherence on the international donor community. If professionals trained through aid and national budget migrate to the donor countries, then in effect African countries and their institutions of higher learning are reduced to training institutions catering the demand of developed countries for highly skilled professionals. One could safely say that de facto the medical universities and health care training institutions of Africa sub-serve the demands of developed countries.

Clearly the problem of brain drain does not apply to low and semi-skilled labour migrants. There is no 'labour drain'. Enhanced securitization of immigration after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA has increased restrictions to the mobility of semi and low skilled Africans to EU and other migration destination countries. This negatively impacts on poverty reduction. Employments for low and semi-skilled migrants could have positively impacted achievement of the MDGs and poverty reduction as Africa has many unemployed unskilled or low skilled citizens. More studies by the International Labour Organization and the World Bank show that low and semi-skilled migrants send more remittance than the high skilled migrants.

What is more, the adverse impact of brain drain is not only limited to shortage of highly skilled professionals in sectors essential for the attainment of MDGs and poverty reduction strategies, but it also constrains developing countries financially too. UNDP says that Africa pays about 4 billion USD per year for expatriate consultants and advisors. However, UNDP is itself one of those organizations that have big pay rate differences for local and international consultants. Such consultancy fee for expatriates do enhance brain drain and migration of professionals by favouring and preferring returnees to locals, and international consultants to national experts. In Tanzania, an expatriate consultant would cost between 170000-200000 USD per year as this includes cost of living, hardship allowance, travel, and child and school allowance. The most expensive cost for highly skilled local consultants would be less than half of the cost for an international consultant. Such pay may encourage many professionals to leave Africa and return back after awhile as international consultant or returnees. This is not to say that Africa needs no expatriate international experts. Indeed it needs them and perhaps in large number, but only when and where there are no African experts. This fact about expatriate consultants is an example of unintended consequence of incoherent policies of donor countries and international organizations.

Let's see the case of EU Blue Card and its potential effect on brain drain. The EU Blue Card is a mechanism, currently under consideration by EU, to meet the growing need for skilled labour. It provides for fast processing migration by removing barriers in visa process and freedom of mobility within EU. It offers attractive conditions for the admission and residence of highly qualified immigrants needed for the EU economy. This is a legislative measure aimed at laying down simplified admission procedures and conditions for highly qualified workers and enhancing freedom of mobility within EU. Moreover, it also provides a single application procedure for a single permit for third-country nationals to reside and work in any EU country.

Clearly the factors behind the EU Blue Card initiative have mainly to do with the global economic competition, demand of multinational companies for non-EU cheaper labour, EU's plan to establish a knowledge based economy, the demographic crisis it is facing in the forms of aging and decline in population, more demanded on the health care and welfare system. It is not simply driven to simplify visa process. In some fronts, EU countries themselves face the problem of brain drain.

Reading between the lines, the proposed EU Blue Card makes it abundantly clear that Blue Card will necessarily lead to brain drain, especially in sectors that are critically short of human resources such as the health and education sectors. The Blue Card Scheme clearly targets to attract mainly: Medical professionals, engineers, IT specialists and other highly qualified workers; Professionals with university degree plus three years of relevant experience. Without specific counter measures, these targets are almost unethical as these sectors are critically demanded in Africa for its development. Moreover, the EU Blue card takes Africans professionally trained for 18-20 years. In effect, the Blue Card could lead to a fast-track "brain picking" from developing countries including African countries. These are professionals that Africa is trying mainly to produce with its meagre resource.

Hence, even if one can not expect that Africa's interest will be taken as the vital factor in the formulation of EU legislation, the Blue Card arrangement however does not put counter brain drain measures such as ethical recruitment principle into actionable and enforceable provision. Absence of stipulated specific actions and implementation mechanisms in the form of law is in order to give effect to the spirit of ethnical recruitment policy. This will create a gap that allows a black hole in the whole arrangement leading anything to happen.

To be precise, the Blue Card Scheme may end up as a filter for recruiting highly skilled and professionals to the EU. It could also lead to discrimination among migrants based on skill and profession, and could be violation of several declarations in "protecting the human rights of all migrants, particularly of women and children". As the percentage of highly trained women in developing countries is very low compared to men, the EU Blue Card may perpetuate the existing gap between men and women in education. This is due to more open opportunity for professional migrants to use access to higher education abroad, while women remaining in Africa still will have limited access to institutions of higher education than those in EU or USA. For this reason the EU Blue Card proposal is in many aspects incompatible with the international declaration and human rights instruments which also emphasises the need to focus on temporary migration of low and semi-skilled Africans and action counteracting brain drain. This could be taken as another issue of policy coherence the need for compatibility of such research policy and discrimination against women.

On the positive note, however, the EU Blue Card Scheme provides for transfer migrants' pension entitlements and accumulated welfare rights acquired as a result of their employment. This will encourage remittance from migrants to countries of origin. It proposes the treatment of the holders of an EU Blue Card similar to EU nationals with regard to tax benefits, social assistance, payment of pensions, access to public housing and study grants. Furthermore, it encourages "brain circulation" through circular migration and possibility of a "time out" for return to Africa. EU partnership with Africa has been of one based on progressive understanding the priorities of Africa. However, it is also clear that EU does make efforts to ensure compatibility of its policies but still it need more serious ones. Still the negative results of EU Blue Card may outweigh the positive ones.

To curb the negative impacts of brain drain, Africa needs to improve the working conditions of employees in Africa and encouraging the use of local consultants for different development projects before looking for international consultants. Only in the absence of local consultant with the need expertise, should donor agencies hire international consultants. To transpose a concept from international law, on this point too the principle of complementarity adhered as code of ethics for recruitment. Capacity building programmes to centres of excellence is another measure to counter the negative impact of brain drain. African institutions of higher learning have to produce more trained professionals in sectors critical to the achievement of MDGs and poverty reduction.

Brain drain and the EU Blue Card and US Green Card exhibit the mismatch between donors' own interest to remain at the top of the competitive global economy and their policy to assist Africa in its endeavour to attain the MDGs and poverty eradication. This is certainly a case of policy incoherence on the side of donor countries.