

To Keep the Poor from Getting Poorer

The world's greatest contemporary problem can be called many names and displayed in graphs and pictures. The simple statement that appeals to us is, "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer." It isn't really a physicist's problem at all. Yet in a peculiar way it is.

The world changes. Problems get solved. We needn't worry as we used to about plague and financial burdens of old age. Even many poverty problems—sweat shops, child labor, inadequate wages—are not the sores in the social body that they once were.

But while the poverty of individuals is yielding, we hope, to attack, the poverty of nations is becoming more conspicuous. Unfortunately the dynamics of the situation are such that what is bad tends to become worse. Them as has gets. Good tools make good products; good products bring more money; more money buys better tools.

We know, of course, that the flow of physicists contributes to the brain drain and the brain drain to the unbalance. On the average the flow is from developing toward advanced nations. India, for example, says that more than 1100 Indians are college teachers in America while fewer than 200 Americans have corresponding jobs in India. Facing such numbers one questions a US government report that the situation is not serious.

We already know, too, that just sending physicists home again doesn't do any real good. They go back to schools that are inadequately equipped and become unhappy. The well trained physicist is happier and more productive in a laboratory that uses him well.

Surely the home country can use the man. If he has absorbed a good physics education, he has demonstrated his capacity to do difficult tasks, and he has trained his mind to take them on with efficiency and vigor. He could deal with problems of economics, agriculture and education. But how do you make him want to? Lots of people like to do and study physics.

So in a larger sense the home country doesn't need the transplanted physicist at all. If what he really wants to do is high-energy theory or laser design, his work is as useful at home as music to a deaf man. What the country really needs is the expert in nutrition or manufacturing this physicist might have been if, in his travels, he hadn't chosen physics.

Would it be feasible to create a talent bank (or exchange) and use its resources to improve the balance? Perhaps it could replace a physicist who has moved from India to the UK with a food expert who would go from the US to the Congo and so on around until the circle is closed. It would have to deal with experts of all kinds, and visits by experts from the bank would have to determine just what flows are to be encouraged. Perhaps nations and companies that benefit by adding transplanted experts to their roles could, in some direct ratio, finance some compensating migrations in the opposite direction.

Indeed this is not a physics problem in the sense that fusion and microcircuits are. But as creditors in the talent exchange, physicists of advanced nations may have an unusual opportunity to initiate a solution to a social problem. The creditor can often suggest a transaction that the debtor can not.

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