UN/POP/MIG-FCM/2005/15
24 October 2005

FOURTH COORDINATION MEETING ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION
Population Division
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations Secretariat
New York, 26-27 October 2005

RESEARCH ON MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT*

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* The views expressed in the paper do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of the United Nations Secretariat.
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The Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM) is part of the School of Foreign Service and is affiliated with the Law Center at Georgetown University. ISIM brings the best social science, legal and policy expertise to the complex and controversial issues raised by international migration. It conducts research on many aspects of migration, offers a certificate in humanitarian studies, and teaches courses such as 'Migration and Development' and 'Immigration Law and Policy.'

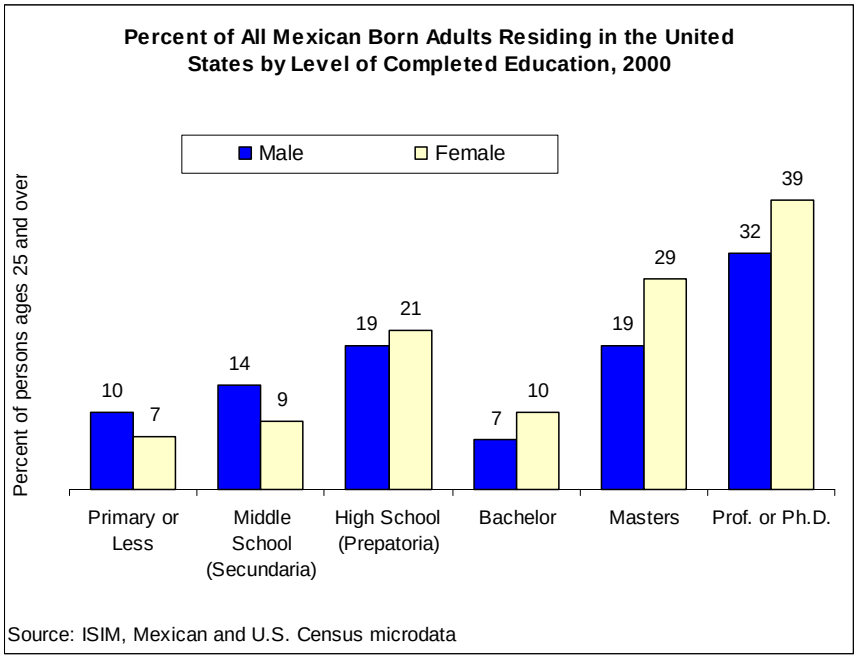
ISIM has long-standing research agenda on various aspects of migration and development. Indeed, a large number of skilled workers are on the move around the world. The trend is driven by the forces of globalisation and the increasing integration of labour markets worldwide. Because of the great scale of the migration many developing countries experience a significant loss of their highly skilled workers. The emerging priority is not simply to avoid brain drain from developing countries, but instead to optimise migration flows so that the loss of highly skilled people does not cause 'brain strain'. We generally prefer this term because highlights the potential for both positive and adverse consequences.

Of course which workers are considered 'highly skilled' may differ from context to context given the diversity of skill needs and resources available to economies at different stages of development. We recognise that many developing countries have few workers who they can ill-afford to loose such as craftsmen or technically trained persons in information technology, healthcare, or construction. Yet, college educated knowledge workers are at the core of concerns over emigration's potentially adverse impacts on development.

The mobility of the highly skilled has been growing rapidly in volume and complexity. The 1990s saw a surge in the number of highly skilled migrants entering the United States, Canada, Australia and Western Europe. At the same time as more skilled migrants settle permanently in these countries, another stream increasingly circulates between countries. The occupational composition of both streams has broadened over time. These trends are related to the nature of modern economies and their appetite for knowledge workers; the impacts of an ageing population and the demands of the healthcare and caring sectors; the process of globalisation; and competitive immigration policies.

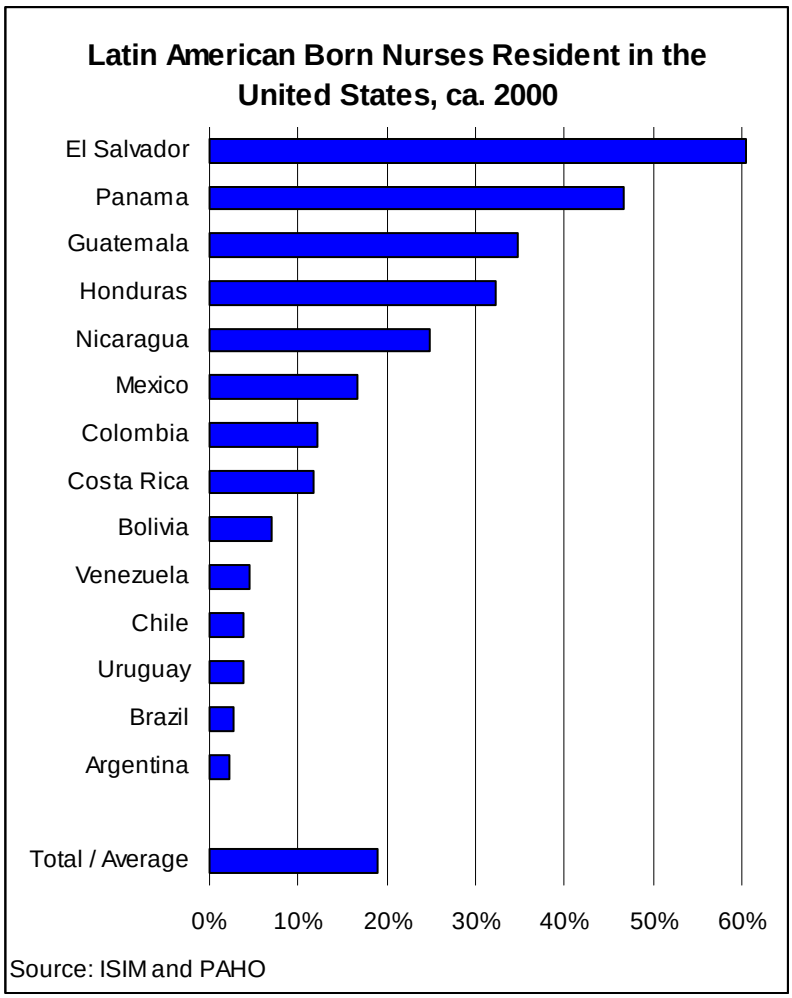
We estimate that nearly one in ten tertiary educated adults born in the developing world resided in North America, Australia or Western Europe in 2001. About five per cent of the developing world's emigrants with secondary education live in advanced nations. However, it is estimated that 30 to 50 per cent of the developing world's population of persons trained in science and technology live in the developed world. Furthermore, the loss of migrants tends to be greater among those with graduate degrees, a fact that is little known and particularly significant for some countries. And the flow of highly skilled migrants may differentially impact upon specific sectors of the sending country's economy. Perhaps the sector that has seen the most worrying effects has been healthcare.

For example, ISIM has a comparative research interest in several countries, but especially a long-standing and collaborative interest in Mexican migration to the United States. While Mexican migration is widely known as a prototypical movement of low-skilled workers, it also has an unrecognized highly-skilled component. In fact, Mexican migrants are highly selected to from secondary educated Mexicans and among those with graduate degrees. Our estimates for Mexico indicate that just 9 percent of Mexican-born persons with a bachelor degree lived in the United States but 36 percent of those with a doctorate. The migration of Mexican females at the upper rungs of education appears to be yet greater than that of males. The implications of these selectivity patterns have not been studied.



Research on the economic effects of brain drain is, despite decades of interest, rather incomplete. Large databases have been recently constructed that are likely to turn that around, but for now an econometric evaluation of 1990 data is our best empirics of the phenomenon. To be sure, high-end mobility may help cement a developing nation into the global economy and the benefits that brings. At the same time, nations with high rates of migration of their best educated stand to see their GDP growth slowed. Indeed, research has found that high rates of migration of the tertiary (college) educated population has adverse effects on GDP growth for at least 21 countries including Mexico. Nor is it clear that the feedback of Mexico's high-skilled diaspora offsets that economic loss, i.e., highly skilled migrants tend to remit less than other migrants and research does not paint a clear picture on the supposed benefits of knowledge transfer or remittances. Still, the mobility of skilled labour is part of today's increasing pace of globalisation and technological innovation. Developing countries that engage in appropriate brain circulation stand to reap the rewards of international and intra-company capital investment, the attraction of highly skilled workers, increased trade, and the transformation to a service-oriented economy.

The healthcare mobility of nurses is widely seen as a critical issue. ISIM has convened roundtables of experts on this issue, most recently with COMPAS in Oxford, England. Foreign healthcare workers in the developed world help offset today's labor shortages and will play an increasing role in tomorrow's aging societies. This movement; however, generates tensions for workers, native and immigrant alike, as well as challenges for policymakers seeking to optimize the supply of health services. Receiving countries need to balance their intake of foreign workers, while ensuring the quality of healthcare, with efforts to boost the supply of domestic workers. For developed countries seeking to meet their changing healthcare needs, and for developing countries desiring to protect their workers' right to migrate as well as their citizens' access to healthcare, health worker migration poses a unique dilemma. Despite often severe impacts, health worker migration often does cause healthcare provision crises in developing countries. Rather, it exacerbates already poor conditions brought on by disease epidemics, poor human resource planning, lack of funding, and other problems. Migration is also not the only reason workers leave the health sector. In South Africa, for example, a recent OECD study found that there are 7,000 expatriate nurses, but 32,000 nurse vacancies and 30,000 once-employed nurses no longer working in the health sector. In many cases, those vacancies are located in rural areas where doctors and nurses prefer not to work. Thus poor allocation of resources—including human resources—is sometimes a more significant detriment to healthcare provision than is health worker emigration.



Policies That Optimize Skilled Migration

The benefits of highly skilled labour migration flows are neither automatic nor inevitable. The extent to which these flows benefit developing countries that send migrants will depend on the development and implementation of appropriate policies that optimise the benefits and minimise the costs. These policies must be developed in both sending and receiving countries, both separately and in partnership with one another. There are at least three alternative areas which we believe have the potential to generate policy options to address these issues.

- Migration management – with a particular emphasis on migration regimes that are temporary by the use of admission policies and by establishing best practices that facilitate and create incentives for return;

- The 'diaspora option' – which draws upon a nation's expatriates, their knowledge and their financial resources to stimulate the transfer of resources to sending countries in a relatively low-cost way; and

- Democracy and development - given that the lack of these is one major cause of skilled migration, there is a need to incorporate the phenomenon of skilled migration, and its many facets, into thinking and planning in developing countries.

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