



How can mobility better benefit rural local development?

The prospects that mobility offers for rural local development are often underestimated. Authorities demonstrate limited capacities for addressing the topic and supporting migrants in their socio-economic integration. Our authors look at regional mobility in the context of West Africa and give an account of a pilot project in Northern Benin examining approaches to fostering better linkages between migration and rural development.

While most public and political attention today focus on South-North migration and on the flows of migrants seeking to join Europe, this should not eclipse the fact that close to 90 per cent of all movements in West Africa remain within the region, with a strong tendency for short movements to neighbouring countries, as publications issued by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) confirm. This 'other side' of West African migration is both a well-established and constitutive feature of the region, reminding us that international borders only improperly reflect the constantly evolving dynamics structuring this geographic space.

■ Regional dynamics and the ECOWAS

Migration constitutes a livelihood strategy and an option to diversify and mitigate risks for numerous households in West Africa. Motivations for

migration often reflect a combination of economic, political, social and, increasingly, environmental arguments. It is also often perceived as a learning process and is thus socially valued. Trajectories of mobility in West Africa are numerous and are frequently influenced by socio-ethnic ties and networks. The ECOWAS, which gathers 15 countries of the region in a process of regional integration, not only recognises regional mobility as a reality but has established the free movement of people within its community as a key principle. Inspired by other processes of regional integration, the free movement of people is in this case seen as a basis to promote regional dynamism and economic growth.

Today, however, there is a significant gap between this regional normative framework and the actual migration dynamics which remain informal in their great majority. The ECOWAS framework and the rights and obligations it formulates for member states and their citizens remain mostly unknown. With most (cross-border) movements unregistered, it remains difficult to quantify the phenomenon and analyse its implications for informed public policies. Nevertheless,

migration is a continuous and diverse process which contributes to reshaping the social, economic and political equilibria in many parts of West Africa. The implications of mobility are evident not only for the migrants and their families but also for the regions of origin and destination. Today, it touches many households in West Africa and offers opportunities for individual and collective development, if proper framework conditions are made available. Its context-specific implications need to be analysed and properly taken into account in development policies and initiatives at local and national level. This is precisely where Helvetas comes in. The pilot activities in Benin are meant to deepen the organisational understanding of the migration and development (M&D) nexus, its potential and modalities to promote it.

■ The department of Borgou – A crossroad of diverse trajectories

Situated in the northern part of Benin (see map), the department of Borgou is amongst the country's poorest areas and constitutes one of the pri-

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ority areas of Helvetas' intervention zone in Benin. The organisation's programme works primarily at local level. Its chief partners are municipalities and their associations, local civil society and private sector organisations.

Borgou fully participates in the regional migration dynamics that characterise West Africa. At the same time, it constitutes a region of destination for many migrants of the sub-region, of departure as well as an area of transit for migrants on longer routes to North Africa and, sometimes, to Europe. Initial studies allowed the identification of three main migration dynamics affecting the department. Borgou primarily attracts many migrants from the ECOWAS region and in particular from the neighbouring countries. Individual migrants follow a route and destination that in many cases was previously used by a member of their communities. Migrants follow relatives or acquaintances from the home country to exercise an economic activity which is usually also the result of socio-ethnic solidarities and networks. For instance, while the Igbos from Nigeria are known to work in the trade of spare parts, Togolese women generally integrate the restaurants sectors, while young men from Niger work as travelling salesmen, usually offering second-hand clothes and tea.

Second, the department of Borgou is also hosting many internal migrants. Communities from dryer North-Western Benin, for instance from the departments of Donga and Atacora, come in search of cultivable lands. While it is once again difficult to quantitatively estimate the phenomenon, this internal migration represents a very important corridor of human mobility for Benin. Many recent settlements are for instance composed of a majority of Beninese people originating from another department. The possibility to acquire cultivable lands is a central motivation of this corridor. In general, the (young) head of the household comes first and brings his family after a couple of years, following the acquisition of some rights over an agricultural plot.

■ A lack of integration mechanisms ...

Field surveys show that despite the permanent significance of both international and internal migration, the issue is not systematically taken into account in local public policies. While local authorities acknowledge the presence of many *étrangers* (foreigners) on their territory, no active mechanisms or policies are generally in place to communicate with the newcomers and facilitate their gradual socio-economic integration in the locality. Most migrant communities are organised through semi-formal associations, which are often only weakly institutionalised and primarily designed for social rather than political purposes. Nevertheless, there is at current no mechanism for regular dialogue between the authorities and these migrants' associations. Furthermore, only very limited initiatives exist to include non-natives in consultations on local development. In this sense, they find themselves excluded from the planning of key public services or the necessary socio-economic infrastructures, despite the fact that all migrants' communities are economically active. Neither is the question of land rights discussed in the case of internal migrants. However, land governance is of critical relevance in a context of high demographic growth and migration. Newcomers often lack the necessary knowledge, and the usage



Migration dynamics in Benin.

rights they may perhaps acquire can be precarious. Under such pressures, the potential for conflict over land rights is evident in the medium term.

■ ... and preparation and support

In addition to receiving migrants, the Borgou is also characterised by an important movement of departure of its youth for seasonal migration. According to first surveys, more than one out of ten young people migrate, mainly to neighbouring Nigeria. Young men go to work in agricultural plantations, while young women are less numerous and very often employed in restaurants and for domestic works. This migration happens in a relatively spontaneous manner, often without much dialogue at household level and preparation. Young migrants leave with limited knowledge about their destination points, payments, working and living conditions, which in reality often turn out to be very harsh. They travel without any identification document. Informal intermediaries (called "waga" = the guide) play a critical role in structuring this corridor, both in recruiting and ensuring border crossing. As things are at the moment, this stream of seasonal migration creates few long-term benefits. Their limited knowledge and preparation makes these young migrants vulnerable to employers and intermediaries when and after crossing the border. Furthermore, there is no reflection on how migration may be integrated in a longer-term personal and household development process. While programmes are in place to fight against child trafficking, there is no intervention supporting young migrants in reflecting on and preparing for migration.

■ Support local capacities and promote inclusion

Helvetas' objective is neither to encourage nor to discourage migration. We understand migration as a livelihood strategy available to individuals and households. We further see its role in reducing the potential costs

and supporting the benefits resulting from these (self-chosen) development strategies. Migration patterns also need to be properly taken into account when designing development initiatives.

A first intervention axis of the pilots concentrates on governance and inclusion of migrants into local development. The objective is to support local capacities for an improved understanding of mobility's implications and for dialogue between local authorities and migrants' associations. On the one hand, the project supports municipalities in gaining an improved understanding of their migration context and their related duties in the light of national legislation and the ECOWAS principles. It also supports the establishment of communication channels with non-native communities.

In parallel, the project has tested approaches to support migrants' associations for effective use of and participation in the consultation mechanisms. In this case, two associations have been given institutional and thematic support based on their expressed priorities in order to improve their functioning and ability to participate in local development. The set-up and practice of communication channels have allowed increased mutual understanding of each other's role and expectations. This has also led to the identification of priority issues for collaboration, such as land rights and governance. As stated before, constant demographic growth and continued migration will increase pressure on land. It is therefore critical to inform on applicable legislation and available options for securing land rights to prevent a rise in conflicts over land. In collaboration with the national farmers' union, *Synergie Paysanne*, Helvetas is for instance active in the vulgarisation of the procedures of the new land code and involves all relevant stakeholders: the farmers without land, the landowners and the local public and traditional authorities. It further supports communities in formalising their renting agreements so that if nec-



essary, they can serve as a basis to resolve conflicts.

■ Promote safe migration

A second axis of intervention concerns community dialogue and preparation for safe and beneficial migration of the youth to Nigeria. Given the scale of seasonal migration to the country but also the challenges young migrants face through the different stages of the migration cycle in particular when 'in-service' and when returning, we have developed a two-step approach for first informing communities and potential migrants on the implications of migration, their rights and obligations and secondly helping candidates experience migration as a safer and more beneficial venture. The first step thus consists in a dialogue with rural communities on mobility. The exchanges include reflections on risks and possible alternatives. The test phase showed that it is possible to create a climate of confidence that allows a discussion on this sensitive topic at household level. The methodology further enabled identifying and entering into dialogue with young candidates for migration. This bilateral dialogue constitutes the second step of the approach and leads to discussing the 'personal project' of the migrant and its objectives. Nearly half of the participants confirm their

choosing for "departure" and attend preparation training with modules on agricultural training, salary negotiations, but also more general issues such as hygiene or health. Young adults interested in alternatives to migration such as skills training are registered in training centres after passing the entry test.

■ An initial stocktaking

Migration is almost a 'defining' trend for West Africa, and will remain a prominent dynamic, considering for instance its demographic growth or its exposure to climate change. Human mobility impacts on local economic but also on social and political equilibria and processes and thus cannot be avoided in policy design. The pilot activities conducted so far have confirmed the multiple dimensions of mobility in the department of Borgou but also a range of missed opportunities for development, risks and potential influence on local conflicts. While they contribute to economic life, migrants' communities are often invisible in local governance and development plans. Land rights emerge as a key issue for local governance in migration-prone areas such as the department of Borgou. There is an important potential in community dialogue and offering support to the preparation of young migrants intending to go to Nigeria. The extent to which the proposed approaches effectively contribute to a more beneficial migration experience and increased returns for personal and community development still needs to be analysed.

Finally, these pilots have once again underlined that a 'migration lens' should be mainstreamed in the region and mobility systematically be taken into account in the design of policies and interventions. In this respect, the pilots have already shown concrete linkages to be made in the fields of good local governance, education and vocational skills trainings and rural economic development.

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