

## HARNESSING MIGRATION POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT EXAMPLES FROM WEST AFRICA

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### KEY POINTS

- Large-scale emigration is often seen to undermine development, because it takes away skilled people.
- Programmes like the 'Return of Qualified African Nationals' scheme have tried to persuade emigrants to return, yet often unsuccessfully.
- The impact of return, and the potential contribution of those migrants who don't return, remain understudied.
- New research in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire suggests we need to look at a range of capital transfers linked to migration.

### Migration return and development

International migration and return have long been major areas of concern for governments in the North and the South. Rich countries of the North have historically tried to exclude migrants to protect their labour markets. Yet, there is now growing recognition both of skill shortages in the North. Migration can also be an important factor in influencing development outcomes for poorer countries. Many countries of the South have sought to reach out to their migrant populations, to encourage the return of skilled professionals, whilst tapping into the social, economic and political resources of migrants.

But what is really known about the inter-relationships between international migration, return and development? New research at the University of Sussex, conducted in collaboration with partners in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, is examining migration abroad, the development of transnational networks, and return migration can enhance progress towards the international development targets of poverty reduction and sustainable development. In this Briefing we look at why international migration and return might be good for West African development.

### Why international migration?

In Africa, many of the issues surrounding international migration and development are well recognised, if little understood. There has long been a heated debate on the impact of migration on labour markets in African countries; one branch of theory suggests that this will have a positive impact by easing unemployment and underemployment, whilst other studies have shown that labour shortages do appear in certain sectors of the economy of the sending country<sup>1</sup>. Remittances by migrants have clearly played a major role in compensating for any loss of workers, and for certain countries these are significantly greater than aid flows. Nonetheless, remittances may be intermittent, and there

is an argument that they are invested more in consumption than in production. In addition, there is also debate on the so-called 'Brain Drain'. It is estimated that 30% of Africa's highly educated workers live outside the continent. In Ghana, a third of those with tertiary education are believed to be working abroad.

### Why return?

Building in particular on concern about the 'Brain Drain', policies to promote the return of skilled migrants are long-standing in Africa. From 1983-1999, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) ran a 'Return of Qualified African Nationals' programme, which saw the assisted return of 2,000 Africans to their home countries. Countries like Ghana and Nigeria have hosted conferences to facilitate return, and provided incentives for returnees to invest in business and real estate. For example, in 2001, Ghana organised a 'homecoming summit' for those who had returned, or were thinking of doing so.

Yet return is by no means the whole story. Nor is it simply that Africa's migrants have become integrated in the North. Rather than returning or integrating, it seems that many international migrants worldwide are more interested in developing 'transnational' lifestyles and perspectives, where they can live 'between' or 'across' two countries and economies - and perhaps also two cultures and lifestyles. One example is West Africa's 'home town' associations, where migrants in Europe contribute towards development activities 'back home'. A wide literature has developed to analyse and explain such developments, associated in the UK especially with the ESRC's Transnational Communities' programme.

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## What are the key issues?

If we are interested in how these processes of international migration, return, and emerging transnationalism can contribute to development, it is important to be clear about what beneficial impacts might include. Also, where do the key structural, institutional and individual barriers to these impacts lie? One way of thinking about this is to focus on the question of capital transfers - and whether migration, return or transnationalism might stimulate or limit such transfers. Key areas of potential capital transfer are summarised in the table below.

Focusing on capital transfer gives us a clear and potentially comparable way to look at concrete impacts of migration, return and transnationalism on development, even if such transfers are often difficult to define and measure.

Another important approach is to consider these issues at the meso-level - exploring the connectivity of migrants and migration streams in the wider world of population groups and socio-economic, political and cultural processes. How important are international migrants and returnees in the social, economic and political networks that make African economies work? (or not work!) What sorts of strategies do migrants and others consider, or put into practice, that might lead to improved development outcomes?

## Transnationalism and development

To date, much of the literature on 'transnationalism' has focused on emerging patterns and practices amongst immigrant minorities in northern countries, especially in the US, but more recently also in the UK and Europe too. 'Transnational migration' is often seen as something that immigrants engage in instead of returning. However, it could also be argued that emerging transnationalism can have just as important an impact on development where it is part of a strategy of returnees. With secure residence rights in the North, returnees are able to move back and forth and not just move their main place of residence back to their home country. The ability to move back and forth might also be critical to the ability of returnees to mobilise resources in favour of development. For more information, go to: [www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk](http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk)

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Other West African research has suggested that negative impacts are felt especially in agriculture, though labour shortages may have beneficial impacts on farming practices, for instance through encouraging rationalisation and technological development.

	Migration	Return	Transnationalism
Financial capital	Cost of migration balanced by remittance of earnings	Cost of return and loss of earnings balanced by transfer of savings	Transfer of savings with opportunity to renew earnings
Human capital	Loss of educated individuals, but lowering of intellectual unemployment	Return of skilled individuals but risk of obsolescence or in-applicability of skills	Potential for on-going skills transfers
Social capital	Expansion of social networks transfers social capital in both directions	Risk of obsolescence of social capital	Potential for renewed generation and transfer of social capital

## Further reading

BLACK, R. and Ammassari, S., 2001, 'Harnessing the Potential of Migration and Return to Promote Development: Applying concepts to West Africa', IOM Migration Research Series, 5, International Organization for Migration, Geneva.

Also visit: [www.geog.sussex.ac.uk/transrede](http://www.geog.sussex.ac.uk/transrede)

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