
Circular Mobility of Labour: The Case of Internal Return Migration in Germany

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Abstract

Circular mobility is composed of a specific sequence of migratory moves, within which – to close the circle – a movement back towards a specific place of departure, or return migration, is a substantial component. The study of return migration emerged as a sub-theme of migration studies since the early Laws of Migration were formulated by Ernst Georg Ravenstein (1885/89). In one of his laws, he explicitly formulates that every migration flow generates a respective counter-flow (Ravenstein, 1885, p. 199). Ravenstein observed that these counter-flows are smaller than the original ones, but he also acknowledged that it is unclear whether these counter-flows are composed of returning migrants or other groups. This issue is still debated today. While we have been studying return migration since decades, we actually do not know much about the actual numbers and the geographical distribution of return migration flows (Dumont and Spielvogel, 2008). This problem affects sending home countries and regions, whose existing procedures are not sufficiently adapted to keep track of return migration. From the home country's perspective, an approach to the measurement of return migration consists in registering immigration of fellow nationals. Yet, this approach might lead to measurement errors, such as the inclusion in the statistics of first time immigrants, who were nationalised while being abroad. Additionally, what is lacking is a standard definition of return, which could help in order to implement better registration procedures (Smoliner et al., 2013). Due to these shortcomings, the study of return migration is often limited to small qualitative case studies or estimations in the frame of broader quantitative studies. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to find representative studies focusing on regional differentiation at the sub-national level. Given that, in Germany, internal migration is far more important in quantitative terms than international migration, it is even more astonishing that the many studies focus on international and neglect internal return migration.

Even though knowledge on return migration is limited due to little data availability, scholars so far have concluded that returning migrants display strong potential for their home countries' regional development (Black and Gent, 2004; Nicholson, 2004; William and Baláz, 2005; Iara, 2006; Cassarino, 2008; de Hass, 2010; Schmithals, 2010). They are considered as knowledge brokers, enhancing institutional change and bringing in new skills from abroad (Iredale and Guo, 2001; Klagge and Klein-Hitpaß, 2007; Klein-Hitpaß 2016). This positive association with regional development opportunities attracted the attention of policy makers and business representatives in the countries and regions of origin (Kovács et al., 2013; Boros and Heged'us 2016). By implementing measures to attract returning migrants, they hope to compensate for the brain drain caused by former periods of emigration. Additionally, emigration has accelerated demographic change in these regions: rapid ageing,

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the lack of skilled labour and population shrinking has been a major challenge to many regions. The major question is therefore: How is return migration actually distributed on a regional level? Which regions can actually benefit from this specific step of circular mobility?

In this presentation, I will present an innovative method for the measurement of internal return migration in Germany, which was developed in collaboration with the German Institute for Employment Research (Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung). Since 1999, the analysed Integrated Employment Biographies data set contains the migration biographies of all German workers, who are subject to social security contributions, as well as all unemployed German workers who are registered as job seekers and who receive unemployment benefits or social security payments. This data set allows us to observe German workers' return to their home district. I will present a first-time analysis of the regional distribution of return migration on a district level (NUTS-3 Level). Furthermore, I will sketch out first insights into regional differences in terms of the socio-economic composition of the population of returning migrants.

A major finding is that return migration displays an uneven geographical distribution across the different districts in Germany, with rural districts profiting more strongly from return migration than large cities. Second, the traditional East-West divide of Germany becomes neutralized when looking into geographical patterns of internal return migration. Third, return migration seems to be a largely male phenomenon. Fourth, there is a rural-urban divide in terms of education and age of returning migrants. Returning migrants, who are younger and better educated, tend to be overrepresented in large cities. The presentation will conclude with a development of future research questions.

Keywords: Circular Mobility, Labour Mobility, Return Migration, Research Data