

Brain Drain in Malawi – the Blame Industry

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Introduction

Did you know that 33% of all skilled professionals leave Africa each year for greener pastures?. This costs The Continent at least US\$4 billion a year to replace these professionals with about 100,000 expatriates. There are more skilled Africans in the United States of America than in all of Africa. About 70% of a large population of Africans living in Europe and North America are educated to degree level with 0-15 years plus industry experience. Proportionately, more professionals leave Africa than any other continent. This may be due to financial constraints for the less educated population but it may also be due to other factors some of which we will touch on presently.

Brain drain has practically strangled growth on The Continent and nurtured poverty and delayed economic development. Of all the different professions, science and technology are the most affected as far as Africans (Malawians) leaving to work elsewhere. This makes perfect sense if you think about it. It is unlikely that a Press Holdings CEO would be willing to leave and go to work in the west. On the other hand, it is more likely that a lecturer in the University of Malawi would be happy to leave at the first opportunity presented to her/him. This is not an attempt to belittle our folks working in the industry back home. It is just an illustration that the CEO would most likely have the most to lose by leaving her/his job in Malawi while the lecturer would have the most to gain by leaving.

This is not meant to be a scholarly discourse. It is meant as a brief note to stimulate discussion as to problems associated with our country's, and Africa's skilled professionals leaving to settle in other parts of the world – usually the west; and what could be done to arrest these problems. As such, I make no attempt to cite any sources. Most of the material presented here is either easily obtained from the public domain or was gathered from personal conversations I have had over the years with colleagues and associates.

Causes of Brain Drain

About 25,000 qualified academic professionals emigrate each year in search of better working conditions. There are many causes for brain drain. Among the most commonly cited reasons given for people leaving are: *crime, low salaries, limited prospects for career advancement and a deteriorating medical infrastructure*. We discuss these issues in some detail.

Some professionals leave because of low pay. In many cases, most people would stay if they earned enough to live on. Many professionals have resorted to either doing consultancies or running informal businesses to make ends meet. I am personally aware

of several professionals in Malawi (read friends of mine) who just barely showed up to teach at the University of Malawi and spent most of their time running their informal businesses.

Some have been driven out by lack of research funding. When one earns a graduate degree, it may be frustrating to go back home and not be able to carry out research in one's field because of lack of funding. Unfortunately, funding some types of research is very low on Malawi's, and many developing countries' priority lists.

Political persecution is often a factor driving the best brains away. Here, I am talking about frustration sometimes when professionals feel they are not listened to by the political leadership. Many may remember, I am sure, the statement "**No mutu bii can teach at the academy**". Strange as that may sound, the mentality is, unfortunately still pervasive in our country. Our political leaders oftentimes give the impression that they have a lot more faith in expatriate professionals than local professionals who, more likely than not, know a lot more about the local conditions than the imported professionals. It is not unusual to have the expatriate professional actually relying on local experts to do her/his job. This leads to frustration and annoyance on the part of the local professionals who may feel unappreciated and driven to making the choice between working under these conditions – which can be demeaning – and leaving. Some will choose to leave. Unfortunately, expatriate replacements for the departing professionals are often more expensive.

Political persecution might also manifest itself in the form of lack of academic freedom or harassment. When people speak out, they have to be politically correct or risk being accused of being unpatriotic or that they have been bought by some foreign masters. Sometimes, key institutional leadership positions are controlled by political alliances. This leads to frustration and may lead professionals to leave.

I am sure most of us gathered here today have heard of a friend or relative who has either been robbed or worse. I know of friends who have lost their lives to crime – they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or they were in the right place but someone had the audacity to get what they had by force. In addition, I am sure we all know that in is trendy these days in our country, if you own a house to surround it with high walls with broken glass or barbed wire nicely embedded on top – kind of like we see in certain places where one ends up if they break the law. This is clearly not a pleasant situation and no one, except possibly for the criminals, likes to live under such conditions.

Who is responsible?

We all share collective responsibility for the mess we are in. Those of us who are outside sometimes find ourselves at the receiving end of abusive statements and accusations of having betrayed our country by leaving; that we wasted taxpayers' money and vanished.

Some have blamed the west for all of our woes. As a matter of fact, President Muluzi lashed out at the west on July 2, 2003 saying the west were the main cause of Africa's

misery and woes. This rhetoric was more common in the early post-independence years but as you can see, it still exists.

I made a bold statement above by stating that we all share collective responsibility. The reason is that by absenting ourselves from home, we create a situation where accountability is greatly reduced. Let me use a term I really dislike but which will very easily explain what I mean – the class thing: the shortage of a highly qualified middle class encourages poor governance, human rights abuses, corruption and undemocratic political systems. Speaking from my own experience, I know that the University of Malawi leadership often showed signs of losing a sense of direction and lacked initiative to lead the institution through crisis periods. In the mid-70's for example, many lecturers and other innocent Malawians were detained without trial, often with the connivance of top University of Malawi officials.

In Malawi (and Africa), we have vegetation in arid areas with very deep roots. Some of this same vegetation also sheds leaves during the dry season. There is a lesson to be learned from our environment. The west absorbs Malawian (and African) thinkers because they recognize the power of the mind. Africa, unlike her vegetation, makes very little effort to tap her intellectual potential. We have failed to adjust according to the seasons: colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial. The tap root of our governments seems to be aimed at destructive military arsenals, destruction of reason – (how else does one explain our politicians' tenacity to change constitutions so they can run beyond their mandated terms?), techniques of silencing dissenters and populist policies.

By failing to offer “greener pastures” for our own highly trained professionals, we are committing suicide by slow poisoning. I was talking to a friend of mine the other day and he asked, “Do you know that a lot of Malawi's medical personnel are moving to the UK? Malawian nurses are especially sought after in Britain.” Then I saw a headline that said something like “Serious Brain Drain Hits Malawi's Ailing Health Sector”. This friend went on to tell me that he thought our priorities are misplaced. He said that there was no reason for the country's hospitals to suffer shortages of drugs. I have heard of stories of institutions wanting to donate supplies and equipment but either we showed no interest or we moved too slowly and these donations went elsewhere, to presumably more deserving recipients. My own personal involvement in a book drive showed how frustrating it was sometimes to get things done with the Malawi bureaucracy.

Some people have blamed the west of deliberately luring qualified professionals with high paying jobs. Some countries have labor laws that in fact encourage professionals to move to the west. I saw some statistics recently which indicated that the UK will need more than 1.2 million migrant workers within the next few years to replace those who will be entering retirement. Decline in birth rates in some western countries is forcing some countries to relax their laws to make it easier for, usually skilled, migrants to come in. One often hears the statement “United States, and the west in general, have the wherewithal to pay any price for anyone they want”.

What can we do to fix it?

Incidentally, this issue is not unique to Malawi (and Africa). Every year, thousands of people from Asia and south/central America move to north America and Europe.

Various schemes have been tried to attempt to arrest this problem in Africa. I have read about AfricaRecruit 2003 supported by the Commonwealth Business Council which aims to help return qualified African professionals back to The Continent. The International Organization on Migration tried the Return of Qualified African Nationals (ROQAN) between 1993 and 1998 but dropped the scheme when they run into funding difficulties. They are now proposing a new scheme where professionals would be assisted to return home to teach, heal or share their skills for a finite period of time. The person may not in fact need to even physically move to Malawi, say. They could “virtually” return home, taking advantage of technology to carry out their tasks.

Besides the individuals themselves, our government can do more to reverse the trend instead of becoming increasingly frustrated by a phenomenon that leaves their investment in human capital, in the form of education, healthcare and other social provisions, unrewarded. Whilst economic conditions dictate that they cannot yet afford to pay Western-size wages, they can ensure that the respect of basic human rights and law prevails over all. Unfortunately, though, with many African governments continuing to flout most internationally observed laws and human rights, they are actually the biggest contributors to the brain drain and will continue to see their ill-afforded investment used to build and contribute to richer economies in the developed world.

We need clear development policies. Moreover, these policies must be followed not just created on paper to show that someone is doing something.

Perhaps one of the things that distinguishes Asia from Malawi (Africa) is that our friends have the basic infrastructure (facilities, salaries, and research funding) in place. Did you notice that even though huge numbers of people leave China or India each year, they still have sufficient retention schemes to do research in space (and military) science? Every time India and Pakistan engage in some sort of squabble, they test fire short or long range missiles.

We need to continue to encourage our leaders to support at least basic freedoms, human rights and international laws. Moreover, we need sound economic policies that create real jobs, not just allowing vendors to sell things on every street. Real jobs will help reduce crime.

With technology, there are things those of us who cannot physically be back in Malawi can still do to help develop our country. As a matter of fact, we can help, even in the absence of technology. Simple acts such as donating pencils, soccer balls, materials for classroom desks go a long way in helping develop our country. Be involved, whether it is in doing a book drive – I have done this and have some idea what is involved – collecting computers, hospital equipment, etc. Don't just sit phwii!