

The Commonwealth, and Migration as Development

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Executive Summary

The paper describes issues relating to migration, brain drain and diasporas in Commonwealth countries, drawing on work undertaken for the Ramphal Commission on Migration and Development, 2009-2011. It concludes that the official Commonwealth, managed by the Commonwealth Secretariat, finds it hard to promote key development strategies due to shortage of personnel and funds, disagreements among its members, and a plethora of demands

For a long time, since the Harare Declaration 1991 if not before, the Commonwealth of Nations has had two mantras: it supports the development of its states and peoples, and it is concerned to promote the practice of democracy, good governance, and human rights. A recent analysis of expenditure by the Commonwealth Secretariat by Sir Ronald Sanders, member of the 2011 Eminent Persons Group, showed that the greater part of its small budget is devoted to assistance of developing countries. In this it is aided by the “grey matter” Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), which has had budgets running between £20M and £35M a year over the last 20 years; this is a low-level assistance programme, which mainly pays for South-based experts to move between states to advise on development projects.

Nonetheless this budget is trivial compared with the aid budgets even of key Commonwealth nations – the UK, Canada and Australia – and has been subject to decline, with recent reductions in assistance from Canada, Singapore (where the CFTC was launched in 1971) and the UK. This has focused attention on what other roles, significant yet relatively inexpensive, the Commonwealth as a multinational association has played and could play to help the majority of its membership which are developing states. In my view these must include: identification of issues of special importance to Commonwealth members; the convening power of the political Commonwealth; advocacy within the association and the wider international community; and pursuit and implementation of defined goals.

Two recent examples of this approach, with which I have been involved, include the adoption of the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol, 2004, which has become a world standard for the cross-border recruitment of school teachers; and the decision by the Commonwealth Heads of Government, 2011, to take forward Ramphal Institute recommendations on the reduction of visa obstacles for travellers between Commonwealth states by means of an officials’ working group. In the first case, responding to pressure from the Commonwealth Teachers’ Group, Commonwealth Ministers of Education hammered out an agreement to provide for fair play between states, and to protect the rights of teachers, in a situation where richer countries had poached expensively trained teachers from poorer states which were educationally needy, often with exploitation of the teachers themselves.

The visa situation was highlighted by the Eminent Persons Group, 2011 (EPG), which argued that citizens would see more benefit in Commonwealth membership if interstate travel was simplified. Early last year, in consequence, the Commonwealth Secretary-General requested the Ramphal Institute, a research and advocacy body focused on Commonwealth states, to investigate three areas: the simplification of visas for business travellers; the easing of visa constraints for legitimate travellers and tourists; and – a matter requested by the Secretariat which was not listed by the Eminent Persons – the easing of visas for those travelling on official business.

The Institute appointed three prominent personalities to visit 15 capitals to test governments' opinion on the possibilities and, without going into detail here, much scope for improvement was identified. For business travellers this could be on the lines of the APEC business card in the Asia-Pacific region; for tourists and visitors it could rest on mutual agreements between regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM); and for those on official business a good example lay in the agreement early last year between South Africa and Nigeria to provide for easy travel for a wide range of officials, from MPs to judges and Vice-Chancellors. The Institute had recommended a Ministerial working party to take these proposals forward, and assist the Secretariat in necessary negotiations between states, and was disappointed that the Colombo summit preferred to set up a working party at the level of officials. It is understood that some states did not wish to proceed at all, but the Secretariat will probably launch the working party in the middle of this year.

It is not by chance that these two examples refer to the movement of persons between states, for the modern Commonwealth has been shaped by major population movements. Some are very well-known: the expansion of persons around the world from the British Isles, especially from the 1700s to the 1950s; the horrific transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the Americas, from the 1700s to the 1800s; transfer of South Asian indentured labour to Fiji, South Africa, Guyana and the Caribbean after the British Empire abolished slavery; and significant smaller movements, for instance of Lebanese and Greek traders to West Africa, or East European Jews to southern Africa. Such movements have continued, with migrations to the UK from the Caribbean and South Asia, from Hong Kong to western Canada, and some are little known. For example, in recent research in Nigeria I discovered that the largest group of Nigerian nationals outside the country – some nine million – are currently in the Sudan.

Discussing the current situation will be the theme of this paper. Here I will draw with acknowledgement on three reports, entitled “People on the Move: Managing Migration in Today’s Commonwealth”, published by the Ramphal Institute in 2010-11 under the direction of the Ramphal Commission on Migration and Development chaired by P J Patterson, former Prime Minister of Jamaica.² The first report was drafted by Dr Alan Gamlen, then of the International Migration Institute, Oxford; the second by Professor Elizabeth Thomas-Hope, University of the West Indies, Mona; and the third by Professor Graeme Hugo, of the University of Adelaide.

To give a fuller picture of the work of this Commission, and to see how it connects with essential aspects of today’s Commonwealth, I will take the liberty of reading its ten terms of reference adopted in 2009:

- 1 The Commission will examine the human dimensions of migration, and make appropriate recommendations to improve the development advantage, and diminish any disadvantage.
- 2 In particular the Commission will consider brain drain, brain waste and brain circulation and, having regard to the need for pro-poor development, will consider the situation of unskilled migrants, gender issues, and the scope for improving training in destination countries.
- 3 The Commission will consider the potential for a set of principles governing migration policy within the Commonwealth, recognising that migration policy is a matter for states and that citizens have a right to migrate; such principles may be designed to protect the rights of citizens, and to promote ethical recruitment.
- 4 Building on the recent “Respect and Understanding” report by the Commonwealth,³ the Commission will recommend ways in which governments may challenge xenophobia in their countries, promote understanding of the causes and benefits of migration, and act to prevent perceptions of unfairness in poor host communities. It will seek “win-win” solutions.
- 5 The Commission will pay particular attention to problems arising from environmentally-induced migration, both for environmentally-fragile states and their neighbours, and advise the Commonwealth how these may be mitigated, and the threatened communities assisted.
- 6 The Commission will recommend how diasporas, and traditional connections between Commonwealth states, may provide greater benefit for the development of member states.
- 7 In particular the Commission will consider how transaction costs in remittance flows between families may be reduced, how community-based and sector-specific organisations may be encouraged, and how a positive relationship between migration, development and the trade in goods and services may be stimulated by governments and the private sector.
- 8 The Commission will make specific recommendations to assist small states and less developed countries (LDCs) which have suffered excessive out-migration of expensively trained persons, and have yet to benefit significantly from return migration or diasporic investment.
- 9 The Commission will, where appropriate, recommend particular Commonwealth strategies or programmes of either a multilateral or bilateral kind – for instance protocols or code of the kind devised for school teachers and health workers, or programme of targeted managed migration such as are current between some Caribbean countries and the US and Canada, and between South Pacific islands and Australia and New Zealand.
- 10 The Commission will present a vision statement for migration policy within the Commonwealth for the next decade, which may influence policy at the global level also.

This may seem a daunting list of terms of reference, and it is to the credit of the Commission, and the three academics who worked closely with it that, dividing the questions between them, all were answered. For the purposes of today’s conference I will focus on just one issue: is migration a loss, or a gain? Then I will move on to consider what the Commonwealth has done, or could do, about it.

The first term of reference, about development advantage and development disadvantage, was one of those tackled by Alan Gamlen, himself a New Zealander. In a stimulating analysis he looked at the former settler colonies, the former subject colonies, and acknowledged that migration movements may no longer be framed by the Commonwealth with free movement within regional associations and the growth of former subject colonies, such as Singapore or South Africa, becoming destinations in their own right.

“First glances might suggest that Commonwealth migration is declining in importance. International migrants represent 2% of the Commonwealth population compared to 3.1% of the global population. Stocks have been proportionally declining in developing Commonwealth countries, and growing less quickly in developed Commonwealth countries.....

“However, such trends belie the profound and enduring influence that the Commonwealth continues to exert on global migration patterns. First, the Commonwealth contains a full fifth of all international migrants. In developing Commonwealth countries, the migrant stock is growing faster than at any time since the 1980s: in 2005-2010 it grew at 1.7% per annum, compared with 0.2% in 2000-2005. In developed Commonwealth countries, migrants have risen from one-in-eight to one-in-six people in just 20 years. Second, intra-Commonwealth migration still accounts for about half of all Commonwealth migration. In 2000, the average (mean) Commonwealth country had sent 52% of its emigrants to and received 49% of its immigrants from, other Commonwealth countries. More than half of all migrants live in a country that shares their native language, and for most of these people, that language is English.”⁴

To spell out what these figures may mean in individual countries, not ignoring issues of xenophobia in those that receive or indeed depend on immigrants, Gamlen looked at four contemporary “hotspots” of migration in the Commonwealth – Singapore, South Africa, New Zealand and Bangladesh. Singapore benefits from a brain drain of the highly skilled, while restricting the rights of the low skilled; South Africa has seen both an exodus of skilled persons, and an influx of skilled and unskilled people from its region (not least Zimbabwe), leading to xenophobia; New Zealand, seen as a classic country of immigration, actually exports almost twice as many persons as New Zealanders who return, with Australia and the British Isles the main beneficiaries; and Bangladesh is a major exporter of low-skilled labour to the Gulf, while there is also unrecorded, informal cross-border migration to India.

The conclusion of all three of the Commission’s reports is that migration is and will be a continuing reality, in spite of the obstacles that some governments seek to put in its way. Further, for cultural, family, linguistic and historical reasons the Commonwealth continues to be a contemporary linkage. This persists through the more recent overlays of regional associations, such that Guyanese may move to Barbados and Ghanaians seek work in Nigeria. Indeed in a crackdown in the 1980s a military government in Nigeria expelled some 80,000 Ghanaians at short notice, a move that would be difficult to replicate under ECOWAS rules today.

But how far is this migration a loss or a gain? Plainly for most of the individuals concerned this is usually a gain. Migration involves financial and psychological cost

and it is often the younger and more aspirational individuals who are willing to take the risk of moving to another country. Lasting family and other connections may ease this transfer.

For the states concerned this migration is much more ambiguous. As referred to above, there can be a loss of trained people, particularly in fields such as health where they are badly needed and in short supply. The flight of personnel can be as destabilising as the flight of hot money, and equally erratic and unpredictable. Obvious issues, such as insecurity or unaccountable governance in a country from which migrants depart, or huge disparities in earnings across borders, explain some of the movement. But there are also traditions of emigration, so that South Pacific islanders see it as normal to move to the bigger society of New Zealand, or even from Trinidad, with a high standard of living in the Caribbean, it is unsurprising to go abroad. The role of higher education, as a suction mechanism for the most able – bringing Indian students to Australia, for example – is also important. But whereas India may hardly notice such a loss, for Samoa there can be a serious reduction in a small nation's capacity unless such graduates return.

Hence the Ramphal Commission on Migration and Development devoted much thought to seeing how these adverse impacts could be mitigated. There were a variety of approaches: financial, such as the encouragement of diasporas to invest in diaspora bonds and other mechanisms which could promote development in countries of origin; trading, taking the example of Indians in Silicon Valley who have transferred work and functions to firms in India, or the use of diaspora entrepreneurs to grow markets for produce and products from their one-time home; mentoring and skills development, so that the enhanced professional skills acquired abroad may be transferred back. It was accepted that, in spite of the spoken desires of many migrants to “go home”, either when they have made money or at retirement, this is usually a pipedream. The reality is that their involvements in the new country, often through marriage or relationships, make it unrealistic to move back even with the cheapness of modern communications.

Furthermore, diasporas may be a wasting asset and not always friendly to the governments in power at home. Whereas a first generation migrant may have affection for his or her place of birth, and wish to help it from a position of greater affluence and security, a child or grandchild may lack this motivation. Further, as the Tamil diaspora around the world currently shows with regard to Sri Lanka after the civil war, there may be caution if not distaste in supporting or investing in a country in whose government there is little trust.

Analysis by Graeme Hugo in the third report for the Ramphal Commission highlighted the extraordinary importance of remittances throughout the global financial crisis which started in 2008. He also commented, “International migration, especially from low income to high income countries, has become a fundamental, important structural feature of global economies. The tenacity of international migration in the face of the most severe global economic downturn in seven decades reflects the continuing strength of the underlying drivers of migration.”⁵ He pointed out that demography, with falling fertility in developed states and continuing high rates of childbirth in some developing ones, including Africa and the Pacific, provide a powerful driver for migration in the 21st century.

Understandably many governments have focused on the potential for investment from diaspora communities, and, in establishing Ministries and other devices to liaise with them, finance has been a key ingredient. Many Commonwealth developing states now offer diaspora bonds, often with attractive rates of return, and private enterprise – such as the Homestrings online platform – provide direct opportunities for diasporians to invest in specific projects, with business plans verified by international experts. However the Ramphal Commission saw this funding potential as only one benefit of a diaspora. One of the problems is that High Commissions and diaspora communities are not always in close or friendly contact, though IT liaison with capitals should make for better communication.

Recognising that migration issues look different in every member country, the Ramphal Commission concentrated on what it saw as a consensual, technocratic approach. It recommended that the Commonwealth should build migration management capacity; it should streamline migration in development policies, by the adoption of more “development friendly” migration policies in both origin and destination countries; it argued that migrants should be helped to share their successes, by encouraging more evidence-driven, balanced and fair dialogues on migration issues in Commonwealth countries; and sought to enhance international cooperation over migration.

The Commission submitted a ten point programme to Commonwealth leaders, prior to their 2011 meeting in Perth, Australia. This urged them to better manage an inevitable process; to position the Commonwealth as a laboratory for best practice; to improve the training of officials; to address negative public perceptions and discrimination against migrants; to share best practice relating to diasporas; to require the Commonwealth Secretariat to develop an appropriate work programme and to request interested governments to take a lead; and to review progress at the 2013 summit.

What happened at Perth? The Commonwealth communiqué was supportive. Commonwealth governments agreed to:

- *commit to maximise the social and economic benefits of migration to improve the resilience and prosperity of Commonwealth members, whilst addressing the challenges posed by irregular migration which undermines legal migration policies.

They

- *Call for stronger international cooperation to manage migration effectively in countries of origin, transit and destination, in order to bolster migration’s positive effects and to enhance safety nets for migrants;

- *Call for cooperation in the fight against irregular migration, including in particular the readmission of own nationals staying irregularly in other states, in accordance with bilateral agreements and international obligations;

- *In this context, articulate the link between migration and development, affirming the importance of adopting migration strategies that would reduce the cost of migration, and create incentives for diaspora communities to invest their financial resources and expertise in the development of their countries of origin;

- * Note and encourage participation in the Global Forum on Migration and Development, which Mauritius will host in 2012

- * Reduce the cost of remittance transfers by removing barriers to remitting and encouraging greater competition in the transfer market, by endorsing the World Bank's General Principles for International Remittance Services
- * In line with this, Commonwealth countries committed to implement practical measures at the national level to reduce the cost of remittances.

It will be noted that the Commonwealth Heads, or their officials who write these communiqués, were particularly exercised by irregular migration, and the financial possibilities created by the growth of diasporas. But the Commonwealth Secretariat, which held a conference in Jamaica in the middle of 2012, looking at the impact of migration on the development of small states, did not take this up as a major element in its work programme. With small resources, human and financial, the Secretariat limits its communiqué follow-up to a few “mandates” – absolute instructions – which Heads of Government give them. Although migration and development appeared again in the 2013 communiqué there is no prospect of an effective programme emerging from Marlborough House. In part too this may be because the positions of member states vary so much that senior staff at the Secretariat see little chance of consensus progress. More seriously, there is a plethora of desire for Commonwealth action, which quite outruns the capacity of its official instruments.

Yet this weakness in follow-up raises a question about the capacity of the political Commonwealth to make a contribution in development more generally. In any development field there is a need for long-term vision and drive, but the official Commonwealth is hardly constituted or funded to provide these. Plainly the question of migration and development matters greatly to many member states. In a context where citizens cannot be stopped from leaving, even if obstacles are placed in their way by destination states, the impact of thousands of individual and family decisions has a profound effect on societies and economies. Internet and mobile phone links are being used by people daily to plan their own movements, just as they are to transfer funds around the globe. The globalisation process is still at an early stage, and it is not exactly in the control of governments.

There has been talk of the Secretariat and Commonwealth moving back into what is described as “thought leadership” – a concept pushed by the many Expert Groups set up by Sir Shridath Ramphal in his 15 years as Secretary-General. But what this may expose is the weakness of the Commonwealth in carrying forward and implementing its own proposals. For there is a severe lack of ownership in today's Commonwealth, illustrated by the fact that only half of its leaders bothered to attend the Sri Lankan summit last year, and that over 70 per cent of the Secretariat budget depends on only three governments. Civil society and individual states cannot easily make up the shortfall in development thinking and Commonwealth-wide implementation if collective Commonwealth will and capacity are absent. This is the current dilemma the Commonwealth faces.

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² All reports are available from www.ramphalinstitute.org In addition to Mr Patterson the members of the commission were: Ms Jill Iliffe, Executive Secretary of the Commonwealth Nurses Federation; Professor John Oucho, Founder and Chair of the African Migration and Development Policy Centre, Nairobi; Hon Mr George Vassiliou, former President of Cyprus; Mr Farooq Sobhan, former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh; Professor Brenda Yeoh, Professor of Geography, University of Singapore; Mr Will Day, then Chair of the Sustainable Development Commission

³ This report, titled "Civil Paths to Peace", prepared by a team chaired by Amartya Sen, was published by the Commonwealth Secretariat in 2007

⁴ "People on the Move", first report, www.ramphalinstitute.org p 15

⁵ "People on the Move", third report, www.ramphalinstitute.org p 2