The recent decision by the Uganda Government to encourage, render official and even facilitate the exit of human resources for health (HRH), initially in form of nurses, to the UK and other developed countries, reeks of an ‘indecent proposal’ that could have negative consequences for the country in both the long and short term. The move comes in support of the activities of a UK-based employment agency Connect Nursing Ltd (UK) (New Vision, 9th July 2004). If carried through, as has been noted in the last few weeks, (Turyagenda, 2004), the Government move will be such a radical change of conceptual framework that it demands explanation. What could have led the (presumably reasonable) government of Uganda to take such an ‘indecent proposal’ as a coroner’s decision? Drawing on an analysis of the international picture of migration of skilled workers and analysis of local events and processes in Uganda, this paper attempts to analyse the reasons that could lead to have Ugandans experimented over the last 20 years, with increasing health staff instability and a growing mismatch of service delivery and population demand (a factor that has even surpassed the traditional sources of foreign exchange for the country. Their effect on the local economy has been officially recognised, especially in the last 5 years. As a result, not clear whether there has been a real significant increase in remittances or the balance has tilted in favour of remittances largely due to the decline in revenue from the traditional (mainly agricultural and animal) exports brought about by imbalances in international trade. Agricultural produce from Uganda and other developing countries has faced badly on the international market due to policies like subsidies to farmers in developed countries and quota supply arrangements, among others. For example, the major fall in international coffee prices has severely eroded revenue from this item and pushed it down the international markets. In the search for replacement sources of revenue, Uganda, spurred on by the need to pay its international debts and identify a “non-traditional” export, is progressively eyeing migrant worker remittances.

Unemployment has been on the uncontrolled rise in the country over the past few years. This is either because their training curriculum emphasises the passing of exams, rather than the acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary for job creation or because the size of the economy is too small to accommodate the qualified personnel, thus forcing the government to look beyond its borders for employment. A combination of these and other macro-economic factors is certainly at play.

Politics

The influence of local politics cannot be entirely ruled out in the consideration to take the decision. During the past (especially the 2001) presidential election campaigns, the question of rising unemployment and poor pay became a prominent issue. To capture the votes’ attention, some opposition candidates and their agents promised to provide jobs for their supporters, including facilitating them to go for odd jobs (‘keyezy’) abroad. After the elections, a lot of public service jobs were declared for jobs in the foreign employment market. Some Ugandans have been exploited by the government for supporting the opposition. In effect they were seeking economic asymmetry. Presidential elections are again around the corner. We are likely to have exactly the same candidates as in the past election. It is not, therefore, far-fetched to think that the issues will be the same. In order not to be caught flat-footed, the government may be taking a political move to disarm the opposition of the issue of unemployment by being the main champion of ‘keyezy’. This line of argument is lent credence by the fact that the promotion of labour export is being handled neither by the Export and Promotion Policy Centre nor the Ministry of Trade and nor the Chamber of Commerce but by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, under the coordination of State House. (Kizza, 2004; Mabir, 2006): Further credence may be lent by the fact that the Presidential Assistant handling the exercise is believed to be very closely related to a prominent campaign agent of the main opposition candidate in the 2001 polls. According to her, “this project is very dear to the president because fighting unemployment is embedded in his 2001 manifesto” (Mabiru, 2004).

Ignorance of the true situation of human resources for health (HRH)

Given the prevalent lack of well-researched information on the (HRH) situation in the country, it is possible that some key people in the government think that there are actually enough health workers in this country, with enough to spare for export. It is often heard being stated as fact that health workers are on the streets unemployed. However, this assumption only derives its strength from the frequency with which it is said, rather than from fact. The facts on the ground show a different picture. Several organizations re-advertise health jobs in the media with no response. Organisations and sub-sectors cannibalise each other of health workers. The public sector recruits from the private-not-for-profit (PNFP) sector and vice versa. Districts recruit each other. The truth is that Uganda does not have enough health workers for the leave alone export. Our production capacity of health workers is too insufficient to sustain the balance between current entrants and those exiting the health care. That is partly why we operate a Minimum Health Care Package instead of the comprehensive services we should be offering our people. In fact, we are not even capable of offering the full “minimum” (450 nurses) package to all the health care. As a result, we are only capable of providing some of the services to some of the people for some of the time. According to one author, we are only capable of “rationing within the minimum” (Sengooba, 2004).

Uganda’s HRH Reality

But what is Uganda’s reality as far as human resources for health are concerned? The project outputs for key staff have not been achieved for some years. According to the Ministry of Health, we have attained about only 2% of the projected target of Enrolled Comprehensive Nursing (ECN) by the end of the first Health Sector Strategic Plan (HSP I) (Mabir, 2004). A number of reasons are cited, prominent among these being the difficulties in shifting to a new programmatic approach to doctors and medical students in training. Some Ugandans have, however, been characterised by lack of schools for children, lack of other social amenities and activities like electricity, piped water, phone networks etc. Other reasons include professional isolation and remoteness in some areas (not being invited to attend conferences, meetings and retreats etc) lack of supervision etc and heavy workload occasioned by the failure to meet the Minimum Service and that of Finance. A rigid employment system brought about by local government decentralisation, where a worker cannot be transferred to a place of work that enables them to achieve their other goals in life or due to sectarian recruitment in some areas, has also been a ‘push’ factor. A rigid public service with few prospects of career development, a continuous drop in real income due to inflation not matched with a relevant salary increment, discrimination in award of scholarships and many others, have all been discouraging to the health workers.

On the contrary, there have been some features of developed countries that push health workers from Uganda and other developing countries. They include a high salary, personal security, higher standards of living, career development, possibility of high level specialization, an aggressive recruitment marketing etc. Some more reasons are cited by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM, 2003).
While the government currently targets to export nurses and midwives, eventually the country will be drained of highly skilled staff of other cadres. It is only the well-qualified, highly skilled and highly specialized skills that are exported by the WHRF exports from Uganda through the channels of remittances and overseas employment. As a result, more cadres will be enshrined upon and even the skeleton nursing staff left will be exported or will eventually "export" themselves thereafter have been doing away with. That's why the country will need a few skilled nurses for the better management of the country.

c) Drainage of national resources on transfer: Since most of the skilled personnel are trained on government bursaries, on expensive and long programs, exporting means that the investment in them is lost to Uganda, at least for a time. An argument is often forwarded that they will return with more knowledge, experience and skills after some time. The return rate of highly qualified health workers is very low indeed because they would lack the necessary equipment, support staff and work environment to help them in their work.

d) Delay in the creation of a mass of qualified and committed health workers: Due to the deprivation of the country of qualified personnel, it will take us longer to create the right critical mass of qualified health workers necessary to solve the health problem. In the era of globalisation, it would take us 5 years of the HGSS to create the required critical mass that can combat communicable and non-communicable diseases.

e) Loss of job-creation capacity: Health workers, like other educated personnel, being involved in other income-generating activities, also act as job creators and engines of endogenous development for the country. Exporting them will deprive Uganda of the people academically positioned to generate new ideas on job-creation and incommageration.

f) Loss of research capacity: With the loss of qualified health workers, there will be less technological research and innovation in the country because the capable people have left. Most technologically advancing countries have benefited from collaborative scientific research, grants and fields led by researches in the country.

Although collaborative research is possible by distance from a number of parties or with partners abroad, in many cases the findings are extrapolated. A number of issues to this effect have been cited in the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI).

Will they come back?

People tend to view the people that they get off the street as being skilled enough to return with a wealth of new knowledge and experience, skill and ability. Thus, is the expectation that the social workers and many other skilled personnel who left the country to pursue foreign careers will return to their compass in both the best interest of the country and their own interest. However, most of the people who left the country to seek employment abroad are not doing so for the best interest of the country or even for their own interest. It is possible that the government may have wished to follow the example of some few other countries which export labour and, reportedly, gain from remittances by the skilled workers. A few other poor countries have done this, mainly in Central American, South American and European countries.

Example from other countries

c) Ethical and equity questions

There is some evidence that a number of Ugandans doing odd jobs in Japan have invested some money back home. A number of linedy commercial buildings have graced the skies of Kampala of recent and the city is now full of people who are used to using the sources of foreign exchange. This is because in most cases of the sources of foreign exchange, most Ugandans abroad have invested the money back home. They have invested the money in the form of building homes for their families, the rest of their earnings are spent on their new lifestyles, in host countries with higher costs of living. Despite having lost our educated people to the developed world for over 40 years, we are yet to see any major projects of community interest, implemented by one or a group of highly educated Ugandans currently working abroad. A quick survey reveals a hospital in Gulu and a hospital in Mbarara, only. Of course, one can track this view with regard to the concept that the development of the country is them and they could do it with what they wish. However, that is also the precise view of this paper. Should the government feel threatened that its skilled people are going away and making it fail to attain its objectives of providing a minimum health care package? Should it even facilitate them? What does facilitation in this case mean?

Although we have no doubt that some money does move from Ugandans to their home countries in the form of remittances. In most cases, the remittances from workers abroad are sent directly to their household members for domestic purposes like food, clothing and education. They are sent through informal channels like by ‘hand’ transfers or through migrant workers associations. In the case of the latter, they are transferred through banks or declared as remittances, even if only for data collection, not taxation. Therefore, a decision to export health workers on basis of information on remittances reveals on slippery ground because the information is highly inaccurate.

Moreover, the whole issue of remittances is governed by methodological and definitional problems and difficulties in capturing data from such an informal economy. Data from the Bank of Uganda show some remittances captured in the Balance of Payments (BOP) statements. To the majority of the lay stakeholders, ‘remittances’ would be defined in a manner similar to that by Sorenson (2004) as that portion of a migrant worker’s earnings sent from the destination country to the country of origin. However, the definition by the Bank differs from this and does not reflect the much-touted aspect of labour exports. According to the Bank... ‘remittances are a residual item in the BOP and are defined as the difference between total purchases of foreign exchange by residents and total declared inflows...’ (Bud, 2004). Clearly, we are talking about different things. The Bank interpretation is methodological, to enable the bank statisticians to estimate the remittances. Such a calculation probably excludes the negative remittance figures (probably suggesting a net outflow) observed in some years in the BOP trend analysis. In the Bank’s interpretation, the ‘identification process’ is based on the ‘identification of inflows’ which is itself a somewhat arbitrary step. The BOP shows that the majority of inflows are through banks or declared as remittances, even if only for data collection, not taxation. Therefore, the remaining 74% are what are estimated to be ‘remittances’. So, even if some money did come, the data are not captured comprehensively so as to be used for planning, and especially, for planning a sensitive move like export of health workers.

Will the remittances be used for productive purposes? Apart from supporting domestic consumption, at best remittances from most Ugandans abroad are used for construction of buildings. Rarely are they substantial enough so as to start a job-creating business in the source economy. Most money ends up in the hands of the migrants’ family and is spent on consumer goods. A resident health worker will provide services to the general population using the health services, whereas they end up in the money being sent to their families. Thus the poorest segments of the society hardly share anything of this remittances. Remittances do not fund important projects like roads, schools, health, power or water.

They are used to start small scale family managed businesses e.g. fuel stations.

In the past, the Ugandans in the diaspora have even had their privileged position of being outside the national borders to various effects for the country. While some have used their time and effort to earn money and send some of it home to sustain and develop the country, others have used it to violently influence or change national policies and even to regime changes. It is common knowledge that since independence Uganda has lived outside, being economically better off than the source countries. However, in the past we looked at good health as a prerequisite to poverty eradication, in line with the findings of the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project (UPPAP) and the subsequent justification of the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), it seems that our opinion has not just changed but actually reversed. It remains to be proven whether this above-mentioned change in public opinion is a result of the leadership of the health sector facilitated by legal amendments or not.

Some opponents of the transfer of nurse training schools from the Ministry of Health (MoH) to that of Education and Sports (MoES) claim that the conceptual framework may have indeed changed ever since the training schools moved. A popular movement among these circles is ‘MoH trains for service while MoES trains for export’. However, this paper maintains that irrespective of the management of the schools, the primary purpose of human resource development in Uganda should be to facilitate their employment. It is the ethical imperative to ensure that the primary policy objectives of the current National Health Policy (MoH, 1998) are that policies may change over time, production for export is neither one of the stated policy objectives for human resources development in the health sector nor is it a stated strategy to achieve the policy objectives. And, until it has been stated as such, in our opinion, either we have to limit our focus on the health sector or we have focused on something outside the policy and ignored the policy.

What do we suggest?

Health workers are like many other categories of educated people and some undereducated people, have being exiting the country for a long time in search of ‘greener pastures’ elsewhere. It is their human right to move in search of an appropriate livelihood and any effort to stop them is tantamount to an abuse of some of their human rights. In our opinion, however, it is the government’s responsibility to facilitate and try to enable the workers. If, for the few exceptions that accrue from the migration of skilled workers, the government feels that they would like to be associated with the process, then they need to ensure that the process is beneficial to the country in an equitable manner. This can be done in a number of ways.

a) A favourable environment for investment: The country needs to put in place some measures to encourage the migrant workers to remit some of their earnings back home. This can only occur if the migrant workers feel confident enough in the investment climate back home as to send substantial proportions of their income. This will require tackling the problem of corruption in the offices that handle investment matters as well as marketing local investment opportunities in a conscious and honest manner.

b) Support from the government: In the past the government has failed to support the government from the government workers (migrants) in the diaspora. It is the responsibility of the government to help the workers from the government workers in the diaspora, by providing them with the opportunities to secure employment in their fields of expertise.

c) Encourage the development of effective transfer channels: Currently, the transfer of remittances is done sacrfically through relatives and friends. The data are never captured for planning purposes. Some have been killed by relatives who misappropriated their earnings, in fear of being discovered and exposed. The government would need to encourage the development of suitable mechanisms for transfers like through banks and other money handling agencies. Other countries encourage microfinance institutions (MFIs) to reach out to migrant workers and provide them with local saving and investment options.
d) Incentive schemes: Some countries try to impose mandatory remittance schemes as a prerequisite to get an exit permit (El-Sakka, 2004). In our opinion, the government should keep clear of this; the country is to benefit from remittances. Some migrant workers might fear the experience in some other countries though. Governments which directly facilitate the out-migration of their workers, like Cuba and the Philippines, also have a mechanism of capturing a portion of the remittances for general development, rather than wait for a trickle-down effect. Some countries have opted for taxes and duties on remittances while others have opted to simply encourage migrant workers to contribute voluntarily to charity activities in their home country.

e) Rationalise the export: Since it is clear that there is already existing imbalance in the distribution of health workers in the country, it is better that the government first adopts a zero-tolerance policy to imbalances in workforce distribution within the country, before exporting staff. Only then would the government have the moral authority to facilitate out-migrating workers and even then, starting with only those from districts with an excess. However, in order to avoid a rush to these districts by health workers, the government would then need to simultaneously institute measures aimed at continuously attracting health workers to all districts and to eventually establish recruitment centres in all districts like they did with the recruitment of ‘AGOA girls’. The measures to attract health workers to the currently disadvantaged districts will take many forms but they all need to be overt and expressly declared, like hardship allowances, remittance allowances, priority in scholarships, affirmative salary scales etc.

f) Encourage a well-balanced skill mix: The facilitation of the emigration of health workers can only be justified if it takes into account the skill gaps and imbalances currently obtaining. The government needs to reconsider its policy of exporting cadres on which there are glaring gaps in the service. The current practice of exporting nurses will only worsen the skill imbalance situation.

g) Institute return migration programmes: In some countries where success has been obtained with labours exports, they have instituted mechanisms for the return of the skilled workers. Return can be physical or virtual. Physical return requires a programme where the skilled workers from a country like Uganda will come back to offer technical services either in form of a consultancy or as an exchange programme with the developed country of their employment. Virtual return or the other hand involves use of the progressively advancing information and communication technology (ICT), whereby the skilled workers from a country like Uganda can offer their technical advice and even manage projects in Uganda from abroad by use of ICTs.

h) Keeping contact: Most importantly, the government needs to maintain contact with the migrating workers and to monitor their welfare. That way, there will be some, and only some, hope that they will maintain an attachment to their country and feel obliged to return to invest their money and skills in their country of origin.

Conclusion:

Until these, similar or even better measures are taken to improve the benefit from remittances of migrating health workers without destabilizing the local health workforce, the decision to export health workers remains an indecent proposal.

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