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# Circular Migration and Human Development

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# Abstract

This paper explores the human development implications of circular migration — both where it occurs naturally and where governments work to create it. The paper discusses various conceptions and definitions of circular migration, and concludes that circular migration is not intrinsically positive or negative in relation to human development; its impact depends upon the circumstances in which it occurs, the constraints that surround it and—above all—the degree of choice that individuals can exercise over their own mobility. The human-development lens distinguishes between de facto circular migration and circular migration that occurs within the parameters of government programs.

Keywords: Circular migration, dual citizenship, forced migrants, guest workers, labor markets, mobility, seasonal migration, temporary migration, visa regimes.

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## I. Introduction

Circular migration as a pattern of human mobility is not new, but it is newly on the policy agenda of governments. The outcomes sought by various governments in seeking to facilitate or instigate circular migration may differ markedly. Many migrant-receiving countries are looking for ways to fill labor-market needs without large increases in permanent immigration, while providing alternatives to unauthorized migration. Many migrant-origin countries are interested in increasing their nationals' access to the labor markets of wealthier countries in order to reduce unemployment, increase remittance flows, and retain or regain access to skilled and experienced nationals (or diaspora members) who work abroad.

Increasingly, states that encounter each other in a migration relationship are coming to recognize that their divergent goals are not mutually exclusive, and that compromise may increase the benefits attainable by both countries. Circular migration is one such compromise. It is seen to increase the likelihood that both source and destination countries can make gains from migration according to their respective preferences. But these calculations rarely take into account the effects of circular migration on the people who move. Does circular migration convey an advantage to the individuals who engage in it—judging advantage in the terms that economist Amartya Sen used in his Nobel Lecture, as “the respective capabilities, which the person has, to live the way he or she has reason to value”?<sup>1</sup>

This essay will argue that circular migration is intrinsically neither good nor bad from the perspective of the individual. Rather, it will convey advantage, or not, to the extent that it is a trajectory chosen by, rather than imposed on, the individual. External constraints on circularity are common with respect to international migration, where sovereign governments have the right, in law, to determine whether non-nationals may enter and within their territories — although they may not be able to do so in practice. Government policies help to determine whether migrants can choose circularity: policies such as those governing the terms of immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> Amartya Sen, “The Possibility of Social Choice”, Nobel Lecture, December 8, 1998. Published in *American Economic Review* 89 (July, 1999).

admissions and stay, the ability to hold more than one nationality, and the requirements of permanent residency.

Constraints on internal mobility within a state also exist, but are less likely to be the result of policy. However, some states, such as China and Russia, restrict the right to change one's place of residence, officially in the case of China and unofficially in the case of Russia (where the restrictions are de facto holdovers from the Soviet Union). In multilingual, multicultural states such as India, Belgium, Ethiopia and Canada, language and culture may act as unofficial barriers to internal movement.

According to Mahbub ul Haq, one of the innovators of the concept of human development, "The basic purpose of development is to enlarge people's choices. In principle, these choices can be infinite and can change over time."<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the conventional focus of development practitioners on monetary income and economic growth, most often on the national level, human development is concerned with individual capabilities. From this perspective, circular migration can serve as a framework for maximizing individual choice.

Given the option, many individuals will choose to move back and forth between their home countries and destinations abroad. Through circular migration, they can avoid making a definitive choice between origin and destination countries (or locations within a country) but, rather, can maintain significant ties in both. They do so in order to maximize the capabilities of themselves and their families: choosing to spend part of their time in a location that offers them superior earnings, for example, while educating their children in a location that has superior schools; or gaining high psychic rewards from philanthropic activities in the country of origin while building a business abroad.

The individuals who are best able to pursue such transnational lives are those who have secure residential status in both country of origin and country of destination, so that they can travel back and forth without fear of losing status in either country. Dual citizenship is the most secure

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<sup>2</sup> Mahbub ul Haq, *Reflections on Human Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 14.

guarantee of such capability, but other forms of legal, permanent residency may confer similar flexibility. This situation is quite different from that of people who circulate, but not quite freely, according to the terms of a visa or contract that requires them to leave the country of destination after a specified period, with the obligation to return home but the possibility of a repeat sojourn. Their capabilities are limited, though still perhaps greater than those of someone who is unable to move at all, or must do so through irregular channels.

The work of Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen highlights the centrality of people rather than states; both underlined the importance of less quantifiable ‘goods’ such as greater access to knowledge, better nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure hours, political and cultural freedoms, and a sense of participation in community activities, among other social indicators. “The use that people make of their wealth, not the wealth itself, is decisive,” Haq wrote. “Economic growth is essential in poor societies for reducing or eliminating poverty. But the quality of this growth is just as important as its quantity.”<sup>3</sup>

Choice, too, is at the center of much of the academic literature on migration. The degree to which migration is driven by individual choice is a longstanding question that has attracted the attention of generations of migration theorists. Ernest Ravenstein, an early scholar of migration, observed in 1889 that most migration is driven by choice, or “desire” in his terminology. He concluded,

“Bad or oppressive laws, heavy taxation, an unattractive climate, uncongenial social surroundings, and even compulsion (slave trade, transportation), all have provided and are still producing currents of migration, but none of these currents can compare in volume with that which arises from the *desire* inherent in most men to ‘better’ themselves in material respects [emphasis added].”<sup>4</sup>

Subsequent theorists have questioned Ravenstein’s observations, and increasingly sophisticated analyses have attempted to disaggregate the determinants of migrants’ decisions. Some scholars place more emphasis on the opportunities and constraints imposed by major institutions and structures than on the capabilities of individuals.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest G. Ravenstein, “The Laws of Migration,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 52, no. 2 (June 1889) p. 241-305.



Clearly, migration always (victims of trafficking or expulsion excepted) includes some element of individual choice. For most people, however, decision-making is constrained by exogenous factors that deprive them of capabilities. This is most obvious in cases of forced migration, where a complete breakdown of public order, mass violations of human rights or a well-founded fear of persecution create a very strong compulsion for people to flee. International legal norms give states special obligations toward refugees: most centrally, the obligation not to return them to a place where their lives or freedom would be in danger. By contrast, the decisions of other migrants do not trigger this obligation, although they may also be motivated — to varying degrees — by desperation. (What makes the difference in international law is not the degree of desperation, but whether an individual can look to the State to protect him or her to the best of its ability.)

Increasingly, policy makers recognize that migration is a normal phenomenon, and that circular migration is part of it. Accordingly, it is widely accepted that the appropriate objective of policy with respect to migration should not be to end migration, as some politicians have dangerously suggested, but rather to ensure that migration proceeds out of choice rather than compulsion.

Evidence from areas where formal barriers to mobility have largely been eliminated (although some may still exist) — such as within federal states, in regional structures that permit freedom of movement or across international borders that are not enforced — suggests that, when it is an option, some migrants will prefer circular trajectories. A small survey of Bulgarian migrants in Greece, for example, found that the benefit they most valued from gaining legal status was freedom of movement, which enabled them to travel to Bulgaria for family visits; most of those interviewed saw legalization as a way of strengthening their bonds with their country of origin because of this ability.<sup>5</sup>

Some patterns of circular migration reflect the *lack* of choices available to migrants. The inability to make an adequate living at home, for example, drives many nationals of the

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<sup>5</sup> Eugenia Markova, “Changes in Social and Economic Status of the Legalized Bulgarian Immigrants in Greece a Year following Legalization”, unpublished paper, Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, date?

Philippines, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and other countries to migrate repeatedly to the Gulf for work. They are not permitted to settle permanently, and many find that their savings or investments are not enough to support them when they return home — so they emigrate again. In such cases, circularity is not freely chosen but compelled by both regulations and circumstances.

A growing number of countries are giving thought, and some are taking action, to encourage and facilitate spontaneous circularity by removing constraints on individuals' ability to move back and forth. A few governments are experimenting with circular migration pilot projects which expand the range of choices available to migrants, but do not leave the decision about where to stay and for how long entirely up to the migrants.<sup>6</sup> This background paper explores the human development implications of circular migration — both where it occurs naturally and where governments work to create it.

## **II. What is circular migration?**

The term 'circular migration' first appeared in the late 1960s and 1970s, mainly in the anthropological and demographic literature on urbanization, rural development, and internal migration in developing countries.<sup>7</sup> Often, it referred to seasonal or periodic migration for work (in agriculture, fishing, hunting, or market commerce), for survival (during droughts, for example), or as a life-cycle process (as is often the case for students). Sometimes this included migrants who cross international borders — such as in Western and Southern Africa — but often these boundaries were porous and cut across ethnically cohesive and commercially integrated regions.

Labor economists later took up the term within framework of the New Economics of Labor Migration, which considered migration to be a family decision to take advantage of wage and

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<sup>6</sup> See generally, Kathleen Newland, Dovelyn Agunias, and Aaron Terrazas, *Learning by Doing: Experiences of Circular Migration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, September 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Walter Elkan, "Circular Migration and the Growth of Towns in East Africa," *International Labor Review* 96, No. 6 (1967): 581-590; Graeme J. Hugo, "Circular Migration," *Bulletin of Indonesia Economic Studies* 13, No. 3 (November 1977): 57-66; M.E. Conaway, "Circular Migration in Venezuelan Frontier Areas," *International Migration* 15, No. 1 (1977): 35-42.

cost of living differentials between different areas and to minimize the risks to family livelihood.<sup>8</sup> By the 1990s, the concept of circular migration (although not the term) had spread to city and regional planners in both developing and advanced industrial countries: the difference between circular migrants and commuters is, after all, one of degree rather than kind.<sup>9</sup> Policies introduced in many member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) during the early 1990s to encourage labor market flexibility aimed to facilitate multiple and multi-directional (if not necessarily circular) moves within countries.<sup>10</sup> Over the next decade, the concept of circular migration entered discussions of international migration — notably along the US-Mexico border and within the European Union in relation to countries east and south of the EU.

Policy debate on circular migration began in earnest in the middle of the current decade, as the EU sought to develop both a ‘global approach to migration’ and a ‘neighborhood policy.’ At the same time, the United Nations initiated a global discussion on international migration at a “High-Level Dialogue” in 2006, which led to an ongoing Global Forum on Migration and Development starting in 2007. Circular migration was seen as a potentially valuable policy tool in both contexts, particularly attractive because it seemed to tap into a natural preference of many migrants (and their descendents) to return at least temporarily to their countries of origin or ancestry.

As states have sought to operationalize circular migration, analysts have been pushed to devise a working definition of what has historically been a flexible and intuitive concept. In the most literal way, circular migration refers to the process of leaving and then returning to one’s place of origin. This is the basic understanding of circular migration in academic literature on urbanization and internal migration. As policy makers began to think about circular migration not just as a spontaneously occurring phenomenon but as an arena for policy intervention, they sought a more specific definition that could distinguish this field of policy intervention from others, such as return migration and temporary migration. Return and temporary migration both

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<sup>8</sup> Oded Stark and David E. Bloom, “The New Economics of Labor Migration,” *American Economic Review* 75, No. 2 (May 1985): 173-178.

<sup>9</sup> David W. Drakakis-Smith, *The Third World City* (London: Routledge, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Jobs Study: Evidence, and Explanations. Part II: The Adjustment Potential of the Labor Market* (Paris: OECD, 1994).

are circular, in that migrants go back to their places of origin — but, in both, repatriation was conceived as the end-point at which mobility ceased. The new discussion of circular migration demanded a more dynamic concept.

A 2007 paper published by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) described circular migration as “a continuing, long-term and fluid movement of people among countries that occupy what is increasingly recognized as a single economic space.”<sup>11</sup> It recognized that circular migration could take many different forms, but put it firmly in the ambit of globalization. Both departure and return could be temporary or permanent, and many migrants would lead truly transnational lives that would engage them in both home and host countries as a matter of choice. Other migrants, however, would suffer various degrees of compulsion in leaving and/or returning to their original homes.

The first session of the Global Forum on Migration and Development, held in Brussels in June, 2007, included a roundtable on “How can circular migration and sustainable return serve as development tools?” (Session 1.4 of Roundtable 1). The background paper for that session defined circular migration as “the fluid movement of people between countries, including temporary or more permanent movement which, when it occurs voluntarily and is linked to the labor needs of countries of origin and destination, can be beneficial to all involved.”<sup>12</sup> This definition departs from the purely descriptive to incorporate an aspirational element of mutual benefit and voluntariness, which are by no means universal characteristics of circular migration.

The European Commission (EC) issued a Communication in May, 2007, which defined circular migration as “a form of migration that is managed in a way allowing some degree of legal mobility back and forth between two countries.”<sup>13</sup> Again, the emphasis on legal, managed migration is more aspirational rather descriptive, but it makes clear what the European Union intends circular migration policy to achieve.

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<sup>11</sup> Dovelyn Rannveig Agunias and Kathleen Newland, *Circular Migration and Development: Trends, Policy Routes, and Ways Forward* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, April 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Newland and Dovelyn Agunias, “How Can Circular migration and Sustainable Return Serve as Development Tools?” (background paper prepared for Roundtable 1.4, Global forum on Migration and Development, Brussels, July 2007), [http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/MigDevPB\\_041807.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/MigDevPB_041807.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

A subsequent Issues Paper on Circular Migration from the European Commission specifies two types of circular migration: of third country nationals settled in the EU returning to their countries of origin (labeled *outward circularity*) and of people resident in third countries of origin coming temporarily but repeatedly to the EU (labeled *inward circularity*). The EC has since been working with Member States of the EU and non-member countries to design and implement agreements focused on inward circulation. A few, notably Sweden, have also been consciously seeking to remove legal and administrative barriers to outward circulation.<sup>14</sup>

Philippe Fargues of the European University Institute proposes an even more prescriptive definition as an operational guide to circular migration policy in the European Union and Mediterranean Basin. He offers six criteria that “make migration circular”: It is temporary, renewable, circulatory (offers full freedom of movement between host and source country during each specified stay), legal, respectful of the rights of migrants, and managed in such a way as to match labor demand in one participating country with labor supply in another country.<sup>15</sup> He recognizes that additional criteria — such as enhancing migrants skills, providing for skill transfers to source countries, and mitigating the negative consequences of the brain drain — could also be included in the definition of circular migration.

A second paper from MPI, in 2008, attempted to further distinguish circular migration from more familiar temporary migration, or ‘guest worker’ programs, or a combination of temporary migration and return migration. It suggested that “circular migration denotes a migrants’ continuous engagement in both home and adopted countries; it usually involves both return and *repetition*.”<sup>16</sup>

Specifying a development content in circular migration, or at least mutual benefits for countries of origin and destination, is another way of distinguishing circular migration from the guest

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<sup>14</sup> Remarks by Eva Akerman-Borje, Director....., Swedish ministry of....., at a conference on .... In Athens, January 26, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Fargues, *Circular Migration: Is it relevant for the South and East of the Mediterranean?* (CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2008/40, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole [FI]: European University Institute, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Newland, Agunias, and Terrazas, as in Note 6.

worker programs of the past — which were wholly oriented toward the labor market needs of receiving countries. In fact, most policy discussions of circular migration since 2005 place it in the context of attempts to increase the development impact of migration.

Overall, there is as yet no formal definition, either legal or administrative, of circular migration and the term often means different things to different people. Some states question the need for a common, formally agreed definition of what should be a flexible, adaptable policy instrument. For operational purposes, however, states negotiating agreements or implementing policies that incorporate circular migration need a common understanding of what is meant by the term.

On a purely descriptive level, most contemporary working definitions of circular migration involve four dimensions: spatial, temporal, iterative and developmental.

- The *spatial dimension* (geography) includes at least two poles: the place of origin and the place of destination. A minority of circular migrants establish more than two poles of orientation: for example the Lebanese industrialist who has business headquarters in Nigeria, an ancestral base in Lebanon, and a family home in London.
- The *temporal dimension* (duration) can range from short-term moves — as short as several months for seasonal workers and up to several years for skilled temporary workers — to life-cycle moves, for example among people returning to their home countries to retire. The amount of time spent at each pole may also vary widely, for example among transnational entrepreneurs.
- The *iterative dimension* (repetition) includes more than one cycle. Migrants who make only one roundtrip between the places of origin and destination are normally described as return migrants. A more fluid pattern of back-and-forth movement, involving repetition of the cycle, is the distinguishing feature of circular migration as it is being discussed and debated in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Finally, the developmental dimension indicates that both the place of origin and the place of destination benefit from the movement of people back and forth between them and that policy interventions are designed to bring this about. A *human* development dimension specifies that the *migrants* benefit from circularity.

While analysts and policy makers may disagree on the parameters of these dimensions (how far a migrant must move to be a circular migrant, how long he or she must remain in each country, how many cycles are necessary and what the development contribution is), most definitions include these dimensions to some degree.

Many of the recent attempts to define circular migration, including most of those cited above, build policy objectives into the definitions. Conflating objectives and defining characteristics probably adds to the confusion about what circular migration really is. A common definition will be more useful if it avoids this pitfall, while programmatic objectives are clearly identified as such.

Whatever definition comes into common use should reflect awareness of the fact that the bulk of circular migration in the world takes place without reference to government policies. It is the result of the choices people make within the constraints that bind them, and a reflection of their capabilities.

### **III. Data on circular migration**

Global data on circular migration do not exist. Very few states record arrival *and* departure information about their own citizens and non-nationals, or about travelers' place of birth, destination and duration (or intended duration) of stay. Australia and New Zealand are among the few who do collect and record such data. Australian geographer Graeme Hugo has made a close study of Australia's data, and discovered *a high degree of circulation* between Australia, on the one hand, and the Asian-Pacific countries that are among the most important sources of its migrants. This includes non-permanent migration to Australia as well as non-permanent return migration from Australia back to Asian countries of origin, especially to North East Asia. Hugo's fieldwork in China and South Korea leads him to deduce that this pattern "reflects a considerable extent of bilocality with many Chinese and South Korea origin Australians maintaining work, family and housing in both countries and...circulating between them."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Graeme Hugo, "Migration between the Asia-Pacific and Australia—A Development Perspective," Paper prepared for Initiative for Policy Dialogue, Migration Task Force Meeting, Mexico City, 15-16 January, 2009, p. 17.

It is particularly interesting that this extensive circulation occurs although the Australian government has no programs or policies to encourage circular migration (except for a very recently introduced program for seasonal workers).

More important, Hugo concludes that “Australia is not a special case.”<sup>18</sup> Circulation is more the rule than the exception in migration patterns between the North and South, but this fact cannot be detected in the migration data collected by most countries. International mobility is much more complex than it is assumed to be in much of the conventional thinking—where the assumption often seems to be that migrants from poorer to richer countries are intent on remaining permanently in the country of destination, and must be compelled to circulate.

#### **IV. Policy interventions to obstruct or facilitate circulation**

Until recently, most discussions of circular migration involved “de facto” circular migration — that is, circular migration that occurs spontaneously as a result of migrants’ decisions, without government intervention. Although this type of circular migration occurs naturally, policy decisions can still influence it, either to facilitate or obstruct circulation.

Two of the most familiar examples of government policy interrupting spontaneous circular migration are drawn from the Mexico-US and Turkey-Germany migration corridors.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Mexican workers circulated back and forth across the US-Mexico border, often in line with seasonal demand for agricultural labor. Most often, they crossed without permission, although the lack of border enforcement during much of the period rendered this distinction moot. From 1942-1964, more than 4 million temporary labor contracts were concluded for Mexican agricultural workers through the Bracero Program; many of the participants returned to the US repeatedly for successive contracts. During the 1980s and 1990s, this historical pattern of circular migration was interrupted by the growing enforcement along the US-Mexico border by the United States and the unrealistically small number of visas available to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 30



low-skilled and seasonal workers. As the costs and risks associated with crossing the border illegally increased, a growing share of these formerly seasonal migrants decided to settle permanently in the United States, eventually bringing their families as well.<sup>19</sup> The shift of US employment growth away from agriculture to other less seasonal sectors — notably in construction and hospitality — also played a part in bringing about this change.

The case of Turkish guest workers in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s provides another example of how government policy has interrupted spontaneous circular migration. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Germany signed bilateral labor recruitment agreements with a number of countries in Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Yugoslavia) and North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria), and with Turkey. These agreements were designed exclusively to meet the needs of Germany's booming post-war economy, with little regard for the needs of the migrants or the countries of origin. Workers were expected to provide a ready source of labor when the economy grew and were expected to depart when they were no longer needed.

When Germany experienced its first postwar economic recession in 1967, the plan appeared to work: large numbers of guest workers returned home until the German economy revived. However, when a more severe recession hit Germany in 1973, guest workers began to settle permanently.<sup>20</sup> Apparently, what made the pivotal difference in the responses by guest workers was a change in German policy. In 1967, Germany continued its commitments under the bilateral labor recruitment programs (although new inflows slowed), but by 1974 Germany had abandoned the agreements. Many migrants might have preferred to wait out the recession at home, where they could survive through the support of family networks and where living costs were much lower. However, with the end of labor recruitment, many guest workers rationally decided to stay in Germany, knowing that if they left they would probably be unable to return.

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<sup>19</sup> Jorge Durand, Nolan J. Malone, and Douglas S. Massey, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003); Demetrios G. Papademetriou, "The Shifting Experience of Free Trade and Migration," in *NAFTA's Promise and Reality: Lessons from Mexico for the Hemisphere* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004); Elena Zúñiga Herra, Paula Leite Neves, and Luis Acevedo Prieto, *Mexico-United States Migration: Regional and State Overview* (Mexico, DF: Consejo Nacional de Población, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Randall Hansen, "Migration to Europe since 1945: Its History and its Lessons," *The Political Quarterly* 73, Supplemental Issue No. 1 (October 2003): 25-38.

Elsewhere, public policy can indirectly have the reverse effect, facilitating de facto circular migration. The widespread ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women had the unintended consequence of an explosion in the number of people entitled to dual citizenship. (The treaty requires states to allow women to pass down their nationality to their children on equal terms with men, so that most children with parents of different nationalities became entitled to the nationalities of both). Some states require that a person choose one and only one citizenship upon reaching the age of majority, but many states no longer enforce rules that force individuals to renounce dual or plural nationalities. Dual citizens are normally able to move easily between the countries in which they hold citizenship, and thus to be circular migrants if they so choose.

Not all policies to encourage circular migration lead to improvements in the quality of life. For instance, during the Apartheid era, South African officials established laws to ensure circulation of black internal migrants under the Influx Control and Group Areas Acts. While these laws ostensibly aimed to grant local autonomy to black populations, they were also used to prevent the settlement of black families in areas reserved for whites. Black male adults had to leave their impoverished communities to find work, and travel back if they wanted to see their families. According to researchers at the University of Witwatersrand, this sort of forced labor circulation resulted in rural poverty, fragmented families living in dense settlements, and the widespread absence of adult males.<sup>21</sup>

With respect to international migration, much of the discussion on how public policies can indirectly encourage circular migration has come from origin countries eager to mitigate the harmful effects of the brain drain and attract back emigrants and members of their diasporas. Increasingly, they have come to recognize that encouraging circulation by the diaspora often requires a minimum “enabling environment” in the country of origin. The most fundamental (and most difficult) elements of this are establishment of the rule of law, property rights, open and transparent government, lack of corruption and other attributes of good governance. Other,

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Collinson, Stephen Tollman, Kathleen Kahn, Samuel Clark and Michel Garenne, “Highly Prevalent Circular Migration: Households, Mobility and Economic Status in Rural South Africa,” in *Africa on the Move: African Migration and Urbanisation in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Marta Tienda, Sally Findley, Stephen Tollman, and Eleanor Preston-Whyte (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2006): 194-216.

migration-specific, enabling policies are diverse and can range from symbolic to highly practical. For instance, they include

- granting voting and property rights to expatriates,
- eliminating visa requirements for members of the diaspora who are citizens of another country,
- accepting dual citizenship,
- establishing investment information centers or ‘one-stop shops’ for diaspora investors,
- promoting transportation and other communications links between the country of origin and major diaspora hubs abroad (this includes building functional airports and highways,
- encouraging carrier competition on major air routes,
- establishing a competitive mobile telephone and data transfer industry, and so forth).

Many of these enabling policies are similar to policies that promote the integration of emerging economies with the rest of the world.

Destination countries can also promulgate policies that encourage de facto circular migration. These may include substantial investments in multinational regional economic integration, leading to the liberalization of labor mobility. More modest changes in visa regimes — for example, allowing multiple entry visas and guaranteed labor market access, even if only for certain groups such as the highly skilled — reduce the transaction costs of circulation. Fostering partnerships between specific enterprises or industries in countries of origin and destination may encourage employees to gain experience in both locations of activity. Other possible steps include guaranteeing pension portability between countries and the payment of health insurance benefits abroad.

The actual policy experience of circular migration by design is much thinner — but this may be changing. A number of developed and developing countries have recently expressed interest in circular migration pilot projects that occur within the framework of state-managed bilateral or multilateral agreements. Notably, in 2007, the European Commission endorsed circular migration as a tool that can both help address labor needs in EU member states and maximize the benefits of migration for countries of origin by facilitating skills transfers and mitigating the risks

of brain drain.<sup>22</sup> The island state of Mauritius has been particularly active in promoting a circular migration pilot; in July 2008 it signed an agreement with France to implement such a program, which is scheduled to start operating in the second half of 2009. (See Text box on page 21.)

## **V. What are the human development implications of circular migration?**

Circular migration is not intrinsically positive or negative in relation to human development; its impact depends upon the circumstances in which it occurs and the constraints that surround it. The MPI paper of 2007 identified four patterns of circular migration according to whether departure and return are temporary or permanent: (a) the permanent return of permanent migrants; (b) the temporary return of permanent migrants; (c) the permanent return of temporary migrants; and (d) the temporary return of temporary migrants. (Permanent migrants are those who have citizenship or permanent rights of residency in their adopted countries.) The first two of these (what the European commission paper calls “outward circularity”) represent the highest level of entitlement in relation to migration. Permanent residents and citizens of countries of destination, assuming that they retain the citizenship of their native countries, are entitled to enter both countries and therefore have great freedom to circulate— although permanent residents often face some limits on the amount of time they can be absent without losing residency rights. Temporary migration (inward circularity), on the other hand, often comes with a set of limitations imposed by the countries of destination.

The human-development lens distinguishes different types of circular migration according to the degree of individual choice: an initial distinction must be made between *de facto* circular migration and circular migration that occurs within the parameters of government programs. Within each category circular migration contributes in varying degrees to building capabilities, endowing migrants with entitlements, and creating the substantive freedom to choose the lives that migrants value.

### *A. De facto circular migration*

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<sup>22</sup> European Commission, *On circular migration and mobility partnerships between the European Union and third countries* (COM[2007] 248 final, Brussels, May 16, 2007).

Evidence from cases where migration is unconstrained suggests that circular migration is an attractive (and possibly preferred) option for many migrants. Surveys conducted by the World Bank in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union found that a strong majority of potential migrants would prefer short periods of work abroad, followed by return, to any other type of migration — upward of 60 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Georgia, Bulgaria, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, circular migration is the historically preferred pattern in West Africa where borders continue to be porous and immigration restrictions are unevenly enforced. Anthropologist David Rain observes that in the Hausa language there are 25 terms for spatial movement and all but one refer to circular migration of varying duration and purposes.<sup>24</sup>

A slightly different type of circular migration is the norm within some advanced industrial countries like the United States and within or among the member states of the European Union, where people change their place of residence often, but also retain ties and periodically return to their villages or regions of origin.<sup>25</sup> Examining inter-state migration in the US, economist Julie DaVanzo (1983) concluded that "(a) the farther the initial move, the likelier is a following repeat move, (b) initial moves apparently pressured by unemployment (and possibly based on inferior information) tend to be followed by return moves, (c) very young households are especially prone to return within a year or so of leaving, and (d) the less educated are the likeliest to return quickly. ... However, the most highly educated are the likeliest to move quickly onward."<sup>26</sup>

Circular migration has historical precedent within the African-American population of the United States, reaching back to the time when the descendants of slaves started to move out of the Deep South. Michael Piore's classic study Birds of Passage: Migrant labor in Industrial

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<sup>23</sup> Ali Mansoor and Bryce Quillin, eds., *Migration and Remittances: Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2007): 110.

<sup>24</sup> David Rain, *Eaters of the Dry Season* (New York: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> On the United States, see Julie DaVanzo, "Repeat Migration in the United States: Who Moves Back and Who Moves On?" *Review of Economics and Statistics* 65, No. 4 (November 1983): 552-59; on the EU, see Zuzana Gáková and Lewis Dijkstra, "Labour mobility between the regions of the EU-27 and a comparison with the USA," (European Commission, Directorate General for Regional Policy, Regional Focus no. 02/2008).

<sup>26</sup> Julie DaVanzo, "Repeat Migration in the United States: Who Moves Back and Who Moves On?" *Review of Economics and Statistics* 64, no. 4 (Nov. 1983): 552-59.

Societies describes the mobility patterns of African-Americans at the turn of the Twentieth century in terms that would be familiar to many international migrants from developing countries today:

"People were forever coming and going. They would work in the North for a while, come back to visit, to take care of a sick relative, attend a funeral, or dispose of a piece of property. Once home, they often stayed on, particularly if they could get a job or if it was summer and there was plenty of food on the farm. Often parents would bring their kids home to live with the grandparents in the South and then return North themselves to work. By the same token, people would go north planning only to visit, but then stay because they had found a boyfriend or a job."<sup>27</sup>

This kind of pattern is also consistent with observed patterns of international migration where migrants depart with a set objective (such as certain amount of savings), which may take them several migration cycles to achieve, and return permanently upon achieving that objective. For instance, Jean-Pierre Cassarino has observed this pattern among Maghrebi migrants in Europe.<sup>28</sup>

This natural preference for circular migration makes sense. For de facto temporary and seasonal migration, circular patterns allow workers to take advantage of dynamic regional employment differences and wage/cost-of-living differentials.<sup>29</sup> With respect to international migration, recent research by Michael Clemens, Claudio Montenegro and Lant Pritchett shows that a single worker can multiply his or her income dramatically by moving — what they call the “place premium”.<sup>30</sup>

Regional differences in wages, costs of living, and employment opportunities also exist within countries — notably within dynamic emerging economies such as Brazil, China, and India characterized by dualistic economies (often with dynamic, outwardly-oriented urban areas and

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<sup>27</sup> Michael J. Piore, *Bird of Passage: Migrant Labor in Industrial Societies* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979) pp. 159-60.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Pierre Cassarino, *Return Migrants to the Maghreb Countries: Reintegration and Development Challenges* (San Domenico di Fiesole [FI]: European University Institute, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> This hypothesis is known as the Harris-Todaro Model of migration. See J. Harris and M. Todaro, “Migration, Unemployment, and Development: A Two-Sector Analysis,” *American Economic Review* 60, no. 1 (1970): 126-42.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Clemens, Claudio E. Montenegro, and Lant Pritchett, *The Place Premium: Wage Differences for Identical Workers across the U.S. Border* (Center for Global Development Working Paper 148, Washington, DC, July 2008).

more traditional, rural interiors). China's recent economic growth illustrates this phenomenon: job growth concentrated along the country's coast has drawn internal migrants from the country's interior who return periodically to and maintain ties in their villages.<sup>31</sup> This process has raised incomes and improved living standards in some historically remote parts of that country.

Circular migration also reflects some workers' preferences in a post-industrial economy. In most advanced industrial countries job turnover has increased notably in recent decades.<sup>32</sup> While some of this shift may be due to changing employer preferences, it may also be attributed to changing worker preferences. As Guy Mundlak observes, "For the same reason that it can no longer be assumed that individuals build a career in a single workplace, it cannot be assumed that they build their career in a single country."<sup>33</sup> Circularity may also minimize the risks of migration. Writing on circulation among Turks in Germany, Amelie Constant and Klaus Zimmermann observe that circular migration "allows workers to take advantage of employment or investment opportunities as they appear both in the origin and destination country."<sup>34</sup>

While this form of de facto circular migration clearly expands the range of individual choices, consistent with human development objectives, its impact on human capabilities and their uses are more contested. Access to a broader labor market may allow circular migrants to better utilize their skills and training, and typically provides them with more income (which can then be invested in building human capital, often of their children). On the other hand, many temporary and seasonal migrants perform particularly unrewarding jobs and forego human capital investments in themselves as they work toward a predefined savings or career objective. Often this implies accepting long hours and poor working conditions.

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<sup>31</sup> Huang Ping and Zhan Shaohua, "Internal Migration in China: Linking it to Development," (paper presented at the Regional Conference on Migration and Development in Asia, Lanzhou, China, 14-16 March 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Steven J. Davis, John C. Haltiwanger, and Scott Schuh, *Job Creation and Destruction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Guy Mundlak, *Circular Migration in Israel: Law's Role in Circularity and the Ambiguities of the CM Strategy* (CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2008/32, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole (FI): European University Institute, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Amelie Constant and Klaus F. Zimmermann, *Circular Migration: Counts of Exits and Years Away from the Host Country* (Discussion Paper No. 2999, Institute for the Study of Labor, August 2007).

The seasonal influx of workers to urban areas — for example in China, India, and Brazil — can strain local infrastructure, lead to overcrowding, place excess demands on food supply, and damage the physical environment. In the regions of origin, periodic absenteeism can have harmful social implications for families and communities at origin. In a study on internal circular migration in Ecuador, Brad Jokisch concludes that circular migration “is blamed for numerous rural pathologies” including neglect of agriculture, lack of agricultural innovation, environmental degradation, damage to social organizations that sustain agriculture, and overburdening those who remain in the countryside.<sup>35</sup>

The challenges of family separation are a feature of international circular migration. Although temporary migration and seasonal migration (both de facto and managed) are often criticized for placing burdens on family and community life, they may also work to preserve and maintain families and communities by putting an economic “floor” under traditional ways of life. This is especially the case when the migrant decides the frequency and tenure of circulation. For instance, among indigenous communities in Southern Mexico, certain culturally important rights such as the right to burial in community cemeteries are contingent upon service to the community through periodic tenure on town councils. Accordingly, members of these communities who move to the United States for work are reported to return for periods ranging from one to two years to serve on municipal councils.<sup>36</sup>

Annual summer vacations in the country of origin — which are common, for example, among Algerians and Moroccans in France, and Lebanese in the United States —also strengthen families and communities by creating intergenerational bonds between grandparents and distant relatives who remain in the country of origin and their descendants and relatives (often second-generation youth) who were born and raised abroad and with vastly different formative experiences.<sup>37</sup> Notably, these annual trips are only possible where parents can afford sufficient vacation time (which usually means that they are either relatively wealthy and have secure jobs

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<sup>35</sup> Brad D. Jokisch, “From Labor Circulation to International Migration: The Case of South-Central Ecuador,” *Yearbook of the Conference of Latin American Geographers* 23 (1997): 63-75.

<sup>36</sup> Alicia M. Barabas, “Traspasando fronteras: los migrantes indígenas de México en Estados Unidos,” *Amérique latine, Histoire et Mémoire: Édition spéciale sur les migrations du Mexique et de la Guatemala*, Université Paris VIII, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>37</sup> The social science literature on this topic is sparse, but it is a regular theme in literary writing.



or are guaranteed vacation — for example, due to employment laws prevalent in Europe but not in North America).

Some of the most striking examples of circular migration as an expression of expanded human capabilities can be found among refugee communities whose members are permanently settled, with legal status, in a country of first asylum or resettlement and are able after many years — or even generations — to travel back to their countries of origin or ancestry without losing legal status in the country of refuge. Forced migration represents a dramatic reduction of capabilities, as refugees often have to leave behind all their economic assets, most of their social networks, the sources of their status and the emotional connections with their home communities. The ability to return permanently, temporarily, or part-time may restore some of these losses. Many refugees from Eastern and Central Europe have been able to reclaim family lands and assets since the collapse of the Soviet bloc and some have become active participants in political and economic life.<sup>38</sup> Second-generation Vietnamese-Americans have discovered their roots since the economic and political opening of Vietnam in the mid-1990s; some of them have invested profitably in Vietnam, particularly in the development of the travel and tourism sector. Sudanese, Liberian and Afghan refugees have returned to their home countries as technical advisors, election observers, and in some cases, senior officials.

#### *B. Circular migration within the parameters of government programs*

Some governments have attempted to establish circular migration patterns within the framework of managed programs. These programs are typically designed to meet specific policy objectives, which may or may not correspond to migrants' personal preferences. As a result, the degree to which these circular migration programs expand individual choice varies and, in most cases, is more ambiguous than is the case for de facto circular migration.

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Vera and Donald Blinken, *Vera and the Ambassador: Escape and Return* (Albany, Statue University of New York Press, 2009).

Most contemporary government-managed circular migration programs allow individuals temporary access to a country's labor market, although they may be sensitive to origin-country development needs and migrants' rights. Some temporary work programs, however, restrict individual choice dramatically with respect to migrants' access to the labor market, tenure in the destination country, work hours and conditions, and in some cases, social relations and religious expression.<sup>39</sup> That said, many migrants are willing, in the absence of better alternatives, to accept these conditions in exchange for the opportunity to work abroad and earn an income higher than that available to them at home. In other words, they decide to live temporarily and voluntarily with limits on one set of capabilities in exchange for another set that they deem more valuable (in this case, higher income and the opportunity to increase their family's living standards and human capital).

The degree to which these government-managed circular migration programs contribute to building capabilities and enable or hinder their full use is also ambiguous and varies widely. Often the conditions of temporary work permits limit workers to a single employer, which may hinder vocational mobility and "lock" foreign workers in to entry level or basic-skill positions. This criticism has been levied against most seasonal agricultural worker programs, for instance, including circular migration programs in Canada and New Zealand.

In many respects, however, circular migration programs like Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program and Spain's seasonal programs promote vocational upward mobility more than traditional, single-entry temporary work programs by allowing employers and employees to develop long-term relationships and allowing foreign workers to accumulate firm-specific capital. Long-term employment relationships enable employers to invest in the skills and wellbeing of their workforce, which benefits both employers and workers. Spain's program notably expands the migrants' options by making it possible for a seasonal laborer who has completed four cycles of seasonal migration in Spain to enter a fast-track procedure for permanent residency.

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<sup>39</sup> On the example of Asian workers in the Middle East, see Nasra M. Shah, "Restrictive Labour Immigration Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Effectiveness and Implications for Sending Asian Countries," (paper prepared for the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, Beirut, 15-17 May 2006).

Circular migration is often criticized for its social impacts on families and communities – although this criticism risks assuming that the observer knows better than the migrant what way of life has value. Indeed, due to restrictions placed on family reunification, circular migration programs frequently separate families temporarily. Most researchers and policy makers tacitly recognize that one of the most effective tools to ensure that immigrant workers return to their countries of origin is to select young workers with families who must remain in the countries of origin. In this respect, family is effectively used as “bond” to guarantee return. However, some policy makers recognize that there are more positive (and less ethically dubious) mechanisms to ensure circularity, such as guarantees of repeat labor market access for those who comply with the rules of the programs.

More positive still are circular migration programs that are designed to add value to the migration experience, by facilitating the migrant’s accumulation of human and financial capital. The farmers’ union in Spain, through its philanthropic foundation, provides a welcoming program that offers newly arriving seasonal workers from Colombia with information about health care and other services, remittance transfers and labor laws. It also assists those who wish to set up small and medium-sized enterprises in Colombia with technical assistance and co-financing. By 2006, about 1200 Colombian workers had participated in the program.

Circular migration programs can be designed to add value to the migrant experience, and thereby increase the migrants’ capabilities, in a number of ways. These include making available training opportunities that augment existing professional or vocational skills, teach new skills such as financial management, or provide language training. In addition, programs may help migrants to amass financial capital through appropriate savings vehicles, co-financing, or matching schemes. The plot project with France initiated by the government of Mauritius strongly emphasizes value added in the design of the project, along with the social and economic reintegration of the returning migrants.

### **The Mauritius-France Circular Migration Pilot**

The government of Mauritius has integrated circular migration into its national economic planning. In a pilot project with France, scheduled to begin in 2009, three categories of visas will be available to participating Mauritians: one-to-five year visas for the highly skilled; one-year work experience visas for university students; and – most remarkably – “migration and development” visas covering 61 occupations and good for up to 30 months.

The pilot project emphasizes entrepreneurship, and includes training programs jointly financed by France and Mauritius. France will provide additional technical and financial assistance to help returning migrants set up businesses (this may include training, purchase of equipment, and/or financing), and Mauritius is seeking donor assistance to establish a facility to match migrants’ savings and investments. The newly established National Empowerment Foundation in Mauritius is a public-private partnership that will support the enterprises of returned migrants.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Few would argue that migration does not bring about losses of capabilities and entitlements as well as gains. Circular migration can mitigate some kinds of losses — for example, long-term separation from family or a home community— while still enabling the pursuit of the gains from migration. In the case of forced migrants, circulation signals capabilities regained: the ability to choose to return from exile safely in itself represents a loss restored.

Circular migration is not a new phenomenon; it has existed for a long time outside the realm of government policies. In a sense, it has only become a policy issue since governments have started to expend great efforts to control movement across their borders in ways that make spontaneous circulation more difficult. Spontaneous circulation has been disrupted in many regions as control efforts have had the perverse effect of locking in migrants who might prefer to

return home periodically. In so doing, control efforts have deprived migrants as well as the origin and destination countries of the benefits of flexibility in the allocation of productive resources. Economic migrants, if allowed, will often allocate themselves to places where their labor is in demand. If that demand dissipates, many will choose to spend time out of the labor market in their home countries, where affective ties are strong and the cost of living is likely to be lower. In 2001, for example, Argentina's economic crisis sparked a massive return of Bolivian migrants to their home country — but by 2003, most had returned as economic prospects in Argentina brightened.<sup>40</sup>

Many migrants make the conscious decision to accept the costs of migration in exchange for accessing more dynamic labor markets and better wages. Studies also show that the additional income of migrants contributes to their families' well being, their children's health and education, and inter-generational mobility. Individual migrants also benefit when they are able to acquire additional skills or experience, or fully exercise existing skills — in addition to the psychological bonus of contributing to their family's well being.

Circular migration challenges policy makers to devise innovative mechanisms that allow workers, employers, and communities to develop permanent relationships and long-term investments in an increasingly mobile global society.

The key concepts of human development, drawn from the version of social-choice theory articulated by Amartya Sen, include *capability*, *entitlement*, and *freedom*. All three are highly relevant to assessment of the human development impact of circular migration.

Circular migration promotes capability, or the opportunity to chose a life that one values, when migrants have the highest degree of choice about when and where they move, how long they stay, and how they occupy themselves during their sojourn.

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<sup>40</sup> Patricia Fagan and Micah Bump, "Remittances between neighboring countries in Latin America", in Donald F. Terry and Steven R. Wilson, *Beyond Small change: Making Migrant Remittances Count*, (Washington: Inter-American Development Bank, 2005), pp.219-244.

It is most positive in conveying entitlements when migrants' legal status is secure, which enhances the prospect they will be treated as legitimate members of both home and destination societies. The ability to migrate legally reduces the risks and, usually, the costs of migration. It also enhances the migrant's ability to activate protection of their rights and claim the social benefits for which legal residents are eligible.

Sen identifies one of the features of freedom as the ability to help people "to achieve what we would choose to achieve in our respective private domains."<sup>41</sup> Circular migration in a context of choice removes some of the Manichean choices that migrants often face—whether to give priority to family or job, to forsake opportunity or cultural roots, to contribute to the development of one's own country or another, to see a child grow up or to ensure that he or she grows up healthy, well-nourished and educated. In other words, it increases their chances of enjoying freedom, as Sen defines that state.

As argued earlier in this essay, circular migration is not always positive. When it reflects a lack of opportunity in the place of origin, when occupational mobility is unavailable and meaningful savings are impossible, and when circularity is enforced rather than chosen, it is reasonable to speak of 'negative circularity'. Positive circularity, by contrast, obeys the logic of economic activity and family needs in a global economy, reflecting the reality of transnational lives. It offers an expansion of choice and flexibility.

At best, return under these circumstances is a response to opportunities in the country of origin — as appeared to be the case among more than 1200 returnees to India and China from the United States surveyed by Vivek Wadhwa and his co-authors in a recent study for the Kaufmann Foundation.<sup>42</sup> The study found that the major motivations for the return of these respondents, who had studied or worked in the United States, were career opportunities, family ties, and the quality of life in the country of origin, rather than the difficulty of getting a visa or the loss of a job. Over one-third of the Chinese and 27 percent of the Indians in the sample were citizens or

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<sup>41</sup> Sen, *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Vivek Wadhwa et al, *America's Loss is the World's Gain: America's New Immigrant Entrepreneurs, Part IV*, Research Report, Ewing Marion Kaufmann Foundation, 2009. the survey was based on a non-random sample, and likely biased toward younger returnees and those in technology-oriented occupations.

legal permanent residents of the United States and about one-quarter in each group said they were likely to return to the United States at some point.

The policy imperatives for positive circularity that contributes to human development are by now clear — although not easy to implement. They include, first, steps to remove disincentives to “outward” circulation:

- instituting secure and flexible residency rights that are not annulled by lengthy absence
- simplifying application procedures for entry, permanent residency, and naturalization
- reforming regulations that discourage or complicate voluntary return
- guaranteeing access to pension rights acquired in the country of destination
- extending some citizenship-like rights to expatriates, including full property rights
- recognizing dual nationality

A second set of measures, to make “inward” circularity more positive for human development would include:

- multiple re-entry visas for migrants who have jobs or job offers<sup>43</sup>
- flexible work contracts
- portable visas (allowing migrants to change employers without losing the visa)
- training programs that enhance migrants’ vocational and life skills
- re-integration programs for returned migrants
- programs for systematic cooperation between enterprises in origin and destination countries

There is nothing predestined about the relationship between circular migration and human development. But policies that broaden migrants’ ability to exercise choice in their patterns of mobility are likely to forge a sustainable and positive link.

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<sup>43</sup> The French government, for example, gives seasonal workers three-year visas that allow the holders to work in France for six months per year, to go home in the off-season and to return on the same permit, which is renewable without limit.