



**A Report on the
International Workshop on Sustainable Return of
Professional and Skilled Migrants**

**7 and 8 March 2005
Dhaka, Bangladesh**

The issue of 'return' needs to be reconceptualised in a rapidly globalising world where return is frequently becoming temporary or circular in nature. This changing nature of return must lead to further research and improved policy interventions to successfully harness the benefits of return migration and create an environment conducive to return.

These assertions paved the way for further discussions at the international workshop titled *Sustainable Return of Professional and Skilled Migrants* jointly organised by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty (DRC), University of Sussex. It was held in Dhaka on 7-8 March 2005. This event was the last in a series of workshops on return migration under this programme. The workshop was attended by migration experts and representatives from RMMRU's partner organisations in the UK, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Asia Pacific Migration Research Network (APMRN), and other academic specialists from various international universities and research centres. Special guests included His Excellency, Mr. Anwar Choudhury, British High Commissioner and the Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. M. Morshed Khan.

The workshop was formulated as an opportunity for researchers from partner institutions of the DRC and other migration experts to meet and share knowledge and research findings on the return migration of professionals. The aim was to explore the concept of return in the contemporary world. While focussing on Bangladesh, the workshop also looked at the experiences of other Asian countries to explore how the relationship between migration, return, development and poverty alleviation works in practice. One objective was to identify some ways that the experiences of return could have a practical impact on poverty. The workshop dealt with conceptual issues, country experiences and various personal case studies from successful returnees. Some of the issues that the workshop covered were: the causes of return, challenges faced on return, social and cultural dimensions of return and public policy issues for making return sustainable.

The first day of the workshop focussed on the key concepts and issues behind return migration, laying the foundations for an in-depth critical analysis of the return process and its suitability for assisting sustainable development. In her introductory speech Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui pointed out that migration cannot be considered an entirely linear process. Emigration and immigration are not distinct processes and increasingly people are finding themselves living in two places at once – or living between places. This practice of 'circular migration' – the movement back and forth between countries and the maintenance of close links in both -- has been called 'transnationalism'. 'Transnationals' and return migrants are critical players, both as causes and effects of globalisation. This workshop wanted to try to incorporate new ideas on return through discussions and debates, to then try and blur the distinction between emigration and immigration. The knowledge and skills that return migrants bring back to the home country and the networks they maintain are important in linking the world and contributing to development.

In the first session Professor Richard Black, Director of the DRC, pointed out that some types of return can be seen as a route to development, reversing the effects of 'brain drain' and creating opportunities for financial, human and social capital transfers. He provided a key definition of sustainable return around which the workshop could be centred: 'Sustainable return occurs when the pressure on people in the country of origin to migrate (including pressure on returnees to re-migrate) is lower, one year after their return.'

Professor Black said that one of the outcomes that he had been looking forward to from this series of workshops was an insight into ways to 'operationalise' this definition in the context of monitoring the return process. He hoped to learn whether there really is a way to evaluate public policies towards return on the basis of a broader conception of the sustainability of return.

Professor Ronald Skeldon's (University of Sussex) presentation centred around some of the key questions about skilled migration and the concept of return. He believed that there should not be any doubt that return is absolutely essential for development. He raised the question of where the respective societies of migrants like Ho Chi Minh, Sun Yat Sen, Lee Quan Yu, Jinnah, Gandhi, and Nehru, would have been had they not returned. However, he also added that in certain cases return can have a negative impact on the society, especially when return migrants bring with them certain philosophies that can be 'antipathetic to development'.

Frank Laczko from IOM, who could not attend the seminar, provided a very informative paper on the possibilities for enhancing the benefits of return migration for development. The development potential of return migration has generally been neglected, he stated. There is a general perception that migration is a one-way process of emigration and the reverse movement, of people returning to their countries of origin, is often disregarded. Due to inadequate information, it is difficult to assess the effects of return migration on development. Moreover, in most cases, return is not part of an organised programme. Therefore, although the number of returnees could be substantial, they are often overlooked. Without knowing how many have returned and what types of migrants were returning, he argued, it is difficult for researchers to draw a representative sample and therefore difficult to establish the long-term effects of return migration. Assessing the impact of return migration on development is not a straightforward exercise given the different types of possible effects: social, economic, political and cultural. He suggested that the impact of return migration would also vary according to the conditions in the home countries. Benefits from return migration often go unrecognised because they go unrecorded, but they could be effectively promoted through a variety of policy measures.

The next session looked at regional experiences of return migration. Dr. Robyn Iredale of APMRN presented a paper entitled 'How to Turn "Brain-Drain" into "Brain-Gain"'. She was unhappy to acknowledge that there has been very little development of theoretical or conceptual frameworks for return migration, and most of the work that done so far tends to focus on individuals rather than macro-impacts. She then gave a brief summary of the two projects that APMRN had undertaken. Both projects explored the factors and processes involved in decision-making among potential returnees. The first project focused on migrants from Taiwan, China, Vietnam and Bangladesh currently living in Australia, but considering return. The second study was conducted in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and focused on scientists and engineers who had returned to these countries. In the case of Bangladeshis living in Australia, the study showed that the downward occupational mobility experienced through migration had often led to return, but few were returning permanently. She believed that many countries, including Bangladesh, are still in the brain drain phase. She finished by presenting a few conditions, which she thought might reverse the brain drain process for developing countries. She summarised these as 'WEPIT', Workplaces, Environment, Government Policies, Incentives, and social Transformation. In her opinion, these are the factors which will ultimately have an impact on migrants' decisions to return.

Drawing from ongoing research, Dr. Eric Leclerc, Associate Professor from the Centre Des Sciences Humaines, New Delhi, presented a case study on the migration and circulation of Indian IT professionals. At the beginning of the millennium, India made a few crucial policy changes, which according to Dr. Leclerc,

could have an important impact on the decision of migrants to return. A high-level committee was set up in September 2000 and the recommendations of its report were implemented by the new government of India in 2003, which founded the Ministry of Overseas Indians to oversee these policies. This included the setting up of 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas' or Non-Resident Indians (NRI) Day, to recognise the positive impact of the diaspora, and introducing a system of dual citizenship, facilitating investment and prioritising the transfer of technical know-how from the diaspora to India. All of these policies have offered important incentives for Indian IT professionals to return although, as he pointed out, India is still struggling to overcome a situation of institutionalised brain drain.

Professor Binod Khadria from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, presented a paper on the return migration of knowledge workers and its costs and benefits in the Indian context. He believes that there has been a shift from a high cost ratio to a higher benefit ratio where sustainable return has been part of the potential or actual benefit of migration. For example, he described the shift in India from brain drain in the 1960s and 70s, to a situation of 'brain bank' in the 1980s and 90s, to the current situation that he described as 'brain gain'. It was in this context that he looked at the dynamic conflicts of interest that arise out of return migration and outlined three under-explored costs: the social costs of temporary migration, the costs of student migration, and the reduction in remittances.

These presentations were followed by several lively question and answer sessions in which the participants and panel members explored these concepts and theories in greater depth.

The second day focused on the personal experiences of professionals like entrepreneurs, bankers, academics, restaurateurs, musicians and filmmakers from Bangladesh. The transfer of skills and knowledge from those returning is immeasurable; returnees have paved the way for the introduction of international standards and practices. The workshop took the opportunity to highlight those Bangladeshi returnees who had made major contributions in their fields and represented examples of successful integration and innovation. These experiences were drawn upon in exploring what needs to be done to encourage beneficial return migration.

Many of the participants felt that in their home country they could become 'big fish in a small pond'. They felt that there were distinctive opportunities to make an impact, which were not available abroad. Some professionals had made career sacrifices that, according to them, were compensated by the social gains from returning. Furthermore, participants wanted the opportunity to contribute to development and society in their home country. Mushtaque Habib, an engineer trained at the University of California noted that the planning and construction of a university campus in Dhaka far exceeded the satisfaction of executing a 60-storey building project in California. As Professor Omar Rahman from the International University of Dhaka explained it:

The main reason behind my coming back was my belief that there are some opportunities in Bangladesh that are distinct and which could not be duplicated in the West. I suspect that the desire to have a greater impact on society is one significant reason, at least for some people, to return.

The participants also outlined reasons why people would not want to return. Absence of job opportunities and career advancement was identified as a major factor against return. A moderately successful migrant would not entertain the idea of returning if they had to start from the ground up in career terms. As Omar Rahman noted the establishment of private universities has created a window of opportunity for the return of academics. For those in the highly specialised professions, the absence of an environment that is

conducive to sharing and developing knowledge and information often acts as a hindrance to return. Furthermore, undesirable work practices and technological inefficiencies leave some professionals frustrated and disillusioned. The lack of educational and healthcare facilities also makes migrants think twice before returning. The proliferation of international standard private schools and hospitals is slowly addressing this problem. A greater concern is that of political stability and personal security. 'Hartals' and associated reports of violence dampen the desire to return. Corruption and bureaucratic practices are further obstacles that return migrants face.

Talking about his experiences in New York, Tareque Masud, filmmaker, commented that:

There, I think we build a kind of strength. What we can say about ourselves is that we do have problems here, but we can turn these problems into a challenge and inspiration

During the sessions the participants offered recommendations to facilitate the return of professionals and the skilled. These include:

- Establish a web-based network illustrating stories of successful returns
- Establish of a business network of returnees to offer new ideas
- Introduce incentive packages in recognition of the achievement of the diaspora community
- Promote linkages with Bangladeshi networks abroad
- Examine opportunities for co-production, creative workshops, academic courses, greater interaction of performers of same trade at home and abroad

In the concluding session, Anwar Choudhury, British High Commissioner, and chief guest, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. M. Morshed Khan, addressed the workshop participants and gave some insights from their own professional and personal experiences of return migration.

Anwar Choudhury, the British High Commissioner observed that:

Migrants are increasingly successful and they will often return or desire to return, not because they have failed, but because they are successful in the country of residence. They long to contribute to their country of origin.

Mr. M. Morshed Khan, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, then spoke about the policy implications of return migration for Bangladesh. The most striking fact before the international community, he told us, is that however autonomous the process of globalisation might be, justice to all stakeholders across boundaries could not be ensured without pragmatic policy formulation and an appropriate framework of policy implementation. The concept of pro-poor policy choice is, therefore, grounded on the notion of making globalisation just and fair to all segments of society. In Bangladesh, we have to develop institutions that would be capable of producing professionals of global standards and in the international context we need to successfully negotiate with other nations for entry into their service sector. The problems faced are multi-dimensional and could hardly be addressed with just domestic policy initiatives. What is urgently needed are joint initiatives by both host and sending countries for making migration effective, transparent and mutually beneficial for all countries and migrants. Proper implementation of mode IV of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) might go a long way towards developing this.

The Bangladesh Government has also undertaken a number of policy reforms to mitigate the problems faced by migrant workers. The establishment of the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment is an example of recent policy initiatives. The deliberations at this workshop have helped sharpen our understanding of this sensitive issue. He said that the conclusions and policy recommendations arrived at during this workshop would help us in updating our manpower exports policy. Here he stressed the need for a continuous process of policy formulation in response to changing circumstances and external environments.

Great progress was made towards fulfilling the two main objectives of the workshop, namely, the identification and comprehension of key policies that could influence all types of return and make it a positive force for development, and secondly, the identification of ways to influence governments in order to implement recommendations, through concrete actions. Other highlights at the workshop were the screening of *Another Horizon*, a RMMRU and Mediamix Enterprise documentary on female labour migration from Bangladesh and a musical performance by the well-known artist Habib, a young returnee, together with two second generation migrants.

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