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International student mobility and poverty reduction: A qualitative study of the mechanisms of systemic change

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ABSTRACT

International student mobility is widely regarded as a means of knowledge acquisition, yet its broader implications for poverty reduction remain underexplored. As governments impose new restrictions on mobility and geopolitical tensions reshape migration flows, understanding the developmental role of returnees is increasingly urgent. Drawing on 143 interviews with mobile and non-mobile “change-agents” across 57 countries, this study examines how returnees contribute to systemic change through four interrelated mechanisms: agency and reflexivity, knowledge translation, transnational social relations, and civic understanding. However, fragmented implementation systems, politically conditioned bureaucracies, and institutional scepticism toward externally informed ideas constrained returnees’ initiatives. Using Critical Realism, Transnationalism, and Transformative Learning Theory, this study emphasizes the complex, negotiated nature of mobility-driven development. The findings highlight the need to move beyond individual skill development in policy and research, calling for policies that strengthen institutional absorptive capacity and sustain transnational collaboration. At a time when geopolitical tensions and visa restrictions are altering mobility patterns, this study contributes to debates on migration, development, and education by demonstrating that returnees act not merely as knowledge transmitters but as strategic agents of structural adaptation. Their ability to translate global insights into locally meaningful reforms has implications far beyond the brain drain discourse, offering a critical perspective on how higher education, migration, and development intersect in an era of rising global fragmentation.

1. Introduction

International student mobility has expanded at a striking rate, climbing from two million students worldwide in 1997 to approximately 6.4 million in 2021 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). This upswing is frequently attributed to the high cultural value placed on obtaining a foreign degree, the perceived economic and professional gains of international credentials, and the market-driven turn in higher education. Although prior research has devoted considerable attention to how overseas study shapes students’ skills, intercultural competence, and career outcomes (Gümüş et al., 2020; Netz, 2021), there remains limited understanding of how returnees’ experiences affect broader socio-economic transformations in their home countries. Specifically, while studies examine economic growth, governance reforms, and democratic principles linked to returning graduates (Atkinson, 2010;

Kwak & Chankseliani, 2024; Rasamoelison et al., 2021; Spilimbergo, 2009), fewer consider in detail how individual transformation can translate into societal impact (Wang et al., 2024).

Debates on the so-called “brain drain” once focused chiefly on whether sending nations were losing valuable human capital or, conversely, benefiting from enhanced skills when graduates returned home. Yet this framing often ignores the intricacy of knowledge translation: the mere presence of foreign-educated individuals may not suffice if institutional, cultural, or political factors hinder their ability to implement meaningful ideas. Returnees could support firm growth (Filatotchev et al., 2011; Perna et al., 2015), research capacity-building (Cao et al., 2020; Velema, 2012; Zhao et al., 2020; Zweig & Yang, 2014), technological and managerial advancements (Kenney et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011), and rural development (Campbell et al., 2021), but the extent to which these efforts translate into tangible systemic

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improvements—such as raising productivity and creating well-paid jobs—remains ambiguous. Reducing poverty, which remains a key global challenge, requires confronting structural inequities and ensuring that economic gains reach marginalised groups (Sen, 1999). While some returning graduates may be well-positioned to catalyse inclusive growth, especially if they have ties to transnational networks or exposure to global social policy debates, others may be thwarted by bureaucratic inertia or local scepticism toward foreign expertise.

Poverty can be understood as the deprivation of crucial capabilities, influenced by both economic and political structures. Research shows that while job creation, income growth, and expansions in services like health and education can contribute to poverty reduction, structural and policy-related factors—such as welfare provisions and institutional support—play a crucial role in determining poverty levels (Brady, 2019; Moller et al., 2003). Meanwhile, the policies shaping redistribution through labour regulations, social welfare systems, and broader resource allocation, help determine how widely the benefits of economic development are shared (Brady et al., 2016). Even in contexts where higher education is growing rapidly and generating a technically skilled workforce, gains in aggregate wealth do not always flow to disadvantaged populations (Hannum & Xie, 2016). Moreover, individuals with the means to study abroad typically do not come from the poorest backgrounds (Aerts & Van Mol, 2023; Di Pietro, 2020), which complicates assumptions that international education is a direct pathway out of poverty for those at the very bottom. Still, many governments, foundations, and universities provide scholarships that promote outward mobility for students from poorer regions, betting that returnees will become catalysts of both economic dynamism and social equity. Yet, as Solingen (2012) argues, global ideas and models do not diffuse automatically: their uptake is mediated by domestic institutional structures, political agents, and the presence—or absence—of what she calls “firewalls” that condition a system’s receptivity to external influences.

At the same time, institutional environments shape how effectively these graduates can stimulate meaningful change upon re-entry. Scholars of human capital theory emphasise that additional education boosts individual productivity (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), yet more recent analyses highlight the critical role of political and economic institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013). Even when individuals gain advanced knowledge abroad, structural features at home—ranging from weak policy frameworks to underdeveloped capital markets—may stifle reforms, limit job creation, or perpetuate uneven economic gains (Rodrik, 2017; Stiglitz & Greenwald, 2014). Understanding the scope for returnees to foster not only macro-level development but also targeted poverty alleviation thus requires examining how they navigate these institutional obstacles, mobilise resources, and craft solutions that fit local norms.

Meanwhile, the global landscape of student mobility is shifting in ways that demand urgent attention. A rising tide of restrictive policies in established host countries, such as the UK’s recent recalibration of student exchange and visa rules (Brooks & Waters, 2024), points to growing geopolitical caution around foreign enrolments. Parallel developments in Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands (ICEF Monitor, 2024; Robitaille & Moosapeta, 2024; StudyAustralia, 2024) further complicate students’ cross-border flows, while decreased Chinese enrolments in the United States (IIE Open Doors, 2024) reflect a broader cooling of bilateral ties. These pressures highlight the fragility of the international education landscape. At a time when global interdependence is being questioned, it is more important than ever to understand what happens when mobility does occur—and whether returnees are able to drive change in an increasingly fragmented world.

Given these complexities, this paper addresses the following research question: How does the influence of international student mobility on individuals translate into their system-level contributions to poverty alleviation? Drawing on a global dataset of 143 interviews with “change agents” in 57 countries—individuals known for advancing significant reforms or launching high-impact initiatives—we identify four

interlocking mechanisms through which returnees enact system-level changes: agency and reflexivity, knowledge translation, transnational social relations, and civic understanding. Rather than assuming foreign training automatically yields developmental gains, we show fragmented implementation systems, politically conditioned bureaucracies, and institutional scepticism toward externally informed ideas critically affect whether new initiatives take root.

This line of inquiry builds on quantitative research by Kwak and Chankseliani (2024), which found that outbound student mobility from low- and middle-income countries contributes to poverty reduction over a 15-year horizon. That study advanced the macro-level argument that, in aggregate, returnees contribute to declines in poverty. Our present analysis unpacks *how* such contributions emerge, uncovering the iterative interactions between globally informed graduates and local structures. Returnees can, for instance, integrate international policies into national agendas, promote entrepreneurial networks that support equitable job growth, or champion inclusive governance. Yet these efforts typically require more than technical expertise: they hinge on the ability to adapt knowledge to local realities, secure institutional buy-in, and mobilise allies across borders.

In summary, this paper shows that the impact of international student mobility is best seen not as a singular event but as a complex process of negotiation between transnational insights and local realities. Our findings build on theoretical perspectives—Critical Realism, Transnationalism, and Transformative Learning Theory—to illuminate how agency, reflexivity, and transnational collaboration unfold at the intersection of education and development. In an era of rising mobility restrictions and increasing global fragmentation, understanding these dynamics is essential—not just for academic inquiry, but for policymakers and educators seeking to harness the full potential of international higher education for inclusive economic and social change.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

This study draws on three interrelated perspectives—Critical Realism, Transnationalism, and Transformative Learning Theory—to explain how international student mobility can contribute to poverty alleviation. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding how returnees navigate structures, maintain cross-border ties, and engage in learning that supports both personal and societal change. Critical Realism (Archer, 1995) provides a lens for examining how individual agency interacts with structural and cultural contexts. Rigid institutions, bureaucratic inefficiencies, or ingrained scepticism can hinder returnees’ efforts, yet individuals can exercise reflexivity—critically assessing knowledge, opportunities, and constraints (Archer, 2010). Reflexivity links personal transformation and system-level impact, as returnees consciously adapt foreign-acquired ideas to local conditions. Agency emerges when reflexive deliberation leads to committed action, typically through a temporal process of discernment, deliberation, and dedication (Archer, 2000). Individuals first identify what matters most to them, then assess possible actions within structural constraints, and finally commit to a course of action. These phases clarify how reflexivity enables intentional engagement within structural constraints.

In this study, systemic change refers to dismantling entrenched structures and/or implementing new policies, practices, or projects that contribute to economic growth or poverty reduction. Crucial to Critical Realism is the idea that structural and cultural contexts do not fully determine individual action. Instead, individuals may resist, negotiate, or adapt to established norms. Through these interactive processes, new institutional or cultural configurations can emerge. Returnees may develop inclusive business models, propose targeted reforms, or reframe policy debates, but success depends on how they navigate constraints.

Whereas Critical Realism foregrounds structure–agency relations, Transnationalism (Faist, 2019; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2009) highlights the circulation of ideas, practices, and relationships

across borders. Unlike classic “brain drain” debates, Transnationalism emphasises reciprocal flows that stretch well beyond a single host country. Returnees often remain tied to international networks, philanthropic bodies, or policy communities, which can spur innovations and reforms at home. However, power differentials and local scepticism may constrain the extent to which returnees embed new approaches. Transnational linkages support returnees in acquiring grants, adapting policy concepts, or introducing specialised technologies. Yet these resources are unevenly distributed. Hierarchies and gatekeeping can hinder those lacking influential connections. Transnational exchange also challenges the notion that knowledge flows one way from “centre” to “periphery.” Returnees act as cultural and professional intermediaries, revising transnational insights for local contexts. Meanwhile, those without mobility experience may remain anchored in domestic frameworks, with fewer opportunities for external comparison or alliance-building.

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997, 2012) explains how individuals develop new ways of thinking by encountering unfamiliar ideas, institutions, and cultures. Instead of passively absorbing knowledge, learners undergo a deeper shift in perspectives and practices. Studying abroad commonly triggers a “disorienting dilemma” that spurs critical reflection. Transformation, however, is not automatic; it depends on how thoroughly new insights are debated, tested, and reapplied (Mezirow, 2012). Beyond technical skills, this involves ethical and strategic reorientations. Returnees facing receptive contexts may introduce policy innovations or new business standards, while those less enabling settings confront regulatory inertia or distrust of external expertise. Learning thus expands strategic capacities, but real-world outcomes hinge on institutional openness. Biesta (2009) views education through three dimensions: qualification (technical knowledge), socialisation (norms and practices), and subjectification (critical agency). Returnees who blend these dimensions may become institutional brokers or policy entrepreneurs, working within or around bureaucracies to support reform. In this sense, transformative learning involves rethinking knowledge and strategically applying it in ways that are responsive to domestic power structures.

Taken together, Critical Realism, Transnationalism, and Transformative Learning Theory present a systemic perspective on how mobility affects poverty alleviation. Returnees are not mere conduits of skills; they operate within institutional and global contexts. Their contributions hinge on how effectively they navigate constraints, build social ties, and adapt knowledge. The resulting networks and relationships often function as conduits for knowledge exchange, policy influence, or collaborative ventures. Meanwhile, the reflexive and transformative processes begun abroad continue after return, as graduates adjust transnational insights to local realities. In favourable circumstances, such efforts can spur policy shifts, strengthen public systems, or expand opportunity. In less supportive contexts, returnees’ initiatives may be delayed, diluted, or only partially absorbed into institutional systems. Ultimately, mobility’s contribution to system-level development is neither guaranteed nor uniform. This study’s theoretical lens highlights how structural constraints, transnational ties, and reflexive agency intersect to shape the varied trajectories of returnee-led reform. The next section details the research design that examines these dynamics.

3. Research design

This study draws on a subset of qualitative data from [Anonymised for peer review], a global research project examining how internationally mobile individuals contribute to sustainable development in returnees home countries (Chankseliani et al., 2025). The present analysis is based on 143 semi-structured interviews with change agents – who have made efforts to combat poverty – from 57 countries globally. The sample includes 111 internationally mobile individuals and 32 non-mobile participants (Table 1). The comparison group of non-mobile participants includes those who had not studied abroad but had made

Table 1
Sample Distribution by Region and Mobility Experience.

	SM Experience(N = 111)		No mobility(N = 32)		Total(N = 143)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
AFR	13	12 %	4	13 %	17	12 %
EAP	17	15 %	3	9 %	20	14 %
EUR	22	20 %	6	19 %	28	19 %
NEA	16	14 %	5	16 %	21	15 %
SCA	22	20 %	2	6 %	24	17 %
WHA	21	19 %	12	37 %	33	23 %

significant contributions to development in their home countries through notable initiatives in livelihoods, food security, gender equality, and related areas, enabling grounded comparison with returnees.

The participant selection process involved two distinct phases. First, we identified countries spanning the 1990 Human Development Index (HDI) classifications—Very High, High, Medium, and Low—to ensure both regional diversity and variation in development levels. This approach yielded a structured and representative sample across six regions: East Asia and Pacific (EAP), Europe and Eurasia (EUR), Near East (Middle East & North Africa) (NEA), South and Central Asia (SCA), Sub-Saharan Africa (AFR), and the Western Hemisphere (WHA). Second, we recruited participants within each selected country by drawing on an internally compiled dataset of change agents, as well as snowball sampling and targeted outreach. The internally compiled dataset was developed through a rigorous review of publicly available records, academic publications, and media sources to assemble comprehensive biographical profiles of individuals recognised for their significant contributions to national development. A central requirement for inclusion in the dataset was that these individuals had played a defining role in initiating, implementing, or advocating systemic change at institutional, national, regional, or global levels while residing in their home country. This dataset was compiled for the entire project, capturing a broad spectrum of change agents across multiple sectors; however, the present study focuses specifically on the subset of individuals whose work is linked to poverty reduction.

While the sample was purposively drawn from individuals known to have made developmental contributions, this does not imply that all participants achieved their goals without resistance. Many described stalled efforts, delayed reforms, or institutional pushback that limited their impact. By focusing on individuals with some record of action, the study explores how international student mobility, shaped by reflexivity and structural context, translates into contributions to poverty alleviation.

The participants in this study contributed to a diverse range of sectors, including entrepreneurship, institutional politics, social entrepreneurship, and civil society. Many initiated new ventures, such as founding organisations or implementing innovative solutions, while others drove systemic change by shaping policy, advocating for legislative reforms, or leading grassroots campaigns. Contributions also included sustaining existing initiatives in institutional politics, culture, and civil society, reflecting a commitment to long-term impact. Additionally, participants were engaged in capacity building, training, and public intellectual work, offering leadership and fostering community engagement. These varied efforts illustrate the dynamic pathways through which international experiences translate into contributions to poverty reduction.

Regarding mobility destinations, the United States emerged as the most common study-abroad location, accounting for 226 instances of international mobility across 111 interviewees, some of whom studied abroad more than once. The United Kingdom followed closely with 154 instances, with smaller yet notable numbers studying in France (27), Australia (16), Spain (13), Canada (12), and Russia (10). These patterns reflect historical trends in international higher education and the global pull of Anglophone academic systems, which remain dominant in

shaping mobile individuals' knowledge and networks. However, returnees' contributions were not simply a reflection of their host-country education but were shaped by the dynamic interaction between foreign-acquired expertise and the structural conditions of their home environments.

Semi-structured online interviews were conducted between May 2023 and September 2024, averaging 58 min in duration. This approach allowed participants to reflect on their personal trajectories, local conditions, and home-country contexts, and to provide detailed narratives on how their international higher education experiences—where applicable—interacted with their local environments to either support or constrain their ability to effect systemic change. Interviews involved discussion of topics such as founding new ventures, driving policy change, advocating legislative reform, leading grassroots campaigns, and enhancing existing initiatives in civil society and institutional politics. To ensure the rigour of the data collection process, the interview instrument was extensively piloted and refined based on comprehensive feedback regarding clarity, question flow, and cultural sensitivity; this process included iterative modifications and the translation of the instrument into multiple languages (English, Arabic, Russian, and Spanish) to accommodate a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds.

Additionally, strict ethical protocols were maintained throughout, with detailed procedures for obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and securing data integrity, thereby guaranteeing that the data collected accurately and respectfully captured the participants' experiences and perspectives. Where participants requested anonymity, we do not provide details about their specific contributions and refer to their region only, rather than their country.

Thematic analysis, informed by Critical Realism, Transformative Learning, and Transnationalism, guided data interpretation. Specifically, we adhered to the following steps:

We began by familiarisation, transcribing all interviews verbatim. The research team read the transcripts multiple times to become fully acquainted with the data.

Next, we developed an initial coding scheme. Drawing on our theoretical perspectives—Critical Realism (which emphasises the interplay between structure and agency), Transnationalism (which highlights enduring cross-border interactions), and Transformative Learning (which explores how new environments can shift worldviews)—we generated an initial set of codes. These covered areas such as “acquisition of knowledge,” “transnational collaborations,” “agency formation,” “structural obstacles,” and “local advocacy.”

Pilot coding followed, with six team members working in pairs to independently code a subset of transcripts using NVivo (v.14). Each pair compared coding decisions within their group to identify discrepancies and refine the coding framework. The pilot phase allowed for early identification of emerging patterns and ensured that the coding structure was aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework. Comparisons across the three pairs ensured consistency across different interpretations, helping to refine code definitions and application guidelines before full-scale coding began. This process minimised ambiguity and ensured a shared understanding of how codes should be applied across the dataset.

We then engaged in iterative refinement, applying the revised coding framework to the full dataset. Regular team discussions were held to assess coding alignment, address discrepancies, and refine definitions. Adjustments were made to accommodate emerging themes and ensure consistency across coders.

To ensure inter-coder reliability, we conducted a reliability check on a subset of transcripts. Discrepancies discussed in a post-coding workshop. Final decisions were made collaboratively, leading to further refinement of code definitions and consolidation of overlapping thematic categories.

During the stage of interpretation and synthesis, we organised themes to illuminate how mobility, in conjunction with local conditions, shaped participants' contributions to poverty reduction. We linked emergent themes back to the theoretical lenses—highlighting, for instance, instances of reflexive agency (Critical Realism), processes of perspective transformation (Transformative Learning), and cross-border network building (Transnationalism).

We also identified constraints, such as limited absorptive capacity, politicisation of resource allocation, or contested legitimacy, that affected the form and uptake of returnee-led initiatives.

As a final analytical step, we synthesised the core themes into four interrelated mechanisms—agency and reflexivity, knowledge translation, transnational social relations, and civic understanding—which collectively explain how returnees contribute to systemic change. These mechanisms were identified through an iterative process of comparing themes across participants, examining patterns in their mobility experiences, and mapping these patterns onto our conceptual framework. This approach ensured that the mechanisms reflect not only individual trajectories but also broader structural dynamics that shape the impact of mobility-driven development.

Throughout the analysis, we remained attentive to the diverse cultural and institutional contexts in which participants operated, thereby recognising the fluid interplay between global knowledge and local realities. By explicitly linking codes to our conceptual framework, we maintained clarity on how individual learning, resource mobilisation, and institutional constraints intersect to produce varied trajectories of change. Thematic analysis was therefore systematic and iterative, allowing for emerging patterns to be explored in depth and for the research team to remain reflexive about possible biases. We triangulated findings by comparing interview data with publicly available information (e.g., participants' organisational websites, media coverage), ensuring coherence and credibility.

4. Findings

The findings establish four interrelated mechanisms through which returnees contribute to systemic change: agency and reflexivity, knowledge translation, transnational social relations, and civic understanding. Rather than operating in isolation, these mechanisms interact in complex ways, shaping how international experiences are adapted, embedded, and mobilised within home-country contexts.

4.1. Agency and reflexivity

International mobility can create an environment that encourages critical thinking about how to serve disadvantaged populations, offering returnees fresh leadership strengths and strategic insights for approaching persistent socio-economic problems. This heightened awareness derives from exposure to diverse economic, institutional, and governance systems, which spurs individuals to face local inequities rather than merely reproduce a foreign template. Nonetheless, whether reflexivity matures into agential capacity depends on domestic conditions—policy frameworks, funding options, and social acceptance. Reflexivity, therefore, becomes crucial: returnees must regularly assess how (and whether) to adapt outside ideas to entrenched poverty, all while confronting doubts or outright resistance at home.

For many returnees, the commitment to contribute to societal change was not fully formed before studying abroad, but emerged through a process of moral and practical reflection during it. Across the interviews, agency often developed through three interrelated phases: discernment, deliberation, and dedication. Some participants arrived overseas with diffuse concerns or vague hopes of doing something meaningful, but it was the sustained encounter with institutional difference that clarified what mattered most to them. An Indian development practitioner

(SCA055), for example, explained that her early work had focused on small-scale interventions, such as business training and support for women entrepreneurs. Studying abroad exposed her to models of structural change and helped her recognise the limitations of localised efforts. Through a two-year programme on sustainable development, she came to see that inequality could not be addressed through isolated projects alone. To reach marginalised populations at scale, she began adapting international policy tools and advocating legal and institutional change at home. The exposure reoriented her strategy and expanded her understanding of what change required. Others spoke of ethical insights that redirected their professional paths. An Iraqi engineer (NEA010) explained that studying in the United States helped her discover a passion for sustainability and shifted her professional path. Although trained in structural engineering, she returned home determined to work on renewable energy and climate solutions. This decision, she noted, was rooted in the values and civic awareness she developed abroad, including a growing belief that her technical expertise should contribute to environmental and social betterment. These were moments of discernment. They were followed by deliberation—conversations, comparisons, and experiments in self-positioning. Over time, many participants moved toward dedication: a conscious choice to act on a particular issue, often made after return but rooted in reflections formed overseas. For these individuals, international study did not simply strengthen prior commitments. It helped constitute them.

Returnees often cite moments when they realised that local conditions call for flexible adaptations. A participant from Indonesia (EAP380), for example, studied Sustainable Development in Sweden and returned to fight rural hardship among female cocoa farmers who had very limited earnings and scant market links. Her initiative, Balini Organic, not only forged direct ties between farmers and overseas buyers but also challenged women to redefine themselves as income earners. She introduced collective training sessions that reinforced their agency, encouraging them to see personal worth and long-term opportunities. This pivot in viewpoint—seeing oneself as a principal actor—became a vital factor in improving incomes and allowing women to invest in family welfare.

Other returnees took similarly adaptive approaches. A digital coordinator (NEA571) who earned a UK degree saw widespread joblessness among displaced persons and recent graduates in her home country in Africa. She responded by launching coding boot camps that incorporated international tech standards while adapting to limited national infrastructure, tailoring the curriculum to match local connectivity. Drawing on what she had observed abroad, she questioned prevailing assumptions about how programming should be taught and made deliberate choices to create a more supportive, flexible learning environment. This reflexive approach—grounded in empathy and a strong sense of local responsibility—shaped how she designed, ran, and iteratively improved the programme. Her approach gave learners confidence, paid internships, and a sense of belonging in the global digital community.

In each example, reflexivity—the willingness to question and reshape outside concepts—proved vital, yet studying abroad does not automatically confer the power to solve social problems. Agency arises only when reflexive deliberation leads returnees to adapt external lessons to local demands and navigate shifting institutional feedback. By comparison, non-mobile reformers, while highly knowledgeable about community needs and often deeply embedded in local systems, lacked the global ties or funding streams returnees gained abroad, limiting their scope. Yet their embeddedness also allowed them to build trust more quickly and respond with solutions closely attuned to lived realities. One public administrator in Africa (AFR666), for instance, channelled her own experience of gender-based violence and bureaucratic inertia into a national menstrual health programme that reached hundreds of thousands. Her civic commitment was shaped not by exposure to other models, but through long-term engagement with failing institutions and domestic higher education that encouraged critical inquiry and revealed

the structural exclusions facing marginalised groups. For non-mobile actors like her, reflexivity often took the form of cumulative learning, self-directed capacity building, and moral clarity grounded in everyday institutional constraint rather than external contrast.

Returnees who sustain links with overseas mentors and networks can organise collaborative ventures, tackle bureaucracy, and bolster morale, though they may face suspicion if people see “foreign ideas” as irrelevant. Ultimately, the most successful participants described a gradual cycle of experimentation, technical refinements, and broad-based support at home. Among non-mobile participants, too, success tended to emerge from long-term persistence, coalition-building, and iterative problem-solving.

Hence, mobility and reflexivity must intersect with local initiative if meaningful results are to appear. The experiences recounted above illustrate that the real advantage of overseas study goes beyond credentials or language proficiency. Rather, it involves gaining a wider perspective on different governance systems, forging alliances abroad, and thinking critically about the most suitable ways to remake these external inputs for local ends. Returnees equipped with such awareness and resilience can open new possibilities for under-served groups.

To grasp why some returnees apply external know-how more effectively than others, one must examine how they engage with their home contexts. Those who invest time in learning from non-mobile partners, co-create programmes that suit local interests, and show patience with evolving institutional barriers stand a stronger chance of sparking economic and social progress. Several participants emphasized the need for persistent local dialogues that integrate foreign and domestic perspectives. This blending requires a willingness to listen to concerns, revise initial strategies, and involve trusted community figures. Yet it is precisely this process of trial and reflection that can forge genuine agency and push forward projects that address the roots of poverty instead of focusing on surface-level symptoms.

Although mobility does not universally transform people into change agents, a heightened sense of agency emerges through reflective adaptation, boosted by transnational collaborations, new knowledge, and a willingness to test different approaches back home. The successes highlighted here suggest that overseas study can be a powerful springboard, but continuous introspection and contextual sensitivity are what truly move local development forward.

4.2. Knowledge translation

International mobility expands how individuals understand, share, and reshape crucial knowledge for reducing disadvantage at home. By spending time in diverse academic, policy, or professional arenas abroad, returnees gain a broader perspective on how public governance, financial instruments, and technology can serve communities outside conventional pathways. Rather than treat their mobility experiences as static credentials, successful returnees rework what they learned in these settings—such as new regulatory methods, funding approaches, or pedagogical tools—so that they respond effectively to specific market realities and social norms. This translation of external lessons into local action has proven instrumental in reforming credit channels for small entrepreneurs, designing new models of urban planning, and anchoring targeted poverty programs in formal policy. While non-mobile counterparts often display detailed knowledge of domestic customs, they typically rely on locally acquired expertise and institutional experience, leaving them reliant on incremental adjustments to established routines. Returnees, in contrast, can draw on internationally tested insights, which they adapt to domestic expectations through sustained reflexivity and ongoing dialogue with partners on the ground.

Empirical findings from multiple contexts highlight how such knowledge translation emerges. A Liberian entrepreneur (AFR144), drawing on Western finance frameworks absorbed during his U.S. studies, adjusted repayment intervals to match smallholder farmers' immediate cash-flow cycles—a subtle recalibration that helped farmers

elevate yields and earnings. A Bangladeshi official (SCA174), educated in political sociology abroad, championed a redefinition of extreme poverty at home, inserting the category of “vulnerability” into government decrees to capture marginalized populations previously ignored by broader welfare plans. In Indonesia, a sustainable development returnee (EAP380) refined her Swedish training to boost income for rural women cocoa growers, launching direct export opportunities while promoting a mindset shift so women saw themselves as full-scale producers. Meanwhile, a Peruvian urban planner (WHA352) avoided imposing foreign blueprints for land use, opting instead to integrate UK-based lessons on financing and spatial organization into Peru’s first cohesive housing statute. Similarly, in the Philippines, a social innovator (EAP220) replaced donor-driven electrification with solar installations that villagers themselves could assemble and repair, drawing on U.S.-taught design-thinking to keep ongoing costs low and boost community capacities. These patterns illustrate a shared process: absorbing ideas abroad, returning home, then modifying those ideas to handle local power structures, resource limitations, and cultural assumptions.

Returnees balance proven methods from elsewhere with the everyday realities shaped by local power structures, customs, and needs. Few “best practices” from abroad operate seamlessly in countries where trust in outside knowledge is fragile and regulatory bodies may be hesitant to embrace untested measures. Returnees like SCA174 and WHA352 found that, without a localised transition process, even excellent planning methods or poverty metrics remain on paper. The challenge is not only technical, as forging alliances with civil service departments or community leaders can make the difference between robust institutional buy-in and superficial compliance. In Liberia, for example, the flexible loan terms championed by AFR144 gained traction partly because local lenders and farmers recognised that these adjustments emerged from a practical dialogue on the ground, not from abstract financial doctrines. That same rationale guided EAP220 in the Philippines, ensuring the solar equipment matched existing supply chains and skill sets.

Non-mobile professionals also engaged in knowledge translation, though they often drew on domestic education, workplace experience, or grassroots initiatives to generate practical solutions. One human rights educator in Central Asia (SCA309), for example, developed national-level anti-trafficking training and shaped legislation after years of self-directed learning within an international organisation. A Yemeni climate advocate (NEA500) translated her master’s thesis into donor-funded programming and rural outreach, grounding her efforts in local research and field realities. While these actors did not return from abroad with comparative models, they adapted locally produced insights to fit institutional demands and donor expectations. Their work illustrates a different form of knowledge mobilisation.

Because knowledge translation depends on repeated experimentation, many returnees devote time to iterative engagement, reevaluating each pilot initiative against its on-the-ground impacts. They remain open to revising their strategies once they see which imported elements resonate and which generate friction under local norms. This adaptive stance, informed by international higher education but rooted in local partnerships, expands the range of feasible solutions. For smallholder farmers, flexible financing may bridge market gaps that stifle production capacity; for urban slum dwellers, reconfigured zoning and better infrastructure can lift living standards. Either way, the decisive factor is how effectively new frameworks are matched to local contexts. Returnees’ advantage rests not in the symbolic weight of overseas credentials, but in the sustained effort to make global insights workable. From reengineering microcredit models to instituting legislative change in housing, their efforts reduce vulnerabilities and open fresh possibilities for self-directed development. By weaving together external experiences with grassroots realities, returnees translate knowledge as a vital force for poverty reduction, offering durable gains that move beyond short-lived charitable ventures.

4.3. Transnational social relations

International student mobility reshapes returnees’ networks in ways that can encourage meaningful work against poverty at home. Rather than serving as passive conduits of skills, these global ties become channels for raising investment, testing policy innovations, and pursuing entrepreneurial ventures—so long as they are carefully strengthened and aligned with the domestic context. Even highly trained graduates must purposefully call on their academic mentors, donor-side contacts, and diaspora communities, ensuring these relationships respond to local power structures and specific development needs. Otherwise, foreign-based partners remain distant acquaintances rather than genuine collaborators.

In India, for instance, a policymaker (SCA441) drew heavily on the connections he built through a Fulbright and subsequent study at a U.S. university to shape a large community platform under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). The platform spans roughly 100 million rural women’s self-help groups, creating a system of collective savings, credit, and decision-making that has reached remote districts. Crucially, he explained that these academic networks—composed of former classmates now in government roles, philanthropic staff he met at university-hosted conferences, and faculty who retained active research grants—allowed him to negotiate shared financing and secure endorsements for NRLM’s expansions. By translating foreign technical concepts into policy frameworks that Indian officials could support, he widened basic credit access for women, introduced new job opportunities to rural areas, and facilitated local representation in district-level councils. He also cited direct collaborations with philanthropic experts from his Fulbright cohort, who introduced monitoring tools and training modules that reinforced anti-poverty strategies within the NRLM structure. As a result, financially excluded populations—particularly women—acquired a direct route into formal credit channels and a stronger collective voice in shaping economic decisions.

In El Salvador, a returnee (WHA445) who studied in the U.S. used his international network—including professionals at multilateral institutions and philanthropic foundations—to attract funding for a technology start-up aimed at underserved groups. During his Fulbright-sponsored period abroad, he met executives from development agencies and “impact investment” circles who were ready to back small tech ventures in emerging markets. After returning, he reactivated these ties by showing prototypes of finance and legal-tech services to potential partners and hosting online demos. Through this process, he assembled cross-border investor syndicates and resolved regulatory obstacles in areas like digital payments—something he felt would have been unmanageable without direct endorsements from his U.S. mentors who vouched for his enterprise. He noted that, in return, these overseas contacts gained a sharper understanding of El Salvador’s daily challenges, letting them adjust their support to address marginalized users. Ultimately, the broadened services helped communities that had historically faced severe barriers to accessing digital resources, supporting both market participation and broader inclusion.

An African fund specialist (AFR698), having studied in Canada, likewise relied on contacts with mentors familiar with global infrastructure finance when structuring proposals for solar power and other crucial projects. In his words, these individuals—some from academic circles and others from prior jobs in North America—provided insights into international loan terms, environmental criteria, and investor risk profiles that he adapted to national regulatory frameworks. With this support, he convinced local policymakers that overseas capital was feasible and could boost rural electrification and job creation if officials adjusted certain regulations and followed transparent procurement norms. He recounted how addressing cultural misunderstandings between Canadian lenders and local authorities demanded ongoing mediation, calling on classmates turned bankers to clarify contract conditions that might otherwise have stymied negotiations. Eventually, his work brought substantial investments to areas once off-grid,

reducing energy costs and fostering new employment in plant upkeep and small downstream operations.

All three examples underline the complexity of matching outside support with local readiness. Non-mobile participants often struggle to reach this scale of activity without the transnational connections gained through student mobility. While they excel in local alliances, they typically lack a pipeline of philanthropic capital or technical coaching that returnees can tap via academic and professional circles. Mobile graduates form trusting ties in campus settings, short-term diplomacy events, and diaspora meetups, then adapt those relationships into tangible investments or policy outcomes back home. These links often grow over time, combining personal rapport with institutional memory and shared professional norms. Still, a few non-mobile actors managed to forge international connections through alternative routes, such as donor collaborations or digital platforms. One African volunteer (AFR699), for example, partnered with a pan-African youth organisation to deliver entrepreneurship training and women's livelihood programmes, supported by international guidance and funding. These relationships were narrower in scope but highly mission-driven, built around specific projects rather than long-term affiliation. Such cases highlight that purposeful cross-border ties can emerge without mobility, but that international study offers a unique possibility to develop transnational social relations that can facilitate systemic change.

Ultimately, the continuity of such transnational connections—and the skill with which returnees embed them at home—shapes how strongly they transform livelihoods and institutions. Each interviewee spoke about methods for preserving these links: scheduling regular conversations with overseas mentors to refine project ideas, convening local gatherings where donor agencies and community leaders refine proposals together, or hosting reciprocal visits so that outside partners can see grassroots results firsthand. By taking these steps, they not only gain specialized insights but also strengthen their credibility with domestic officials who want assurance of legitimacy before approving foreign collaborations. Without these sustained efforts, the potential advantages of studying abroad—such as exposure to large-scale finance or advanced policy models—may never take root in complex domestic environments.

In the end, it is the active, ongoing use of these networks—rather than mere possession of foreign credentials—that prompts visible shifts in governance, financial access, or service delivery for disadvantaged populations. Only by bringing these external relationships into structured local initiatives do returnees turn global linkages into meaningful poverty-reduction progress. Their testimonies suggest that transnational relations require deliberate cultivation and careful local assessment, but can ultimately provide the capital, trust, and know-how critical for tackling structural inequities in emerging economies. Even those with excellent connections risk letting their alliances lapse if they fail to maintain dialogue and mutual respect with local stakeholders. Conversely, those who work to refine such ties—drawing on the lessons of their overseas training, engaging in candid exchanges about shared objectives, and tailoring programs to specific local contexts—go on to enlarge the scope of what impoverished communities can realistically achieve.

4.4. Civic understanding

International mobility broadens how returnees interpret public service, community engagement, and the obligation to tackle entrenched inequities. Rather than view civic responsibility as merely theoretical, they adapt governance lessons gleaned abroad to the on-the-ground work of ministries, local councils, or grassroots coalitions. Several interviews show that, while non-mobile individuals often engage in community affairs, they typically rely on narrower local precedents and small-scale improvements. By contrast, returnees draw on comparative insights to question outdated bureaucracies or paternalistic methods, merging external experience with local realities. Through that process,

they recalibrate budgets, refine social initiatives, and coordinate alliances across public and private domains, thereby rooting civic ideals in measures that help lift struggling communities out of hardship.

A Colombian official (WHA148), who obtained her master's at the London School of Economics, introduced a data-driven overhaul of social benefit distribution, mapping disadvantaged households more precisely so that aid consistently reached low-income neighbourhoods. This reconfiguration, aimed at cutting red tape and corruption, ties civic accountability to practical gains: families on the economic margins receive greater support and remain less vulnerable to political favouritism. Meanwhile, a Bangladeshi entrepreneur (SCA031), influenced by a pluralistic setting in Malaysia, observed, "It's such a diverse country... they are all living together in harmony and peace. They have respect for each other. It's beautiful." Inspired by these inclusive norms, she built a nonprofit that rallies women and youth in over forty countries around sanitation and hygiene. Her campaigns actively involved impoverished groups in shaping water and health programs, positioning them not just as passive beneficiaries but as local decision-makers, a stance that links civic ownership to better outcomes for families living on scant resources.

An Afghan development specialist (SCA532) explained that his academic and professional experience in the U.S. encouraged him to engage communities and officials through inclusive channels, even under a changing regime. He recalled how civic culture in the U.S., especially the emphasis on grassroots partnerships and social justice, shaped his belief that services should reach the most marginalised. According to him, seeing how different U.S. states manage partnerships with donors and grassroots bodies heightened his resolve to set up local committees to ensure that school reconstruction and emergency relief in conflict zones reached displaced families. By translating that mindset into local negotiations, he assembled practical solutions, like field-based committees, to ensure relief efforts reached the poorest households.

Returnees also expanded civic thinking in other arenas: an Ecuadorian official (WHA203) drew on her liberal arts training to promote workplace education and transparent export procedures, arguing that skilled labour would improve income security for low-income households. A Georgian official (EUR280), after completing a U.S. graduate degree, helped streamline post-Soviet customs systems, reducing the burden of bribes on small traders and enabling informal entrepreneurs to formalise operations. A Nepali innovator (SCA122), frustrated by his country's neglect of applied research, founded a National Innovation Center inspired by U.S.-based models of inclusive innovation. "We are trying to develop the culture of doing research and innovation," he explained. His goal was to create "job opportunities for young people" and prevent mass outmigration from rural areas.

Across these accounts, international education served as a catalyst for aligning civic responsibility with concrete contributions to poverty alleviation. Participants repeatedly emphasised how exposure to functioning democratic institutions, open consultation, and rights-based policy helped them see governance not only as administrative coordination but as a way to correct structural injustices. Rather than transplant civic templates from abroad, they reinterpreted concepts like deliberative budgeting or decentralised oversight to fit domestic bureaucracies and power relations. This translation of civic ideals into institutional practice often enabled returnees to pursue systemic shifts that improved social targeting, reduced corruption, or widened participation in planning and delivery.

Non-mobile participants also exhibited civic commitment, typically cultivated through long-term engagement with public institutions and grounded in lived proximity to constraint. While many worked ambitiously to reform public systems, most had fewer opportunities to encounter alternative civic models or critically reassess the boundaries of state obligation. One government legal advisor in the Dominican Republic (WHA188) described how she championed national ratification of the Hague Convention on child protection by building a constitutional argument for state responsibility and lobbying across ministries. She explained that at the university, she "had the opportunity to learn

about the whole issue related to rights... personal, political, social, economic,” and credited certain professors with reinforcing values of “respect, of honesty, of doing the right thing.” Her civic perspective, as she described it, was also shaped by navigating the tension between legal guarantees and systemic inertia. While her work resulted in concrete legal reform, like several others in the non-mobile group, she approached civic engagement as an ethical duty enacted through domestic institutions rather than a domain to be redesigned. In contrast, returnees more often described civic learning as a process of recalibrating what governments owe to citizens, drawing on international examples to restructure how rights are delivered, budgeted, and made accountable.

4.5. Constrains of systemic change

Returnees do not operate in open institutional fields. Their ability to apply knowledge, mobilise networks, or act strategically is shaped by structural and cultural environments that condition the contours of possibility. Across the dataset, even those with clear commitment and relevant expertise encountered limitations not of skill or intention, but of context. Many navigated slow-moving systems, competing logics, and embedded forms of resistance that restricted or redirected their efforts. While all returnees faced some degree of institutional friction, this section helps explain why certain initiatives advanced while others were delayed, diluted, or stalled. It identifies three recurring constraints that shaped returnees’ capacity to act: coordination and capacity gaps, politicisation of development decisions, and contested legitimacy.

The first constraint relates to the limited absorptive capacity of domestic institutions. This took the form of coordination failures, procedural opacity, and institutional fragmentation, which collectively reduced the state’s ability to implement new ideas, even when there was political will. Several participants described institutional environments characterised by fragmented responsibilities, weak coordination, and blurred lines of authority. These conditions did not block their projects outright but introduced continual friction in the effort to implement those projects. In the water and sanitation sector, for example, one African returnee (AFR594) working on decentralised infrastructure explained that formal contracts and technical solutions alone were insufficient. Effective delivery depended on building and maintaining cooperation with local governments, negotiating across administrative boundaries, and managing multiple contractor relationships. The challenge, he noted, was not opposition to the initiative but the complexity of navigating decentralised systems and securing multi-level cooperation. Sustained progress required procedural navigation, ongoing stakeholder engagement, and political awareness as much as technical expertise.

A second constraint was the politicisation of resource allocation and institutional priority-setting. Returnees frequently found themselves navigating politically inflected bureaucracies, where decisions about timing, funding, and location were shaped by electoral considerations. In multiple contexts, participants described how development interventions, particularly those targeting infrastructure or redistribution, were filtered through the lens of political expediency. A senior Liberian official (AFR536), trained abroad in engineering and public administration, found that technical plans were frequently sidelined by electoral considerations. “There’s a huge grapple between a political endeavour and then the technical aspects of what needs to be done for the country,” she explained. Projects that addressed the needs of marginalised rural populations were routinely displaced by infrastructure investments in politically significant urban areas. Even when funding was approved, only partial disbursements arrived, and staffing constraints left technical teams overstretched. The case revealed how the logic of public service delivery was reshaped by partisan dynamics, requiring returnees to frame development proposals in ways that were politically intelligible and strategically timed.

A third constraint concerned legitimacy, specifically how returnees

were recognised, or not, as credible actors within domestic institutional frameworks. Participants noted that externally informed ideas were not always seen as legitimate, particularly when they introduced unfamiliar categories or challenged established assumptions. This was not solely a matter of interpersonal reception; it reflected epistemic boundaries around what counted as valid knowledge. One common form of this constraint was epistemic legitimacy: the perceived validity and relevance of foreign-acquired concepts in local policy discourse. A Bangladeshi economist (SCA174), for example, explained how efforts to reshape national poverty policy required careful framing of new concepts that were initially unfamiliar within official circles. Terms such as “extreme poor” and “tomorrow’s poor” had no prior place in domestic discourse and were not immediately adopted. Over time, through sustained engagement, iterative translation, and coalition-building, these ideas shaped national strategies and NGO programming. In his account, credibility emerged from the cumulative work of embedding new frameworks within institutional logics. In most cases, this form of constraint did not involve overt rejection, but rather slow institutional uptake shaped by expectations about how new knowledge must be framed and delivered.

Together, these constraints—fragmented implementation systems, politically conditioned bureaucracies, and conditional recognition of expertise—shaped not just whether returnees could act, but how. In many cases, they adapted their strategies, reframed their initiatives, or shifted their institutional entry points. Rather than clear-cut cases of success or failure, particularly given that all participants were selected based on some record of contribution, the interviews reveal processes of negotiation in which returnees adjusted their approaches in response to structural pressures. Many interviewees emphasised that their ability to read institutional signals, recalibrate expectations, and build coalitions across actors and agendas was essential to sustaining progress. Understanding how mobility contributes to poverty-related reform requires attention not only to what returnees do, but to how structures condition the form and reach of their action. Structural constraints do not dictate outcomes, but they shape the field on which action becomes possible.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study builds on and extends the findings of [anonymised for peer review], which showed that international student mobility contributes to poverty reduction in low- and middle-income countries over the long term. While that earlier work employed a macro-level approach, our qualitative analysis reveals the micro-level negotiations and adaptations that support or constrain the translation of learning into systemic change. In examining these processes, we confirm that mobility’s potential is neither universal nor guaranteed. Returnees, through reflexive engagement with new knowledge and civic frameworks, develop agency that allows them to navigate the formidable challenges of reintroducing ideas to home-country environments. In focusing on four key mechanisms—agency and reflexivity, knowledge translation, transnational social relations, and civic understanding—we find that returnees who develop agency through critical reflection on how best to adapt foreign-acquired expertise to domestic contexts exhibit greater capacity to develop projects with the potential to contribute to poverty reduction. Although we do not measure poverty or economic change directly, our qualitative data suggest that such reflexive application of overseas learning can enable structural contributions, particularly in settings where institutional constraints are surmountable.

Nevertheless, transformative efforts can stall when resistant institutions, bureaucratic gatekeepers, or entrenched networks perceive overseas approaches as incompatible or unproven. Non-mobile participants, for their part, frequently exhibit deep contextual knowledge and trusted grassroots ties, but they lack transnational investment pipelines and alternative policy frameworks. This contrast suggests that development outcomes hinge on bridging the complementary strengths of both groups rather than relying solely on imported concepts or purely

domestic initiatives. Crucially, our findings challenge simplistic dichotomies between “brain drain” and “brain gain,” demonstrating that international student mobility operates within a continuum of knowledge flows, that are contingent upon local absorptive capacity and transnational linkages.

A central insight concerns the role of reflexivity. Returnees who critically interrogated how best to deploy their knowledge often described repeated cycles of experimentation, recalibration, and strategic adjustment. Their efforts did not succeed by default; they succeeded when structural conditions allowed space for innovation and when individuals recognised how to navigate them. In Archer’s terms, reflexivity becomes agential when deliberation over concerns and constraints leads to committed action. In this study, participants described how movement from reflection to practice was shaped by institutional resistance, requiring not only motivation but strategic timing, alliance-building, and political sensitivity. Some initiatives were embraced and scaled; others were delayed, redirected to less sensitive domains, or set aside. Rather than assume uniform outcomes, the analysis shows how similar intentions can lead to varied trajectories depending on how systems receive and reshape returnee efforts. This iterative process aligns with Critical Realism’s emphasis on the dialectic between structure and agency: returnees’ capacity for transformation depended not only on their acquired knowledge, but also on the institutional landscapes into which they returned. Mobility was a catalyst, not a guarantee.

Knowledge translation, in particular, emerged as a politically charged, institutionally conditioned process rather than a straightforward transfer of expertise. Our data illuminate the interplay of policy alignment, regulatory context, and transnational resources in shaping how returnees’ ideas gain traction. Even the best-prepared returnees discovered that external legitimacy rarely trumped local power dynamics. Instead, returnees whose initiatives gained traction typically refined their proposals, aligned them with domestic priorities, and secured support from local stakeholders. This reinforces the Transnationalism perspective, which highlights that sustainable global knowledge exchange depends on reciprocal flows and negotiated legitimacy, not one-way diffusion. Returnees who built transnational alliances and embedded their efforts within domestic frameworks stood a better chance of institutional uptake. Yet this process was not automatic. Some participants, particularly those perceived as too dependent on external models or networks, faced institutional resistance.

Civic understanding also proved essential for translating international experience into poverty-oriented change. Exposure to participatory governance frameworks abroad encouraged some returnees to challenge top-down or exclusionary models at home. Others introduced deliberative approaches to budgeting, citizen oversight, or inclusive infrastructure planning. Still, these efforts met varying fates. Entrenched bureaucracies and political hierarchies often determined the degree to which initiatives gained traction, regardless of their technical merits. These patterns highlight both the expansive promise and the stubborn limits of mobility-enabled change.

The comparison group reminds us that impactful reform is not exclusive to returnees. Non-mobile participants often spearheaded important changes through long-term engagement in public institutions, civil society, and community-based initiatives. They often drew on domestic education and sustained engagement in their local contexts. What distinguished returnees was not moral commitment, but exposure to alternative models of governance and development. By encountering unfamiliar institutional logics and civic models abroad, they acquired a broader repertoire for interpreting and responding to structural problems. This comparative vantage point enabled returnees to question prevailing assumptions and reimagine how institutions could function. What mobility offered was not a linear path to impact, but a wider conceptual and relational horizon from which to act.

Our findings carry several implications for researchers, policy-makers, and funders. First, we must look beyond short-term economic

metrics—such as wage premiums or skill gains—to examine how mobility can restructure entire sectors or policy domains. In doing so, future scholarship might combine robust qualitative data with targeted economic indicators, thereby reassuring economists that claims about system-level transformation rest on more than anecdotal evidence. Specifically, mixed-methods approaches that integrate longitudinal economic data with qualitative process-tracing could provide stronger empirical grounding for assessing the impact of returnee-driven change. Second, programmes that facilitate re-entry support, encourage sustained transnational ties, and integrate returnees into inclusive local planning are more likely to spur incremental but durable improvements in job creation and poverty reduction. Finally, the structural barriers revealed by this study—bureaucratic inertia, policy gatekeeping, and doubts about the applicability of outside ideas—highlight the need for more nuanced evaluations of “brain circulation.” Mobility alone does not ensure systemic impact; it must be matched by institutional conditions that allow new ideas to take root.

As the world grapples with rising nationalism, restrictive migration policies, and a retreat from international cooperation, understanding the broader societal outcomes of mobility is increasingly urgent (Chankseliani & Kwak, 2025). The potential of globally trained returnees to support inclusive development depends not only on what they bring home, but on whether systems are open to what they offer. If nations turn inward, dismissing transnational collaboration and restricting knowledge flows, they risk losing an entire generation of talent with the capacity to contribute to structural reform. Now more than ever, appreciating the societal value of mobility is not merely an academic concern—it is a global imperative.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Maia Chankseliani: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Joonghyun Kwak:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Natalya Hanley:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Ahmad Akkad:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Mercedes Crisostomo:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Zhe Wang:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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