

# Wealthy countries saving billions at expense of poorer nations by taking their nurses

*Wealthy countries saving billions at the expense of developing nations by taking their nurses— it's time for them to give back*

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, July 2, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- During the International Council of

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Wealthy countries are in essence pocketing the money low-income countries have spent on training those nurses. It is difficult not to conclude that this is a global nursing ripoff.”

*ICN CEO Howard Catton*

Nurses (ICN) Congress, ICN highlighted striking figures demonstrating both the economic power of care — and the economic exploitation at the heart of inequitable nurse migration.

The latest accounts suggest that billions of dollars are being transferred from the world's poorest countries to its richest due to wealthy nations saving on nurse education costs by recruiting abroad — and then failing to compensate the countries they recruit from.

ICN President Dr José Luis Cobos Serrano remarked: “Ethical recruitment is vital for health equity and justice all around the world. Though ICN supports individual nurses’ right to migrate, we are hearing that vulnerable developing nations are losing hundreds of thousands of nurses, often due to aggressive recruitment by rich countries. This is backed up by data from the new World Health Organization (WHO) State of the World’s Nursing (SOWN) report which shows that almost a quarter of nurses in high-income countries are foreign-born.

We can't deprive some countries of valuable health care human resources to supply others. ICN urges high-income states to break these inequitable patterns and commit to sound, self-sufficient workforce planning and ethical recruitment, including mechanisms to fairly compensate developing nations for the essential workforce they have invested in training.”

Howard Catton, ICN’s CEO, highlighted the stark economic toll unethical recruitment takes on developing countries, saying:

“Wealthy countries are taking much-needed nurses from fragile states already experiencing shortages, in essence pocketing the money low-income countries have spent on training those nurses — and National Nursing Associations (NNAs) from these source nations have told me

there is either no or very little financial giveback. If they are compensated, we are hearing that these developing countries are getting a pittance in return for the valuable nurses they have invested in educating, in some cases \$1000 dollars per nurse, a tiny sum that doesn't come close to compensating them proportionally for what they are losing.

'This is a form of sleight of hand by wealthy countries, who are offsetting massive amounts by intentionally hiring internationally rather than paying to educate and retain their own nurses.

'For example, new data shows that Canada, one of the major recruiting countries, has avoided over C\$1 billion in training costs by recruiting health workers from low and middle income countries. Adding up what the top ten or so recruiting countries save in training costs by taking developing countries' health personnel, we're likely looking at tens of billions — that's tens of billions shifted from the world's richest countries to its poorest, with very little evidence that source countries are getting anything back.

'It is difficult not to conclude that this is a global nursing ripoff.'

Trillion-dollar returns from nursing and social jobs — but leaders must go beyond using nurses as currency.

The international recruitment crisis reflects a wider distortion of the true value of nurses.

At ICN's recent Congress in Helsinki, attendees heard that World Economic Forum (WEF) models show a \$3.1 trillion return in GDP from investing \$1.3 trillion in nursing and social jobs in the United States alone.

ICN's work has continually demonstrated that nurses are the key to improving population health, achieving economic growth and addressing health challenges from climate and conflicts to pandemic resilience. However, leaders are still failing to invest in building a sustainable, equitable workforce and the nursing shortage remains a global health emergency.

Mr Catton commented:

"It may seem like politicians don't know the value of nurses, but actually, perhaps they do. In fact, leaders understand the value of nursing so well that they use nurses as a political currency: they justify not spending on other areas by telling us how many nurses they could hire instead — but then they continue to make the wrong choices.

'It's all about priorities. The world understandably is currently focusing on defence, but the price of one stealth bomber plane would cover WHO's \$2 billion annual budget, as WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom recently pointed out, or could fund 100,000 nurses. We have to find the balance between defence and health and recognise that both are issues of national and global security and that you cannot choose health without also choosing nursing.'

ICN calls for proportional giveback with concrete solutions  
ICN's message is simple: if you take, you must give back.

Dr Cobos Serrano, ICN's President, said:

"Any country that wants to be seen as ethical must provide mutuality and real, proportional giveback when they take health workers from overseas.

'If rich countries are saving billions, why can't they put a proportion of those gains back into a global fund to strengthen nurse education in source countries? We know developing nations spend more on servicing their debts than on their entire healthcare or education budgets — why aren't wealthy countries writing off part of the sovereign debt owed to them by the nations whose workforces they are depleting?

'We urgently need a strengthened WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel with binding commitments to properly compensating developing nations for the health care workers they are losing. The risk otherwise is that the Code is only enabling the recruiting country to "take" and is not supporting any compensatory "give".

'ICN also calls on leaders to urgently address the inadequate working conditions, poor compensation, and failures to protect nurses from violence, much of which is gender based, that are perpetuating shortages and fueling these patterns of inequitable nurse migration and unethical international recruitment."

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#### Note for Editors

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) is a federation of more than 140 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

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