



## Insight

## Return migration and economic development: opportunities and challenges

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of return migration in economic development. It documents the various measures of return migration and their limitations. It discusses the impacts of return migration on entrepreneurship, investment, human capital accumulation, and the transfer of knowledge and norms. It also reviews the challenges and debates surrounding the contributions of return migration to the economic development of countries of origin.

## 1. Introduction

Many perceive international migration as a one-way movement. In reality, a significant share of immigrants move abroad only temporarily, and growing evidence suggests that international migration is often characterized by frequent returns. Although exact figures are difficult to determine, estimates indicate that approximately one in four migration episodes involves a return (Azose & Raftery, 2019). Similarly, evidence from census data covering 60 origin countries in 2000 and 2010 suggests that return migrants constitute a substantial share of immigrants, over 40 % (Chen et al., 2022). Data from destination countries reinforce this picture: for example, about 40 % of immigrants to the United States return within ten years of arrival (Akee & Jones, 2019).

For many migrants, migration is inherently temporary, often shaped by destination-country regulations. This is particularly the case for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, a major hub for global labor migration hosting around 17 % of the world's migrant stock (31 million) in 2023, where virtually all migrants, regardless of occupation, skill level, or origin, are employed on fixed-term contracts.<sup>1</sup> In some origin countries, such as the Philippines, a substantial share of emigrants are on short-term contracts. In 2023, there were around 2 million temporary Overseas Filipino Workers.<sup>2</sup> Overall, these patterns demonstrate that a significant share of international migrants return to their countries of origin within only a few years, underscoring the prevalence and scale of return migration globally.

Despite its scale, the economic development implications of return migration remain understudied. This paper examines the role of return migration in economic development. It provides a brief overview of how

return migration is measured and highlights data limitations. It then explores the economic impacts of return migration on returnees and their origin countries and reviews the challenges and debates surrounding its contributions to the economic development of origin countries. Finally, the paper presents policy options and concludes.

## 2. Measuring return migration

In policy circles, discussions on return migration often focus on involuntary return, such as repatriation and assisted returns. In contrast, the academic literature primarily examines voluntary return migration, the most common form, in which migrants choose to return to their country of origin. This decision may stem from an initial intention to migrate temporarily or from changing circumstances that prompt a reassessment of their migration plans.

Statistics on return migration are not systematically recorded, as governments and border agencies rarely track outflows with the same rigor as inflows. Some studies estimate out-migration rates using repeated census data or representative surveys, such as labor force surveys, which record immigrants' year of arrival in the host country. By comparing the initial stock of a given cohort with its size at a later point, researchers can infer out-migration rates. For instance, Borjas and Bratsberg (1996) apply this method to analyze return migration in the United States.

Another approach involves longitudinal surveys that track a representative sample of the foreign-born population over time, such as the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP). Other countries, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Sweden, also conduct immigrant-

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<sup>1</sup> See The World Bank (2023), chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> See The World Bank (2023), chapter 5.

specific longitudinal surveys. However, these surveys often suffer from attrition, posing a challenge for studying return migration.

Administrative data provide another avenue for studying return migration, particularly when population registers are linked with social security and taxation records, as seen in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. While access to such datasets remains limited, availability is increasing. For example, Canada's Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB) integrates immigration and tax records, offering valuable insights into immigrants' labor market behavior (Aydemir & Robinson, 2008).

However, out-migration does not necessarily equate to return migration to the home country. Therefore, return migration is also analyzed using data from origin countries. Representative surveys and population censuses that capture individuals' previous place of residence or their country of residence five years prior to the census date provide insights into return migration. A well-known example is the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), which monitors migration flows between Mexico and the United States (e.g. Constant and Massey, 2003; Munshi, 2003). However, specialized surveys tracking migrants in host countries and upon their return to origin countries are not common. Some surveys collect data on returnees but tend to have relatively small sample sizes restricting the depth of analysis.

In principle, while return migrants can be captured in population censuses, these are infrequent and typically limited in their information on previous destinations and migration experiences. Estimates by Chen et al. (2022), based on census data for a sample of 60 origin countries, suggest that return migrants constitute a large share of immigrants, around 42 % on average, but with notable regional variation. As Fig. 1 shows, Latin America and the Caribbean (56 %) and Africa (43 %) have higher return rates compared to Asia (37 %) and Europe and North America (28 %).

Another sparse but promising source of data on return migrants is comprehensive panel data, including migrant surveys that capture retrospective information on workers' full employment and migration history. For example, the Egyptian Labor Market Panel Survey collects extensive data on return migrants at the time of the survey as well as

retrospective information and employment history, allowing for in-depth analysis of return migration.

To sum up, despite ongoing efforts to improve data collection on international migration flows, return migration statistics remain limited.

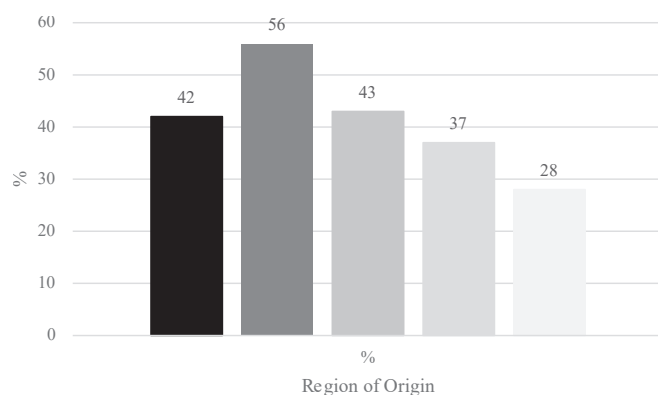
### 3. Why return?

There are many competing hypotheses on the determinants of return migration, shaped by disciplinary perspectives.<sup>3</sup> From an economic perspective, return migration presents a theoretical challenge, as standard economic models emphasize wage differentials as the primary driver of migration.<sup>4</sup> Since migrants relocate to maximize earnings, returning to a lower-wage origin country appears paradoxical. However, return migration can be interpreted as a rational life-cycle strategy to maximize long-term utility. In theory, temporary migration allows individuals to accumulate financial and human capital for future consumption and investment upon return. Migrants may also derive higher utility from consumption in their home country, which offsets the diminishing marginal utility of foreign earnings (Djajic & Milbourne, 1988; Stark et al., 1997). Additionally, overseas savings yield greater consumption potential when home-country prices are lower. Migrants may also alleviate credit constraints by working abroad until they reach an optimal savings target (Dustmann & Kirchkamp, 2002; Mesnard, 2004). Furthermore, migrants might enhance their human capital abroad to secure higher wages upon return (Dustmann et al., 2011). On the other hand, unfavorable host-country conditions, such as unemployment, may accelerate return migration (Borjas & Bratsberg, 1996).

The literature on the empirical determinants of return migration is limited. For example, (Yang, 2006) exploits the large exchange rate shocks generated by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis to shed light on the motives for return migration. He finds that Filipino migrants are less likely to return when they experience more positive exchange rate shocks. Similarly, Abarcar (2017), focusing on Australian immigrants, shows that favorable exchange rate shocks reduce return migration by increasing the marginal benefit of staying for consumption. Kirdar (2009), using German panel data, finds that savings accumulation and purchasing power parity are significant determinants of return.

Labor market shocks, particularly unemployment, also play a crucial role, as demonstrated by Bijwaard et al. (2014) and Bijwaard & Wahba (2023). Using a unique administrative panel covering the entire population of immigrants to the Netherlands from 1999 to 2007, Bijwaard et al. (2014) find that unemployment increases the likelihood of return migration. They also show that the effect of unemployment varies depending on migrants' region of origin and length of stay. Bijwaard and Wahba (2023) is one of the very few papers that distinguish between return and onward migration. They find that unemployment is more likely to trigger return migration than onward migration. Specifically, when total earnings are low, unemployment significantly increases the likelihood of return, while when total earnings are high, unemployment raises the probability of onward migration.

Finally, using innovative data that tracked top-performing secondary school students between 1976 and 2004 from three Pacific countries,



**Fig. 1.** Estimates of share of return migrants as a percentage of all immigrants by region of origin.

Source: Author's own illustration based on data in Chen et al. (2022)

<sup>3</sup> For example, some studies argue that return migration decisions are often driven by personal factors such as family obligations, health concerns, and other individual considerations, for example see Cassarino, 2004. Other studies highlight the role of emotional attachment to the homeland, as well as experiences of exclusion and limited social integration in host societies, as additional factors that can compel migrants to return, for example see Carling and Pettersen, 2014. See King and Kuschminder (2022) Handbook on return migration which provides various disciplinary perspectives on return migration.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that our focus in this paper is on economic/labor migrants. For those who migrated for non-economic reasons, such as refugees who were displaced by conflict, their return is largely influenced by the conditions in their home country. For example, see Alrababah et al. (2023) on the return intentions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

(Gibson and McKenzie, 2011) find that income gains play only a minor role in determining return migration. Instead, family ties, personal connections to the home country, and lifestyle considerations are more important factors in the return decision, especially for the highly educated. Hence, even from an economic perspective, there are various—and sometimes conflicting—reasons for return.

#### 4. Return migration and economic development

Return migration can be beneficial for the economic development of the origin country in several ways. In the economics literature, economic development is understood as improving the well-being and quality of life of people through economic growth, infrastructure, education, healthcare, and social progress; in other words, economic development focuses on human development, not just economic growth. Return migration can potentially impact both individuals and their home countries. At the micro level, it can enhance individual and household welfare through accumulated savings, skill enhancement, and knowledge transfer. At the macro level, returnees contribute to economic development by promoting human capital formation, entrepreneurship, and innovation. This highlights the multifaceted role of return migration in economic development.

##### 4.1. Entrepreneurship & business creation

A substantial body of research examines the relationship between return migration and entrepreneurship. In the economics literature, migration is often viewed as a means to accumulate savings and overcome credit constraints. Early studies find that among returnees, those who accumulate overseas savings are more likely to become entrepreneurs rather than wage workers (McCormick & Wahba, 2001; Dustmann & Kirchkamp, 2002; Mesnard, 2004). This literature distinguishes between self-employment and business creation, emphasizing that return migrants not only invest their savings in micro-enterprises but also possess entrepreneurial skills. Several studies control for reverse causality between entrepreneurship and return migration; that is, they use methods to ensure they are capturing the effect of return migration on entrepreneurship rather than the other way around (e.g., Piracha & Vadean, 2010; Wahba & Zenou, 2012; Batista et al., 2017).<sup>5</sup>

However, Kveder & Flahaux (2013) find that Senegalese returnees often turn to self-employment as a last resort due to insufficient capital accumulation abroad. In contrast, Marchetta (2012) examines whether return migration improves the survival of entrepreneurial activities in Egypt, using panel data and instrumental variable techniques to address selection bias. She finds that return migration enhances business survival rates, potentially due to reduced credit constraints and the application of newly acquired skills and entrepreneurial knowledge. Overall, this literature shows the positive role of returnees in micro-enterprise development and economic growth in their home countries.

##### 4.2. Human capital accumulation

One of the key benefits of migration is human capital accumulation through skill acquisition. Several studies examine the impact of overseas experience on returnees' wages and control for selection bias by estimating counterfactual wage distributions or accounting for migrants' pre-migration characteristics. (Lacuesta, 2010) finds that return migrants in Mexico earn significantly more than non-migrants but attributes this wage premium to pre-migration differences in ability rather than human capital gains from migration. In contrast, Reinhold & Thom (2013) identify a positive impact of return migration on post-return

wages, driven by occupation-specific experience acquired abroad, particularly for return migrants who worked in occupations in the United States that matched their current occupation in Mexico. De Vreyer et al. (2010) show that West African returnees from OECD countries benefit from a wage premium, while those returning from non-OECD countries do not. Wahba (2015) underscores the importance of controlling for multiple selectivity biases—non-randomness in emigration, return migration, labor force participation, and occupational choice following return decisions—when estimating wage outcomes for Egyptian returnees. Her findings suggest that temporary migration leads to a wage premium, but failing to account for both emigration and return selection would overestimate the effect.

Another dimension of human capital accumulation is occupational upgrading, which remains relatively limited. Carletto & Kilic (2011) analyze the occupational mobility of returnees in Albania compared to non-migrants and find that prior migration experience increases the likelihood of upward occupational mobility. In contrast, Masso et al. (2014), using online job search data from Estonia, find no significant effect of temporary overseas experience on occupational advancement. Elmallakh and Wahba, 2021b investigate whether temporary overseas migration facilitates occupational upgrading upon return. Using Egyptian data, they control for the endogeneity (reverse causality) of migration decisions and find that return migration enhances upward occupational mobility.

However, Coniglio and Brzozowski (2018) emphasize that the benefits of return migration depend on both the quality of migrants' overseas work experience and their ability to reintegrate into the domestic labor market. Analyzing Polish returnees, they find that skill mismatches abroad are strongly associated with skill underutilization upon return, but that soft skills acquired overseas can provide returnees with a competitive advantage relative to non-migrants.

##### 4.3. Knowledge diffusion and FDI

Migrants also facilitate the cross-border transfer of ideas, technology, and knowledge. While a well-established literature examines the impact of international migration on trade and foreign direct investment (FDI), similar mechanisms operate through return migration. Returnees, having established networks in destination countries, can stimulate trade, attract FDI, and foster innovation upon their return. Empirical evidence suggests that return migration serves as a key driver of international knowledge diffusion and productivity growth. For instance, Bahar et al. (2022) estimate that returning migrants contributed around 6 % to Yugoslavia's total export growth between 2000 and 2005, demonstrating how returnees can enhance national economic performance through productivity gains. Choudhury (2016) examines the role of return migrants in knowledge production within geographically distant R&D locations in India. He finds that return migrants have higher prior patenting activity and continue to file more patents than local hires. Moreover, local employees working under return migrant managers exhibit higher patenting rates, suggesting that returnees act as conduits for knowledge transfer.

##### 4.4. Social remittances

Migration exposes individuals to different cultures, norms, and political ideologies, many of which are later transmitted back to their countries of origin through both the diaspora and return migrants. These transferred norms, or "social remittances" as coined by Levitt (1998), span social, economic, and political domains. Return migrants often bring back political ideas about governance, institutional quality, and accountability, increasing awareness and participation in political life. For example, Spilimbergo (2009), using a global panel dataset on foreign students over 50 years, finds that individuals educated abroad in democratic countries contribute to democratic change in their home countries. Similarly, Mercier (2016) examines the impact of political

<sup>5</sup> To address this reverse causality/endogeneity, studies often use instrumental variable approaches to isolate variation in the likelihood of return migration that is unrelated to entrepreneurial activities.

leaders who studied abroad on democracy levels in their home countries. She finds that leaders who studied in high-income OECD countries are associated with increased democratization, particularly in formerly autocratic settings.

Migrants' exposure to different institutional environments abroad can also shape their expectations and demands for better governance upon return. One of the first papers by (Batista and Vicente, 2011) investigates how international migration influences the demand for political accountability in Cape Verde. To measure this, they implemented an innovative field experiment embedded in a survey on perceived corruption in public services. Respondents were given the option to anonymously signal their support for making the survey results public by mailing a prepaid postcard, with the condition that at least 50 percent of participants needed to respond for the findings to be released in the national media. They find that emigration increases the demand for political accountability, particularly among individuals connected to migrants in countries with stronger governance institutions.

An important question in the literature is whether return migrants' adopted norms spread beyond themselves to their families and communities. Chauvet & Mercier (2014) use electoral and census data from Mali to examine how return migration affects political participation. Controlling for migration endogeneity, they find that return migration increases voter turnout and electoral competitiveness, particularly among returnees from non-African countries. Interestingly, the impact extends beyond returnees themselves, influencing electoral participation in neighboring areas.

Migration also affects social behaviors and attitudes, including fertility and gender norms. Returnees often adjust their fertility choices based on the prevailing norms in their destination countries. Bertoli & Marchetta (2015) study Egyptian returnees, who primarily migrate to Arab countries with higher fertility rates. Controlling for migration selectivity, they find that return migrants exhibit fertility patterns similar to those in their destination countries. Similarly, Tuccio & Wahba (2018) explore the transmission of gender norms in Jordan, using unique data capturing different aspects of women's empowerment, namely, the role of women, freedom of mobility, and decision-making power. They find that women living in households with a return migrant are more likely to hold traditional gender norms compared to those in non-migrant households. This effect is particularly strong for returnees from conservative countries, indicating a transmission of traditional values from destinations with restrictive gender roles. Moreover, the study shows that return migration influences not only attitudes and perceptions but also outcomes on women's labor force participation, educational attainment, and fertility.

Tuccio et al. (2019) examine the impact of international migration on the transfer of political and social norms using data from Morocco. They address the double selection into emigration and return migration and control for the selection into destination countries, which prior studies acknowledged but largely overlooked. They find that households with return migrants, especially those from Western Europe, are more likely to support political and social change.

#### 4.5. Economic development

While the economics literature on migration has highlighted the positive effects of return migration on migrants and their families, studies measuring its broader impact on the overall origin economy remain relatively scarce. A recent study by Bucheli and Fontenla (2025) examines the effects of Mexican return migration from the United States on Mexico's economic development. They exploit spatial variation in the increase in return migration rates between 2000 and 2010. To estimate the impact of return migration, they first use changes in state-level immigration enforcement policies in the United States to model return migration rates at the municipality level in Mexico. They then estimate the impact of predicted return migration on several economic development measures. This methodology allows them to account for the

possibility that improving economic conditions in Mexico might have encouraged some migrants to return. Their findings suggest that return migration fosters higher levels of development by improving income, employment, health, and education outcomes.

In summary, the empirical evidence underscores the broader economic benefits of overseas migration, including the transfer of accumulated capital, skills, and norms.

## 5. Challenges

While return migration has the potential to contribute positively to the economic growth of home countries, its effects are often difficult to quantify. One of the main challenges in assessing its impact is the lack of reliable data. Although migrants frequently return with accumulated financial capital, new skills, and exposure to different ideas, the absence of systematic data makes it difficult to measure these contributions. As a result, evaluating the precise impact of return migration on economic development remains challenging.

Another difficulty lies in capturing the aggregate effects of return migration on the home-country economy. Return migration is often perceived as a localized phenomenon: while it may significantly affect specific households or communities, its broader influence on national indicators such as GDP, employment, or industrial productivity is harder to detect.

A central debate in this area concerns whether return migration leads to a "brain gain" or "brain waste." The "brain gain" perspective emphasizes that returnees bring back skills, entrepreneurial abilities, and innovative ideas that can enhance productivity and stimulate economic development. Many scholars argue that returnees are better equipped to contribute to their home economies with knowledge and expertise acquired abroad (Dustmann et al., 2011). Through entrepreneurship, innovation, and the transfer of technological know-how, they can drive long-term growth. However, in practice, returnees may face difficulties reintegrating into the domestic labor market, with many unable to secure jobs matching their qualifications and overseas experience. This can lead to underemployment or even unemployment. Weak institutional frameworks, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption, further constrain returnees' ability to establish or expand businesses. Political instability and inadequate infrastructure may also limit the extent to which returnees can effectively apply their acquired skills and knowledge, reducing their potential developmental impact.

In summary, while return migration holds significant promise for contributing to economic development, its success depends on multiple factors, including the quality of the migration experience, the absorptive capacity of the home-country labor market and institutions, and the broader economic and political environment.

## 6. Policy recommendations

To fully capitalize on the benefits of return migration, governments must implement policies that address the specific challenges faced by returnees. The following policy recommendations outline key strategies to facilitate the contributions of returnees to economic development.

Policymakers should take a proactive role in fostering a supportive environment for returnee entrepreneurship. This can be achieved by reducing bureaucratic obstacles, offering tax incentives, and providing financial assistance, such as low-interest loans or grants. Simplifying business registration processes and establishing clear investment guidelines can also encourage returnees to start businesses and invest in their home country. These measures not only support the economic reintegration of returnees but also stimulate innovation, create jobs, and diversify local industries, thus strengthening the broader economy.

To effectively harness the skills and experiences of returnees, policymakers should focus on facilitating their reintegration into the labor market. Creating platforms for knowledge exchange between returnees and local workers can foster mutual learning and contribute to skill



development across various sectors. By strengthening labor market linkages and promoting skill-building initiatives, returnees can make meaningful contributions to the economy, driving innovation and enhancing productivity.

Governments should also invest in regular, systematic data collection on return migration to better understand the scope and impact of this phenomenon. National statistical agencies can collaborate with international organizations and local institutions to collect and analyze data on return migration patterns, skills, and the contributions of returnees. Exit data from destination countries, if systematically collected and shared, can provide a direct measure of return flows. Additionally, conducting periodic surveys on the challenges and opportunities associated with return migration would provide valuable insights for evidence-based policymaking. This data can inform targeted interventions and ensure that resources are allocated efficiently.

In the long run, improving data on return migration will increasingly depend not only on traditional sources (surveys and censuses) but also on new technologies. Advances in AI and geospatial tools could make it possible to integrate census and survey data with real-time signals from mobile phones, social media, and satellite imagery. With progress in privacy and security measures and international data harmonization, many of the data challenges in measuring return migration may be addressed.

Given the potential of returnees' contributions, with the right policies, governments can transform return migration into a powerful driver of economic development.

## 7. Conclusion

Return migration has significant potential to contribute to the economic development of countries of origin. When migrants return home after acquiring savings, skills, and knowledge abroad, they can play a crucial role in driving economic growth. The financial resources they bring back can stimulate investment, particularly in local businesses, infrastructure, and industries, fostering job creation and innovation. Additionally, the new skills and expertise returnees acquire can enhance productivity and improve the workforce's overall capabilities, helping to raise wages and promote economic efficiency.

However, the full potential of return migration for economic development depends on how effectively the home country leverages the financial and human capital of returnees. By adopting policies that encourage investment, facilitate the reintegration of returnees into the labor market, and promote knowledge sharing between returnees and the local workforce, countries can ensure that the benefits of return migration are maximized. Ultimately, with the right policies in place, return migration can become a powerful driver of sustainable economic development.

Efforts to improve data on return migration are essential to better measure and understand the potential impacts of return migration. At the same time, future research can further examine understudied aspects of return migration impacts. For example, studies should investigate the macro-level economic impact of return migration and quantify its effects on local and national economies. Digital footprints, such as mobile phones, social media, and satellite data, can be used to predict return migration, track return patterns, and assess local-level impacts. Finally, studies should examine how return migration interacts with climate change, including whether returnees invest in climate-resilient infrastructure, adopt sustainable livelihoods, or influence social norms related to environmental behavior, such as recycling and resource conservation. Providing rigorous evidence on the impacts of return migration is critical for devising the right policies to maximize its benefits.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jackline Wahba: Writing – original draft.

## Declaration of competing interest

The author declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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