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No. 08: Thinking About the Brain Drain in Southern Africa

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Southern African Migration Project

Thinking About the Brain Drain in Southern Africa

Migration Policy Brief No. 8

Series Editors: Jonathan Crush and Vincent Williams

Editorial Note:

This migration policy brief contains the Introduction to the book Destinations Unknown: Perspectives on the Brain Drain in Southern Africa (Africa Institute and SAMP, 2002), edited by David McDonald and Jonathan Crush. The text has been updated to take account of the passage of the South African Immigration Act of 2002. Further information on the book, including ordering details, are available at: <http://www.queensu.ca/samp/books/book7.htm>

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The movement of skilled people from one country to another is one of the most hotly contested public policy questions today. Debates amongst politicians, academics and bureaucrats about the scale and character of skilled migration, and the policies required to address these movements, are taking place in countries throughout the world (Zweig and Changgui 1995; Odunsi 1996; Phillips 1996; Carrington and Detragiache 1998; Iredale 1998; Iqbal 1999). As the opportunities for skilled personnel to move increases with globalization and the shift to a service economy (Sassen 1988, 1998), as the costs of international travel decrease, and as the ability to communicate with other parts of the world becomes easier, it is likely that skilled migration itself will increase over the next few decades, magnifying its importance as a public policy issue.
- 1.2 Compared to the volume of unskilled and forced migration, the international movement of skilled people is still relatively small (Findlay 1995), but its social and economic relevance outweighs its numerical significance for a number of reasons, some imagined, some real. The loss of a country's 'best and brightest' is seen not only as a loss of human resources but also as a general indicator of whether a country is a desirable place to live. Nothing conjures up the image of a country gone wrong like the belief that skilled people are leaving in droves: a public litmus test of sorts where citizens vote with their feet. If true, a skilled exodus heralds tougher times to come, as human and financial capital moves with skilled nationals.
- 1.3 Given the far-reaching social and economic implications of the so-called 'brain drain' it is not surprising that there has been much public and academic hyperbole on the matter. Political leaders declare emigrants unpatriotic and selfish, while the media make wild and unsubstantiated statements about the extent of emigration and the motivations for it. Southern Africa is no different in this respect. Skilled migration is currently a topic of hot debate in the region and it has attracted a wide range of claims and counter-claims,

particularly in South Africa where the emigration of skilled nationals has generated considerable public attention during and since the demise of apartheid.

2.0 Debating the Brain Drain

2.1 In the early 1990s the brain drain became a card in the hands of those arguing for the entrenchment of white political privilege (Rule 1989, 1994).¹ The issue re-emerged with unexpected force after 1994. Banner headlines declaring an “Exodus as Rainbow Nation’s iridescence fades” (*Financial Mail*, 25 October 1996), “74% with skills want to quit SA?” (*Sunday Times*, 13 September 1998), and “Brain Drain Reaching Mind-bending Proportions” (*Cape Argus*, 4 August 2000) contributed to a “moral panic” over the state of the country’s social and economic stability. The *Sunday Times* fuelled a national controversy on the subject, which started with a speech in Mauritius at a SADC conference by President Nelson Mandela where he suggested that “whites were running away from their country” and asserted that “the real South Africans were being sorted out in the process”. Equally strong responses from government officials attempting to defend their post-apartheid record have polarized the debate.

2.2 In other SADC countries, the longstanding brain drain debate is a great deal more sophisticated and less polarized (Prah 1989; Zinyama 1990; Saasa 1996; Sachikonye 1998). At independence in the 1960s and 1970s, most countries inherited a woefully underdeveloped local skills base. Much advanced training had, of necessity, to take place outside the country or region. Governments sending students overseas confronted the challenge of drawing them back again once trained. Local training became a much more attractive and cost-effective alternative and there was dramatic expansion of higher education in most SADC states. Independence also saw a major expansion in the numbers of highly skilled expatriates arriving in these countries, primarily from Europe, North America and the rest of Africa. Organizations such as the IOM also set up programmes to encourage skilled nationals to return home (Weiss 1998).²

- 2.3 Independent governments played a delicate game, offering skilled expatriates sufficient inducement to come and pass on their skills and experience while dissuading them from staying permanently. In the 1980s and 1990s, various new developments refocused the brain-drain debate as many countries faced, for the first time, a potential drain of local skills to other countries within the SADC.
- 2.4 The first movement of significance was the so-called “white flight” to South Africa from countries such as Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Crush 2000a). Politically their departure was unlamented but their exodus left sudden holes in the private and public skills base. Deteriorating economic conditions in some states (as a result of civil strife and South Africa’s war of destabilization) led to further uncertainty and departures, this time of skilled blacks. From the late 1970s, a silent drift of skills began from SADC and other African countries (particularly Ghana and Uganda) to the ‘independent’ South African homelands of Transkei and Bophuthatswana. Prah’s (1989, 14) study of what he called “the great trek of talent” to the homelands involved an estimated 7,000 highly-skilled Africans by the late 1980s.
- 2.5 In the early 1990s, the end of apartheid produced fears within SADC of a renewed brain drain to South Africa from the rest of the region (Saasa 1996). Initially, these fears seemed justified. Skills migration to South Africa from all other SADC states jumped significantly in the run-up to the 1994 election. Some 200 medical doctors reportedly left Zimbabwe for Botswana and South Africa in 1992 alone (Saasa 1996, 65). Experts projected further losses and a significant impact on struggling local economies. The region’s loss would be South Africa’s gain, further exacerbating chronic regional inequalities. These fears have actually been muted by post-1994 South African immigration policy which placed a very low premium on skills import from anywhere (Crush 1999). The other SADC states have been the unwitting beneficiaries of South

Africa's anti-immigrationism. Work permits have been hard to come by and the movement of skilled Africans into South Africa has not yet reached anticipated levels.

3.0 Finding the Right Numbers

- 3.1 The need for reliable data on the extent and impact of skilled migration cannot be overstated, as the recent South African furore amply demonstrates. Unfortunately, the debate has been based more on misinformation and conjecture than methodologically sound research, with the *Sunday Times* article mentioned above being a good case in point. Although an impressive 11,000 people responded to a questionnaire in the "appointments" section of the newspaper, there is no way of knowing if the sample was representative of the skilled population in the country as a whole, making the survey entirely unreliable. Moreover, the largely financial and managerial nature of the jobs advertised constitutes a very narrow definition of skills, and the people reading the appointments section are more likely to be out of work, about to change their jobs, or dissatisfied with their current job – not a normal cross-section of skilled personnel. The readership of that paper is also largely white and English-speaking.
- 3.2 Another problem with the *Sunday Times* survey was that responses came from those who were sufficiently motivated to fill out the questionnaire and return it by post. Surveys that require people to post back responses, or phone in their opinions, are likely to be biased since those who have strong opinions are more likely to take the time to fill the questionnaire out and return it. In this case, the odds are strong that the sample is over-represented by people who want to make a statement about their disillusionment with the current state of affairs. In other words, the responses that led to the front-page banner headline and kicked off a national debate came from a group of people who read a traditionally white, English-language Sunday newspaper, and who are more likely to be dissatisfied with their present lot in life than a true cross-section of skilled South Africans.

- 3.3 There have been few serious efforts hitherto to take the brain-drain debate beyond the level of anecdote and hearsay. While Prah (1989) did make a serious effort at a representative survey of skills migration to the South African bantustans, the topic was of limited scope and the sample size small. Considerably more problematic was a survey by Polonsky *et al.* (1988,1989) of 73 emigrating South Africans on board a cruise ship destined for Australia, research that was subsequently published as a serious academic contribution. Policy making on a topic as important as the brain drain must be based on far more sound and rigorous methodological research than this.
- 3.4 In 1998, the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) instituted a series of nationally-representative surveys in the SADC region on the attitudes of skilled people towards migration. Nationally representative surveys were conducted in South Africa, Botswana and Lesotho to provide detailed information on the scale and character of skilled migration (plans to include Zimbabwe were postponed due to the unexpected closure of the university at the time of the research). Future research on this issue is planned for Namibia, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Mozambique and will be published separately by SAMP.³
- 3.5 The research project was broken into three components. The first component was interviews with “skilled nationals” – i.e., skilled people who are citizens and residents of the country surveyed. A total of 1,257 people were interviewed from a range of occupations and training: 725 in South Africa; 306 in Lesotho; and 226 in Botswana. The samples were based on the best demographic information available for skilled nationals in each of the countries and were conducted using rigorous selection methods and trained interviewers (more detailed methodological descriptions are provided in the text of each chapter). Sample selection and questionnaires were consistent across the three countries. In South Africa, in particular, random sampling produced a highly-skewed sample by race with whites predominating in the sample. This is regrettable but

inevitable given the apartheid legacy which denied blacks access to advanced training and skills development.⁴

- 3.6 The second component of the research was interviews with non-citizens living and working in the country where they were interviewed. These samples were also broadly representative of the pool of skilled people in this category, and sample selection and questionnaire formats were also consistent for the countries surveyed. A total of 400 interviews were conducted in South Africa and 125 in Botswana. Unfortunately, unrest in Lesotho and the subsequent intervention of SADC forces in September of 1998 interrupted interviews in that country and data collection was halted after only 67 interviews with skilled foreigners.
- 3.7 The third component of the research was interviews with employers of skilled personnel. This work was only conducted in South Africa, due to logistical and budgetary constraints, and consisted of interviews with 200 public and private sector organizations from a wide range of industrial, commercial and service areas (e.g., medicine, law, mining, information technology). Once again, these interviews are broadly representative of skilled employers in the country and sampling and interviewing techniques followed standard research practices.
- 3.8 A related piece of research (already reported on in Policy Brief No. 5) was conducted by the South African National Skills Abroad (SANSA) network at the University of Cape Town. SANSA examined the pool of skilled South African nationals living in other parts of the world (predominantly Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand) and attempted to gauge both the quantitative and qualitative character of this diaspora.
- 3.9 In total, over 2,000 people were interviewed by SAMP in three different countries, with an additional 2,000 diasporic skilled South Africans covered in the SANSA data base. This research therefore represents the widest sampling of skilled personnel yet conducted

in Southern Africa. It serves as a reliable baseline of empirical data as well as a methodological yardstick for future research on the topic.

4.0 Defining Skills

4.1 It is important to explain at the outset what SAMP understand by the term “skilled” in its policy research. The idea of a brain drain implies a depletion of skilled people who are vital to the functional core of a national economy. While actual definitions of skilled persons may vary, they all tend to focus on people who have received some sort of specialized training that results in superior technical competence, talent, or abilities that are applied in professional occupations. Without these people, the operation and development of the economy would be severely hindered.

4.2 We have therefore opted for a relatively broad definition of the term “skilled”, one that encompasses a broader range of skills than the popular wisdom might imply. The functional core of an economy does not only consist of people with post-graduate degrees, in well-paying, high-level corporate positions. It is also sustained by people who, despite having no advanced formal education, have worked their way up the corporate ladder, have started their own successful businesses, or play a critical role in the public sector. Our samples therefore include anyone who has special training or work experience which is in relative short supply in relation to the labour market as a whole. Doctors, accountants, engineers and other professionals who are typically associated with skilled migration have certainly been included in the samples, but the skills base is not restricted to these categories.

4.3 The samples are also contextualized, in that what is deemed an important skill in one country may not be important in another. In Lesotho, for example, interviewees were drawn from a core list of professions but a decision was made to also include teachers

and skilled artisans, since people from these areas are regularly seeking, and often finding, jobs in South Africa, and are in short supply in Lesotho.

5.0 Challenging Brain Drain Stereotypes

- 5.1 Official figures, in South Africa at least, dramatically undercount the extent of emigration. On the other hand, the SAMP surveys show that the alarmist rhetoric of crisis that pervades discussion of the brain drain in the popular press may be misplaced. There is no doubt that there are thousands of South Africans, Batswana and Basotho leaving their countries to live and work in other countries in the region and other parts of the world, but the situation is far from desperate and there is no indication of a looming mass exodus in the near future. Skilled nationals in all three countries are generally satisfied with their work and social lives and have no immediate plans to leave. Moreover, there is a pool of skilled foreigners who are equally satisfied with their lives in their host country and do not plan on leaving in the near future. Finally, and perhaps most revealing of all, employers of skilled personnel in South Africa do not appear to be having major problems hiring skilled nationals (with the notable, and globally relevant, exception of information technology personnel).
- 5.2 This is not to deny that many skilled people have given thought to leaving their home country or to say that South Africa, Lesotho and Botswana have an excess of skilled people ready to fill any vacant post. In South Africa, an extremely high 69% of skilled nationals said that they have given the idea of emigration “some thought”. Many have also made contact with potential employers overseas and many more have friends, colleagues or family members who have already emigrated, serving as examples and valuable reference points for their own possible emigration.
- 5.3 But thinking about leaving, and actually doing so, are very different things. Only 20% of the skilled South Africans interviewed by SAMP said that it was “very likely” that they

would leave the country for a period of more than two years and only 3% said that it was “very likely” that they would leave within the next six months. A composite statistical index used to construct each person’s “emigration potential” showed that only 2% of the sample falls into the “very high” category. These are hardly grounds for construction of a moral panic about a middle class exodus (Haffajee 1998).

- 5.4 Skilled nationals in Botswana and Lesotho have a similar profile, although attitudes in Lesotho may have changed after the SADC intervention in 1998. In Zimbabwe, recent political developments also appear to have influenced the attitudes of skilled personnel towards emigration. But the survey results described here do reveal a remarkable stability and commitment amongst skilled professionals to the home country in at least three SADC states.
- 5.5 In terms of skilled foreigners, the surveys found that these people are also, by and large, happy to be living and working in their adopted country. Most have strong transnational links back home, send remittances to family and friends, visit home on a regular basis and are proud to call themselves a citizen of their home country. Many also say that they want to return home at some point. But there is no sense of a large or immediate exodus from the host country. Skilled foreigners are generally satisfied with their jobs, and with their colleagues, and are involved in the communities where they live. They have, in other words, settled down for the medium term, if not permanently.
- 5.6 To risk a metaphor, skilled people in the region, be they skilled nationals or skilled foreigners, know where their suitcases are and have given some thought to what it would take to pack up and leave the country, but the suitcases are still in the cupboard and there are no plans to pull them out in the immediate future. There is no sense from this research that skilled people are going to make a rush on the banks, pack their things and leave tomorrow. Whether citizens or permit holders, skilled people in the three countries surveyed have significant material and emotional ties to the countries where they live and

work: homes, friends, families, communities, jobs, and careers. There is a sense of patriotism and commitment to the home/host country that is largely ignored in the popular coverage of the brain-drain issue. If skilled people in the region have an alternative destination in mind, it is by and large a destination unknown, with no set timetable.

- 5.7 Another important aspect of the research worth highlighting here is the challenge it offers to stereotypes about emigration, particularly in South Africa. Popular myth in South Africa has it that English-speaking white males are most likely to want to leave the country, with women, Afrikaners and black South Africans, in that order, more likely to stay due to a lack of skills, a lack of a second passport, or a deeper commitment and ties to the country. Our survey of skilled nationals in South Africa, however, suggests that English-speaking whites are just as likely to want to stay in the country and that black South Africans and Afrikaners are almost as likely to want to leave. Only in the area of gender do there appear to be significant differences, with men in general more likely to leave than women. However, because men also dominate the more mobile professions, it is hard to say whether this is a function of inherent gender preference or simply a function of gendered structural inequality in the labour market.

6.0 Implications for Immigration Policy

- 6.1 The policy implications arising from this discussion are important to identify. Given the importance of the South African labour market in the region (and, indeed, on the continent), as well as the impending reforms to that country's immigration policy, it is worth relating the findings of this research to the new immigration policy embodied in the 2002 Immigration Act (RSA 1999, 2000).⁵ The Act replaces the Aliens Control Act, the last major piece of apartheid-era legislation left on the books in South Africa, with far-reaching implications for South African citizens, residents and visitors.

- 6.2 The first point to emphasize is that the first term of office of South Africa's post-apartheid government was characterized by a general suspicion towards most forms of immigration (Croucher 1998; Crush 1998; Peberdy 1999). Temporary and permanent immigration of skilled personnel have declined consistently since 1994. The government has come recently to revise its view and admit that skills immigration is not necessarily disadvantageous to South Africans. Indeed, the 1999 White Paper on International Migration explicitly asserts the government's stated interest in "attract[ing] qualified people in South Africa to offset the brain drain" (RSA 1999, 30). In early 2001, the ANC endorsed this policy goal.
- 6.3 The reasons for this softening of position are not unrelated to the lobbying efforts of big business. Some of these complaints are perfectly legitimate. The Department of Home Affairs is seriously under-resourced and, under the archaic Aliens Control Act, lacked the mechanisms to speed skills entry. Press reports suggest that it is still dealing with the skills needs of South African corporations in an *ad hoc* and unpredictable manner (Anon. 1999; Steinberg 1999). The lobbying of South African and international business involves the idea of a "skills crisis". This crisis is supposedly crippling South Africa's international competitiveness. Interestingly, however, the magnitude and impact of the skills haemorrhage are simply assumed rather than demonstrated. The government has similarly made no systematic effort to quantitatively demonstrate that there is actually a brain drain of crisis proportions.⁶
- 6.4 The new strategy for attracting skilled personnel to South Africa has two dimensions. First, the Minister of Home Affairs has suggested that the South African government needed to make it easier for skilled persons to obtain extended work permits and/or permanent residency for themselves and their families. Second, he proposed to let "market forces" determine where skills are most needed in the economy. The state, through the agency of the proposed Immigration Services, would monitor the skilled labour market, and would establish a national training fund that employers who hire

skilled foreigners would need to pay into to train South Africans for future jobs, but the bulk of the decision-making would be delegated to employers.⁷

- 6.5 The proposal to make it easier for qualified persons to obtain visas, work permits and temporary resident status for themselves and their families is a welcome corrective to the immigrant decision-making of the past. Simplification of administration and greater consistency in policy should go a long way toward attracting skilled people to the country. There are, however, a number of problematic assumptions and contradictory lines of argument in these proposals.
- 6.6 The first problem is that skilled emigration (the brain drain) is not necessarily as significant a problem as it is made out to be. In uncritically accepting popular wisdom on the issue without questioning the validity of the ‘facts’ which led to this conclusion, the White Paper unwittingly set the country up for a series of policy reforms which may not address the demographic and attitudinal realities of skilled migration. At the very least, the SAMP research reported here suggests that popular assumptions about the migration plans of skilled South African nationals and skilled foreigners cannot be taken for granted and that much more (sound) research is needed on this important topic.
- 6.7 A second problem concerns the proposed mechanisms for selecting skilled immigrants. As noted, the fundamental objective is to let “market forces” decide what kinds of skilled people are needed in the country. In its rejection of a centralized, state-run ‘points system’ such as has been used in Canada and other immigrant-receiving countries to determine where skills are most needed, the White Paper argued that “[i]t is difficult for Government to determine what type of skills are required within South Africa, and who the people are that can contribute to our economic growth”.⁸ In the “final analysis, only the industry can tell who the industry needs, why and for how long”. The White Paper argued that “it would be simpler if the industry by itself could determine what it needs to grow and prosper and were able to satisfy these needs from the world labour market” and

proposed that Home Affairs delegate power to corporations to issue visas and permits (RSA 1999, 29-31).

- 6.8 There is a fundamental tension between a laissez-faire approach to letting the market determine who should be let into the country and the legacy of control that has been so much a part of immigration policy and culture in the South African government in the past. White Paper statements like “the migration system should enable Government to retain control over who may enter the country and the conditions and length of his or her stay” (RSA 1999, 17) are in direct contrast to the neoliberalism that also guides the document – e.g., “any government is likely to fail if it attempts to counter market forces moved by the invisible hand of economic fundamentals” (RSA 1999, 20).
- 6.9 The proposal to require employers to pay into a national fund to provide training to South Africans proved highly controversial. Official logic was that this fund would effectively make the cost of hiring a foreigner higher than that of an equivalently qualified South African. Thus, employers would only hire foreign workers when they really needed to do so. That this would happen even without this disincentive seemed lost on the drafters. More persuasively, the funds would add value to programmes aimed at expanding the skills base of South Africans. Nevertheless, the practicalities of such a system remain open to doubt and it would be almost impossible to enforce in a consistent and fair manner. And because skilled foreign migrants are also already likely to be more expensive to hire, this will be seen as an additional penalty for hiring workers that are actually needed. Such a policy could act as a disincentive to immigration and settlement by skilled non-citizens. This is only partially resolved by the proposed five-year residence requirement for citizenship.
- 6.10 A third issue is the manner in which the new approach to skilled migration creates a sense of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ immigrants. From the very beginning of the document, the White Paper made it clear that it sought to “let people who add value to our society in and to

keep those that do not, out” (RSA 1999, 9). The people who add value are “those who invest, are entrepreneurs and promote trade, those who bring new knowledge and experience to our society and those who have the skills and expertise required to do the things we cannot properly do at this stage.” Undesirables, by default, are those who do not have these skills or resources – in other words, poor and “unskilled” migrants who “compete for scarce resources” and “insufficient job opportunities,” become “involved in criminal activities,” and otherwise “weaken the state and its institutions by corrupting officials, fraudulently acquiring documents and undeserved rights and tarnishing our image locally and abroad” (RSA 1999, 16).

- 6.11 This kind of language directly contradicts assertions about the need to address xenophobia by “making communities understand the tragedy of illegal immigration” (RSA 1999, 21), and potentially undermines the stated desire to attract skilled personnel by contributing to a general mood of distrust about non-citizens. Reports of harassment of highly skilled professionals from other African countries are common and are no doubt related to the high rates of xenophobia in the country as a whole (Crush 2000b; McDonald *et al.* 2000). The proposals can only lead to further confusion and ill-sentiment on the part of South African nationals about newcomers to the country. Xenophobia must be addressed *in toto* as an issue of basic human rights and not as something that suits the narrow sectoral economic interests of a country one way or the other (Mattes *et al.* 2000).
- 6.12 A final tension relates to the question of where skilled immigrants are expected to come from. The White Paper laid out a hierarchy of immigration which seeks to “serve our people first; the people of the region and member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) second; the people of Africa third; and the rest of the world last” (RSA 1999, 9). But it failed to explain how this order of preference will be attained (once again raising the tension of the role of the market versus the role of the state), whether this hierarchy is constitutionally sound, or whether the skills needs of

South Africa coincide with the geographic supply of the skilled immigrants it is hoping for. The Immigration Bill is no more enlightening on this point. If new legislation is to assist with this broader policy objective it would need to spell out in much more detail how it plans to achieve these objectives, whether it is appropriate to have geographically preferential immigration policies, whether it is practically feasible to implement, and what its implications might be for other SADC countries still concerned about a possible brain drain to South Africa. In a world of global head-hunting for increasingly mobile skilled personnel, South African policy makers and immigration bureaucrats will need to be much more strategic in their efforts to attract the people they want, and will need to break down the false distinction between skilled and unskilled migrants if they are to deal with xenophobia as a whole.

- 6.13 Finally, the new policy is remarkably quiet on what would be required to stem the flow of skilled personnel out of South Africa. Part of the reason for this is the Constitutional right of South African citizens to move where they want (a right which millions of South Africans did not have under apartheid) and the reluctance of the South African government to institute policies to keep people in the country. But it nevertheless begs the question of what policy mechanisms might reduce the so-called ‘push’ factors and convince people to stay. This volume examines this issue in some detail in the South African context by examining the likes and dislikes of skilled nationals with respect to their home country and how they compare it to their “most likely destination” if they were to leave.
- 6.14 Not surprisingly, crime and safety come up as one of the main ‘push’ factors from South Africa. But even higher on the dissatisfaction list of skilled South Africans are the “present level of taxation” and “relative share of taxes in comparison to others.” This concern with taxes pertains to much more than just emigration, of course, and taxes are only part of a much larger emigration-potential puzzle amongst skilled South Africans. But given the high profile that tax (and fiscal reform in general) has in South Africa, it is

not inconceivable that levels of taxation could start to play an even bigger role in the emigration decision-making process.

- 6.15 This potential is made all the more likely with the downward pressures on personal taxes for high-income earners in immigrant-receiving countries like the United States, and has sparked a furious debate in some countries (e.g., Canada) as to whether the personal tax differential is a source of their own brain drain. Notably, the debate in Canada is divided on the issue (DeVoretz and Laryea 1998; Janigan 1998; Iqbal 1999).
- 6.16 Nevertheless, as fiscal conservatism continues to gain momentum in South Africa it will no doubt become a more explicit tool for keeping (and attracting) skilled personnel. But is this actually a line worth pursuing? Would South Africa, in its efforts to retain skilled personnel, simply be engaging in a ‘race to the bottom’ of tax reforms? This is a race that it can barely expect to win on an international scale given the relatively limited scope for further fiscal cuts in South Africa and growing pressures from an increasing pool of poor and unemployed South Africans for more progressive redistributive tax measures.
- 6.17 Would South Africa not perhaps be better off addressing the concerns that skilled personnel have about crime and social upheaval with a more balanced redistributive fiscal framework, a fiscal framework that addresses the material roots of crime and unrest though poverty alleviation? Tax issues cannot be ignored, of course, but to focus on these narrow economic reasons for emigration risks the potential of competing in an international tax reform race that cannot be won. The strategy also risks losing out on an opportunity to construct a more sound and attractive public sphere domestically that may ultimately go further in retaining the skills that South Africa needs.

7.0 Skilled Migration in Regional Context

- 7.1 A central issue is the importance of thinking of skills migration issues regionally. If regional integration in Southern Africa is going to take place in any meaningful way, the exchange of highly skilled personnel must be an integral part of it. At one level, this integration is already taking place, albeit at a slower pace than once anticipated. In the sample of 400 skilled foreigners in South Africa, for example, a total of 41% were from Africa with 18% from Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. In Botswana, 77% of the sample of skilled foreigners were from African countries with the majority of those from SADC countries. In other words, there is a significant emerging regional exchange of skills taking place and SADC countries need to acknowledge, debate and support this interaction.
- 7.2 Thinking regionally also brings into question the whole notion of a brain drain. If skilled South Africans are working in Lesotho, or if skilled Zambians are working in Botswana, does this represent a loss of skills to the country of origin or does it represent a building and expanding of the skills base for the region as a whole? This is particularly true if these skilled people are in regular contact with colleagues back home or if they return home to practice their trade. A Zimbabwean doctor practising for ten years in South Africa may seem like a major loss to Zimbabwe at the time, but if this doctor returns with new skills and exposure to different systems it could create a 'brain gain' for the country in the end and for the region as a whole.
- 7.3 In the end, of course, national boundaries remain a very tangible feature of the Southern African landscape, both physically and psychologically (McDonald 2000). Colonial constructs die hard, and as the unsuccessful attempts to create a SADC Protocol on the Free Movement of People illustrate, it will be some time yet before national governments in SADC are able and willing to think favourably (let alone strategically) about the skills pool in the region as a whole. Nevertheless, we can be optimistic about the potential for

southern African countries to attract and retain skilled personnel. The challenge for the policy makers will be to develop strategies based on sound empirical research in ways which benefit the region rather than play blindly into the lowest common denominators of globalization.

ENDNOTES

1. In 1993, Nelson Mandela made several public appeals to white South Africans not to leave because their skills were economically indispensable (Rule 1994, 34).
2. The Re-integration of Qualified African National Programme (RQAN) was initiated in the early 1980s and involved (within SADC) Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia. By the mid-1990s the programme has assisted 1,500 African nationals to return (450 to Zimbabwe alone and many of those from South Africa) (Weiss 1998, 77). Given these limited numbers, therefore, RQAN's significance and impact seem to be primarily symbolic.
3. The geographical scope of brain drain research needs to be expanded to compare more countries and there are still serious methodological challenges to be overcome (gaps in the demographic information on the skills profile in the region being the most significant). A host of new questions also emerged from the research. Other limitations derive from the quantitative research methods employed in these surveys. Closed-option, Likert-style questionnaires are useful insofar as they allow for large sample sizes and comparative data analysis, but they are limited in their ability to 'get under the skin' of what motivates people to migrate (or not) and what their likely plans are for the future. Only detailed qualitative interviews with smaller samples of skilled people can provide this kind of ethnographic information, work that SAMP intends to conduct as part of its future research mandate.
4. The national sampling procedure deployed by SAMP in this particular study produced a South African sample that was 75% white. This does not indicate racial bias in the actual methodology; rather, it is a testimony to its accuracy. A white-biased sample is the inevitable result of sampling a population whose apartheid legacy is concentrated skills amongst whites in general, and white males in particular. The sample size of black South Africans was still adequate to draw conclusions about migration intentions but these should be seen as provisional until confirmed by a larger study. In addition, the emigration intentions of South Africa's future skills base (universities in which blacks are much better represented) are currently being researched by SAMP.
5. In early 2001, a new Immigration Bill was tabled in Parliament to give effect to the recommendations of the White Paper. Although there are inconsistencies between the White Paper and the Bill, in the area of skilled immigration the Bill does attempt to give legal substance to the White Paper's proposals (and indeed the earlier recommendations of the Green Paper).
6. The White Paper makes similar errors of judgement in its uncritical acceptance of the fact that "three to five million illegal immigrants" are living in South Africa (RSA 1999, 18), figures that have been criticized for being based on unreliable methodologies and unrealistic assumptions (Brunk 1996; Crush 1999; McDonald 2000).
7. The Immigration Service was conceptualized as a quasi-independent body with considerable autonomy (somewhat akin to the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service on which the drafter of the Bill based his model). The ANC has objected strongly to this proposal and a revised bill places the Service directly under the control of the Minister.
8. For an analysis of the points system method of selecting skills and its potential relevance to South Africa, see Williams (1999).

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