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SECOND GENERATION RETURN MIGRANTS: THE NEW FACE OF BRAIN CIRCULATION IN THE CARIBBEAN?

By Claudette Russell

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Executive Summary

People have been crossing borders since borders were created. Most migrate for economic or environmental reasons, from the global South to the global North in search of wealth and opportunity. In the Caribbean, the region has a long history of migration to the global North resulting from long-standing political ties with its colonial masters.

The migration of Caribbean people leaving the region peaked in the 50s and 60s. Some migrants have started returning home as retirees. This first wave of return migrants is consistent with models of international labour migration that assumes that some migrants will be inclined to return to their countries of origin. But while some migrants have returned as retirees who go back to reconnect with their homeland, others are in their younger years and are returning to capitalize on the skills gained in the North. Now, the flow of return migrants is increasingly being defined by the children of first generation migrants returning to their parents' country of origin to enter emerging labour markets – this second wave of “returnees” is a phenomenon partially driven by improvements in living standards in countries in the global South.

Caribbean nations have among the highest emigration rates of skilled workers in the world. Perhaps, the children of first generation migrants, called *second generation return migrants*, will have an impact on the societies and economies of their new homes. Second generation return migrants bring with them education, connections to the North, and often an entrepreneurial spirit which could contribute to growth in the region.

Once the loss of the best minds from the region was reason for concern. But, second generation return migrants offer a potential for the region to benefit from the investments it has made to the North giving new reason for Caribbean governments to put in place tailored policies that respond to younger migrants who offer great potential to contribute to the region.

A. Introduction

The Caribbean has a long history of migration to the global North resulting from long-standing political ties with its colonial masters. People leave mostly for economic reasons. While some return as retirees coming back to reconnect with their homeland, still others return as younger workers interested in capitalizing on the skills gained in the North.

Now, this return migration flow is increasingly being defined by the children of first generation migrants, born in the North, but returning to their parents' country of origin to enter emerging labour markets. This think piece explores the potential for these labour migrants, called second generation return migrants, to contribute the societies and economies of their parent's homeland. This pattern of return migration demonstrates how brain circulation is becoming a new reality, reconfirming the cyclical nature of migration patterns in the region. The paper also explores the potential for Caribbean governments to put in place tailored policies to incentivize second generation return migrants to come home.

B. Context

TRENDS IN CROSS-BORDER MIGRATION IN THE CARIBBEAN

Cross-border migration of people is not a new phenomenon. In 2013, an estimated 232 million people migrated across borders to live in countries outside their birthplace, representing an increase of 36 percent since 1990 (Ritzer, 2015). This is consistent with the first patterns of migration that began after 1492 when Europeans explored, conquered, and colonized other parts of the world (Schaeffer, 2009). Today, most people migrate for economic or environmental reasons from the global South to the global North.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) represents a regional block of 20 Member States, primarily considered small island nations. Over the past five decades, many of these island nations have put in place various strategies of survival and growth. Today, they are full participants in a globalized world, with many classified as middle-income countries. Barbados and the sister islands of Trinidad and Tobago, with populations of 0.3 and 1.2 million, respectively, are the only two countries in the region with high-income status. While migration out of the region has slowed in recent years, the region is still a net exporter of labour migrants.

CARICOM migration patterns have resulted in a vibrant body of research on the complex flows of people, goods, and money across borders. The region's colonial past and subsequent decolonialization process are among the factors that have facilitated centuries old movement of labour migrants in search of wealth and prosperity (Bryon and Condon, 1996). Emigration from the Caribbean region as a whole was an estimated 7 million in 2013, representing an emigration rate of 15.5 percent, four times as high as in Latin America (International Organisation for Migration, 2017).

C. Return migration patterns

New trends in Caribbean migration suggest that the movement of labour out of the Caribbean, which peaked in the 50s and 60s, may be reversing as retired immigrants living abroad show signs of returning home. This *first wave* of return migrants is consistent with models of international labour migration that assumed that some migrants will be inclined to return to their countries of origin.

Most scholars now argue that Caribbean migration is best characterized as a cyclical pattern of people leaving and retuning (Bronfman, 2007; Mandle, 2011; Potter, 2005).

The interest in migration circulation in the Caribbean is reflected in a growing discussion about return migration linked to neoliberal policies of developed nations (Bristol, 2010; Bronfman, 2007; Gmelch, 1980; Watson, 1982) and improvements in living standards throughout CARICOM (Gmelch, 1980; Jain, 2010; Mahabir, n.d.; Mishra, n.d.), both of which are enticing immigrants to return to their homeland. Neoliberal policies such as cutbacks to social programs, shifting focus of labour market programs, or attacks on the rights of workers, including immigrant workers, act as push factors because immigrants are more likely to be negatively affected by them, thereby contributing to their decision to return home. On the other hand, improvements in the living standards of Caribbean countries act as pull factors because they entice migrants to return to their homeland.

The effect of push-pull factors on return migrants can also be observed in the emerging economies of Taiwan, China, and India. Some migrants are retirees, or the first wave of return migrants with an intense affinity to their homelands. But, recent trends suggest that some migrants are returning to skilled or semi-skilled jobs in response to improved economic status in their homeland to capitalize on the skills and experience gained in the North (Bryon, 2000; Gmelch, 1980; Stracken, 1983).

NEW RETURN MIGRATION PATTERNS – SECOND GENERATION RETURN MIGRANTS

Starting from the premise that Caribbean migration “was not necessarily permanent” (Bronfman, 2007), there is a new interest in looking at the children of first generation migrants taking a second look at their parents’ country of origin to enter emerging labour markets in these developing countries. While the research is still in its infancy, the phrases *second generation return migration* or *foreign-born returning nationals* have emerged to describe this reverse migration trend (Phillips, 2006; Plaza, 2002; Potter, 2005; Potter et al., 2009; Reynolds, 2011)¹.

The data on return migration is the most difficult aspect of the migration cycle to quantify because most countries gather information on incoming migrants, but less so on returning citizens. And, the children of first generation migrants are even more difficult to identify from migration data because their parents’ identity is not typically collected.

¹ The phrase refers to only young migrants from outside of the CARICOM region.

From a research project conducted by Robert Potter in 2004 who used a targeted group of second generation return migrants², some basic characteristics were identified. Most of the migrants in Potters' sample returned from OECD countries with a median age at the time of returning of 33 years. They were primarily Black and female, and were highly influenced to be return migrants by their first-generation immigrant parents. The majority were college or university educated and were employed at the time that they decided to emigrate (Potter, 2006).

Potter's research identified several 'push and pull' factors such as displeasure with the educational system in their birth country (push) or reconnecting with family and home (pull). More research is needed to better understand the relationship between these 'push and pull' factors and how they align with neoliberalism policies in the North and emerging markets in the South.

To understand second generation return migration patterns and its potential benefit to the region, a reasonable departure point could be to look at patterns of first generation migration and the challenges created by the movement of labour out of the region.

D. Brain drain effect

Caribbean nations have consistently had among the highest emigration rates of workers in the world. In Guyana and Jamaica, for example, 89 and 85 percent, respectively, of skilled individuals emigrated to OECD countries from 1965 to 2000 – twelve times that of high income countries and eight times the world average (Docquier and Marfouk, 2005). In 2000, the emigration rate of skilled persons was 43.2 percent in states with populations below 1.5 million, compared with 7.4% for developing countries as a whole.

The fact that the best minds of the region leave is not unique or solely problematic. There is much to be gained from individuals developing skills and perspectives from abroad, especially for the small island nations of the Caribbean. In contrast to past hypotheses, we now "think more in terms of brain circulation, a two-way (or multiple directional) movement of talented individuals." What is now highlighted in the literature is 'beneficial brain drain' (Solimano, 2008).

But, the high level of skills depletion or brain drain from the region is said to outweigh the advantages accrued, including skills development, building networks, and increased remittances of migrants, (Beine et al, 2008; Bristol, 2010; Downes, 2006; Gmelch, 1980; Mandle, 2011; Potter, 2006). One argument is that small states lose productivity because the people remaining at home have limited opportunities to make use of new technologies. Also, migratory flows in the Caribbean are affected by inadequate institutional capacities of Caribbean nations and the region to address issues associated with brain drain, individually and collectively (Mahabir, 2007).

² Potter conducted 51 in-depth semi-structured interviews with foreign-born and young returning nationals to Barbados and St. Lucia from October 1999 to February 2000.

Since migration has in the past been an “integral part of the social and economic fabric of the region”, the argument has been made that first generation returnees have, and are likely in the future to play, “extremely significant roles in the region’s development” (Potter, 2001).

The next step in this argument is that the increase in the return flow of highly skilled migrants who are second generation return migrants, could demonstrate how brain circulation is becoming a new reality, reconfirming the cyclical nature of migration patterns in the region.

E. Implications for economic growth

Migration has always been a factor in the development of the country of destination. Most migrant workers fill vacancies in the host countries and actively pay taxes. When they are accommodated into the culture and society of a host country this contributes to an efficient form of development (Raghunath Mahabir, n.d.)

This argument suggests that return migrants to the Caribbean can also play a role in the development of the Caribbean region. And, second generation return migrants, who are younger than their first generation parents, also have the potential to impact the societies and economies of their new homes. These labour migrants offer great possibilities to the region because they bring with them education, connections to the North, and often an entrepreneurial spirit (Potter et al., 2009).

The impact of their entrepreneurial spirit cannot be understated. Some second generation return migrants have pursued self-employment related to accommodation and transportation services, boutiques, restaurants and bars to serve the tourism industry as well as businesses in information communications and technology (Potter, 1996). Further, they have connections to the North that "can act as bridges between foreign technology and markets and local entrepreneurs, and complement and strengthen local market-based institutions" (Mandle, 2011).

Younger returnees also invest in land and housing. When they return to the region, there is a potential to boost real estate markets in the region.

Second generation return migrants have the potential to significantly alter the composition of the relatively small Caribbean populations, and could impact the social and economic structures in the region for decades to come.



F. Conclusion

Migration has long been understood to be a tool for development. This short think piece illustrates the potential for the migration of the children of first generation immigrants to make a contribution to the economic growth of their parent's place of birth. Caribbean governments need to look at the innovative potential of these returnees more systematically to determine how their ideas and skills can be used constructively to benefit their economies and societies (Gmelch, 1980).

While second generation return migrants are a relatively small cohort, their presence could increase the number of persons with professional, technical and managerial/administrative occupations in the region. There are a number of questions that remain such as *what measures could CARICOM government use to incentivize second generation return migrants thereby mitigating the effects of brain drain from the region?*

Where once the loss of the best minds from the region was reason for concern, now there is a potential for the Caribbean to benefit from the investments it has made with a rich supply of skilled labour that left the region. There is new reason for CARICOM governments to put in place tailored policies that attract young professional second generation return migrants who have much to offer the region.



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About the author

Claudette Russell is a Trinidad born Canadian who has over 30 years of experience in the Public Service of Canada, including more than 12 years at the senior executive level. This experience includes working with various levels of governments, stakeholders, and with international partners and NGOs.

Following her public service career, she has been providing and managing consulting services related to human capital development throughout the Caribbean and in Canada. Her expertise lies in youth development, education reform (especially Indigenous education), technical and vocational education and training, labour market development, and labour market migration, particularly in an international development context. She is a seasoned researcher who has worked in various cross-cultural environments.

Ms. Russell is an M.A. candidate in International Development (anticipated completion 2019) and has an educational background in Statistics, Mathematics and Economics. She has worked consistently on social policy research using statistical analysis and methods in various disciplines.

She is the Owner and Founder of Stories for Development.

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