

Editorial

**Temporary Labour Migration:
An Illusory Promise?**

Temporary labour migration is back in the headlines again. It had fallen into discredit after the experience of the “guest-worker” era, when many of the guest workers who were present at the time of the first oil price shock remained in the host countries where they had found work. Recently, much of the debate on temporary labour migration has focused on so-called “circular migration”, which also incorporates the notion of repeated movements.

Why temporary migration is back in the limelight

There are essentially three reasons for the resurgent interest in temporary migration. The first relates to the fact that returns of highly qualified migrants are seen as a possible response to concerns about brain drain. For example, in India and Chinese Taipei, the return of highly skilled migrants has had beneficial effects on the development of the native software and high-technology sectors. As a result, some have argued that this model of return migration could be applied more broadly, enabling origin countries to reap some benefits from the temporary loss of talented expatriates.

The second reason is related to the discovery of the large remittances transferred by immigrants, both high- and lesser-skilled, back to their origin countries. These remittances greatly improve the welfare of persons left behind and tend to be more common for recent or short-term immigrants than for those long-established in host countries. Temporary migration tends to spread the benefits of remittances and of skill transfers among more persons.

The third concerns the fact that lesser skilled migration continues to suffer from a bad image in many host countries, with less favourable labour market outcomes for immigrants with low education and, often, for their children as well. As a consequence, there is a general reluctance to acknowledge that there are labour market needs for low-skilled migrants and a belief that any needs which do exist should be dealt with by means of temporary flows.

But how often do immigrants return to their countries of origin after a stay in a host country? Can migration policy encourage returns to host countries? Is temporary/circular labour migration a workable solution? This publication provides some answers to these questions.

Returns are non-negligible but they are not driven by policy

Depending on the country of destination and the time period considered, 20% to 50% of long-term immigrants leave the host country within five years after their arrival, either to return home or to move on to a third country (secondary emigration). There are also noticeable return flows around the age of retirement. Returns are generally spontaneous, taken at the initiative of the immigrant. They suggest that even longer term migration is more dynamic than is generally believed. The above rates of return apply even to countries such as Canada, the United States and New Zealand, which grant the right of permanent residence upon entry to long-term immigrants and where access to citizenship is relatively

easy. The more stable status granted to immigrants in these countries does not seem to result in more back-and-forth movements, except in some special cases.

Most returns are driven by individual determinants. Explicit policies by both host and home countries to encourage or attract returns have achieved little to date. Programmes for assisting voluntary return by host countries have had only a limited impact on returns. If the political, economic and social situation in the home country is stable and attractive, a certain number of returns occur spontaneously; otherwise, assistance and financial aid by the host country are rarely sufficient to convince many migrants to return. In any event, there is little incentive for long-stay immigrants to depart, especially if they have brought in their families and their children have been born and educated in the host country.

Similarly, efforts made by some origin countries to attract back their nationals residing abroad have had a limited impact. The empirical evidence suggests that returns tend to occur to origin countries when economic conditions are attractive and new opportunities exist. The returning emigrants to Ireland during the Celtic tiger era are a good illustration of this. When the returns do occur, the human and financial resources contributed by migrants can give a dynamic boost to growth already underway, especially if governments allow these resources to be put to effective use. But the basic growth fundamentals have to be already in place.

Can temporary labour migration play an important role in the future?

In 2006, there were about 2.5 million entries of temporary labour migrants in OECD countries, about three times the number of entries of permanent labour migrants. These are migrants whose return is part of the conditions of entry into the host country. But many consist of intra-corporate transferees, working-holiday makers and free-circulation migrants, whose return (or not) poses little problem.

But some temporary labour migration programmes also exist for low-skilled persons from non-OECD countries. These are managed in the context of bilateral labour agreements. They offer examples of successful planned returns and are generally characterised by the involvement of all of the various stakeholders, including employers, employment agency staff and migration officials. They also concern jobs which are by their very nature temporary and have a finite duration, such as seasonal jobs.

What about permanent labour needs? Therein lies the crux of the problem. At least some of the current and future labour needs in OECD countries concern low-skilled jobs and many of the needs are likely to be long-term in nature. In many OECD countries currently, the same occupations are listed as shortage ones, for example, construction trades, hospitality, household work, cleaning work and personal care. The need for workers in these occupations is on-going. Indeed, the fact that there are few possibilities for legal entry for persons in these occupations may be one reason why many of the jobs are held by irregular immigrants in many countries.

Could temporary migration programmes satisfy labour needs in the occupations cited above? For this to work, one would need to cycle in and out repeated cohorts of temporary migrants to occupy the same jobs. From the employer perspective, this could be very costly, since it means an inability to retain experienced workers and the need to invest in repeated training of new arrivals. Governments could attempt to impose a temporary labour regime on employers, with strong enforcement mechanisms, but only at considerable economic

and political cost. Historically, economic rationality has generally won out over artificial or badly-designed regulations.

Temporary labour migration is at best a partial solution

The expectation of temporary stay by labour immigrants does not appear to be a foundation on which one can construct a solid migration policy. Some labour needs, both high and lesser skilled, are of a permanent nature and need to be addressed by long-term migration. The contribution of immigrants to satisfying these needs has been critical in the past and may well become so again. Better to put in place the policies that can help avoid the integration problems of the past than to pretend that temporary migration can be made to work in all cases.

Likewise, some returns of high-skilled migrants to their countries of origin do occur and will undoubtedly continue to do so. But it is illusory to expect that migrants will return just because they are able to do so without jeopardising their status in the host country. Little from recent migration experience suggests that this is a major phenomenon, especially when the entire family is involved and when economic conditions in the origin country remain difficult. The presence of a favourable economic and institutional climate in the country of origin remains a necessary requirement.

In sum, temporary labour migration may have a limited role to play in certain sectors and occupations to complement existing “spontaneous” returns and it is doing so already. But it is unrealistic to expect this to become the cornerstone of any future labour migration policy.

John P. Martin



Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs

Introduction

*2008 Edition of International Migration Outlook
shows an increase in migration flows to the OECD...*

Permanent-type legal immigration of foreign nationals (about four million) continued to increase in 2006, an increase of about 5% relative to 2005, but a slowdown compared to recent years. There were large increases in inflows in the United States, Korea and Spain. The largest proportional increases occurred in Portugal, Sweden, Ireland and Denmark, while declines were evident especially in Austria and Germany. Over 2.5 million temporary labour migrants arrived in OECD countries, but temporary migration is increasing more slowly than permanent-type migration.

*... notably in family migration and migration
for employment...*

Family migration continues to dominate among the inflows of permanent-type immigrants, except in Japan. Family migration remains the leading category in the United States (70%) whose migration regime is heavily family-based, and in France (60%), and has become important in Portugal, with the arrival of family members of recent labour migrants, many from Ukraine. Many European countries, among them Italy, Ireland, Spain and the United Kingdom appear as important labour migration countries, with some 30 to 40% of permanent-type immigrants arriving for work-related reasons. Free-movement migration is proportionally important in Europe. In Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Germany, such movements account for almost half of permanent-type migration and in Switzerland close to 70%, while in France, Italy and Portugal they are much more limited in scope (less than 20%). The United Kingdom, for example, currently satisfies all of its lesser skilled labour needs through free-movement migration

*... while, the number of asylum seekers continues
to decline*

Asylum seeking in OECD countries declined for the fourth consecutive year in 2006. The United States was the largest receiving country at 41 000, with Canada, France and Germany and the United Kingdom all falling in the 20 000 to 30 000 range. Sweden, Austria and Switzerland, are the main receiving countries, in per capita terms. Irak, followed by Serbia and Montenegro are the most important countries of origin.

*There are increasing inflows of international
students*

Overall, the number of international students increased by about 50% from 2000 to 2005, with the United States and the United Kingdom each showing an increase of 120 000 students,

France of about 100 000 and Australia of close to 85 000 students. Strong percentage increases have occurred in New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Japan, Korea and the Netherlands. Although international students are a potential source of highly skilled labour migrants for OECD countries, there is no systematic data as yet on stay rates after completion of study.

*European migrants are far more common in Europe,
but Asian migrants outside of Europe*

In 2006, 60% of immigrant inflows in Europe were of European origin whereas movements from Asia to OECD countries outside of Europe accounted for almost 50% of total flows to that area. Latin American inflows into non-European OECD countries reflect largely the high inflows of Mexican nationals to the United States. The growing importance of Latin American migration to Portugal and Spain is evident. Although Europe is the destination for about 85% of movements from North Africa, about 60% of those from sub-Saharan Africa are to OECD countries outside Europe. Likewise, South Asia sent four times more, and East and Southeast Asia six to seven times more immigrants to OECD non-European countries than to European ones.

*China accounts for almost 11% of the flows,
Poland and Romania less than half this*

The top twenty countries of origin in terms of inflows accounted for fully 60% of all inflows in 2006, with China, Poland, and Romania at the top of the list. Bolivia, Romania and Poland have seen the largest increase over the six years ending in 2006. Turkey, the Russian Federation and the Philippines, on the other hand, have seen moderate declines in inflows since the year 2000. Compared to movements over the past ten years, large increases in German and Polish migration flows to other OECD countries were registered in 2006. The increase in emigration from Germany is essentially to neighbouring countries, in particular Poland, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Denmark. Immigration from Poland increased in Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark and Germany.

*Migration flows from potential new OECD
members and from enhanced engagement
countries account for a sixth of all immigration
flows to the OECD*

In May 2007, OECD countries agreed to invite Chile, Estonia, Israel, Russia and Slovenia to open discussions for membership in the OECD and offered enhanced engagement, with a view to possible membership to Brazil, China, India, Indonesia and South Africa. The flows from these countries to the OECD currently account for a sixth of all immigration flows to the OECD, but only some 10% of all immigrants, with China and India each having about 2 million former residents in OECD countries.

The foreign-born population has increased by about 18% since the year 2000

The foreign-born population in 2006 accounted for about 12% of the total population in OECD countries for which data are available, an increase of 18% to 2000. Certain countries have seen very high rates of increase in the immigrant share of the population since the year 2000, in particular Ireland, Finland, Austria and Spain.

The report focuses on the contribution of immigrants to the labour market in OECD countries

In 2006, persons born abroad represented a significant portion of the workforce and the employed population in OECD countries, although important variations exist among host countries. In Finland, immigrants account for less than 3% of total employment, in contrast this figure is as high as 25% or more in Australia, Switzerland and New Zealand. The increase of immigrants share in total employment was particularly notable in Spain, Ireland and Italy.

In most OECD countries, immigrants, both men and women, earn significantly less than their native born counterparts...

Immigrants earn less than the native-born, with the exception of Australia. Wages of immigrants are low compared to the native-born in the United States – median immigrant earnings are about 20% less than for the native-born and 15% less in the Netherlands. The immigrant/native wage gap tends to be smaller than the gender wage gap.

... and immigrants from non-OECD countries are at a particular disadvantage

There are several indications that the labour market seems to strongly value host country qualifications and experience, measured by years of residence. In addition, immigrants from non-OECD countries have significantly lower earnings. By contrast, immigrants who have naturalised earn more – even after controlling for duration of residence.

This year's report provides a review of structural and institutional developments in migration policies

Without major new perturbations in flows in 2006-07, many OECD member countries, such as France, Hungary, Romania and the United Kingdom, decided to introduce substantial changes in their migration policies. Some of the legislative or operational changes represent the continuation or completion of unfinished business, others are new initiatives (Canada, Finland, Japan, Norway, Poland and Portugal).

Two special chapters deal with topical issues...

Among OECD countries, competition is high to attract and retain the highly-skilled. But labour market shortages are also appearing in many lesser skilled jobs. The demand for workers for low-skilled jobs has been met partly through migration. The management of low skilled labour migration is a challenging issue in OECD countries. The primary concern regards the long-term employability of lesser skilled migrants and their integration in host countries. Temporary work programmes for immigrants are currently implemented in many OECD countries. The growing importance of temporary migration has created growing and renewed interest in return migration and its impact on the development of sending countries.

... the first chapter addresses the issue of the management of labour migration of the low-skilled...

Migration of the lesser skilled is taking place, both through managed migration schemes and through unmanaged (i.e. irregular) migration. This chapter analyses the presence and the role of low-skilled workers in the labour forces of OECD countries, as well as recruitment strategies for such workers. There is considerable experience in many countries with the management of low-skilled labour migration, and a number of temporary migration schemes appear to be working well. However, the persistence of unauthorised movements and of illegal employment of immigrants, suggests that existing policies are not entirely adequate. A careful assessment of labour market demand at regular intervals would appear to be the first essential element of a labour migration programme, in order to ensure that there is an adequate provision of work permits and of entry possibilities to satisfy the labour market needs of the host countries. Due to the employment-driven nature of low skilled migration programmes and the fact that permits are often tied to specific jobs, the possibility of abuse exists, highlighting the need for careful monitoring and inspection regimes to guarantee respect for workers' rights, but also to provide employers with incentives to respect legality. Finally, temporary migration programmes for permanent or ongoing needs may be problematic, since all parties can have an interest in preserving the employment relationship.

... and the second chapter presents a new perspective on return migration

What is the scope and nature of return migration? Which immigrants are more likely to return home? Why do some migrants settle permanently in the host country, while others choose to stay only a short time? What role should immigration policies play in this respect? Can return migration be well managed? Finally, what is its impact on the economic development of the home country? This chapter is an attempt to provide some answers to these questions. An initial finding is that return migration is a major component of migration flows. Return migration is concentrated at the extremities of the lifecycle. The characteristics of integration in the host country have an ambiguous impact on the propensity to return. Migrants plan their migration pathway, and their return, in light of their individual and family objectives, but they also take account of opportunities

in their home countries. In this context, it is important to take advantage of all the ways in which migrants can contribute to the development of their home country, without necessarily making return a precondition. Engaging the diasporas, through virtual or temporary returns, can also promote the transfer of skills and technologies. This will serve to reinforce ties with the home country, which for some will facilitate their reintegration if they return. Return migration can in this way support, if not actually initiate, the development process.

LIST OF SOPEMI CORRESPONDENTS

AUSTRALIA	Ms. M-J. JONES Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Canberra
AUSTRIA	Ms. G. BIFFL Austrian Economic Institute, Vienna
BELGIUM	Ms. A. GEYSELS Service public fédéral Emploi, Travail et Concertation sociale, Brussels
BULGARIA	Ms. D. BOBEVA Bulgarian National Bank, Sofia
CANADA	Ms. M. JUSTUS Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa
CZECH REPUBLIC	Ms. J. MARESOVA Czech Statistical Office, Prague
DENMARK	Ms. M. WICHMANN BERKOWITZ Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs, Copenhagen
FINLAND	Ms. A. SAARTO Ministry of Labour, Helsinki
FRANCE	Ms. C. REGNARD Ministère de l'Immigration, de l'Intégration, de l'Identité nationale et du Développement solidaire, Paris
GERMANY	Ms. B. FRÖHLICH Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Berlin
GREECE	Mr. S. ROBOLIS University of Athens
HUNGARY	Ms. V. ÁCS Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Budapest
IRELAND	Mr. P. O'CONNELL The Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin
ITALY	Ms. C. COLLICELLI CENSIS, Rome
JAPAN	Mr. J. HIROISHI Ministry of Justice, Tokyo Mr. T. OGATA Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Tokyo
KOREA	Mr. Young-bum PARK Hansung University, Seoul
LITHUANIA	Ms. A. SIPAVIČIENE Vilnius

LUXEMBOURG	Ms. C. MARTIN Commissaire du Gouvernement aux Étrangers
MEXICO	Mr. G. MOHAR Ministry of the Interior, Mexico
NETHERLANDS	Mr. G. ENGENSEN and Mr. E. SNEL Erasmus University, Rotterdam
NEW ZEALAND	Ms. M. ADAMS Department of Labour, Wellington
NORWAY	Mr. E. THORUD Royal Ministry of Local Government and Labour, Oslo
POLAND	Ms E. KEPINSKA University of Warsaw, Institute for Social Studies
PORTUGAL	Mr. J. MALHEIROS University of Lisbon
ROMANIA	Mr. D. GHEORGHIU National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies, Bucarest
SLOVAK REPUBLIC	Ms. M. LUBYOVA Bratislava
SPAIN	Mr. A. IZQUIERDO ESCRIBANO Faculté des Sciences politiques et de sociologie, La Coruna
SWEDEN	Mr. M. HAGOS Ministry of Justice, Stockholm
SWITZERLAND	Ms. C. de COULON Federal Office of Migration, Berne
TURKEY	Mr. A. ICDUYGU Koç University, Istanbul
UNITED KINGDOM	Mr. J. SALT University College London, Department of Geography, London
UNITED STATES	MS. S. SMITH Washington

LIST OF OECD SECRETARIAT MEMBERS INVOLVED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS REPORT

Division of Non-member Economies and International Migration Division

Jean-Pierre Garson, Head of Division

Georges Lemaître, Principal Administrator

Jean-Christophe Dumont, Principal Administrator

Thomas Liebig, Administrator

Jonathan Chaloff, Administrator

Gilles Spielvogel, Administrator

Pauline Fron, Statistical Assistant

Olivier Chatal, Statistical Assistant

Sylviane Yvron, Assistant

Anne-Marie Gray, Assistant

Amanda Sudic, Assistant

Claire André, Trainee

Ekrame Boubtane, Trainee

Iris Kesternich, Trainee

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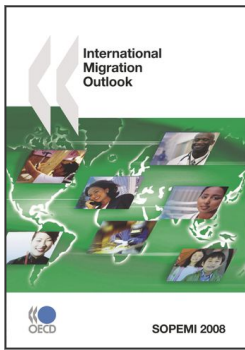
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