CIRCULAR MIGRATION: THE WAY FORWARD IN GLOBAL POLICY?*

ABSTRACT

This article reviews research findings and policy documents on circular migration. The author argues that the phenomenon of circular migration is not new, but policy interest is somewhat recent. While he suggests that circular migration policies may make some positive contributions to economic development, labour shortages, public opinion and illegal migration, he notes that such policies are not a "magic bullet."

STEVEN VERTOVEC
Steven Vertovec is the Director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Circular migration appears to be the rage in international policy circles. A variety of policy-makers within national and international institutions are advocating measures to facilitate the movement of migrants to-and-fro between their homelands and foreign places of work. Their main idea is that circular migration systems could be managed in ways that bring proverbial "win-win-win" results (i.e., benefits for receiving countries through meeting labour-market shortages, for sending countries through guaranteeing remittances for development, and for migrants themselves through offering employment and control over the use of their wages). Circular migration is also being advocated as a potential solution (at least in part) to a number of challenges surrounding contemporary migration. What are policy-makers suggesting, why now, and what should we bear in mind if circular migration is indeed to be the way forward in global policy?

Much of the interest in circular migration stems from the way migration itself is now widely understood. These days, many academics and policy-makers alike comprehend migration largely through a paradigm that emphasizes the importance of border-crossing social networks. Through the course of their movement, migrants utilize, extend and establish social connections spanning places of origin and places abroad. By means of such connections or networks, migrants learn and inform each other about where to go, how to get jobs, places to live, and so on; they also maintain families, economic activities, political interests and cultural practices through these transnational ties. While such networks have practically always functioned among migrants, modern technological advances and reduced costs surrounding transportation and communication have allowed for the intensification of transnational connections, practices and mobility.

While migration scholars have increasingly studied migrant transnationalism over the past 15 years or more (e.g., Glick-Schiller et al. 1992, Portes et al. 1999, Vertovec 2004), policy-makers have also recently come to recognize the ways in which transnational ties condition migration processes. This shift largely came through a rather sudden realization that remittances, the transnational flows of money earned by migrants abroad, have become a major global economic resource. The value of worldwide remittances doubled during the 1990s to well over $105 billion annually – more than twice the level of international aid. The scale of remittances has continued to soar. The United Nations (2006) puts the annual figure of official global remittances at some $232 billion; the amount of unofficial flows is estimated to be much higher still. These staggering figures have prompted policy-makers to delve into migration matters as never before.

Subsequently, there has been widespread interest in the role national, binational or multinational and international policies can play in fostering and managing various dimensions of migrant transnationalism. For instance, several international agencies, intergovernmental forums and government departments are now drafting policies with regard to the relationship between migration and development (especially concerning the transfer and use of remittances), the activities of migrant hometown associations (mostly regarding support for specific development projects), and ways to "tap" diasporas for various purposes (mainly through philanthropy, entrepreneurship or political lobbying). Similarly, policy-makers have acknowledged transnational connections in their efforts to create policies to reverse the impact of brain drain by facilitating "brain circulation" of professionals through temporary return visits or through "virtual return" over telecommunication systems.

Circular migration patterns themselves are based on, and create further, transnational networks. The current policy turn – or better, re-turn (see below) – to temporary and circular migration policies

stems in large part from the relatively recent recognition of the significance of migrant transnational practices. Indeed, most of the policy documents cited below preface their remarks on circular migration with statements acknowledging the prevalence, ubiquity and significance of transnational practices among migrants today.

A look at several recent documents produced by international and national agencies shows not only the prominence of circular migration as a preferred, forward-looking mode of migration management, but also the diversity of issues which circular migration policies might also address.

The Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), established by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, published its report after two years of extensive consultations (GCIM 2005). As part of its comprehensive overview, the GCIM noted how "the old paradigm of permanent migrant settlement is progressively giving way to temporary and circular migration…The Commission underlined the need to grasp the developmental opportunities that this important shift in migration patterns provides for countries of origin" (p. 31). In order to make the most of this shift, the GCIM recommends that "countries of destination…promote circular migration by providing mechanisms and channels that enable migrants to move relatively easily between their country of origin and destination" (p. 31). In keeping with its terms of reference, the GCIM did not offer much more on this topic by way of suggesting specific measures or potential impacts.

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In *World Migration 2005*, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) also proposes that more circular migration could bring benefits, especially to developing countries (IOM 2005). The IOM advocates that migrant-receiving countries should open up more avenues for regular, repeat temporary labour migration and give incentives to migrants by offering future return to the same job. It also suggests that making residence or dual citizenship available to certain migrants and establishing more flexible visa regimes will act as encouragements to productive, free exchange between countries.

The World Bank's Europe and Central Asia Region section has produced a major study on international labour migration in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (World Bank 2006). Here, interest in circular migration goes beyond economic development of migrant-sending contexts. The report suggests that managed circular migration might increase broad opportunities for trade and investment linkages, reduce brain drain by facilitating the international transfer of skills, and reduce negative social and familial consequences associated with illegal migration. It is also noteworthy that, in advocating circular migration, the World Bank is not suggesting that such systems will necessarily provide superior economic benefits; rather, it pragmatically suggests that circular migration might be a more palatable idea in places where public opinion is strongly resistant to proposals surrounding permanent migration of the unskilled.

In 2005, the European Commission addressed circular migration in two documents. The first, *Communication on Migration and Development* (2005a), proposes that circular migration policies could play a key role in fostering the transfer of skills to the developing world (p. 25). It also advocates that:

> Policies to maximize the developmental impact of temporary migration…should focus on encouraging circular migration, by giving a priority for further temporary employment to workers who have already worked under such schemes and have returned at the end of their contract, and also by offering appropriate rewards to participating migrants. (p. 7)

This document reiterates general calls elsewhere, but adds a degree of specificity by suggesting such employment priority measures could become European Union policy.

The second document, the Commission's *Policy Plan on Legal Migration* (2005b), outlines at least three possible measures that could enable viable, managed circular migration systems: the provision of long-term multi-entry visas for returning migrants; an understanding that former migrants be given priority for obtaining new residence permits for further temporary employment under a simplified procedure; and the creation of a European Union database of third-country nationals who left the European Union at the expiration of their temporary residence or work permit. Again, a broad interest in circular migration and its benefits is taken a step further by way of proposing specific policy instruments.

A final policy document to consider comes from the United Kingdom. Following a lengthy review process, the House of Commons International Development Committee published its report titled *Migration and Development: How to make migration work for poverty reduction* (House of Commons 2004). "The UK Government," it says, "should explore the potential development benefits which might be gained from more circular migration, and – alongside its developing-country partners – should examine the different ways in which such circular migration might be encouraged" (p. 48). The Committee interestingly approaches circular migration from a rather different vantage point, as it were, when it recommends that in sectors such as health, policies

could be created so as "to help migrants to return home temporarily by offering leave of absence from employment and other forms of assistance" (p. 88). Here circular migration is envisioned as taking place from the receiving country to the sending country and back. The committee's advice also goes beyond that of other agencies by suggesting that circular migration schemes could act as incentives for sending countries to assume more responsibility for countering illegal migration (p. 41).

To recap, many policy-focused agencies are promoting the creation of managed circular migration systems. Perceived potential benefits include: a) (with reference to the interests of migrant-sending states) encouraging circulation of human capital and ensuring flow of remittances for development; b) (with reference to the interests of migrant-receiving states) plugging sectoral labour shortages, ensuring that temporary migrants leave, and mitigating illegal migration. We might also add: c) (with reference to employers' interests) recruiting from a known and reliable pool of workers, retaining trained and experienced people, and keeping wages low.

What about the migrants themselves? What does circular migration hold for them? It is important to underscore the fact that circular migration represents an age-old pattern of mobility, whether rural-urban or cross-border (see, for example, Elkan 1967, Chapman 1979, Cordell, Gregory and Piché 1996). Such patterns have variously been called repeat, rotating, multiple, seasonal, cyclical, shuttling or circuit-based modes of migration. Most research on circular migration patterns has examined what we might call "unregulated" systems – that is, migration flows that have been established by migrants themselves between homelands and places of work, as opposed to formal or regulated systems by which employers and states collaborate to recruit, transport and employ workers from abroad. Based on such research (including Massey 1987, Massey and Espinosa 1997, Duany 2002 and Constant and Zimmerman 2004), the following traits seem evident.

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In today's world a considerable proportion of migrants are not "first movers" – many have made multiple trips within their home country and abroad (from across a near border to indeed across the world) in order to work. Moreover, frequency matters: studies indicate that there is an increasing probability of making repeat moves the more an individual has already moved. This finding underscores what, in migration theory, is known as the self-perpetuating nature of migration. With each move, migrants learn more about migration, where and how to find jobs and housing, and so on. Such knowledge, set of social connections and experience is also referred to as "migration-specific capital"; the more you have of this, the less risk you face moving, the lower the costs and the better the chances of success – all factors encouraging circular migration.

Further, after a few moves, it seems that a migrant's legal status is not relevant to the likelihood of repeat movement. Once people learn how to cross borders (or have established reliable facilitators to help them cross), they are less concerned with whether they go legally or not. The exception comes with rising human capital: as people gain skills and experience that may allow them to progress in terms of socioeconomic mobility, they become more concerned with being legal. The likelihood of circular migration also depends on social traits. Repeat movements are most likely among young, unmarried men; this likelihood falls with marriage and increases again with children. However, when migrants have children in school (particularly in receiving contexts), they are less likely to engage in circular migration. Dual citizens are more likely to circulate – not surprisingly, since they generally can do this with little hassle at the border.

Of special note with regard to the development agenda behind much emerging policy, circular migrants tend to remit more money to their home localities. This finding makes sense, given that circular migrants plan to return in the near future in order to make use of these posted earnings themselves. And does circular migration increase or diminish opportunities for socio-economic mobility? Here social scientists come up with contrary analyses. Some researchers suggest that the experience and money obtained abroad does give migrants scope to get better jobs (either in the homeland or receiving context); others say that circular migrants tend to remain stuck in low levels of employment, such as seasonal agricultural labourers. This might particularly be the case in regulated circular migration systems, which see people returning year after year to the same job, rather than trying to negotiate their way into better jobs and localities like unregulated circular migrants might do.

Examining one well-known, regulated system of circular migration, Tanya Basok's (2003) study of the Canadian Mexican Seasonal Workers Programme importantly shows contrasting dimensions of such schemes. Basok demonstrates that the programme provides undoubtedly positive development benefits in migrants' homelands. The circular migrants on this scheme invest their earnings in land, business, children's education, housing and medical treatment. More widely, their remittances stimulate local economic growth around their villages and towns in Mexico. While working in Canada, they might be doing the same low-level work; back in Mexico, they might be building a business. However, Basok points out, "in order to maintain the lifestyle which these migrants and their households enjoy, migrant workers need to continue participating in the Canadian guest worker programme for many years and this dependency forces them to accept various forms of abuse by Canadian growers" (p. 20).

Contemporary calls for the policy systematization of circular migration may well address many of the various issues raised in the documents discussed above. For migrants themselves, the rolling out of more circular migration schemes may indeed bring considerable benefits too. However, as with other kinds of temporary migration policies (see Martin 2003 and 2005, Ruhs 2005), there are a number of concerns to bear in mind when designing circular migration policies. These include questions such as:

- Will migrant workers get "locked in" to modes of dependency and exploitative relationships with employers?
- Will circular migrants' work permits be non-portable (i.e., restricted to specific employers or sectors), thereby increasing chances of exploitation and lessening chances of socioeconomic mobility?
- Will policy-regulated circular migration systems become closed labour markets, with limited opportunities for access among new would-be migrants?
- Since any temporary migration scheme will only function if migrants indeed return after their statutory period of employment, will enforcement mechanisms become more draconian?
- Since circular or other temporary migrants will be required to leave after short stays, will this preclude any kind of "integration" strategies for them (including language training or information about living in the society of reception)? Consequently, will lack of integration strategies make migrants more vulnerable, socially excluded and geographically encapsulated?
- Again, since they will have to leave after a time, will there be no chances for circular migrants to naturalize (and, in doing so, gain dual citizenship which would help them "circulate" more easily)?
- Even given creation of ideal circular migration policies and systems, will it not remain cheaper and less bureaucratically burdensome for employers simply to continue hiring undocumented migrants? Or will tough employer sanctions be put in place to mitigate against this at the same time as circular migration schemes are put in place?

A final question arises when considering the current popularity of circular migration in policy circles. Haven't such schemes, such as the American *bracero* programme and the German *Gastarbeiter* system, all been tried – and dropped – a long time ago? This question is directly addressed by Stephen Castles (2006), who answers both "yes" and "no." He details how, while they do indeed have important features in common, current approaches are significantly different from the well-known pre-1974 temporary migration policies.

Why are many policy-makers specifically calling for circular migration now? There are surely numerous reasons (again see Castles 2006), but at least four can be drawn from the documents considered above: a) recognition of the prevalence and importance of transnational practices among migrants has spurred new thinking, especially about remittances and the developmental potential of organized migrant labour schemes; b) the "win-win-win" mantra is being taken seriously, again especially around migration and development. Circular migration appears to be a readily available option to provide immediate three-way benefits; c) circular and other temporary forms of migration are considered by policy-makers to be more amenable to public opinion, which has clearly and increasingly hardened against migration in most parts of the developed world; and d) many policy-makers believe they now have the technical know-how (such as "e-borders," Advance Passenger Information Systems, and large shared databases) that would potentially enable them to keep track of numerous eligible migrants as they come and go between homelands and foreign places of work. It remains to be seen whether these lines of reasoning will prove sufficient to roll out new international guidelines and schemes.

For sending countries, receiving countries and migrants themselves, mutual gains may indeed be had if circular migration policies become manifest. Moreover, as recent policy documents suggest, circular migration policies might positively contribute to tackling challenges around economic development, labour shortages, public opinion and illegal migration. Yet when considering anything – particularly an approach to global policy – that portends to be a kind of magic bullet, caution should certainly be taken. The "wins" of the win-win-win scenario may not be as mutual as imagined.

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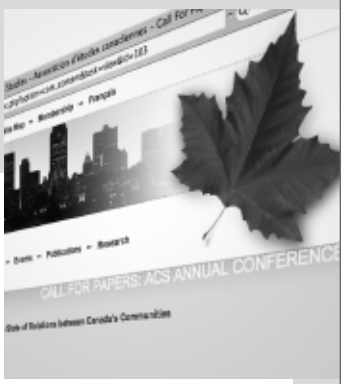
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Note

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