



Senior Committee: Economic and Social Council

Issue: Mitigating the effects of brain drain on healthcare worker migration

Background information

Brain drain is a term used to describe the significant emigration of highly skilled and qualified individuals from one country to another, most commonly due to a desire for better living conditions, working conditions, professional opportunities, and other diverse motives. This term is applicable specifically to healthcare workers, a group encompassing not only doctors and nurses, but also midwives, lab technicians, hospital managers, and so on¹. Most health workers migrate from developing countries to places with the greatest working conditions, creating a scarcity of skilled individuals in developing nations, necessary for their economic growth. Because of its impact on both donor and destination countries, the brain drain phenomenon has become an ever-growing global concern, exacerbating the gap in health inequities.

The main motivations for healthcare worker migration can be attributed to “push” and “pull” factors. In relation to the brain drain phenomenon, “push” factors refer to reasons that encourage professionals to emigrate from their countries of origin; these include limited career opportunities (or limited occupational advancement), poor working conditions, insufficiency of resources to carry out research, financial matters, political instability, and often times, war. Professionals who end up being influenced by these “push” factors are not to be penalised in any way, as Article 13 of the UDHR explicitly states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state” and “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.”²

¹ “The “Brain Drain”: Migration of Healthcare Workers out of sub-Saharan Africa” 10 December 2023 <https://med.stanford.edu/content/dam/sm/schoolhealtheval/documents/KissickBrainDrainFactSheetFinal.pdf>

² “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” 10 December 2023 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universaldeclaration-of-human-rights#:~:text=Article%2013,to%20return%20to%20his%20country.>

Differently, “pull” factors are the reasons that attract professionals to a specific foreign country. These range from financial reasons, better quality of life for one’s family, safer atmospheres, potential career opportunities, and recruitment by other nations. Young and educated individuals are most likely to seek these pull factors from nations abroad, looking for higher education and the economic improvements abroad. The nations which receive these people benefit from “brain gain” as they welcome new professionals, although it is commonly acknowledged that developed countries do not need a rise of skilled labour to the extent that developing nations do. Subsequently, due to the brain gain of the countries of destination, the “donor” nations lose their talents, and progress is hindered.

Concerning the perspectives on the brain drain, debate arises regarding whether a member state is to be for the migration of healthcare workers or against the migration of skilled professionals abroad. On one side of the argument, the positive impacts of brain drain include an increase in income equality in the country of origin, as well as an adherence to human rights of migration— allowing a country to maintain the loyalty of its citizens. Not only that, but the movement of healthcare workers and the opportunity to emigrate increases incentives for higher education³ . However, it is questioned whether the migration of healthcare workers should be prevented due to the negative effects of these individuals’ decisions; for donor nations, brain drain causes a loss skilled labour and reduces the chances of development in poorer countries. The home country, which loses its health workers, also lose their return on the investment in their education, and public service quality suffers the impact of the increasing percentage of migrating healthcare providers. Thus, many hold the opinion that brain drain is unethical and further exacerbates the decline in the efficiency of healthcare systems that populations in LEDCs face.

International action to date

World Health Organization Global Code of Practice

Policies and international agreements have already been put into place to regulate health care worker migration. The WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel, a voluntary protocol initiated in 2010, set out a series of key principles and recommendations to

³ “The “Brain Drain”: Migration of Healthcare Workers out of sub-Saharan Africa” 25 December 2023
<https://med.stanford.edu/content/dam/sm/schoolhealtheval/documents/KissickBrainDrainFactSheetFinal.pdf>

approach the challenges of health personnel migration.⁴ It was adopted by 193 countries and is recognised as a landmark in improving the health system through a framework involving international cooperation. The main objectives of the code are as follows:

- To establish and promote voluntary principles and practices for the ethical international recruitment of health personnel, taking into account the rights, obligations and expectations of source countries, destination countries and migrant health personnel;
- To serve as a reference for Member States in establishing or improving the legal and institutional framework required for the international recruitment of health personnel;
- To provide guidance that may be used where appropriate in the formulation and implementation of bilateral agreements and other international legal instruments;
- To facilitate and promote international discussion and advance cooperation on matters related to the ethical international recruitment of health personnel as part of strengthening health systems, with a particular focus on the situation of developing countries.

EU Brain Drain to Brain Gain

In support of the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel—and with the objective of improving its implementation in several nations—the Global Health Workforce Alliance and the Health

Workforce Department of the WHO launched the “Brain Drain to Brain Gain” project, supported by the European Commission and co-funded by Norad. The project’s main objective is to improve the management of migration flow from Sub-Saharan Africa and Asian countries towards Europe⁵, with a specific focus on the labour migration of health personnel.

⁴ “WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel” 26 December 2023

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/wha68.32>

⁵ “Brain Drain to Brain Gain” 2 January 2024

https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/201611/ev_20160225_co03_en_0.pdf

The International Convention on Migrant Workers

Signed in 1990, The International Convention on Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families is a UN multilateral treaty aimed at protecting the rights of migrant workers (along with their relatives) from potential violations. However, the convention has not been widely ratified, and not all UN member states are parties to it.

Current situation & Focus for Debate

According to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) "Health Workforce Support and Safeguards List 2023", 55 countries have significant health staff shortages, 40 of which are in Africa.⁶ This indicates that around 80% of Africa is experiencing medical staff shortages, with a greater deficit in its Sub-Saharan region— 36 out of 57 nations recognised by WHO to have critical shortages are in Sub-Saharan Africa⁷. Over 50% of healthcare workers in African nations have reported their intentions to migrate from their home country once trained.

However, the pre-existing issues in the healthcare system, which continuously encourage professionals to migrate, have only been exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019; healthcare services suffered a dramatic decline due to the reduction in patient flow, nearly up to 70%⁸, making migration to high-income countries all the more attractive to health workers. Additionally, many Western nations further targeted health professionals from low-income countries for recruitment during the epidemic, causing the emigration of highly skilled workers to significantly exceed those of lower skilled workers, which is especially observed in smaller, poorer countries with fewer than a million health workers— WHO had warned that this accelerated recruitment would significantly harm health systems in their home countries. A representative case of this would be the mass emigration of healthcare workers to developed countries from Nigeria. As a nation in Sub-Saharan Africa, the challenges in Nigeria's healthcare system, such as poor funding and poor working

⁶ 'Africa's health worker brain drain' 8 August 2023 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/africashealthworker-brain-drain>

⁷ "The "Brain Drain": Migration of Healthcare Workers out of Sub-Saharan Africa" 26 December 2023 <https://med.stanford.edu/content/dam/sm/schoolhealtheval/documents/KissickBrainDrainFactSheetFinal.pdf>

⁸ "Covid-19 impacts on healthcare access in sub-Saharan Africa: an overview" 27 December 2023 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10317188/>

conditions⁹, were only worsened by the pandemic. According to a UK government report, 13,000 Nigerian healthcare workers migrated to the UK between 2021 and 2022.¹⁰

COVID-19 disruptions did not merely affect Nigeria; the entire African continent suffered from brain drain. Any healthcare worker with a professional license in Africa can easily migrate and seek work anywhere, according to the WHO healthcare director, Jim Campbell. Since medical professionals can earn 25 times more in North America than in African countries¹¹, this option becomes extremely appealing for many healthcare workers. They seek opportunities to develop their skills and to receive international recognition.

Dr. Theophilus Wangata has said that possible solutions to brain drain in Africa include more educational opportunities, higher university capacity, higher capacity in the training of doctors, and increasing the local capacity in hospitals.¹² Another strategy that many African nations have considered is Diaspora, an option which encourages skilled professionals to contribute to their home country and its development without having to live in it.¹³

Nations suffering from brain drain will experience a reduction in their GDP, losses of income tax revenues, reduction in the quantity of skilled manpower, and a greater economic disparity in comparison to developed countries. If brain drain is not resolved, several nations' economies may be severely impacted and, consequently, may end up not having enough resources to invest in the creation of jobs and in their healthcare system as a whole.

⁹ 'The COVID-19 pandemic and health workforce brain drain in Nigeria' 4 August 2023 <https://equityhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12939-022-01789-z>

¹⁰ 'Why do people come to the UK?' 4 August 2023 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigrationstatistics-year-ending-march-2021/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-for-family-reasons>

¹¹ 'Brain drain in African countries' 8 August 2023 <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/medical-professionals-areemigrating-africa-because-catastrophic-conditions-health-care>

¹² 'African Medical Professionals Experiencing 'Brain Drain'' 5 August 2023 <https://www.voafrica.com/a/african-medical-professionals-experiencing-brain-drain-/7207359.html>

¹³ 'Brain drain in less developed countries: Africa in focus' 7 August 2023 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303984720_Brain_drain_in_less_developed_countries_Africa_in_focus

It is of utmost importance that measures are taken to deal with the severe challenges of the worldwide medical brain drain, and that long-term solutions are established in order to ensure the stability of all nations' political and economic states.

Thus, during debate, delegates are expected to gravitate towards discussion regarding how best to ease the consequences of brain drain, without intruding on the rights of individuals. Although member states might want to devise methods to keep their healthcare workers in their home countries, the reduction of the migration of professionals in developing countries should be prioritised. Notably, countries on different sides of migration patterns are bound to hold different views and perspectives, which delegates must take into account when contributing towards a resolution.

Delegates must identify the key areas in which brain drain should be tackled— including education, employment, social policies, and research— in order to devise the best possible interventions. Member states are to consider all possible solutions that delegates propose, which might include, but are not limited to:

- Implementation of legal restrictions; member states may decide to use restrictive policies to slow down brain drain (such as Thailand, in which skilled people trained by public institutions are obliged to repay the state if they go abroad ¹⁴ .) However, delegates should keep in mind that compensatory agreements between sending and receiving nations have been difficult to negotiate in the past, and, therefore, legal restrictions might not be the most optimal solution.
- Encourage the return of diaspora; involving means such as greater career prospects and working conditions, stability in their homeland, and find out the needs and aspirations of diaspora, amongst other incentives.
- Mobilisation of diaspora for local investment; nations may adopt strategies to create links between diaspora and their home country to receive compensation for their investment in education.

¹⁴ "Brain Drain is Not Irreversible" 1 January 2024 <https://www.undp.org/publications/brain-drain-notirreversible-human-development-viewpoint>

- International cooperation; foster a globally connected environment in which communication between the countries of origin and the countries of destination of diaspora reduce the amount of damage in the country of origin.
- Consistent monitoring of international migration; encourage member states to work closely with organisations such as the IOM (The International Organization for Migration) and the ILO (International Labour Organization) which aim to address the the challenges associated with migration.
 - Prompt greater availability of expertise to developing countries; originate projects such as the UNDP’s TOKTEN (Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals Programme) in which expertise is made available to developing countries in order to provide qualified specialists to contribute to the development of their home countries.
 - Investment in infrastructure; the improvement of infrastructure may effectively slow down brain drain by providing a habitable environment and enhancing the living conditions of skilled professionals.

Bloc positions

USA

Undoubtedly, the USA is one of the nations who has benefited the most from brain gain in recent years— it has been the dream destination of millions of professionals from developing countries. US healthcare relies heavily on immigrants, with approximately 1.6 million working as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, or dental hygienists.¹⁵ It is expected that immigrants’ presence in the United States’ health-care sector will only continue to increase in the future.

Nigeria

Nigeria’s medical brain drain issue has worsened in recent years, seen from its change in physician-patient ratio; while WHO recommends the ratio to be 1:600, Nigeria’s ratio in 2022 was 1:9083, with 218 million people needing medical attention. Maternal and infant mortality rates have drastically

¹⁵ “Immigrant Health-Care Workers in the United States” 9 January 2024
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrant-health-care-workers-united-states>

increased as more and more health workers have migrated from Nigeria. To encourage Nigerian medical professionals to stay in their home country, the government will have to take a series of measures, including the fixing of infrastructure and tackling insecurity. Reversing Nigeria's brain drain will not only be beneficial to Nigeria itself, but Africa as a whole.

Haiti

Foreign policies that have endangered the lives of citizens are the main reason for the increasing brain drain in Haiti. Seeking better and safer life conditions, many professionals in Haiti continue to migrate to developing countries. Other than professionals, a large amount of Haiti's educated youth has also been migrating to other countries. Between 2015 and 2022, 80% of those migrating from Haiti between the ages 18 and 29 have a high school level education, and 20% have a higher level education.¹⁶

Jamaica

In the past few decades, nearly a million Jamaicans have migrated to the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Of those with tertiary level education, 80% of Jamaicans living abroad had received their training in Jamaica.¹⁷ In 2022, The Global Economy indicated that Jamaica had the second highest brain drain in the world, with a brain drain index of 9.1.¹⁸

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is experiencing one of the worst brain drains despite the large number of professionals it produces, especially in medicine. This becomes extremely concerning seeing as 75% of Ethiopians suffer from communicable diseases, such as malaria and tuberculosis, which have greatly

¹⁶ 'Haiti's brain drain: educated youth are leaving the country as fast as they can' 9 August 2023 <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/haitis-brain-drain-educated-youth-are-leaving-country-fast-they-can>

¹⁷ 'Jamaica' 7 August 2023 [https://www.iom.int/countries/jamaica#:~:text=%22Brain%20Drain%22.&text=Over%20the%20past%20several%20decades,trained%20in%20Jamaica%20\(Source\).](https://www.iom.int/countries/jamaica#:~:text=%22Brain%20Drain%22.&text=Over%20the%20past%20several%20decades,trained%20in%20Jamaica%20(Source).)

¹⁸ 'Jamaica reeling from the second highest brain drain in the world' 7 August 2023 <https://our.today/jamaicareeling-from-second-highest-brain-drain-in-the-world/>

exacerbated mortality rates.¹⁹ Ethiopia's main push factors appear to be its inadequate salary, poor healthcare system, risky work environments, its lack of educational opportunities, poor economic development²⁰, and others. In an attempt to reverse the medical brain drain, Ethiopia adopted a nationalist approach which would restrict emigration.

Not only were these restrictive measures ineffective, they clearly suppressed civil and political rights.

Key terms

Brain drain

Brain drain is the migration of educated, trained, or qualified people from one country to another as a result of push and/or pull factors.

Brain gain

Defined as the increase in the number of professional and qualified individuals entering a country and benefiting its economy as a result.

LEDCs

Abbreviation for Less Economically Developed Countries, representative of nations which the United Nations has indicated to have the lowest levels of socioeconomic development.

MEDCs

Abbreviation for More Economically Developed Countries, indicative of countries with advanced economies and industries.

¹⁹ 'Reversing medical brain drain in Ethiopia: thinking beyond restrictive measures' 6 August 2023

<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/mjas/article/download/208460/196506>

²⁰ 'Reversing medical brain drain in Ethiopia: thinking beyond restrictive measures' 6 August 2023

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Diaspora

Large groups of people who spread from their original homeland to other countries. Diaspora strategies attempt to manage relationships with these individuals, encouraging highly skilled expatriates to contribute to the development of their country without having to physically be in it.

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