Towards the Sustainable Return of West African Transnational Migrants—What are the Options?

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Background

- Three generations of migration studies focusing on return can be traced in the literature since the global economic crisis in 1973
- Concept of sustainable return migration has changed over time, as return no longer seen as an end in itself
- Most West African countries experienced a net loss of population between 1995 and 2000, only recently has substantial return been feasible
- Impact of financial, social and human capital transfers on development process of origin is increasingly recognised
Sustainability of return

- Distinguish between forced migrants and economic migrants
- Definition of sustainable return
  - Absence of re-migration after return
  - Availability of socio-economic factors at origin
  - Rights of returnee
  - Sustainability of livelihoods
  - Important to consider transnationalism in definition
Sustainability of return (cont.)

- Permanent and temporary return in the West African context
  - Study showed that a majority of returnees in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire claimed their return was permanent, particularly the elite returnees
  - However, many of the less-skilled were planning to re-emigrate although they initially described their return as permanent
- Importance of voluntariness of return and environment at origin
Sources of data

- Literature review with focus on West Africa
- Much of the data used come from a study undertaken in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire in 2002
- A total of 604 less-skilled and elite returnees were surveyed
- The survey explored
  - practice of migration
  - returnees’ involvement in different kinds of capital transfers
  - barriers and opportunities for returnees to be involved in development of their home community
- Some other sources used include
  - Docquier and Marfouk’s (2005) data on international migration by educational attainment
  - Kakbi et. al. (2004) study on the economic impact of Netherlands-based Ghanaian migrants on rural Ashanti
  - Orozco’s (2005) data on Ghanaian diasporas, development and transnational integration.
Some characteristics of West African return migrants

- The study in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire observed that men and women spend similar amount of time abroad and are equally likely to work and join associations while away.
- However, women are slightly less likely to send remittances home and are much less likely to attend school when abroad.
- Over 50% of all migrants surveyed in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire were between ages 30 and 49 when returned.
- In general, less-skilled returnees are older than their elite counterparts upon return; this is particularly evident among females.
- A majority of migrants returning to Ghana were married.
Influence of transnational return

Impact of financial capital transfers

Remittances
- Total remittance to developing world estimated to $72.3 billion (formal channels)
- Only 5% to Sub-Sahara Africa
- Could have major impact on poor countries’ economy
- Transnational remittances in Ghana were estimated to $1.2 billion in 2004, which is a significant share of national income
- Remittance from diasporas is the most direct and fastest growing form of engagement with home
- West African diasporas tend to send increasing amounts of money over time and maintain transnational commitment
- Study showed that Ghanaians’ abroad sent more frequent remittances home than did Ivorians’
Influence of transnational return (cont.)

- Remittances could have a direct effect on people’s livelihoods and result in increased living standards
- 80% of those who had sent remittance to Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire did so mainly to meet subsistence needs of their families
- Time spent abroad, legal status of migrant and relation with family at home influence volume and frequency of remittances
- A majority of remittances tend to be used for consumption on the individual and household level
- Although benefits seem concentrated to the household level the extended community can benefit through ‘spill over’ effects.
Influence of transnational return (cont.)

Investment
- Many migrants abroad invest in businesses at home or other development related activities
- 56% of less-skilled Ghanaian migrants returned to self-employment, while 32% of Ivorians did so
- Most of these returnees also employed other workers in their businesses

Donations
- Transnational migrants contribute directly to programs for the development of the local home community through a variety of projects
Influence of transnational return (cont.)

Impact of social capital transfers

- Attendance and support at social gatherings
  - Important for the extension of social capital between the migrant and the family and community at home
  - Improve social status and build social networks

- Social networks and professional contacts
  - Help in development of businesses and professional activities back home and to overcome barriers to return

Engagement in hometown associations

- Could enhance transfer of social capital gained abroad
- About 61% of elite returnees in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire reported to have been engaged in associations while abroad, compared to 43% of the less-skilled
Influence of transnational return (cont.)

- Migrants transfer social capital to origin also through visits and contact with family at home
  - Over half of all Ghanaians abroad visit Ghana once a year or more
- Social capital transfers are important in order to facilitate financial and human capital transfers
Influence of transnational return (cont.)

Impact of human capital transfers

Education

- Almost 70% of less-skilled returnees and close to 90% of elite returnees from Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire reported to have studied abroad.

- The level of educational attainment of emigrants has shifted since 1990 in both Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire towards higher educated emigrants.

- This supports the argument of ‘brain drain’, however if return is made an attractive option returnees could have a large impact on development process at origin.

Work skills and experience

- Most Ghanaians and Ivorians emigrants reported they had worked while abroad.
Influence of transnational return (cont.)

- However, the proportion of those who claimed they had gained work experience while abroad was much larger among the elite.

- Impact of human capital on development mainly depends on three conditions:
  - accumulation of some knowledge and experience abroad
  - usefulness of things learnt abroad in the home context
  - desire and ability to apply human capital gained abroad

- Almost all returnees surveyed in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire reported that they had gained experience abroad that they had tried to apply at the workplace upon return.

- The impact of Ghanaian and Ivorian elite returnees on public and private development has shifted over time.
Pro-poor policy alternatives

- Migration as a livelihood strategy in West Africa
- The moderately poor returnees have the greatest ability to alleviate poverty
- Pro-poor migration policies will maximise the benefits of migration for poor people and work to reduce risks involved in the migration process
- Role of PRSP in migration policies
- Most programmes designed to encourage return of skilled migrants have been ineffective and have had little impact on poverty
- Focus on development of policies to promote positive effects of diasporas abroad
Pro-poor policy alternatives (cont.)

- The relationship between remittance and development is not fully understood and national policies dealing directly with remittance from abroad are largely missing
- Dual citizenships for migrants abroad in Ghana and Nigeria
- Efforts to strengthen relations with diaspora communities and associations from West African governments
- Main issue for policy makers lies in the identification of contexts that are favourable for investment of resources upon return
- Importance of adjustment of policies to changing patterns of migration
Recommendations

What are the options?

- Encouraging and implementing voluntary return programmes, particularly in the case of countries with recent conflicts
- Influencing the economic and social environment to make return an attractive option
- Establishing a commission focusing on remittance and development
- Encouraging bank institutions to create special favourable interest rates or lines of credit for investment to maximise positive impacts of migrant investments and savings from the diaspora
- Extending dual citizenships to all West Africans abroad to make return favourable and easy
- Extending Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) policies to enhance the ability of members to attain employment
- Emphasising migration in PRSP in all West African countries.
- Focusing on the importance of financial and social capital transfers as well as human capital to promote sustainability
- Creating close social and financial links with diasporas abroad
Thank you