Harnessing potential of student returnees. (First draft)

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of return migration has caught a renewed attention in recent writings particularly with the advent of the migration-management-for -development discourse. Moving on from analysis of purely economic contribution of migrants, the present writings have looked into the non-economic contribution of migrants such as through return and transfer of knowledge and skills. Sitting within the broader theme of the panel, this paper discusses returnee students, the challenges they face in contributing to the homelands and incentives home countries can offer to help them in this contribution. The first part of the paper gives a brief introduction of student migrants. The second part discusses in brief the typologies of returnees based on their motivation for return. This is followed by presenting the challenges they face in using their knowledge and skills. The last part describes how to returnees can be persuaded to use their knowledge and skills in the home countries.

2. Methodology

The paper is based on qualitative fieldwork since 2009 on Nepali students in UK, Denmark and Sweden as well as those who returned after completing their educations and/or a brief extended stay. Besides this, it also derives from data from fieldwork conducted with students studying in UK, Denmark and Sweden which looked at their perspective for return. Fieldwork methods include focus group discussions, key informant interviews, participant observation, informal interviews, and small group discussions.

The returnee respondents consisted of graduates, Ph.D. students, and post-doctoral students who were working in educational sectors, entrepreneurial activities, government offices, and non-governmental international organization Nepal.

3. Who are student migrants and returnees-?

The phenomenon of student migration is not new for Nepal. Historically, India was the chief destination for students. This is changing and the recent data from Home Ministry (MOE, 2014)

shows that countries like Australia, Japan, USA are the most important destinations for Nepali students. Altogether, 28126 students went abroad for study this year (MoE, 2015). However there are no empirical data to ascertain the number of returnees.

While we were unable to gather information on the number of return, we tried to access who is returning. Our analysis shows that based on their decision to return, returnees can be broadly classified into the following six categories as shown below.

a. Returnees with firm intention of return prior to migration

Among this type of returnees, there is a strong indication that from the very first that they were strongly motivated to return once they completed their studies as shown below-

"*Oh I was very sure that I would return after completing my Ph.D. I did not even think of staying a day more- I had taken my return ticket*".

Others were not so sure- but more tilted towards returning when they were going abroad for studies.

b. Returnees who did not feel belonged to the place

The study finds that the feeling of not belonging to the host country, the stigma associated with being viewed as a second class citizen, and general exclusion from the host country also motivates some to return.

But after having settled long enough to study—through job placement, university admission, and closer interaction with the society—their perceptions about their host county changes and for some it becomes a motivation for return.

c. Family obligation

These returnees feel obligations to directly take care of their family members after completing their studies.

" I have to take care of my parents, you know that the feeling of responsibility you get… ok, I am old enough, they have cared my life and now it's my time to care them after finish my school. … Not that somebody imposed on me, but just my feelings'.

Such returnees, however, are mobile and travel outside Nepal for trainings, conferences, and short courses. They strive to keep their professional networks in their migration countries active through co-work, regular contact, and joint-projects which prolongs their mobility. However, they do not intend to leave the country again for a very long period.

d. "Missing home" type of returnees

These students ultimately never grow comfortable with the socio-cultural way of life in their destinations, and prefer the relaxing and slow pace of Nepal. For these students, being at home also means less responsibility to care for everyday matters, and an easier time starting new ventures and maintaining back-up plans if other ideas fail – something that would have been very difficult in the destination country:

"You have a nice house to live in - I don't pay rent, I don't have to worry about electricity bill, I don't have to worry about calling plumber if something goes wrong –there is always food in the fridge, there is everything in your house, it's very stress free you know".

e. Returning for using knowledge

These returnees come home motivated to use their newly-acquired knowledge and skills. They refer to their experience abroad as "one knot in the chain". They feel that their small effort in the home-country could make significant impact in local people's lives, as opposed to their destination countries which are comparatively developed.

. So that urge of coming back and doing good job was stronger.... As I began to teach others, it become much more stronger that I have much more bigger role to play in my society, in my country than staying here in general".

In general these returnees feel that there is more space to contribute to society in Nepal and this gives them a sense of importance

4. Challenges faced by the returnees.

The section below describes in brief the challenges faced by the returnees upon return to homeland. These are based on FGDs and IDIs with returnees.

Loss of social networks

The most significant challenges to the returnees is the loss of social networks they possessed prior to migration. While social networks played an important role in migration and life in the destination, returnees complained that they would have lost all the social networks upon return. This hampered their access to important information such as vacancy announcement, announcement for competition

One way of coping with this loss as created by the Nepali returnees was establishing a Facebook group called " Farkeka Nepali"- returned Nepalis. Besides this, they ran a monthly program where they invited people from different occupation to brainstorm about various aspects of jobs in Nepal.

Difficulty in finding basic information for start-ups

Another issue that came up in the narratives was related to information. The returnees complained that if they want to do something new, they would often have to spend days looking for place where they could get factual information about it.

Lack of rules and policies

Another significant challenge that returnees face when they want to start up a business is the lack of rules and policies. While they came with innovative ideas which worked quite well in the west where they were living, returnees found that due to lack of clear policies in ideas of their choke meant that they had to think of other schemes.

Political unions

The political unions which are present strongly in the private sector was another factor that hindered them from using their knowledge. Having spent a considerable period outside the country, they were not able to negotiate properly with these union bodies and also felt at loss because they were not up to date with the general local politics of the homeland.

Lack of backup insurance and financial schemes- and the need to self-finance ideas

The fact that there was no investment to support returnee youths who wanted to start up small entrepreneurship was a matter of frustration which again pushed them to remigration. This meant that even when they come with innovative ideas and a dream of using it in the homeland, they would have to have to earn till they could financee their ideas. A few INGOs such as GIZ have now started schemes where they provide funding for Nepali returnees from Germany to start project of their choice.

5. Recommendations and best practices

The following section presents the best practices and recommendations. These are based on FGDs and IDIs with Returnees and other relevant stakeholders,

Managing outmigration and recording return

Managing migration is about establishing a sound database on migration. This database in case of student migrants should have details of the migration process and trajectory such as destination, courses, duration of stay and link it with the other datasets in the national level.

Outreaching migrants in destination

The next strategy is having regular access to these students who are abroad. A strong theme that came in the narratives of those who were still abroad was the lack of linkages with the home country. In such case, the homeland should take initiatives to reach out to migrants. One way of doing this is by approaching students when there are international visits from the state. Another way of doing it is engaging students in social and philanthropic work while they are still in destination. Another part of outreaching migrants is establishing information hubs for them so that they are in regular touch with what is happening in the homeland and also get easy access to information that they need for taking decisions.

Integrating returnees in the youth policies

While the country has drafted the youth policy and has established employment fund for youths, the young returnees are not addressed by this policy. The study finds that like their labor counterparts, a good majority of student returnees also re-migrate from their homelands due to lack of adequate livelihoods upon return.

Providing financial backups and insurance

The study finds that student migrants are unique in the aspect that they come with innovative ideas but lack the financial resources to act upon it. Case study shows that when they have been able to manage funds to put their ideas into practice, they have contributed with great innovation to solve persisting local problems such as power cuts in Nepal. Thus providing financial support in form of rolling grants, would help these returnees to implement ideas. Providing backups in case of business failure is another aspect of inviting returnees to use their knowledge and skills.