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Abstract

Towards Sustainable “Brain Circulation”: What India and China can Learn from Each Other

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Since the topic of “brain drain” was introduced to the United Nations debates in the late 1960s, policy thinking on highly skilled migration has shifted its focus from discouraging emigration in the 1970s to encouraging returns in the 1980s, and to facilitating “brain circulation” since the 1990s. However, concerns have also been raised regarding the sustainability of some programmes aimed at brain gain and brain circulation. It is observed that many scientists who returned with assistance from government and international agencies (particularly in Africa and Latin America) soon left their home countries again (remigration), and some transnational organizations set up to facilitate knowledge exchange often remain symbolic with little actual impacts. This paper explores the issue of sustainability by comparing the migration systems of the highly skilled from China and India.

In both academic literature and public media, China is commonly regarded as a successful example of brain circulation due to a wide range of aggressive government programmes, and India is often urged to follow suit. My comparative study suggests, however, in some sectors, brain circulation with minimum government intervention in India is in fact more sustainable than heavily invested programmes in China. The migratory process of the highly skilled from India – including how they leave and how they return – are built into the dynamism of the global high-tech industry. By comparison, many government-initiated and -implemented programmes in China fail to achieve their goals in the longer run. Thus, China probably needs to learn from India how to link its programmes to industrial dynamisms to make it more economically viable and sustainable. At the same time India can take note of China’s measures in encouraging exchange in such areas as basic research. In short, a proper mix of state policy and market mechanism seems a key to achieving sustainable brain circulation programmes.