LONDON, UK: Health Poverty Action, a U.K.-based international development organisation, has published a new report on the consequences of the migration of health workers. According to the researchers, poor countries will be affected worst by the severe shortage of health workers as the specialists they train migrate to wealthier countries. Although recent data suggests that the influx of internationally trained health workers has stabilised or declined in some Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, overall migration of health personnel to OECD countries is increasing, the investigators said.

The report showed that in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland nearly 50 per cent of doctors were trained in non-EU countries. In Italy and France, doctors educated in other countries account for 60 per cent of the medical personnel. The latest statistics from the General Medical Council show that 50 per cent of all doctors and 10 per cent of all nurses in the U.K. were trained in other countries.

Owing to increased utilisation of health services by an ageing population and insufficient numbers of people trained to replace retiring health workers, many EU member states are relying increasingly on health workers trained in other countries.

The European Commission estimates that the EU will be faced with a shortage of one million health professionals (250,000 physicians, 150,000 dentists, pharmacists and physiotherapists, and 590,000 nurses) by 2020. According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 25 per cent of all doctors and five per cent of all nurses who were trained in sub-Saharan Africa were working in OECD countries in 2006.

Therefore, the authors of the current report suggested that Africa will be the most affected by the crisis. They estimate that only three per cent of the world’s health workers are employed in Africa, although the continent has 23 per cent of the world’s global disease burden. The financial cost to Africa of losing trained health workers is estimated to be in the billions, and more than African countries receive in aid for health, they said.

The report also highlights the responsibilities of wealthy countries in recruiting international health workers and calls for internationally coordinated efforts to tackle the global health-worker shortage to prevent the widening of global health inequality. The report, titled “The health worker crisis: An analysis of the issues and main international responses”, can be downloaded from Health Poverty Action’s website.