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Diasporas Brain Circulation and the University

'Diaspora' is a term of self-identification used by a community of people who live outside a shared country or area of origin but maintain active connections with it. In Italy there are diaspora communities of various sizes from all over the world, including Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Middle East and Africa (there are over 20 cultural organizations in Italy dedicated to the Somali diaspora alone). These communities help build bridges between their countries of residence and countries of origin, and benefit the social/cultural and economic fabric of both. One important way in which diaspora communities can potentially benefit their sending societies, is by serving as a mitigating factor for the negative effects of "brain drain"—the long-term or permanent migration of highly skilled or educated professionals to more attractive markets.

The first attempts to investigate the brain drain occurred in the 60s and 70s and built upon British Economist John Hicks' 1930s research on human capital flows. They theorized that that human capital, like financial or physical capital, responds to market signals and wage differentials in a rational optimization of this factor. On this classical view, the "push" factors—those circumstances which drive high-skilled individuals to leave their home society—are primarily things like low wages and weak social security, while the "pull factors"—drivers that entice individuals to choose one host society over another—are simply the potential to earn a better living. The consequence is that highly skilled labor is continually drawn out by more attractive markets, and the detriment to the sending societies is compounded: not only do they lose their skilled workers but development suffers and their own market becomes marginally less attractive with subsequent losses.

Not only has the context of the labor market changed substantially since the 1960s as we transition from an industrial/post-industrial to a largely knowledge-based global economy, but contemporary research tends to view human motivation as far more nuanced with not only economic but also social and cultural factors impacting decisions to stay or remain. The picture that emerges in this light is somewhat less grim in terms of the social and economic costs of brain drain. Recent research tends to question the wholly negative effect of high-skilled labor outflow, and even argues that under certain circumstances, the brain drain might ultimately benefit the sending society in a phenomenon known as "brain circulation". While high-skilled workers still move abroad for many of the reasons theorized by the purely economic brain drain theories (such as higher wages and better working conditions), they also tend to remain connected to their country of origin through family and cultural ties. In this way, high skilled workers abroad (or upon returning to the sending society) can continue to benefit the source country either directly through economic remittances or indirectly through the circulation of new skills and ideas (social remittances).

Diaspora communities factor in by helping to maintain and strengthen connections between sending and receiving society, thus fostering the brain circulation process. This occurs directly through the ties of family and social and professional networks, and indirectly through the sustenance of the identity and memory of the sending society abroad. Further, when high high-skilled workers form a diaspora abroad, they can even promote trade and other economic partnerships between the sending and receiving societies. Universities play an important role in this process, in so far as they serve as a natural focal point for the diaspora connection on both the sending and the receiving end. Not only do they train the next generation of highly skilled workers, they also promote knowledge circulation between source countries and ones which host their respective diasporas through academic collaboration, partnerships, scholarships, exchange programs, etc.

These observations are at the core of Luiss University's 2021 Diaspora Initiative, held through a series of webinars which took place between January and May 2021, around topics such as geopolitics, global business, digital technology and data science, with the involvement of Institutions, Researchers, Italy's many diaspora communities and prospective students in their respective areas of origin. The Initiative highlighted the need for an Observatory conceived as an interdisciplinary research agenda organized in thematic areas related to African Diasporas in Italy, brain drain vs. brain circulation, education and development, circular migration and the experience of African students in Europe. A preferred point of view on the African Continent aimed at investigating the impact of diaspora communities in facilitating brain circulation and the role universities play in this process.

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