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Skilled migration and development practices: Republic of Moldova and the countries of South East Europe

Few months ago, in Chisinau was launched a volume entitled *Skilled migration and development practices: the cases of Moldova and the countries of South East Europe*. A Swiss - Moldovan research team that coordinated the publication intended to reveal the link between the two subjects - skilled migration and development practices - in a very innovative manner: by presenting national practices in a broader regional or even European context. Having the empirical evidence of Moldovan case as one of its core parts, the work concludes with a compendium of regional good practices at the level of national programmes and projects. The final task of the editors was to combine the results of a scientific investigation with practical case studies in order to identify the potential for a regional approach in this area. Because of the need for a common understanding on this point, there should be agreement among all the stakeholders involved – countries of origin, countries of destination, migrants and the society in the homeland, as well as international organisations and donors working in the region. In this regard, the authors of the papers included in the volume conducted an analysis of the current situation within the area of skilled migration management in the region and they established the outlines for the new framework for action.

- **Linking skilled migration to home country development**

According to data from the UN, 232 million people, equivalent to 3.2 per cent of the world's population, were international migrants in 2013, compared with 175 million in 2000 and 154 million in 1990 (UN 2013). Among the issues linked to international human mobility, skilled migration is one of the most discussed of the ones related to the development of countries of origin and countries of destination. Over the past 20 years, this phenomenon has become both a threat and an opportunity for the general process of development in some regions of the world, and South East Europe is one such region. In recent decades, the countries generically included within this region have experienced a period of far-reaching transition as they have strived to become consolidated democracies and establish themselves as functioning market economies and efficient democratic states. New states started to appear in the region with the union of some states, the dissolution of others and a number of revolutions of a more or less peaceful nature, and these changes brought new political regimes, new economic paradigms and new social constructions. Countries followed their own paths to democracy and the market economy, undertaking reforms either through the medium of shock therapy policies or more moderate transitions. These processes were accompanied by the emigration of large sections of the population and this brought additional social and economic costs for the countries in question.

More recently, and as a consequence of positive development trends in the region, states have started to shift their policies from a position of resilient disability to a more

proactive approach, as they attempt to link the migrant communities of their foreign-based nationals to the modernisation processes that are taking place in the homelands. For obvious reasons, which are related to the imperatives of increasingly knowledge-based economies and societies, skilled migration has been easily identified as a priority area for policymakers and the civil society as well as for researchers in the South Eastern region of Europe.

Qualified migrants certainly bring an added value to the countries of destination. According to an OECD analysis, there is empirical evidence to show that highly skilled migrants bring higher productivity, more entrepreneurial assets and greater trading opportunities to the host regions (confirmation of this can be seen in the changes made to migration policies to favour the admission of highly qualified workers) (OECD 2010). A further example is the contribution that foreign-born scientists make to science advancement in the host countries, which can be clearly seen from the fact that 32% of Nobel prizes are awarded to US-based researchers of foreign origin (Brunner 2011).

The question that arises here is how to share these benefits with the countries of origin and to create the most suitable enabling conditions for a process of brain circulation, so as to make sure that there are no skills shortages in the emerging economies and societies. By creating greater opportunities for cross-border connections between individuals, communities and societies, the current framework of transnationalism, in which diasporas act as bridges between the home and the host countries, gets policymakers to look far beyond their national borders when analysing the impact of their policies (Meyer 2001; Agunias and Newland 2012).

- **Recent developments in brain drain/brain gain approaches**

Over the last number of decades, globalisation processes have significantly accelerated international migration streams and the mobility of highly-educated people who go abroad in search of better personal and professional opportunities to satisfy their growing expectations regarding the quality of work and living conditions. This increased emigration of scientific and professional elites from developing or transition countries to industrialized economies, has been traditionally seen as a net loss for the countries of origin and a gain for the richer destinations.

However, one of the main advances in migration and development thinking and practice in recent years has been the shift from a position that emphasises the negative impact of skilled migration to one that recognises the potentially positive effects that the international mobility of scientists and skilled professionals can have on home country development. This is the result of a currently common approach, which considers international migration through the prism of the migration and development nexus, highlighting the emergence of new social actors of influence as part of the global social and political transformations. This approach sees migrants, diasporas or transnational communities (Wickramasekara 2010) as valuable resources circulating between countries. The search for alternative ways of addressing the emigration of the skilled individuals and reversing brain drain, by harnessing their accumulated overseas experience, knowledge and skills for the benefit of the home country, has increased the

interest expressed by academics and policymakers alike in the role and the value of scientific diasporas. Scientific diasporas consist of groups, networks or associations of emigrated scientists and skilled professionals, who are engaged in producing and circulating knowledge and creating transnational cooperation relations with their home country (Barré et al. 2003; Tejada and Bolay 2010).

Accordingly, migrants' groups or diasporas emerge as actors that promote the transfer of knowledge and skills through decentralized forms of cooperation that span borders (Tejada 2012). In shaping the processes related to the harnessing of diaspora's resources, political and economic factors in both the countries of origin and the countries of destination and the individual profiles and behaviours of migrants have a significant role to play. Accordingly, a multi-level analysis of the study of skilled migration and its diverse impacts should be adopted to identify the main factors at both an individual and a country level that are associated with the positive contributions to home country development (de Haas 2008, 2012).

While diasporas can influence socio-economic development in their home countries in various ways, diverse institutional mechanisms and strategies need to be put in place to ensure enabling environments that can promote the potential benefits of skilled migration. The existing literature and current policies related to skilled migration and skilled labour mobility are centred on two interconnected issues. The first of these is the brain drain vs. brain gain debate and the challenge of promoting the return of the emigrated human capital and of retaining it in the home country. The second issue is concerned with the contributions that diasporas make through the transfer of knowledge, skills and other valuable resources. Both the framework of diaspora contributions and return channels have acquired importance in the study of skilled migration within the migration and development nexus at the same time as several developing and transition countries are making an effort to establish durable links with their diasporas while simultaneously promoting retention and return schemes for their scientists and skilled professionals (Agunias and Newland 2012).

The capitalization of diaspora's resources can take diverse forms. The empirical evidence of various case studies shows different levels of success, which depend both on the individual profiles and experiences of migrants and the contexts in the home and the host countries concerned. There are numerous world cases of transnational initiatives and institutional programmes tapping into and mobilising the expertise and resources of overseas-based skilled professionals and scientists. Some cases such as Korea and China provide evidence of several institutional initiatives that encourage the return of their skilled personnel. Both cases have shown how the returned skilled personnel can raise productivity and contribute to economic development in their home countries (Saxenian 2005; Yoon 1992; Song 1992). Other countries have directed their efforts towards the engagement of their diasporas at a distance, as a definitive return is not always feasible. During the 1990s, Colombia and South Africa created innovative scientific diaspora networks to capitalise on the interconnection potential of information and communication technologies and social networks, and to try and get their skilled nationals abroad engaged in the enhancement of their national systems of science and technology. In both

cases institutional support and intervention was determining but ephemeral, and therefore the success of these examples was limited (Tejada 2012).

Various experiences also show that in many cases the local society in the home countries does not benefit from the brain gain practices. Furthermore, the potential of having a positive impact at the different levels of development is not the same for all countries, but rather these depend on the context of the country in question. This is why a particular pro-diaspora strategy may work in one country but not in another. Therefore, in order to explore the viability of harnessing the potential of diasporas, it is imperative to take a context-specific approach that should start by advancing knowledge on the respective diasporas and the specific factors that influence their engagement. Research should be encouraged in order to provide an insight into the personal and professional experiences of diasporas in the main destination countries, labour migration policies and structural settings in those countries, as well as the national systems of science and technology and the various institutional initiatives at a national and regional level that are related to migration and development.

For the countries of South East Europe, which have faced great challenges as market economies in transition and due to the hard-hitting impact of the mass emigration of their scientific human capital, the academic and practical dimension of engaging the scientific diaspora has recently been recognised as being of a great importance. Some strategies have been put in place, although the majority of these are still inefficient. This inefficiency can be explained mainly by the tough economic, social and political structural conditions in the home countries and by the poor administrative capacities for their implementation.

The various countries in the region have had quite different experiences. Whereas the creation of the Romanian Ad-Astra Network offers an example of a bottom-up diaspora initiative that has managed to impact the reform of the research sector in Romania at a distance and become a valuable alternative to institutional retention and return schemes (Nedelcu 2008), the cases of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Republic of Moldova, Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine mainly show top-down pro-diaspora policies headed by the governments with the support of international organisations and development cooperation agencies.

At the academic level, highly skilled migration is not a central research topic in South East Europe except in the case of Croatia, Albania and Romania. Only a few researchers have attempted to approach this issue (Cvetičanin and Petrović 2013; Germeñji and Milo 2009; Kilic *et al.* 2007; Mai 2011; Mroukis and Gemi 2011; Gaugas 2004), and they have mainly focussed their attention on the factors that trigger the migration of the highly skilled, the reasons why they choose their destination countries and the motives for their return to the home country.

This volume attempts to fill some of the existing gaps in the literature. It takes the experience of the Republic of Moldova as well as those of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine as case examples to examine

issues related to links between scientific diasporas and home country development. The volume is based on the assumption that the knowledge and experience gained abroad by the emigrated scientists and skilled professionals and the high quality research infrastructure and working methods that they use in their research and professional activities in the destination countries can be leveraged by the home country, provided that efficient channels of interaction are established and supporting local structures are put in place. Despite the institutional strategies launched by the national governments of these countries as they seek to foster cooperation with their scientists and skilled professionals based abroad, there are currently no permanent links or supporting instruments that can effectively connect them to key national stakeholders and allow them to capitalise on the resources that they have accumulated overseas.

- **The Republic of Moldova as a case in point**

This volume pays particular attention to the Republic of Moldova, for which these issues are of vital importance given the fact that it has one of world's highest emigration rates. It is estimated that 25 per cent of the country's labour force is living abroad (IOM 2012) and the country was particularly hard-hit by the exodus of scientists, researchers and skilled professionals during the first years of independence in the early 1990s. It is estimated that the scientific potential of the country fell by 83 per cent in just a decade and a half, with the absolute number of scientific researchers dropping from a total of 30,000 in the early 1990s to less than 5,000 in 2004 (ASM 1990-2009).

In 2008, the government of the Republic of Moldova launched a focused approach through the Academy of Sciences of Moldova (ASM), which was concretely aimed at addressing skilled migration and fostering cooperation with foreign-based Moldovan scientists and skilled professionals. As we discuss elsewhere, Moldova's determined support to enhance linkages with the scientific diaspora is mainly based on two issues. The first is an acknowledgment of the potential benefits that the country can obtain from collaborating with Moldovan scientists and skilled professionals abroad. The second is the belief that the Moldovan national system of science, research and innovation is adequately suited to accommodating diaspora initiatives and taking advantage of transnational cooperation (Tejada *et al* 2013a). This was quite an innovative approach within the region, making Moldova a leader in the implementation of pro-diaspora policies aimed at curtailing brain drain. However, a low level of development and deficient structural conditions have limited the expected positive outcomes, and while skilled Moldovans abroad are motivated to contribute to home country development, more often than not, their potential brain gain actions are hindered by factors associated with the home country context.

Two initiatives were recently implemented as part of this institutional brain gain approach. The first is the programme for the temporary return of Moldovan scientists and young researchers put in place by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the ASM under the EU-Moldova Mobility Partnership scheme. The other initiative is the implementation of a research project conducted by the ASM in collaboration with the Cooperation and Development Center of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne

(CODEV-EPFL). The aim of the project “Connecting the scientific diaspora of the Republic of Moldova to the scientific and socio-economic development of the home country” was to provide empirical evidence on Moldovan scientists and skilled professionals abroad and to offer empirical-based policy recommendations to engage them in cooperation activities with the home country.

The research draws on two complementary survey questionnaires supplemented by follow-up in depth interviews. On the one hand, we examined the Moldovan scientific diaspora made up of scientists, skilled professionals and postgraduate students living abroad, while on the other we studied scientists and skilled professionals based in Moldova. The two-fold approach employed - countries of destination and country of origin - in one single study allowed us to simultaneously observe the situation and experiences of skilled Moldovans in the destination countries and the conditions of the scientific community based in Moldova, and the perceptions of both regarding their propensity to establish cooperation links between both groups. The study advances knowledge of their professional and academic experiences and prospects, migratory projects and opinions regarding the role of the diaspora in home country development.

By offering new empirical evidence on skilled migration from the Republic of Moldova, this study helps to fill an important gap in the literature, given the fact that research on skilled migration from Moldova is practically inexistent. There is also a lack of evidence on the extent to which the cooperation links between the members of the scientific community, and those of the diaspora of the Republic of Moldova are established, and the ways that these connections could be encouraged for the benefit of both sides.

From the perspective of the destination countries, the study outlines the parameters of the Moldovan scientific diaspora and it captures the main determinants of their transnational cooperation actions with their colleagues based in the home country, as well as the factors associated with their potential return. Although skilled Moldovans do feel positive about their study and work experiences abroad, and notwithstanding the fact that they are appreciated human resources in the destination countries, they are also keen to help in the development of Moldova. This is based on their belief that they can create benefits through their accumulated knowledge and expertise and their professional experience abroad. They see themselves contributing through specific actions involving knowledge transfer, joint publications, scientific collaborations and facilitating the transfer of skills and knowledge. They also feel that they can help to inspire a work culture that is suited to innovation and development.

The study points to the fact that the transnational cooperation projects in which skilled Moldovans abroad have already been engaged are mostly sporadic and carried out on an individual basis, grounded on a personal interest rather than a collective one. However, there are some initial signs of informal networks and associative initiatives evolving towards more structured communitarian-based actions, which are considered vital in terms of increasing the scale and impact of transnational cooperation. Some of the obstacles that limit actions which were mentioned by the skilled Moldovans abroad include a lack of

sufficient recognition of their development role among the community that is left behind, local resistance to change, as well as insufficient institutional support for their engagement.

The observations of the findings indicate that the mobilization of the resources of skilled migrants and their mobility plans hinge on the environment they are exposed to, and the opportunities on offer in both the host and the home countries. Even though emigration of skilled Moldovans may endure, return plans - involving students for the most part - are apparent but they will only become real actions if they see that available opportunities, incentives and enabling environments are provided in Moldova. Indeed, an enabling socio-economic environment with adequate career prospects is a decisive factor that influences mobility decisions. As such, if economic and political conditions in Moldova remain unclear, skilled Moldovans may decide to settle abroad permanently.

The findings from the country of origin show that the scientific community based in Moldova recognizes the potential role that their colleagues from the diaspora could play in the scientific, economic and political development of the country, and they believe in the benefits of collaboration between both groups. However, the majority do not maintain permanent professional relations with their colleagues based abroad due to lost contacts and a lack of institutional support facilitating this endeavour. From our study we observed that even though there are high expectations of the contribution that the diaspora can make to home country development, the members of the Moldovan scientific community feel that the scientific diaspora is not visible enough, not mobilized enough and the specificities of their skills and expertise are unknown to the local community.

The findings suggest that the contributions of the scientific diaspora are conditioned by existing opportunities for the transfer and absorption of their overseas-accumulated skills and knowledge to the local context. While some supporting mechanisms provided by Moldovan institutions do already exist, we observed that these have not been properly disseminated among the scientific community, because its members are barely aware of them and make hardly any use of their potential benefits. Some additional mechanisms that Moldovan scientists believe could encourage the collaboration between the diaspora and the scientific community include: the establishment of a diaspora network platform, temporary return through short-term assignments on specific missions and involvement in joint targeted activities from a distance. The research concludes that apart from establishing or reinforcing formal channels of interaction to stimulate joint activities of knowledge transfer on a systematic manner, there is a need to improve the local structural situation in Moldova.

4. Objectives and content of the volume

The introduction of Part I of the volume establishes the scene of skilled migration and development in South East Europe. Part II, *Skilled migration and diaspora policies in selected countries of South East Europe*, starts with a chapter on EU policies and initiatives on migration and development towards Eastern Partnership Countries: the

implications for skilled mobility from Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, Oleg Chirita offers an analysis of several EU policies and legal tools used to address the mobility of highly skilled persons, looking at their intended objectives and implementation. The specific initiatives developed under the Mobility Partnership signed between EU and Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia would seem to be very relevant for the overall goal of the volume. These address the issue of highly skilled workers from the angle of return, reintegration and the prevention of 'brain drain'. As the author concludes, there is a need to strengthen the external dimension of EU immigration policy in order to respond to the opportunities and challenges faced by the EU in the field of migration, and to help partner countries address their migration and mobility priorities.

The subsequent chapter of Part II looks at the evolution of diaspora policies in the Republic of Moldova, as a result of the persistent character of Moldovan migration and the shift in state policies targeting the diaspora. According to the author, the voice of Moldovan communities abroad is now being heard more and more. Even though the lobbying and the advocacy activities of Moldovan migrant communities are still at a nascent stage, they can already be felt in the different areas related to homeland development.

In the next chapter, Tanja Pavlov and Bernard Zeneli encourage discussion of the mechanisms to develop brain gain policies in order to engage highly skilled migrants in the socio-economic and democratic development of the home countries. The authors present some very inspiring national policies and practices and they identify the difficult socio-economic circumstances, and the way in which these policies are developed and implemented, as bottlenecks that obstruct their development. The authors advocate a strategic approach to development and migration in the region.

Starting from the challenge as to how to define highly skilled migration and how to calculate it statistically in the case of Ukraine, Antonina Rishko analyses the main research gaps as well as further opportunities and requirements for future studies in this area, assessing the main causes for the failures and achievements of Ukrainian policies in managing highly skilled migration. Her main conclusion is that occasional collaborations should be replaced by a well-designed and well-implemented state policy, with a single coordination body.

Basing themselves on the example of Croatia, Caroline Hornstein Tomić and Borna Pleše look at a new perspective in the region – the need to attract foreign workers – particularly those with high educational profiles, while taking into consideration the condition of Croatia as an aging society and a new Member State of the European Union. The example of the Unity through Knowledge Fund (UKF) as an instrument for the further development of research infrastructure and connecting scientists and professionals as a means of enhancing international cooperation, and the competitiveness of domestic knowledge production could act as an inspiration for the other countries in the region and for the donor community.

Part III of the volume is dedicated to the findings of the research project “Connecting the scientific diaspora of the Republic of Moldova to the scientific and socio-economic development of the home country”. It presents new empirical evidence on skilled migration from the Republic of Moldova in two separate chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to the evidence on skilled Moldovans abroad while the second chapter focuses on the experiences of the scientific community based in Moldova. Both evidence-based analysis discuss the scientific diaspora option for Moldova within the links between migration and development with complementing perspectives of the country of origin and the countries of destination. The promising existing situation and the opportunities for cooperation between the scientific diaspora and the home country identified throughout the project encourage further work towards a regional policy within the area of skilled migration and development. Yet, considerable improvements to the local structural situation are necessary.

Part IV of the volume presents success stories from Moldova, Croatia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia including Kosovo and Montenegro, which are the result of the mapping exercise carried out during the regional workshop *'The highly-skilled mobility and the development of the research and innovation sector of the Republic of Moldova: the need for a structured vision'*, organized on October 12 2012 in Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, which sought to identify available national and regional practices, useful instruments and strategies for capitalizing the knowledge and expertise of the members of the highly skilled diaspora in order to strengthen the research and innovation sector in the home countries of South Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. These examples serve as proof of the current attempts undertaken by the national authorities as well as the community of donors to turn the brain drain phenomena into brain circulation.

As national experiences frequently show, skilled migrants move mainly in response to economic opportunities abroad, which are better than those available at home, but also in response to specially designed migration policies in the host countries. In the case of researchers and scientists, the conditions for research and development related activities in the host countries can also be an important pull factor.

In order to enhance the benefits for the countries of origin, the countries of South East Europe need to develop adequate scientific, technological and business environments that can offer enough rewarding opportunities for their skilled citizens who have developed their skills abroad and who want to return, and also to encourage those based in the home countries to stay. As the contributions in this volume show, possible policy instruments range from repatriation schemes for post-doctoral fellows and scientists to schemes that leverage diaspora networks. Other alternative options may provide skilled migrants with suitable platforms to transfer the expertise and skills they have accumulated overseas to the homeland, without any need for a permanent physical return to the home country, thereby providing their colleagues back home with access to the knowledge networks in which they are involved in the host countries.

If the knowledge and examples included in this volume can help policy makers in the countries of South East Europe to formulate an effective skilled migration policy that will create enabling environments to benefit all the parties concerned, then we will have achieved our objective.

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