


A CREATIVE WAY TO OFFSET BRAIN DRAIN

Brain drain has a deeply damaging effect on Caribbean countries. But is it possible that they could benefit by educating and training more scientists and sending them abroad?

 by Marvadeen Singh-Wilmot



Marvadeen Singh-Wilmot was the first Caribbean scientist named a TWAS Young Affiliate (2010-2014). She is a chemistry lecturer at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, and has won honour both for teaching and research. Her research focuses on new materials for sensing and storage from lanthanide metals. Through teacher training workshops and kids' science programmes, she is working to popularize science in Jamaica.

Brain drain is one of the negative effects of migration which continue to retard growth in developing countries. Small island states and mainland countries in the Caribbean Basin are among the most seriously affected and have lost between 10% and 40% of their labour force due to emigration to countries such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

There is greater cause for concern when one considers that reduction in the labour force is larger in the higher education categories. The World Bank reports that Guyana loses 89% of its tertiary graduates, Jamaica 85%, Haiti and Suriname over 80%; the rest of the Caribbean countries have lost more than 50% of their labour force with university education.

Since the cost of education is largely government-subsidized in most Caribbean countries, this constitutes a major loss in return on investment in education, and it has been argued that funding of tertiary education in the Caribbean provides a direct subsidy to the economies of developed nations.

However, with weak infrastructure, high debt burden and low investments in key growth-drivers such as science, technology and innovation, it is very difficult for developing countries like those in the Caribbean to reverse this trend, stimulate growth and retain their



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brightest and best – or should I say retain their brightest and best and stimulate growth? Indeed one depends on the other so that highly skilled and educated people positively impact creativity and productivity in a country, but without the opportunities for them to work and grow they will certainly leave for greener pastures.

The good news is that Caribbean people give back. The region is reported to be the world's largest recipient of remittances as a percentage of GDP. However, a 2006 International Monetary Fund Working Paper quantified the costs and benefits of migration in the Caribbean and concluded that the gains from remittances and other investments through diaspora engagement were much less than the loss from migration. If this position could be shifted so that returns from the Caribbean diaspora exceed the loss, an overall benefit could be realized.

Caribbean countries might therefore need to capitalize on the current global demand for highly educated knowledge workers by increasing access to and the quality of higher education. Large-scale training and export of highly skilled workers in a knowledge economy will lead to increased remittances and foreign direct investments through diaspora engagement. It could also reduce the augmented emigration loss as the pool of university-educated people will expand and international migration will have a smaller proportional impact on the labour force.

This can lead to increased productivity and competitiveness of the entire population and stimulate stagnated social and economic growth in many developing countries. ■