## *Local/Global Encounters*

# Shifting the Focus of Migration Back Home: Perspectives from Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT *Loren B. Landau and Darshan Vigneswaran raise three fundamental critiques about how contemporary migration and development debates are likely to affect sub-Saharan Africa. They suggest that the focus should shift from movements out of Africa to migration, displacement and urbanization within the continent in order to take into account the negative effects of migration on families, conflict and political accountability. They argue that given that the balance of negotiating power rests with Europe and North America, it is unlikely that any future agenda on migration will give priority to African interests.*

KEYWORDS *Africa; policy; agenda setting; displacement*

### Rediscovering migration and development

Over the past two years, migration and development have been primary themes in global policy debates. These discussions are a welcome counter to discourses painting migration (and migrants) as inherent threats to economic and physical security. They also represent a slow acknowledgement among the 'development community' that planning must consider human mobility. Without more careful attention to which migrations and what kind of development we are discussing, however, this flurry of activity may become yet another chimaera whose benefits to poor countries in Africa and elsewhere never materialize.

The likelihood of poor or unintended outcomes is heightened in sub-Saharan Africa where data scarcity prevents informed predictions and institutional incapacity limits the ability to manage and capitalize on migration. There are moves to collect more information and build capacity, but our current understanding of both migration and development means that we are unlikely to help realize the promised benefits. Moreover, forces shaping policy-making in Europe and Africa make it all the more likely that what benefits there are will accrue outside of Africa.

It is critically important to pay additional attention to the region where most African migrants are: Africa. The key question is whose interests the migration and development agenda will serve, something that can only be answered through careful and empirically informed discussions. We hope the paper contributes to such a discussion.

## Interests and origins

A broad-based and transnational consensus has begun developing around the migration and development agenda. For rights-oriented migrant advocates in developed countries, this discourse is a welcome departure from discussions exclusively focused on migration's security implications. This does not mean, however, that the policy responses that emerge will effectively address human rights and development concerns. As the UN High level dialogue in 2006 made clear, northern- and southern-based participants have come to the table from different directions and it is an open question as to whose interests will prevail (UN General Assembly, 2006).

Several themes have been afforded prominence in the current discussion because they conform to developed countries' pre-existing preferences for immigration control (Neuman, 1993). A new consensus means recognizing that: western Europe is already contributing to the development of African partners in the form of remittances; there are strong rationales for controlling migration from the global south because it helps to prevent brain drain; and that increasing the collective capacity of states to regulate immigration could promote human development and prevent exploitation and abuse. Advocates for African migrants are entitled to ask whether these issues are being highlighted because they refer to genuine potential for measures to generate African prosperity, or because of a convenient 'fit' between the new popularity of the topic of migration and more deeply rooted and historically prior interests of more powerful neighbours (Lavenex, 2001).

The fact that policy-makers in regions like Southern Africa are recognizing the developmental aspects of migration may have a slightly different meaning. In some respects, it is merely a realization of the region's long-standing economic dependence on migrant labour (Kotze and Hill, 1997). Policy-makers are well aware that this is not only a key facet of national integration but also a prominent form of regional interdependence across countries that share minimal cross-border trade (UNDP *et al.*, 2000). At the same time, in a region that lacks a strong record of multilateral decision-making and worrying degrees of public xenophobia, there has been little sense of urgency to construct common positions on migration. The Southern African Development Community's efforts to produce a Protocol on migration are a case in point. During the post-Apartheid euphoria of the mid-1990s, a free movement initiative promised substantial deregulation of a sector that was riddled with corrupt enforcement bureaucracy. Concerted lobbying by migration-sceptics in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, however, ensured that these ideas were scrapped. Leaders in more humble neighbours, whose citizens stood to gain the most (in terms of improved labour standards and wages) from free movement, collectively failed to rescue the venture (Oucho and Crush, 2001). In this context, it is difficult to imagine the emergence of a migration and development discourse that genuinely reflects the interests of migrants *from* Southern Africa *in* Southern Africa. A more likely (and familiar) scenario involves external partners using the leverage of aid to encourage local governments to regard certain (pre-determined) topics as coterminous with their own development interests.

## Which migration?

Given the degree to which current debates reflect external interests, it is of little surprise that they are dominated by discussions of migration from relatively poor southern countries to members of the OECD. But privileging South–North migration inaccurately reflects global patterns of human mobility and distracts us from their developmental impacts. Recent estimates find that only about half of the 74 million international migrants from developing countries reside in significantly wealthier, northern countries. If one removes Latin and North American migration systems from these figures, the percentage remaining in 'the south' jumps dramatically. According to data cited in a recent World Bank report (Ratha and Shaw, 2007: 8), 69 percent of African international migrants stay in Africa.[1] This translates into something close to 3.1 million African-born people (including North Africans) in Europe (Hugo, 2006: 70–71), with 18 million international

migrants within Africa (Society for International Development, 2006a, www.sidint.org/files/Migration%20Project%20Policy_Paper_EN1.pdf, accessed 10 June 2007; 2006b, www.sidint.org/files/Migration%20Project%20Policy_Paper_EN2.pdf, accessed 10 June 2007: 16). Those in Europe are significant, but the most important migrations are on the continent.

A closer look at migration within the region reveals a number of other important dimensions. For one, the number of refugees in Africa is almost equal to the number of Africa migrants to Europe: 3,023,000 in 2005 according to the UNHCR (2006). Many of these are housed in massive camps that generate crime, insecurity and social tensions and in ways that can reshape trading networks and political authority (Juma and Suhrke, 2003). Second, the number of people displaced by war, conflict and natural disaster is probably close to double the number of refugees. Third, and perhaps most significantly, urbanization is resulting in millions of people moving on a yearly basis. The United Nations (Bouare, 2006) estimates that between 1995 and 2000, Nigeria alone had 5.4 million rural to urban migrants, Tanzania had 2.0 million, Kenya had 1.8 million and South Africa another 1.28 million. The result of these movements may not be as Malthusian as many fear, but there is no denying their long-term significance on health, service delivery, families and political institutions. But these are not the issues that policy-makers are discussing.

What is on the agenda is human trafficking, a concern effectively promoted by agencies such as the International Organization for Migration. Over the last two decades in Europe, trafficking has risen sharply in political profile, acquiring broad-based popular attention and demands for public action and legislation. While trafficking is a gross transgression of human rights and a crucial issue to monitor in Southern Africa, there is little evidence to suggest that trafficking ought to take prominence in regional policy reform. Robust research on the sex industry in the Western Cape suggests that trafficking is either not as prevalent as previously thought, or not in the sectors most commonly presumed (Gould and Fick, 2007). Even those committed to tackling the issue have failed to find many cases.[2] Moreover, existing laws already sanction the variety of crimes (kidnapping, unlawful detention, labour exploitation, etc.) that form a part of trafficking operations. Despite these factors, there has been a relative frenzy of activity, punctuated by the IOM media campaign against trafficking and South Africa's recent drafting of legislation to counter this disturbing form of international trade. For researchers and advocates of migrant issues across the region, this outcome seems alarmist, particularly given the well-known and widely documented problems having to do with other less well-publicized migration-related forms of hardship and exploitation (e.g. abused deportees, unaccompanied minors and refugee victims of refoulement).

## What development?[3]

Given what little we actually know about migration within Africa or from Africa to elsewhere in the world, we must treat any promised developmental consequences with healthy scepticism. We should also broaden the kinds of developmental effects we consider. Much of the discourse on migration/displacement and development is shaped by micro-economic perspectives (Jacobsen, 2005; World Bank, 2006; Lindley, 2007). Even when viewed from such vantage points, migration and development celebrants typically overlook the potential negative economic consequences of migration. Apart from brain drain and its potential (but by no means certain) consequences for the health, teaching and technology sectors, the movement of people out of Africa represents an effective transfer of cash resources to the North. An International Organization for Migration report on migration in 2005, for example, finds that South Africa spends US$ 1 billion in training health workers who have left the country. It is unlikely that the remittances received by skilled workers will match the direct and indirect public investments made in training skilled workers. We must also ask how much of the money that is sent goes into 'development' and not just survival (Maphosa, 2004; Haas, 2005). Given that most of this money goes into private hands, little will strengthen much-needed public capacity for

advancing human welfare: remittances cannot replace public sector investment in critical sectors such as health and education.

There is also reason to suspect that the moneys sent home might never reach those who are most in need. Migrating is often a significant financial investment, meaning that those moving outside their country or region are already relatively privileged. In many instances, Africans who move across borders are from urban areas and middle-class households, and the remittances they send go to family and kin located in urban areas. Some of these may reach poorer rural relatives, but this is far from certain. Rather, remittances are probably heightening inequality. Research in Latin America suggests that migration-related inequality decreased over time, but Africa lacks many of the social institutions that might promote such effects. Moreover, by concentrating additional resources in urban areas, it may further accelerate urbanization, a point discussed in more detail below.

Migration may also have significant and less desirable social by-products. These include the separation of families and the removal of figures who would ordinarily be role models for future generations. Perhaps most fundamentally, promoting the migration of the middle classes can have negative political effects in sending countries. The combination of an absent middle class and remittances to relatives left behind may well be what has enabled Robert Mugabe to maintain power in Zimbabwe. Somewhat more benignly, remittances used to secure private sector health and education services may help short-term poverty alleviation while doing little to encourage the state to fulfil its service provision mandate (Haas, 2005: 1275). Indeed, remittances potentially undermine pressure on political leaders for service delivery and accountability, creating states that are even further disconnected and disinterested in their people. In some instances, remittances may also help foment or sustain conflict (Collier, 2000).

Regardless of how broad our thinking about migration and development may be, one can also not be too sanguine about the likelihood that any policy – no matter how well informed – will achieve the desired ends. In almost no cases do African governments have the capacity to measure, predict and proactively respond to human mobility in ways that will contribute to the public good. Even where African states have good migration policies, they often lack 'the trained personnel, as well as the systems, procedures and technology required to implement them in an effective and consistent manner' (GCIM, 2005: 9).

Given that the emerging development agenda is at least in part a reflection of African states' collective incapacity to address their population's needs, there is also an irony in asking them to develop policies to combat 'brain drain' and 'human smuggling/trafficking' while managing migration for development. No matter how well meaning, more interventionist policies may only heighten the rent-seeking and corruption that already characterizes many African borders (Coplan, 2001). One must similarly wonder what states will do if encouraged to regulate remittances: fund transfers that are now often informal and completely private (Truen *et al.*, 2005). In places where African states have zealously begun regulating international and internal migration – South Africa, Western Tanzania, Zimbabwe – the results are not typically developmental. Instead, they often result in disenfranchisement, human rights violations and heightened poverty (Human Rights Watch, 1999; CoRMSA, 2007).

## Agenda setting: Who matters?

Many proponents of a migration and development agenda also demand ongoing dialogue to ensure mutual benefits among migrants and sending and receiving countries. Such negotiations are unlikely to become equal partnerships for at least three reasons:

1. Many of the migrants – in Europe and elsewhere – are either willing or are effectively unable to participate in policy debates. Not only does their absence from countries of citizenship mean their influence there is reduced, but their tenuous legal status or other socio-legal

restrictions prevent them from political participation in their countries of residence.

2. In terms of relations between Europe and Africa, Europe has clearly articulated interests regarding migration and development and strong political constituencies on these issues. Alternatively, few African countries have clearly stated objectives (let alone policies) in this area. And while the EU may be internally divided, it presents a common front to the outside world. Despite the existence of the African Union and other regional bodies (e.g., SADC, ECOWAS, EAC), the continent lacks a unified voice or negotiating strategy on migration, as it does on many other issues. And while Europe wants selected African migrants, it can go elsewhere for those skills. Once again, the North scores the upper-hand.

3. One must also wonder how much room there is for development advocates to shape migration policies within Europe or Africa.[4] Despite our best efforts, security interests are far more likely to trump concerns over poverty alleviation. Given the continued preoccupation with terrorism and high levels of xenophobia, politicians seem unlikely to stake their reputation on migration policies intended to benefit other countries.

One must, of course, consider the possibility that any state can effectively implement a migration and development agenda. Even in Europe and North America, there are few reasons to believe that policies dedicated to generating selective or managed migration will do much to shape the type or numbers of people who move. In Africa, the possibilities are even more remote. Instead of shaping migration flows, the primary result of restrictions is likely to be further economic distortions and human rights violations.

## Conclusions

If the real interest in migration and development is the development of African economies and communities, we must shift the locus of debate and deliberation away from European migration. Rather, we need to develop the data needed (and the people needed to collect such data) to understand migration and displacement within Africa. We must also generate nuanced models that consider the developmental contexts and needs of countries and communities, as they exist in contemporary Africa with all of their conflicts, corruption and resources. Short of this, the renewed dialogue on international migration runs the risk of heightening inequality, corruption, exploitation and poverty.

### Notes

1 Further support for this point can be found in House of Commons International Development Committee (2004).
2 The Southern African Counter Trafficking Assistance Program run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported 194 Victims assisted from January 2004 to May 2007.
3 This section draws heavily from discussions with Caroline Kihato, formerly a policy analyst with the Development Bank of Southern Africa.
4 This point stems from a comment made by Aurelia Wa Kabwe Segatti at the Fourth AFD/EUDN conference. 'Migration and Development: Mutual benefits?' (Paris, 8 November 2006.)

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