

Some Ideas of Brain Drain - Reversing Projects for Malawi

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July 4, 2003

This presentation aims at providing a framework for an informal discussion on ways in which Malawi's highly - trained and skilled professionals living overseas can actively participate in building the Malawi nation to lessen the negative effects of brain drain on Malawi. The migration of skilled workers from underdeveloped nations such as Malawi to the rich nations of Europe and North America (so-called 'Brain-Drain') is an inevitable result of the dynamics of global economics. Today such dynamics favor nations with well-established infrastructure for socio-economic growth and prosperity. As Malawians living abroad, we must seek to promote and advance ideas that take advantage of the unprecedented developments of the information age to reverse these unfortunate effects on Malawi. It is suggested that focus be concentrated in expanding and maintaining communication links between highly - trained and skilled Malawi nationals living overseas and those who are in government and private companies in Malawi.

Government, foreign aid agencies and individuals must seek creative ways to tap the knowledge and skills of Malawi nationals living overseas without, for the most part, requiring them to give up their overseas residence and primary engagements. Some of these projected ideas are presented for discussion in this presentation and I hoped that the meeting today not only adds more ideas but also considers the prospects of success for these proposed projects.

Traditionally, the loss of skilled and highly - trained workers from Malawi has been through students who complete higher studies abroad and, for various reasons, choose not to return to Malawi. Other professionals were forced to leave the country in earlier years because either their political views did not match with those of the then government or they were disgusted with lack of personal freedoms and the assault on individual rights

during the reign of President H. Kamuzu Banda. For many, the main reasons for staying abroad are, of course, economic in nature. In recent years, deaths due to AIDS-related illnesses have exasperated the situation by stripping the country of its few professionals. Despite a more liberalized economy and increased political and personal freedoms that followed the re-institution of multiparty democracy, many more students who are now able to study abroad on their own finances are choosing not to return to work in Malawi. In fact, it appears more skilled Malawians are leaving the country at a faster rate today than before 1994. This trend makes it difficult for Malawi to truly sustain social and economic development.

Many governments and organizations have proposed and even put into place programs that sought to encourage skilled scientists and technology experts to return to and work in their homeland. An example is the recently established South African Network of Skills Abroad, SANSA, a joint initiative of the Development Policy Research Unit of UCT in Cape Town and ORSTOM, a leading French agency for scientific cooperation. SANSA plans to link skilled South Africans overseas with their counterparts in local projects, and research so they can contribute towards a competitive, knowledge-based economy. Another is the AfricaRecruit 2003 Program, which is a recruitment program geared toward African graduates, professional and executives outside Africa interested in obtaining employment anywhere in Africa. The Commonwealth Business Council is sponsoring this program.

Some agencies and African governments have suggested “get tough measures” to reversing the loss of skilled workers from Africa. These approaches include requiring students on government scholarships and financial aid to enter into and to honor legally -

binding agreement (bonds) to return to work in their homeland. They suggest doing so, in part, by working with the destination countries to deny employment and other immigration benefits to foreign skilled workers. Such agreements are not only difficult to enforce for several reasons. Sponsored students and workers viewed these commitments as a burden and they ignore them once they go abroad. Furthermore, destination countries have actually put in place “national interest” -immigration laws that tend to attract and favor immigrations of highly – skilled foreign workers [for instance, the H1-B visa in the USA]. So what can a less developed nation like Malawi do?

Some Malawians, under the right situations, would love returning to work in Malawi. Many express the desire to return after they have worked some years abroad and become reasonably secure financially, so they can spend their twilight years in a part-time job or in volunteer activities near their families and relatives. Many others would render their skills and professional services for no remunerations for a short period. Since there are obviously real economic constraints that would make it difficult for the government to lure skilled Malawians back with competitive salaries and good work environments, other ways to tap their skills and knowledge during their most productive years, must be found and encouraged.

Malawi government and foreign aid agencies must be lobbied to facilitate the participation of Malawians abroad as far is practical. Some of the ways to reverse the negative effects of “Brain – Drain” on Malawi include

- Organized short – term volunteer activities, (such as medical missions, computer literacy training missions) by Malawi nationals living abroad.

- Organized short - term contracts (for health, social, educational, agricultural services) to Malawian abroad awarded, financed and overseen by foreign aid agencies.
- Resources (equipment, such as used computers and book) assistance for specific, focused projects, such as establishment of computer literacy centers
- Encourage investments by foreign –based Malawian in Malawi banks and loan organizations under special government – protected (insured) investment programs.

A starting point would be to conduct two complimentary small - scale surveys. One survey would identify the numbers and range of skills of Malawian nationals living outside Malawi, the other would determine the most serious current needs (in terms of skilled manpower) in Malawi, especially in the areas of agriculture, health, tertiary education, youth and social services and business. The “foreign” survey (which I would be able to conduct) would:

- Identify the range of skills and high professions of Malawi Nationals living outside the country that can be tapped.
- Gauge the willingness and interest of skilled Malawians to offers their expertise for free or for a token remuneration.
- Organize Malawians by creating a wider network of Malawi technocrats ‘of goodwill’ living outside the country who can organize themselves according to skills and professions and formulate specific ways in which their services can be tapped. Such groups would maintain communication links with their Malawi - based counterparts to share ideas via the internet.

- Eventually hold an information database (electronic) of skills and professions of Malawians living abroad which foreign aid agencies, Malawi private companies and the government can search through to fill positions, recruit consultants and even seek volunteers.

Our government must be lobbied to actively promote or, at least, facilitate these activities, especially the conduct of the survey in Malawi. In the past, similar efforts did not materialize because of our government (or its overseas embassy personnel) gave at best lukewarm endorsement.