
Cremers, J.

Published in:
CLR News

Citation for published version (APA):
Even though the countries vary in their wage setting institutions, the authors find that migrants in general earn less than their local counterparts. After EU enlargement, all countries have opted for re-regulation of wage formation. The UK has a statutory minimum wage, but no provisions for the legal extension of collective agreements. Therefore, the statutory minimum wage remains the main instrument for migrant wage regulation. In Germany and Switzerland, there is rising demand for the introduction of national statutory minimum wages. In Norway, extension of collective agreements has become an accepted instrument in regulating wage standards.


In recent years the integration debate has led to a more restricted political attitude towards labour migration in Europe. In the political debates the positive effects migration has for a labour market with frictions and shortages, and the profit that receiving countries have from foreign labour doing the job notably in the lowest echelon of the economy could not outweigh the supposedly negative effects. Against this background ideas of ‘circular migration’ can be seen as the ideological frame for a temporary ‘migration of labour not of people’. The discussion paper written by Piyasiri Wickramasekara, a former Senior Migration Specialist in the ILO’s International Migration Programme (MIGRANT), says it very bluntly: one of the advantages claimed for circular migration is that ‘there are no integration costs given the temporary stays of circular migrants. This in itself implies tacit support for xenophobic tendencies in destination countries’ (p.2). The author takes another stand; in his view ‘Even temporary workers have basic labour market and social integration needs defined

by international standards, and national legislation’ (p.44). The trade union movement has a crucial role to play. The author refers to the possibility to sign cooperation agreements between unions in sending and receiving countries to address protection gaps relating to migrant workers in temporary and circular migration programmes.

The paper goes beyond the political hype of wordings, such as ‘triple win’ or even the notion of ‘circular migration’, which mask the narrow-minded economic and political view of (migrant) workers as a commodity that can be hired and fired when it serves business. The author looks at definitions of circular migration, evidence of its incidence, and some practical examples of different circular migration systems in operation. He reviews European Commission policies and activities on circular migration and the approach of global agencies and the trade unions. According to the author, circular migration is nothing new. Definitions of circular migration have ranged from simple generic definitions to prescriptive ones, but in fact it is ‘temporary migration of a repetitive character across borders involving both formal and informal movements’ (p. 92). Circular migration can be divided into spontaneous circular migration, occurring when migrants from origin countries or the diaspora in destination countries engage in back and forth movements, and managed or regulated circular migration programmes (CMPs). ‘While it can be distinguished from permanent migration, and return migration (one-trip migration and return), there are nevertheless interfaces among them with circular migration sometimes leading to permanent migration or final return. By definition circular migration is part of temporary migration regimes’ (p. 92).

The concept of circular migration has been promoted by the European Commission and the Global Forum on Migration and Development as a triple win solution, bringing ‘benefits to destination countries, origin countries and migrant workers themselves – and a major mechanism to reap development benefits of labour migration’ (p.1). While most supporters
refer to the growing demand for flexible labour markets (not necessarily a win for migrant workers) and effective migration management and mention the triple win argument, the author concludes that the benefits ‘have been exaggerated, and that they are not very different from those of temporary labour migration programmes, which share a number of weaknesses’ (p. 22). Some of the supposed wins may be at the expense of either migrant workers or local workers or countries of origin, and thus hardly represent a ‘triple win’. A long list of weaknesses (instead of wins) can be made:

- The short duration of contracts, especially in seasonal and non-seasonal work, is a cause for concern that directly affects migrants’ capacity to contribute back home.
- The short duration may mean that migrant workers can be denied the assistance needed in working and living in destination countries.
- The re-migration process may involve high costs that cannot be fully recovered by migrants.
- Labour brokers and intermediaries can find many opportunities to defraud migrants.
- The undue power of employers in the selection of workers and re-nominating them for subsequent visits must be noted.
- The unequal bargaining power of countries of destination is well known.
- While migrants are expected to bring back skills, it is unlikely that employers invest in training circular migrants in lower skilled categories.
- Frequent separations from the families at home also involve social costs.

In the concluding sections, the author writes that there is hardly any difference between temporary labour migration and circular migration movements/programmes: ‘Both are affected by the operation of private employment agencies who contribute to the considerable erosion of the expected wins for migrant workers’ (p. 86). Both have major issues relating to workers’ rights and trade unions have identified both
temporary and circular migration with precarious work. The author challenges the underlying idea that host country citizens do not want permanent settlers. A comprehensive migration approach should look at ‘permanent migration programmes to address permanent or long-term labour shortages induced by demographic and other factors, regular labour admission programmes with guaranteed rights for workers on a par with national workers, improved seasonal worker programmes, and the exploration of other options in addition to circular migration’ (p.86).

Finally, why this upsurge of interest? In the case of the European Union, circular migration approaches can be seen as being a part of the externalisation of the EU migration policy. It seems first an attempt to find an alternative to the less successful, traditional guest worker programmes when a proportion of temporary migrants settled in destination countries. Second, it reflects the trend towards flexible labour markets and flexicurity – migrants have to leave or not arrive when there is slackening of labour demand in the destination country – and thus, countries of origin have to shoulder the reintegration burden. Third, it represents security-oriented approaches to migration driven by the need to combat irregular migration and shifting part of the burden responsibility to countries of origin. Fourth, the recent emphasis on promoting migration and development linkages through win-win formulas has found circular migration to be a useful tool to supplement or replace the limited co-development approaches.