

‘Brain Drain’ as a Symptom of Global Power Imbalances

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The migration of skilled workers, also known as ‘brain drain,’ was described as “one of the major forces shaping the landscape of the 21st century” by the World Bank’s *World Development Report* in 1999.¹ The purpose of this paper is to explore the disproportionate amount of skilled labour migration from poorer countries to richer countries. I argue that brain drain is a symptom of global power imbalances that historically colonial and neo-colonial countries actively exploit through policies and practices. While there are some benefits associated with skilled labour migration, the net impact on the source country is negative. To investigate the impacts of this phenomenon, I provide some background on skilled labour migration, such as the conditions driving people to migrate. I also consider some positive and negative aspects of skilled labour migration, a case study on how brain drain impacts health professions, and some of the global implications of brain drain. I conclude by assessing proposed solutions to skilled labour migration.

Before beginning, it is important to acknowledge that the discourse surrounding this topic generally adopts a binary between the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ or ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries. Unfortunately, these labels do not accurately represent the complex power relations that led to these conditions. Many of the countries placed in the ‘developing’ category are historically colonised countries that have suffered from the severe and long-lasting effects of colonisation.² It is vital to begin an analysis of this international phenomenon in the context of colonisation, and brain drain is no exception. Therefore, I aim to acknowledge the legacies of colonialism that produce global,

exploitative power relations as I examine the ways in which brain drain relates to these asymmetries of power. As such, when necessary for differentiation, I refer to ‘historically exploited countries’ and ‘historically colonial countries,’ while recognising that in many cases this power imbalance is still perpetuated through neocolonialism.

Brain drain is defined by the United Nations as a “one-way movement of highly skilled people from developing to developed countries that only benefits the industrialised (host) world.”³ A common example in the Canadian context is the emigration of highly skilled Canadians to the United States, as described in the book, *Brains on the Move* by Harris, Easton, and Schmitt. They describe Canadian brain drain as “Canada’s failure to retain its own share of superstars” or, more colloquially, the “Wayne-Gretzky model,” referring not only to celebrities but also to doctors, engineers, scientists, and post-graduate students.⁴ In this book, the authors argue that “the impact could be large, [both in terms of knowledge and financial capital] even if the total number [leaving] is quite small.”⁵ This bilateral relationship—though a relatively small economic ecosystem in the greater world economy—is an example of asymmetries of power that are self-reinforcing, as made evident by the brain drain phenomenon.

Of course, brain drain is not limited to Canada. Scholarship has been examining this global phenomenon since at least 1965.⁶ For example, in *The Brain Drain* by Grubel and Scott in 1977, the authors examine the “international migration of human capital, skills and expertise, embodied in persons.”⁷ They focus on the effects of long-term migration rather than the temporary circulation of scholars and technical experts around the world. They lay out four solutions that I outline and assess later in this paper. However, some of the early literature lacks a certain level of nuance when discussing power relations in an increasingly globalised world, especially with respect to self-interested states and corporations who may actively contribute to this phenomenon.

Skilled labourers are motivated to emigrate by both micro- and macro-level factors. On the micro level, people may leave due to insufficient income, lower job satisfaction, or crime in their local community.⁸ Oberoi and Lin describe these motivators as “push factors.” As a result of their research on the emigration of healthcare professionals from some southern African countries to Australia, they concluded that these push factors are actually “perceived as far greater than the Australian

pull factors.”⁹ However, they do note that once skilled labourers have settled, the strength of stay factors are as strong or stronger than push factors.¹⁰ The former includes opportunities for career growth and the development of new social circles, particularly if entire families have moved. An additional factor not outlined by Oberoi and Lin is gender discrimination. It is important to note that one of the reasons that women in particular may be motivated to emigrate is because of the undervaluation of women’s skilled labour in their home countries.¹¹ Overall, individual labourers do have agency to decide for themselves whether or not they want to emigrate; however, that does not negate the significance of international development policies and practices. Many women may therefore choose to move to a country that is more receptive to their talents. In general, most of the micro-level motivations can be reduced to greater income, greater opportunity, or greater freedom.¹²

Institutional policies and practices have a direct impact on the macro-level. Moreover, brain drain is reflective of a global system in which the benefits of migration are unequally distributed.¹³ While in-depth research into the motives of skilled labour migration is limited, an important question must be raised: what proportion of this emigration is a result of heavy promotion from historically colonial countries and corporations whose interests reside alongside them? For instance, countries or corporations may experience a lack of skilled labourers after a relatively sudden increase in demand for certain skills. It can take years to train people as doctors or engineers, and in many cases countries will turn to foreign labour to meet the demand as quickly as possible rather than investing in domestic education.¹⁴ While this may seem like the most efficient solution, it perpetuates global disparity of power, wealth, or status of countries in their ability to entice or retain skilled workers. Nica explores these issues in reference to the Caribbean. She notes:

there is a significant increase in the migration of highly skilled and higher educated Caribbean natives to more developed countries. When these persons migrate, there is a shortage of persons remaining with the ability to adequately develop the Caribbean countries.¹⁵

Skilled labourers generally migrate to countries with greater levels of global power, deepening the power divide between richer and poorer countries.

Migration trends demonstrate that historically colonial countries have the power to attract the world's skilled labourers. Statistics regarding immigration policies in Canada suggest that 60 percent of immigrants are admitted into Canada for economic reasons, and roughly half of those were admitted through the skilled workers program.¹⁶ Although 30 percent of immigrants accepted through a skilled labour program may not seem significant, it would be unsurprising if this is an overrepresented group in the demographics of immigration applicants. It would be interesting to see if 30 percent of overall applicants would be considered skilled labourers, but this data is not forthcoming. Nevertheless, the data demonstrates that Canada, among other historically colonial countries, has the privilege to choose the 'best of the rest,' as they implement policies to "attract migrants of higher potential economic recruitment."¹⁷

Brain drain as a topic has come to the forefront in the last fifty years and is still the subject of much debate. Most scholars agree that there are costs and benefits associated with skilled labour migration for both the recipient country and the source country. For instance, the recipient country benefits from 'brain gain' and free-riding on foreign education, but it may become reliant on foreign labour to meet shortages. Meanwhile, the benefits for the source country are mostly limited to remittances and perhaps knowledge gain if workers return. In addition to brain drain, the costs for host countries include investment in the training of emigrants.¹⁸

The impacts of free-riding by the host country are significant. When countries and corporations rely heavily on foreign labour, it leads to a "lack of development of domestic supply."¹⁹ As Oberoi and Lin explain, "in the US, hospitals hire 5000 foreign medical graduates each year to fill first residency positions. At the same time, US medical schools turn away thousands of US applicants with high grade point averages."²⁰ Filling vacancies with immigrants in the United States means that there will possibly be vacancies in the source country. More clearly, "the loss of one doctor will have a greater impact on the developing country than the gaining of one doctor will have on a developed country."²¹ The evidence suggests the unequal distribution of the costs and benefits of global migration. Countries that have historically benefited from exploitative policies continue to do so at the expense of countries that were historically exploited, thus perpetuating asymmetries of power.

Much of the debate regarding the costs and benefits of skilled labour emigration hinges on the subject of remittances. Kahn and Bashar argue that the income sent home as remittances “[acts] as a lifeline for the poor, increasing income for the individuals and families.”²² They also claim that the additional income may correlate with “greater human development outcomes across a number of areas such as health education and gender equality.”²³ As referenced by Agrawal et al., Yang suggests that remittances may “increase investments in education by easing binding liquidity constraints.”²⁴ This is echoed by Pfeiffer et al., who suggest that parents’ schooling is the “main determinant of school attendance” but that remittances do encourage children to remain in school.²⁵ The most concrete example of positive outcomes associated with remittances is outlined by Oberoi and Lin: “some countries such as the Philippines have systematically trained more doctors than required so they can be sent abroad and the economy can benefit from the remittances.”²⁶ This has benefited the source country in this case, but it is not the global norm.

On the other hand, Oberoi and Lin point out that current scholarship still debates whether or not remittances “truly boost economic development if remittances are not spent on productive investments and are spent upon basics such as food, medicine and clothing.”²⁷ Based on the cash transfer literature, it is more likely that the recipients will focus primarily on their own basic needs; this conclusion is supported by a United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report on the subject.²⁸ The methodology used to create this report includes a mix of focus groups, in-depth interviews, case studies, and community and household questionnaires, reaching a diverse group of community respondents from the families themselves to local leaders, such as mayors, school workers, doctors, and police officers.²⁹ Regarding remittances, the report notes that such income only “contributes to a very small extent to the development of local infrastructure” but that it does “significantly [contribute] to improving the financial situation of the household.”³⁰ Unfortunately, there are cases of misusing remittances, such as when the child is in the custody of a nonfamily caregiver who has taken “advantage of the money and goods to satisfy their own needs.”³¹ The UNICEF report showed similar results regarding the investment in education, but they suggest that while some money goes toward higher education, the amount “spent on education (through the

secondary level) and health are similar to those spent by families that do not receive remittances.”³² The report also outlines health findings that were contrary to the benefits outlined by Kahn and Bashar discussed above.

The scholars who flaunt the supposed benefits of remittances, such as Kahn and Bashar, ignore a crucial detail. They often focus their arguments on the effects of the ‘GDP multiplier,’ in which families receive income and then spend it in the community, consequently contributing to the greater economy. The effects of the GDP multiplier are greatest “when remittances flow into rural areas,” but these rural areas are “not the likely origins of the most skilled emigrants.”³³ Lowell points out that it is “more reasonable to assume that highly skilled emigrants originate in urban areas, and that their remittances are sent back to family members in urban areas” where the GDP multiplier is significantly lower.³⁴ Finally, Lowell suggests that an increase in the general level of education “tends to reduce the likelihood that a worker remits” and that “high-skilled remitters do not generate uniquely high cash flows; just the opposite may be the case.”³⁵ Therefore, one of the two advantages promoted by the historically colonial recruiting countries is much less advantageous to the source country than many scholars have previously thought.

The other proposed advantage is ‘brain circulation’ (also known as ‘brain bank’) “through the return of skilled professionals to their countries of origin” after having gained specialised skills or knowledge from another country.³⁶ Pritchett suggests that brain circulation “might offset the traditional fears of ‘brain drain.’” Furthermore, this migration would be more productive if it is promoted by the source country under the “remittances and return” model instead of the “recruitment, remittance, and return” policy instigated by the potential host country.³⁷ Interestingly, Agrawal finds that among his sampling of Indian innovators, “returnees were quite rare” and “knowledge-flow characteristics are similar to innovators who never left.”³⁸ That is, Agrawal argues that the knowledge capital gained by the source community through returning emigrants is akin to the return of a local professional from travel. In other words, there was no added advantage in skilled workers leaving on a more permanent basis. While this may not be the case in every situation of returning workers, and further research is certainly needed to come to more definitive conclusions, Agrawal’s example is nonetheless

an informative starting point.

Brain drain affects many different professions, including teachers, scientists, and doctors. Canada's involvement in the poaching of foreign professionals is particularly evident in the healthcare profession, the effects of which have hit Africa the hardest.³⁹ One of the most well publicised cases of this practice is Shoppers Drug Mart's recruitment of young pharmacists in South Africa, "with promises of \$100,000 salaries" to draw them in.⁴⁰ Canadian healthcare associations are one of the biggest recruiters in South Africa, engaging potential workers "through regular newspaper and magazine campaigns," thus intensifying South African staff shortages.⁴¹ As a result, many of these countries hire their own foreign workers and often must pay more than if they had hired domestically.⁴² While these cases certainly spark debate, Krotz points out that Canadians need to acknowledge their dependence on "more subtle forms of this phenomenon."⁴³ Over the past few years, the Government of Canada has enacted a number of policies that exacerbate this issue, such as a bill that gave the Citizenship and Immigration Minister "discretion in hand-picking certain immigrant applications from the large backlog and accelerating their passage into Canada."⁴⁴ The current policy climate seems to be in line with Pritchett's hypothesis in 2006 that brain drain "will only get more severe as more and more countries tailor their immigration policies to attract migrants of higher potential economic contribution"; this is supported by Krotz's investigation in 2017.⁴⁵

Instead of investing in the thousands of students who have the desire to fill the demand for doctors, neocolonial countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia are capitalising on other countries' educational investments.⁴⁶ Siphokazi Phillip, the international relations coordinator for the professional association of South Africa's nurses, said in an interview with Krotz that he is skeptical of the "mitigating effects of remittances."⁴⁷ Margaret Zondo of Zimbabwe, echoing conclusions reached by UNICEF and Labonte, says that remittances are "fine for family and friends, but they don't stimulate local economies."⁴⁸ These two assessments demonstrate that many community leaders are actively questioning the so-called positive impacts.

From an economic and social perspective, there are significant implications of brain drain for exploited countries. Economically speaking, replacing the emigrated domestic workforce is expensive. Arno Tanner,

a reporter for the United Nations, stated in 2005 that “Africa has lost a third of its skilled professionals in recent decades, and has had to replace them with 100,000 expatriates from the West, at a cost of \$4 billion [US] a year.”⁴⁹ As explained by Labonte, this pattern of labour migration has led to hierarchies of recruitment reflecting the global power and wealth imbalances. His work uses the healthcare economy as an example:

8000 Canadian-trained doctors now practice in the USA; 25 per cent of practising physicians in Canada (mostly in rural areas) are foreign-trained, many from South Africa; and almost 80 percent of rural South African physicians are from other countries, notably Cuba and other SSA [Sub-Saharan African] nations.⁵⁰

Nigerian computer scientist Philip Emeagwali showed that emigration makes it incredibly challenging to establish a middle class. As a result, Africa has “a massive underclass that is largely unemployed and very poor, and a few very rich people that are mostly corrupt military and government officials.”⁵¹ There are social implications as well, such as increased strain on social support systems that are already eroded under neoliberalism. In Kenya, for example, there are “thousands of trained nurses it desperately needs but cannot employ, due to lack of money to pay them, and a lack of money or means to set up clinics.”⁵² Labonte attributes these problems to structural adjustment programs promoted by neoliberal capitalism, which emphasise privatisation and the slashing of social welfare programs, making poverty reduction much more difficult.⁵³

A gendered analysis of skilled labour migration requires attention to the motivations of emigration. Unsurprisingly, “the current share of women in the world’s population of international migrants is close to half.”⁵⁴ However, it is unlikely that this gender make-up is reflected across different professions, such as among domestic workers.⁵⁵ Ozden and Neagu postulate that many professional women may migrate because they “face discrimination in their domestic labour market.”⁵⁶ They argue that there is a “relatively low level of employment of educated women from developing countries, which implies that their skills are being underutilised.”⁵⁷ In this context, skilled labour migration may actually be advantageous to women. However, this may be reflective of marginal cases considering that there are increasing levels of brain

drain among educated women in developing countries.⁵⁸ This data also suggests that there was some level of inclusion in these communities, for otherwise their departure would have been left unnoticed. Since there has been an absence of substantive research on the impact of skilled labour emigration using gender as the main variable, it is difficult to estimate the impact of gendered emigration, especially considering complex family, community, and cultural dynamics.

According to Grubel and Scott, the solutions offered to mitigate the consequences of brain drain can be classified into four major groups.⁵⁹ These four categories include “narrowing the income gap,” “narrowing the opportunity gap,” “making migration more difficult,” and enacting “intergovernmental compensation schemes.”⁶⁰ The first category prioritises “the reduction of income differences throughout the world.”⁶¹ Agrawal et al. suggest that increasing developmental investments “may provide the largest boost to the supply of more moderate-ability individuals”; that is, people will be more likely to stay in their home country when their needs are met.⁶² Solutions that narrow the opportunity gap focus on “equalizing opportunities for personal and professional development of highly skilled persons throughout the world.”⁶³ Policies in this category include the promotion of ‘package deals’ that require direct admission of a certain number of ‘unskilled migrants’ for every skilled worker who is admitted.⁶⁴ Additionally, projects may be implemented to target emigrants after they have migrated. For example, the Reverse Brain Drain Project in Thailand aims to “recruit Thais overseas and facilitate their return to work in state agencies or the private sector using various incentives.” Nica, favouring other solutions, argues that “any assistance required to counter brain drain merely forms part of what they [historically colonial countries] already owe.”⁶⁵ It is equitable that they assist the countries they have materially benefited from exploiting. Pritchett argues that “restrictions on the mobility of the highly skilled in poor countries is a highly inequitable tax to pay for the global public good of poverty reduction.”⁶⁶ The last category, “intergovernmental compensation schemes,” includes policies in which “recruiting countries are required to invest in training a certain number of professionals per emigrant.”⁶⁷ These policies generally do not influence the degree of brain drain, but they do attempt to make the losses “less painful.”⁶⁸

Grubel and Scott suggest that the first two categories of solutions are largely focused on “economic and social development as a positive goal”

in contrast to the latter two categories, which are focused on “reducing or stopping the brain drain as a negative goal.”⁶⁹ Regardless of their normative assessments, narrowing the income and opportunity gaps is essential. Intergovernmental compensation and migration prevention are also important, especially considering the length of time it may take to fundamentally shift imbalances of power and wealth. Therefore, any program that attempts to tackle the issue of brain drain in a way that addresses root causes but also supports the countries through the transition must carefully balance all four of these categories. Narrowing the income and opportunity gaps will likely take a significant amount of time and capital, and it will certainly require multilateral cooperation.⁷⁰ This long-term process means that some sort of short-term mitigation plan, especially in the realm of healthcare, is required to quickly aid people who are suffering. Intergovernmental compensation schemes are another important factor, for they reaffirm that the countries who have benefited from brain drain are complicit in its perpetuation. This compensation would allow for reparation while simultaneously ameliorating the problem, so that they are not just throwing money at the problem as a token of their progressiveness. Furthermore, Labonte notes that there needs to be a “multilateral framework to manage the international flow of people.”⁷¹ All countries that are implicated in the problem need to be involved in the solution. At the same time, the voices of those who are most affected should be prioritised so that there can be meaningful change rather than another imposition of neocolonial ideals.

While brain drain exists between many countries, its effects are most detrimental when it arises between historically colonial or neocolonial countries and historically exploited countries. Like a one-way global conveyor belt, brain drain moves scarce professional human resources away from those who need it most. This exploitation is due to global power and wealth imbalances, as demonstrated by Canadian pilfering of medical professionals from South Africa. Taking into account its gendered dimension and economic impacts, brain drain may have some benefits to the countries from which skilled labourers migrate, but the overall impact is negative. Global collaboration will be required to adequately address the embedded power relations that have led to brain drain.

NOTES

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