

Internal return migration – a promising potential for rural development? Evidence based on quantitative survey data from Germany

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Background, research question and hypotheses

Population growth in Germany is (like in many other European countries) characterized by heterogeneous, small-scale patterns. Highly populated agglomerations continue to grow while rural and peripheral regions face a considerable population decline. This development brings about severe challenges for rural communities and regions as depopulation comes along with a reduction of public services. Rural depopulation is primarily driven by low in-migration and high out-migration, in particular of highly educated young adults. The selective out-migration of well-educated young people (“brain drain”) is regarded as a threat to the economic development of rural areas as their human capital is seen as being an essential foundation for economic development initiated by the local community (“endogenous rural development”; e. g. Stockdale 2006). In this context, returning migrants are increasingly considered to play a crucial role for rural development. By increasing the human capital endowment of their home regions and bringing in new skills, returnees are considered key players for institutional change and the creation of new jobs. Moreover their strong attachment to their home region is supposed to translate into high levels of civic and social engagement which – to a certain degree – compensate the low supply of public services (Stockdale 2006; von Reichert, Cromatrie & Arthun 2014; Nadler 2017). As a consequence, various campaigns have been implemented by policymakers and business representatives with the goal to encourage return migration (Nadler 2017). Yet little is known about the potential impacts of return migration for rural regions, as the very few existing studies (e. g. Stockdale 2006; von Reichert et al. 2014; Kummel & Nadler 2018) often rely on case studies. Moreover, these studies typically apply a qualitative approach and therefore face drawbacks in terms of quantifiability and generalizability of their results.

Drawing on large-scale quantitative survey data, this paper aims to assess the potential impacts of return migration for rural regions in Germany by analyzing the characteristics and activities of people who have returned to the region where they grew up in comparison to those who have never left this region (stayers) and those who have moved in (in-migrants). In accordance with the current scientific debates regarding the potentials of return migrants for their home region, special attention is given to differences regarding the human capital endowment in terms of education and entrepreneurial activities as well as social capital endowments in terms of civic engagement. Differences between rural and urban areas are examined.

In response to a lack of educational and occupational opportunities, many young career-oriented people leave their rural home region and move to larger cities, where the diversity of educational and job opportunities is higher (e. g. Stockdale 2002; Zorlou & Kooiman 2019). Hence we expect returnees to be more highly educated than stayers and to resemble in-migrants with regard to their educational level. Taking into account the rich research and discussion on the increased propensity of international migrants to start up an enterprise based on their entrepreneurial and leadership skills gained abroad (e. g. Naudé, Siegel & Marchand 2017), we further assume return migrants to be more likely to become self-employed than stayers. Finally, it is commonly assumed that the decision to move back is often grounded in well-established social ties to the local community as well as an emotional attachment to the place of home. “[T]hese ties translate into an increased ability and desire to make a difference back home” (von Reichert et al. 2014: 221). Based on a qualitative study on the impacts of return migration on 21 rural U. S. communities, von Reichert et al. (2014) found

evidence that decisions to move back were often grounded on social and place ties and, as a consequence, promoted civic engagement. Referring to this finding and the discussed underlying mechanisms, we assume a higher civic engagement of returnees compared to in-migrants. Compared to stayers, the intensity of engagement is expected to be on a similar level or even higher.

Data and methods

The empirical analysis uses longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) for the years 1990 to 2017. To establish the mobility status for each respondent at each wave, information from the biographical questionnaire as well as records of subsequent migration events during panel participation were taken into account. Migration was captured on a county (district) level (NUTS-3 level). Respondents were considered “stayers” if they still live in the county where they spent most time during their childhood, “in-migrants” if they have moved to a different county and “returnees” if they returned to the county where they were raised. Overall, the analyses included 248,450 observations from 32,579 individuals (stayers: 226,447 obs.; in-migrants: 18,468 obs.; returnees: 3,535 obs.). In a first step, differences with regard to the probability of having a high (i. e. tertiary) education as well as the extent of civic engagement between stayers, in-migrants and returnees were assessed by means of regression techniques. Civic engagement was measured by the frequency (at least once a week, at least once a month, less often, never) of volunteer work in clubs or social services.

First results

Compared to stayers, returnees were found to be more likely highly educated in both contexts, rural and urban counties. According to the estimations, the probability of having a high education is 7.6 % higher for returnees compared to stayers in the rural regions. Compared to movers, only for urban regions significant differences with regard to education were found (i. e. people who have left their home region and moved to an urban county are more often highly educated compared to people who have returned to their (urban) home county) while no significant differences were found with regard to rural counties. Hence, with regard to rural regions, returnees as well as in-migrants turn out to equally bring in high human capital in terms of education. With regard to volunteer work, however, the results don't match the expectations as return migrants are not found to be extraordinary high engaged. Instead, stayers clearly show the highest level of engagement, while leaving the home county is found to be associated with a much lower level of engagement. Returnees were found to have the same engagement-level as movers. Fixed-effects panel regression reveals that moving away is associated with reduced engagement, while people don't re-increase their engagement substantially after they have returned to their home county.

Summary and outlook

This paper sheds new light on the potential impacts of return migration for rural regions in Germany. Returnees in rural regions are found to have a higher formal education than the immobile local community, supporting the assumption that returnees bring in new knowledge and skills to their home region which is expected to be an important pre-requisite for rural development. However, in contrast to results of previous (qualitative) studies, returnees are not found to be highly engaged in volunteer work. Rather, migration comes along with an abandonment of engagement while migrants stay less engaged after they have moved back to their home region. One possible explanation for this finding could lie in the migration-related discontinuity with regard to social life as migration typically leads to severing ties to local social networks. As a consequence, staying put at one region might be much more conducive for establishing high levels of volunteer work. Further analyses will investigate the pre-requisites for civic engagement among return migrants more thoroughly, as it is reasonable to assume that the level of engagement differs by the motives and circumstances of the return move as well as the duration of absence from the home region. Moreover, analyses regarding the entrepreneurial activities of returnees will be carried out.

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