

# GRITIM

Working Paper Series

Number 11, Spring 2012

*Overcoming the ethical dilemmas of skilled migration? An analysis of international narratives on the "brain drain"*

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### ***Abstract***

Migration-related issues have, since approximately 2000, been the object of increased attention at the international level. This has led, among other things, to the production of international narratives, which aim both at understanding migration and at proposing policy recommendations on how to address it, with the objective of improving the governance of migration at the global level. But this implies overcoming dilemmas stemming from the diverging interests of states and other actors (like NGOs and the private sector). This article examines the way in which international migration narratives address skilled migration, which is characterised by some of the clearest political trade-offs between stakeholders. It argues that these narratives attempt to speak to all parties and conciliate contradictory arguments about what should be done, in order to discursively overcome policy dilemmas and create a consensus. While this is line with the mandate of international organizations, it depoliticises migration issues.

### ***Keywords***

Skilled migration, International Organisations, International narratives on migration.

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## **Introduction**

Over the last decade, international migration has been the object of a substantial amount of attention at the international level. International organisations (IOs), in particular, have produced several ambitious reports on the topic, in which they attempt to outline what could (or should) be the core orientations of governments’ migration policies. The underlying assumption is that migration is a major global issue that has yet to be properly addressed by states and the international community; existing approaches would fail to produce optimal results, especially as far as their impact on development is concerned. Unlike other issues of cross-border significance, migration policymaking would also suffer from a lack of cooperation between states. In IOs’ attempts to improve migration policies, a first and necessary step is the production of narratives in order to develop a shared understanding of the challenges and to outline possible responses.

This article examines the way these narratives address the issues raised by the migration of high-skilled workers. This type of migration provides for some of the deepest dilemmas faced by IOs in trying to elaborate common policy principles. The migration of skilled workers (including engineers, researchers, teachers, doctors or nurses) is commonly associated with the negative consequences of the ‘brain drain’; it raises a range of economic, political and ethical questions regarding, for example, developed states’ role in attracting the ‘best and brightest’ from poorer countries; its impact on welfare and development among those left behind; or the respective role of markets and governments in global segments of the world’s labour market. If IOs want to promote their responses to these issues, they first need to address them at a discursive level and produce a narrative that overcomes these dilemmas.

This article is structured in the following way. It first describes current attempts to improve the governance of international migration, and the obstacles thereto (section 1). It then examines the role of discourses in this process (section 2), and presents the corpus of reports upon which our analysis is based (section 3). Section 4 provides an overview of the debates surrounding the brain drain and of the different arguments developed since the issue emerged several decades ago. In this context, IOs display an overall optimistic interpretation of the outcomes of migration at large (section 5), which leads them to challenge the pessimistic views on the impact of brain drain (section 6). We then turn to their policy recommendations (section 7), stressing their aspirational nature. Finally, section 8 examines how these narratives conciliate the respective role of states and of the private sector in skilled migration dynamics.

## Global governance and international migration

International migration is by nature a transnational phenomenon that creates interdependency between states; yet, no multilateral framework exists to regulate the governance of migration flows at the international level. As many observers have noted, there is no single agency devoted to migration; the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) only addresses refugee issues and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is situated outside the United Nations, while other migration-related issues (such as trafficking or migrants' human/labour rights) are dealt with by other organisations<sup>1</sup> – thus leading to fragmentation and competition (A. Betts, 2011; K. Koser, 2010). In addition, the normative framework is weak, as few states have ratified the relevant international law instruments pertaining to migration (A. Pécoud, 2009). To a large extent therefore, migration remains an issue of state sovereignty and is governed in a predominantly unilateral manner.

The last two decades, however, have witnessed increasing international attention being paid to migration-related issues. The topic was for instance seriously discussed at the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and, since around 2000, several initiatives have addressed international migration. They include the setting up of the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) in 2003, the organisation of a High-Level on International Migration and Development at the United Nations in 2006, the creation of a yearly Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) in 2007, and other state or non-state initiatives such as the Bern Initiative (2001) and the Hague Process on Refugees and Migration (2000).<sup>2</sup> Developments took place at the regional level as well: migration became an issue for the European Union, while so-called Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs) were created throughout the world (C. Thouez and F. Channac, 2006).

The major assumption behind these initiatives is that greater coordination between states would enable migration policies to achieve better outcomes. Unilateral approaches would fail or lead to suboptimal results. Core issues in these debates include

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<sup>1</sup> These include the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

<sup>2</sup> Other examples include the appointment of Special Representative on migration by the UN Secretary-General, or the creation of the Global Migration Group in 2006, which brings together International organisations involved in migration-related issues (see Newland 2010 for an overview of these initiatives).

the relationship between migration and development (through remittances and diasporas notably), the fight against human trafficking, interstate cooperation (especially to enhance governments’ ability to address migration), the protection of migrants in vulnerable situations, or other topics drawing increasing attention (such as the impact of climate change on human mobility). Skilled migration is a key element therein: it is a potential challenge to the development of sending regions, while affecting the enjoyment of human rights among left-behind populations (in the case of the migration of health professionals, for example).

Yet, as A. Betts and L. Cerna (2011) argue, a multilateral approach to skilled migration faces important obstacles. High-skilled labour migration has distributive consequences, usually benefiting receiving states while imposing costs upon sending countries. The interdependence between governments is therefore asymmetrical, which is further reinforced by the fact that sending countries have little control over the emigration of trained workers and are therefore largely powerless. In addition (and unlike low-skilled migration), receiving countries tend to see skilled migration as desirable and – given the limited supply of skilled workers available – to compete to attract them. This is unsupportive of cooperation mechanisms, either among destination states, or between them and sending countries. While global migration governance is in general difficult to develop, the obstacles are particularly severe in the case of skilled migration, which raises the question of how international discourses address this type of migration.

### **Narratives of international migration**

A major dynamic in global governance is the elaboration of narratives to frame a given issue and states’ possible responses to it. Governance indeed implies the cooperation of a wide range of actors, including not only governments and IOs, but also NGOs, civil society groups and the private sector, which are expected to converge upon certain principles. But in the absence of a supranational actor endowed with authority over all stakeholders, this process cannot rely on top-down power relations, but only on participants’ adherence to the rules. This does not, of course, mean that relationships between actors are on equal footing, but nevertheless points to the need for a set of common ideas on what is at stake and what should be done – hence the necessity of repeated contacts and debates between parties (such as the GFMD) and of the existence of internationally agreed-upon narratives (J. N. Rosenau and E.-O. Czempiel, 1992).

It is in this context that one can understand the high number of international reports devoted to migration in the last decade. Examples include the six *World Migration Reports* produced by the IOM (between 2000 and 2011), the 2009 *Human Development Report* (UNDP, 2009), as well as the reports produced by the initiatives listed above (GCIM, GFMD, HLD, Bern Initiative, The Hague Process, etc.). These reports have two objectives: assessing what migration is (trends, dynamics, impact, etc.) and how it could be addressed (policymaking). The mandate of the GCIM was, for example, “to provide the framework for the formulation of a coherent, comprehensive and global response to the issue of international migration” (GCIM, 2005: vii).

In other words, narratives are to elaborate the analytical and ideological foundations of potential mechanisms of global migration governance, by – on paper at least – overcoming states’ diverging concerns and the dilemmas and trade-offs associated with them. This is clear in the so-called ‘triple win’ objective, according to which sending and receiving states, along with migrants themselves, would benefit from migration. This is also in line with IOs’ mandate, which is to provide governments with, on the one hand, expertise on global issues and, on the other, normative guidance and support in policy-formulation. This is also one of their major strengths: as M. N. Barnett and M. Finnemore write, “even when they lack material resources, IOs exercise power as they constitute and construct the social world” (1999: 700).

This constructivist approach underlines the fact that international narratives do not only study migration or reflect existing views. Confronted with an absence of shared beliefs and principles, they actively struggle to construct a ‘global’ perspective that hardly existed before their intervention. In doing so, they make migration legible at the international level – and thus transform an issue long associated with national sovereignty into a potentially ‘global’ challenge requiring ‘global’ governance (J. M. Amaya-Castro, 2012).

### **The corpus**

We examine the way international narratives address skilled migration, and how these narratives may provide an analytical and normative basis to overcome the obstacles to the ‘governance’ of this phenomenon. Our corpus is composed of major international reports on migration; it was designed to reflect the perspectives of the major players in the field, including key IOs (World Bank, World Health Organization, World Trade Organization, ILO, IOM, UNDP) and other important international



initiatives (GCIM, The Hague Process). The reports are the following, in chronological order:

1. Declaration of the Hague on the future of refugee and migration policies (UN, 2002)
2. World Trade Report 2004 (WTO, 2004)
3. Report of the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM, 2005)
4. World Migration Report 2005 (IOM, 2005)
5. ‘International migration and development’, Report of the UN Secretary-General (UN, 2006)
6. World Health Report 2006 (WHO, 2006)
7. ILO’s Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration (ILO, 2006)
8. World Development Report 2007 (World Bank, 2007)
9. Human Development Report 2009 (UNDP, 2009)
10. World Development Report 2009 (World Bank, 2009)

Our analysis does not emphasise the possible differences between these reports, but considers them as a single corpus in which convergence is more important than divergence. This may be run against long-standing oppositions: for example, the work of the UNDP relies on the notion of ‘human’ development (inspired by Amartya Sen), which contrasts explicitly with the more orthodox ‘Washington consensus’-inspired understanding of development used by Bretton Woods institutions like the World Bank. Yet, while the intellectual and ideological assumptions behind these approaches are unquestionably different, their approach to skilled migration is quite similar and cuts across most reports. This echoes what P. Utting (2006) calls the ‘compromise’ between IOs, which is at the heart of the so-called ‘post Washington consensus’: neoliberal or ‘capitalist’ institutions (and most notably the World Bank) have progressively incorporated ‘social’ and ‘political’ elements in their work (such as empowerment, social capital, the role of institutions, poverty, gender, etc.), while organizations involved in rights and protection (like the ILO or the OHCHR) have ceased questioning the premises of capitalism, while still criticizing some of its outcomes (in terms of, for example, human/labour rights violations or inequalities).

### **The ‘brain drain’ debate**

The notion of ‘brain drain’ was first developed in the UK in 1963, to refer to the emigration of British scientists to North America. The term was subsequently widely used and applied to migration from poor regions to the Western world; it represents a pessimistic interpretation of the impact of skilled migration, understood as a loss of resources for sending states, and therefore as both a consequence and a cause of underdevelopment. The key promoters of this approach were the governments of sending countries, along with researchers and experts, who denounced the cost of brain drain and sought ways to compensate for it, for example through the ‘Bhagwati tax’ (J. N. Bhagwati and W. Dellafar, 1973).

According to de Haas, “discursive shifts in the scholarly and policy debate on migration and development are an integral part of more general paradigm shifts in social theory” (2010: 2). The negative perception of skilled migration in those years thus corresponded to the predominance of the historical-structural Marxist paradigm in social sciences; it was also influenced by ‘dependency thinking’, which challenged modernisation theories by arguing that contact with Western capitalism created (rather than solved) underdevelopment in the Third World, as well as by Wallerstein’s world-systems theory and its emphasis on the imbalanced relationships between world regions. This negative paradigm started to be challenged at the beginning of the nineties. The stress was put on the benefits of skilled migration for sending countries, through remittances, the role of diasporas in economic and political development, return (or ‘circular’) migration, and the positive consequences of emigration options on the education and training prospects of populations in regions of departure. This led to the emergence of the notions of ‘brain gain’ and ‘brain circulation’, and to two major positions.

The first attempted to incorporate both the negative and positive views in order to achieve balanced understandings of the relationships between skilled migration and development. The purpose was to correct the over-negative interpretations without dismissing them, while taking into account the possible gain effects, with an emphasis on the complexity of the issue and the variations between times and regions. According to H. de Haas (2010), this was influenced by the crisis of the historical-structuralism approach in social sciences, by the diffusion of post-modernist thinking and by the emergence of new approaches, which recognized the possibility for individuals to display agency and actively change social structures. The ‘poor’, then, would no longer be a passive victim of structural forces, but an actor who can seek to improve his/her

livelihood. Rather than a flight from poverty, emigration would represent a livelihood strategy by individuals and households (O. Stark, 1991).

The second position is characterised by a predominantly optimistic understanding of skilled migration and has become increasingly influential over the last decade. It has taken the form of interest in diasporas’ involvement, return migration, and remittances (D. Kapur, 2004). This has been accompanied by a trend to speak of ‘mobility’ or ‘circulation’, terms that are thought to be less static than ‘migration’. The argument is that, in an era of globalisation, migration (and especially the ‘mobility’ of the highly-skilled) would be a normal process, no longer associated with a loss, but with the ‘circulation’ of trained workers within a global labour market. IOs have played a role in promoting this optimistic paradigm, which is in line with their ‘triple-win’ objective (A. Gamlen, 2010).

The pessimistic paradigm has not disappeared, however, as these different views do not follow each other chronologically but rather coexist within academic and policy debates. Among researchers and experts, recent production displays varying mixes of these paradigms (see, for example, J. Adams and H. Richard, 2003). NGOs, by contrast, regularly recall the negative consequences of brain drain.<sup>3</sup> IOs tend to be more optimistic, while nevertheless regularly acknowledging the negative consequences of skilled migration. We now turn to a closer examination of the ways in which they articulate their arguments with respect to the brain drain.

### **A positive approach to migration**

Overall, IOs’ narratives develop a positive understanding of international migration and of its consequences. The following statement by the ILO is quite representative of the general tone adopted by international reports:

“Labour migration can have many beneficial elements for those countries which send and receive migrant workers, as well as for the workers themselves. It can assist both origin and destination countries in economic growth and development” (ILO, 2006: 3).

Both skilled and unskilled migration would be potentially useful and positive:

“The traditional distinction between skilled and unskilled workers is in certain respects an unhelpful one, as it fails to do justice to the complexity of international

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Oxfam (2007) and Physicians for Human Rights (2004).

migration. For example, many countries are currently eager to recruit migrants who are specialists in information technology and engineering, but they are equally eager to attract migrants who are able to provide high-quality care to elderly people and children. While they may have different levels of educational achievement, all of them could be legitimately described as essential workers” (GCIM, 2005: 7).

Developed states would need migration “to address the economic and social challenges presented by their ageing and diminishing populations” (GCIM, 2005: 16). For sending states, migration “would yield enormous benefits ... in the form of increased remittances, diaspora investment and the transfer of knowledge” (*ibid.*). And for migrants, “human mobility can be hugely effective in raising a person’s income, health and education prospects” (UNDP, 2009: 1); moreover, “being able to decide where to live is a key element of human freedom” (*ibid.*). Logically, therefore, these reports welcome more migration. The UNDP, for example, invites governments “to reduce restrictions on movement within and across their borders” (*ibid.*).

While this positive appreciation seems to run against dominant views on the need to control and restrict migration, it is worth stressing that IOs systematically develop normative guidelines regarding *how* migration should be regulated in order to be beneficial. Migration may have positive outcomes, but only insofar as it is ‘managed’ properly: “Managed migration offers great potential” (UN, 2002: 4). This excludes approaches based on *laissez-faire* or ‘open borders’; the GCIM calls for a ‘well-regulated liberalisation of the global labour market’ (2005: 17). IOs’ task is then precisely to inform (or instruct) states on the way they are to apprehend migration to make it a positive process. This proper regulation of migration is regularly viewed through a ‘management’ lens, with the clear economic connotation of this term (M. Geiger and A. Pécoud, 2010).

A core assumption behind this positive appreciation of migration is that sending and receiving states are in complementary situations: “the former are running short of working-age people, while the latter have such people to spare” (GCIM, 2005: 15). This would create a convergence of interests in ‘regulated’ migration channels from poor to rich countries. But skilled migration challenges this assumption, as sending countries actually lack workers in sectors such as health or education. The health situation in many countries is thus considered as “of particular concern” (UN, 2006: 60); indeed, “the public health sectors in several countries have large vacancy rates” (World Bank,

2007: 192), which “has seriously impeded the delivery of health services to local populations” (GCIM, 2005: 24). The WHO even describes health workers’ flows as “fatal flows”, adding that “when a country has a fragile health system, the loss of its workforce can bring the whole system close to collapse and the consequences can be measured in lives lost” (2006: 101).

On the other hand, the same reports seem to consider that skilled migration is an unavoidable process that is already well-established. “Industrialized states” are “currently confronted with shortages of personnel in high-value and knowledge-based sectors of the economy such as health, education and information technology”; being “unable to recruit, train and retain the necessary personnel at home”, they are “turning to the global labour market in order to meet their human resource needs” (GCIM, 2005: 13). In other words, skilled migration would be a normal feature of overall positive migration dynamics, while nevertheless challenging the triple-win ideal that underlies IOs’ narratives.

### **From pessimism to optimism**

The result of this ambivalent attitude is that reports acknowledge pessimistic views, but immediately challenge them. Reports thus feature the strange coexistence of different interpretations of skilled migration. For example, the UN Secretary-General notes that:

“Small national economies are most vulnerable to ‘brain drain’, particularly in such crucial sectors as health and education ... These countries need assistance both to train enough skilled workers and to retain them, since crushing workloads, lack of proper supplies, limited career prospects, professional isolation and inadequate pay contribute to a low rate of retention of skilled personnel” (UN, 2006: 14).

Yet, a few lines below, one can read that:

“The migration of skilled migrants has a number of positive aspects. Migrants have the opportunity of acquiring or improving skills and experience abroad and, even if they stay abroad, may prove as investors, philanthropists, bearers of new knowledge or promoters of trade and cultural exchange, to be valuable resources for their country of origin” (UN, 2006: 14-15).

The same dynamic can be found in the Hague Declaration:

“The process of globalisation is introducing new dimensions in the labour market, in particular the demand for highly skilled workers, which raises the considerable challenge of brain drain from poor to rich countries” (UN, 2002: 13).

But:

“[Skilled migrants] ... send money back to their relatives ... Employment in countries of destination results in the generation of billions of dollars annually, far exceeding official development assistance. Skilled migrants who have settled in other countries, especially the more advanced economies, are to be encouraged to share their knowledge and other resources for the development of their country of origin. Many examples exist of successful cooperation and networks between migrants, such as scientists and technologists, in the interest of the countries they have left” (*ibid.*).

According to T. Van Dijk (2006), a discourse is more convincing if it establishes a common moral ground with its audience. A message is difficult to promote if it directly contradicts some of the readers’ assumptions, beliefs or values. This calls for a discursive strategy that first meets what the audience expects, before turning to the introduction of new, different or challenging arguments. From this perspective, and as the examples above make clear, the pessimistic argument represents the initial message; in the first stage of the argument, the reports regret the losses incurred by ‘brain drain’ and by recognising that this is a serious problem. In line with the *captatio benevolentiae* rhetorical strategy, this establishes an ideological and political background centred on development, human rights or global justice, which is presumably in line with what the audience expects from IOs. It is only in a second stage that reports turn to ‘new’ policy recommendations based on remittances and the development potential of diasporas. This points to the tactical use of pessimistic ‘brain drain’ arguments to support the introduction of optimistic views. A closer examination of the recommendations put forward by these reports confirms this trend.

### **Ethical recruitment versus circular migration**

The reports evoke two main policy orientations with respect to skilled migration. The first pertains to so-called ‘ethical recruitment’ practices, which aim at intervening in the volume or nature of migrant flows to make them less harmful. The second is captured by calls for ‘circular migration’, to avoid the definite loss incurred by

permanent migration and foster migrants’ contribution to their country of origin. The first orientation is present but contested, while the second is the object of almost unanimous agreement.

The ILO, for example, calls for “adopting measures to mitigate the loss of workers with critical skills, including by establishing guidelines for ethical recruitment” (ILO, 2006: 30). The UN Secretary-General similarly asks “high-income countries” to “refrain (directly or through recruitment agencies) from actively recruiting skilled personnel in countries that are already experiencing skill shortages” (UN, 2006: 19), as well as to “actively support the formation of human capital in those countries” (UN, 2006: 62). The same point is made by the WHO:

“Receiving countries have a responsibility to ensure that recruitment of workers from countries with severe workforce shortages is sensitive to the adverse consequences. The significant investments made in training health care professionals and the immediate impact of their absence through migration must figure more prominently as considerations among prospective employers and recruitment agencies. Discussions and negotiations with ministries of health, workforce planning units and training institutions, similar to bilateral agreements, will help to avoid claims of “poaching” and other disreputable recruitment behavior” (WHO, 2006: 103).

This ‘ethical’ approach has motivated the adoption, in 2010, of the WHO Code of Practice for the international recruitment of health personnel. This instrument coexists with other codes of practices and guidelines elaborated by national authorities, professional associations and international bodies.<sup>4</sup>

But according to C. Merçay (2010), these normative efforts are challenging as they run into the conflicting interests of WHO’s Member-States, which explains the difficulties faced by this organization in reaching a consensus. In addition, calls for ethical recruitment also run against the valorisation of migration discussed above and are therefore controversial. The GCIM recognizes that skilled migration leads to a ‘serious loss’ for health and education sectors, but argues that ethical recruitment would ‘not be consistent with human rights principles’, ‘run counter to the globalizing tendency of the labour market’ and ‘be very difficult to put into practice’ (2005: 24-25).

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<sup>4</sup> Examples include UK’s ‘Codes of Practice for NHS Employers Involved in the Recruitment of Healthcare Professionals’ (2001) and the Commonwealth’s ‘Code of Practice for the International Recruitment of Health Workers’ (2003).



Moreover, “it is also doubtful that the codes of conduct some destination countries have formulated in an attempt to introduce a degree of self-regulation in the recruitment of foreign professionals are effective” (2005: 25). The GCIM even calls for *more* skilled migration for the sake of economic growth and competitiveness; “governments and employers should jointly review current barriers to the mobility of highly educated personnel, with a view to removing those which are unnecessarily hindering economic competitiveness” (GCIM, 2005: 20).

Reports also briefly mention other strategies to prevent (or compensate for) skilled migration, but reject them all. This is the case with ‘Bhagwati tax’-mechanisms: according to the GCIM, “calls for states that recruit foreign professionals to provide direct financial compensation to the countries from which those personnel come are not practicable” (2005: 25). Attempts to prevent the mobility of skilled professionals are also rejected: “the Commission has serious doubts about quick-fix solutions that would seek to bar professional personnel from leaving their own country and finding employment elsewhere” (*ibid.*); indeed, “blaming the loss of skilled workers on the workers themselves largely misses the point, and restraints on their mobility are likely to be counter-productive - not to mention the fact that they deny the basic human right to leave one’s own country” (UNDP, 2009: 3).

By contrast, reports are largely unanimous in calling for ‘circulation’ to address the negative consequences of skilled migration. The World Bank rejects the dichotomy between ‘drain’ and ‘gain’ and retains only the notion of ‘circulation’: “Critics of the ‘brain drain–brain gain’ debate point out that it ignores real-world patterns of international migration. Skilled workers do not ‘drain away’ as much as ‘circulate’ among countries in the world economy” (2009: 168). The GCIM also notes that “the old paradigm of permanent migrant settlement is progressively giving way to temporary and circular migration” (2005: 31), while also recommending the promotion of such migration patterns:

“In the current era, there is a need to capitalize upon the growth of human mobility by promoting the notion of ‘brain circulation’, in which migrants return to their own country on a regular or occasional basis, sharing the benefits of the skills and resources they have acquired while living and working abroad ... Countries of destination can promote circular migration by providing mechanisms and channels that enable migrants to move relatively easily between their country of origin and destination” (GCIM, 2005: 31).



The notion of ‘brain drain’ would then be inaccurate, obsolete, or ‘outmoded’:

“The notion of ‘brain drain’ is a somewhat outmoded one, implying as it does that a migrant who leaves her or his own country will never go back there. In the current era, there is a need to capitalize upon the growth of human mobility by promoting the notion of ‘brain circulation’” (*ibid.*).

The ‘ethical recruitment’ versus ‘circular migration’ opposition mirrors, to a large extent, the ‘pessimistic’ versus ‘optimistic’ contrast. The first orientation is based on the recognition of existing harm and seeks to compensate by reshaping migration policies, while the second assumes that a no-harm scenario is possible and builds upon this aspiration to design new approaches to migration. Let us note the ‘wishful thinking’ nature of ‘circular migration’ arguments: as the quotes above show, they are based on a mix of empirical evidence and desirable evolutions; the rejection of the ‘brain drain’ notion is partly inspired by information according to which migrants do circulate, but also by the wish that they circulate.

Analysing international discourses on development, D. Eade writes that they are “concrete and yet aspirational” (2007: 468); they are rooted in reality and its problems, while at the same time envisaging a bright future that would be radically different from today’s world. Reports thus recognise the challenges raised by brain drain but do not seem to address them directly, as they prefer considering a world in which migrants would circulate in a way that would benefit everybody. In this sense, these narratives constitute what F. Molle calls a “nirvana”, i.e. “an ideal image of what the world should tend to” (2008: 132).

### **States and the private sector**

Circular migration schemes are not only advocated in the case of skilled workers; they currently constitute a popular policy orientation to address all types of labour migration (S. Castles 2006). In the words of the UN Secretary-General, “under such programs, migrants benefit from having a legal status and countries of origin gain from remittances and the eventual return of migrants, provided the experience they gain abroad can be put to productive use at home. Receiving countries secure the workers they need and may enhance the positive effects of migration by allowing migrants to stay long enough to accumulate savings” (UN, 2006: 18). The idea here is that long-

term/permanent migrants remit less, but this development impact is not the only factor; indeed, such programs also enable receiving states to avoid “additional costs in terms of infrastructure and social and cultural integration in the receiving country” (WTO, 2004: xviii).

Policy approaches that favour circular, temporary, or seasonal migration are regularly criticised for primarily serving employers’ needs, while ignoring the interests of migrants and being unsupportive of their rights (P. Wickramasekara, 2011). The reports of our corpus indeed pay much attention to the private sector: this makes sense, as no regulation of skilled migration can succeed without its cooperation; but this also raises the issue of the relationship between governments and employers, and of the possible divergence between their respective interests. The GCIM, for instance, is acutely aware of such tensions; it is conscious that migration is a field that is “traditionally ... regarded as the preserve of sovereign states” (2005: 3), but nevertheless believes that the interests of the private sector should be better taken into account when drafting skilled migration policies:

“Highly educated personnel make an important contribution to corporate competitiveness and the expansion of the global economy, and there is consequently a need to facilitate their mobility. States have a legitimate concern to defend their citizens against unfair competition from foreign nationals, and they will evidently continue to act on that basis. Even so, governments and the private sector should jointly review existing obstacles to professional mobility, with a view to removing those that are preventing enterprises from deploying the right people at the right place and time” (GCIM, 2005: 20).

Employers’ aspiration – “deploying the right people at the right place and time” – would characterize a private sector presented as dynamic and enterprising, but countered by slow and reluctant governments unable to react quickly enough to employers’ needs:

“Private enterprises have long recognized the importance of developing and deploying talent from around the world. But policy makers in government have had to consider other and competing priorities, and have tended to adopt an ambiguous attitude towards the movement of highly educated personnel” (GCIM, 2005: 20).

The private sector would therefore be “increasingly anxious” (GCIM, 2005: 9) and would therefore call “for a more liberal approach to international labour migration”

(GCIM, 2005: 16) in order to remove “current barriers to the mobility of highly educated personnel” (GCIM, 2005: 20). This leads Boucher to argue that, “in these global policy reports, the structure of the global capitalist system in its neoliberal form is taken for granted, and not taken as part of the problem” (2008: 1462). While this critique is justified, it is worth noting that these narratives displays a concern with ‘regulation’ that is not entirely consistent with a neoliberal approach; according to the Hague Process for example, “a comprehensive, planned approach is needed for the management of migration flows” (UN, 2002: 10). In the same vein, these narratives systematically call for ‘orderly’ migration: “humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and societies” (IOM, 2005: 11). Reports thus seem to navigate between *laissez-faire* approaches that see the private sector as the solution, and more state-regulated orientations that would grant governments a more important role – an in-between ideal that the GCIM calls “a well regulated liberalization of the global labour market” (2005: 17).

Two other related issues illustrate this. The first is the role played by private recruitment agencies in skilled migration. The UN Secretary-General observes that ‘private recruitment agencies that specialize in the placement of skilled workers in developed countries are multiplying’ (UN, 2006: 62), which challenges states’ role as organizers of foreign workforce recruitment and their regulatory capacities. This is preoccupying, as ‘some of the individuals and enterprises involved in the recruitment process are guilty of misleading and cheating the migrants they engage, usually by providing them with false information, promises or expectations’ (GCIM, 2005: 70). Most reports thus call for increased regulation of this sector, through “legislation and policies containing effective enforcement mechanisms and sanctions to deter unethical practices, including provisions for the prohibition of private employment agencies engaging in unethical practices and the suspension or withdrawal of their licenses in case of violation” (ILO, 2006: 25).

These quotes are to some extent reminiscent of the discourses on trafficking (and irregular migration), which tend to blame ‘traffickers’ and ‘smugglers’ while ignoring states’ responsibilities (J. Berman, 2003). Here too, abuses would stem from the practices of some intermediaries, and not from the broader context underlying skilled migration. This attitude toward recruiters also highlights the limits of these reports’ recommendations; they talk to governments but know that these are not the only actors in organising skilled migration. A neoliberal approach would consist in letting private

actors manage the allocation of skilled workers across borders, whereas policy recommendations aiming at regulation and order would on the contrary stress governments' role. International reports on migration tend to find a third way between these two scenarios.

The second issue that shows the uneasy relationship between states and the private sector in international migration narratives regards education. A key element in skilled migration dynamics is indeed the role of education, in creating trained workforce that may then migrate or in failing to provide enough workers (thereby making recruitment abroad a necessity). In our corpus, education in relation to migration is regularly viewed as an investment for the sake of economic growth. The GCIM writes that 'all countries should make substantial investments in the education and training of their citizens in order to increase the competitiveness of their economies' (2005: 24). But most reports recognise that this is not only expansive (and therefore difficult for poor countries), but also risky, as trained people may emigrate (which then amounts to losses on investments).

But if people pay by themselves, this is no longer an issue: "Governments may ... be concerned ... if the state has financed expensive tertiary education, only to see students leave after graduation. Where higher education is mostly financed privately, ... this is not as much of a concern" (World Bank, 2007: 192). The UNDP speaks of a "reform of education financing", which "would allow private-sector provision so that people seeking training as a way of moving abroad do not rely on public funding" (2009: 5). This reflects an understanding of education as a private investment made by individuals, who then sell their skills on the global labour market. Alternatively, education is viewed as a tool in a strategy to prevent skilled migration and avoid brain drain. Another option put forward by UNDP is indeed the 'tailoring' of skills so that they are 'useful in origin countries but less tradable across borders' (2009: 5). The WHO similarly calls for "adjusting" education, arguing that "training that is focused on local conditions can help to limit workforce attrition" (2006: 102).<sup>5</sup> As S. Dumitru (2009) observes, this utilitarian and tactical use of education runs against the idea of education as a right and of governments as having the duty to provide training to their citizens.

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<sup>5</sup> As the WHO further notes, 'lessons from longstanding efforts to improve workforce coverage in rural areas suggest that training local workers – in local languages and in skills relevant to local conditions – helps to stem exits of health workers. Such approaches to training often lead to credentials that do not have international recognition, which further limits migration' (2006: 102).

## **Conclusion**

Arguably, IOs and their narratives cannot be expected to ‘solve’ the ‘problems’ raised by skilled migration. Brain drain has been the object of concerns for several decades, but no clear-cut conclusion has emerged. IOs are therefore unlikely to suddenly come up with the ‘right’ policies to ensure ‘triple-win’ results. Yet, it remains that the narratives analysed in this article do claim that they have something to bring to policy debates – hence the need to critically examine their arguments. This is all the more relevant given the potential influence of these reports. The analysis of international discourses on development has for example made clear that they may remain influential even if they are misleading, or even if development actually fails to take place (J. Crush, 1995). This points to the above-mentioned capacity of IOs to shape the way governments and other actors (including NGOs and many researchers) see the world - and think about what to do.

Our analysis has showed how international migration narratives seek to satisfy both the pessimists and the optimists in brain drain debates. They indeed acknowledge the dark side of skilled migration while envisaging scenarios in which migrants would circulate for the benefit of all. To some extent therefore, all parties can find what they wish: NGOs and sending states see their concerns with the well-being of left-behind populations recognised, while receiving countries and employers may welcome the focus on the facilitation of skilled migration. A closer look at these narratives nevertheless reveals that they tend to privilege the optimistic scenario, as they reject policy orientations based on pessimistic interpretations and favour approaches based on circular migration.

S. Hoffmann (1995) highlights what he calls the ‘crisis of liberal internationalism’, which stems from the impossibility of achieving the different objectives of the liberal agenda; in this case, IOs’ narratives highlights the extreme difficulty to conciliate two of the most important aims of liberal thinking, i.e. the ‘rights and development for all’ versus the ‘expansion of free trade’. IOs would then struggle to overcome these contradictions. This strategy is crucial if, as suggested in the introduction, IOs aim at producing a global consensus on migration. They develop their arguments in all directions, to speak to everybody and produce a ‘global’ and federating

message - with the obvious risk of failing to develop a strong and convincing argument able to influence governments.

But the accommodation of contradictions is not necessarily a weakness for international narratives. Their main purpose may not be to develop a solid and coherent argument that would stand in opposition to other competing arguments, but to transcend all possible disagreements to develop a supranational (not to say superior) discourse that suffers no contradiction.<sup>6</sup> These narratives then constitute what D. Maingueneau (1999) calls 'self-constituting' discourses, which refer to nothing but themselves and aspire at producing a 'truth' that is inseparable from the authority of those who produce it. The reports analysed in this article are indeed autonomous, self-produced and self-legitimised. This is why and how they can host a form of accepted 'doublethink' (as Orwell, in 1984, designates the simultaneous acceptance of two mutually contradictory beliefs).

This type of discourse-production is probably necessary to produce the consensus upon which IOs can rely. In a world in which states' interests violently conflict with each other, discourses may constitute the only place where contradictions may be resolved. But this has a political cost, as a final outcome of this situation is that IOs never blame anybody for the possible damage created by skilled migration. This contrasts strongly with NGOs' narratives, which regularly names those they consider 'guilty' of the brain drain (namely governments in the West, multinational corporations and Bretton Woods institutions). IOs reject these representations of the world characterised by tensions between actors/countries and power struggles. This leads to a naturalised (and somewhat fatalistic) understanding of reality, in which the current world order is not the product of imbalances in power but of vague and unavoidable processes such as 'globalisation'. The result is a depoliticised vision of the social.

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<sup>6</sup> In this respect, it is worth noting that IOs' reports rarely explicitly attack positions other than their own; they do not mention other sources of policy arguments, and as a matter of fact do not even quote each other (as documented by Maas and Koser 2010).



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