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Migration, insecurity and development in Central Africa

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Coltan deposits, Democratic Republic of Congo, May 2012

The study of African migrations has historically been imbalanced, biased towards studies of West Africa and the Maghreb. Today's studies largely focus on irregular movements towards Northern countries. The disproportionate attention that is paid to migration outside the continent continues to supplant the study of migration within the African continent, which is of a far greater magnitude. Despite the lack of up-to-date, dependable statistics, we can trace a migration dynamic specific to Central Africa^[1], which is particularly marked by both long-standing continuities but also by profound ruptures. In fact, when migrations are understood in their larger sense, taking into account all forms of mobility, Central Africa

appears more than ever as a place of intense human movement (Lututala 2007; Poutier 2003). These movements are the product of determinants as diverse as local history, community practices, environmental questions, economic motivations, demographic factors and political conflicts. The types of movement that prevail in Central Africa in particular are strongly influenced by history, notably in terms of transcontinental flows towards Europe ever since Central Africa was formed of former German, Belgian, French and Portuguese colonies.

International migrations which begin in Central Africa are however more and more oriented towards the African continent, notably towards Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, but also towards America (Thomas 2011) and Asia. This evolution in destinations is one of the major characteristics of African mobility in the 2000s. This emergence or reinforcement of new territories of emigration is the result of African migratory protectionism as well as the growth in the power of xenophobia, in particular in the former eldorados struck by the economic crisis. Migrations beyond the continent, which tended formerly towards the old colonial metropolises, are now turning to new places, including new linguistic areas, e.g. Senegalese in Italy or Spain, Malians in Argentina or Brazil. The addition of Southern Europe and North or South America to countries like DRC, Cameroon and Angola as migration destinations marks a turn away from the privileging of former colonial powers in destination choice (Fall 2016; Styan 2000). Further flows include migrations for study to countries like Canada, Belgium or the US, which are often followed by settlement, as well as the migration of medical doctors from Angola, Cameroon and DRC to Northern countries and recently towards South Africa, which has left in their wake an uneasiness about 'brain drain'. There are also many migrations among high-level sports players, e.g. Cameroonian or Congolese footballers joining English, French or Belgian football championships.

Many of these migrations, however, are riskier than ever for Central Africans, who are faced, for example, by 'containment zones' for irregular migrants in the Maghreb, which today is the principal transit corridor towards the Schengen countries (Bolzman et al. 2011; Shapendonk 2011; Carling & Hernandez-Carretero 2008; Bredeloup 2009). Some of these migrations are forced, provoked by economic considerations or inter-ethnic conflicts. Here history and the contemporary meet: the forced return or refoulement of populations formerly displaced against their will towards prosperous zones or towards their zones of origin are another facet of postcolonial migrations. Measures taken by countries to expel international migrants particularly affect West Africans, e.g. Sudanese from Mali or from Senegal, who are strongly represented in the informal and artisanal sector in DRC, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, but also impact migrants living in bordering countries, e.g. Congolese from DRC in Congo and Angola.

MIGRATION REVEALS LOCAL TURBULENCE

Central Africa's geopolitical situation and its socioeconomic evolution explain the great mobility of its populations. In fact, the political instability that has prevailed in the region since the independence era, and more particularly since the second Congolese war (1998–2003), has combined with environmental concerns and competition for access to resources to encourage greatly diverse migrations. Measuring a huge 4,109,568 km² for a population of 157,368,000, Central Africa is situated in an equatorial zone abundant in water and linked by a network draining the vast Congo basin that covers nearly 4 million km². A dense forest covers a good part of Cameroon and CAR and more than half of the territories of Gabon and Congo, and is a precious source of desirable woods. The region's underground mineral resources are at the heart of a global race for energy resources, with petrol and/or extremely rare or coveted minerals such as copper, gold, diamond, manganese, bauxite and coltan in Angola, Chad, Congo, DRC, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.

The source of conflicts of all kinds, the region's immense natural resources have always been at the heart of greed and political tension, of which the major consequences are political instability and civil or instate wars. The many *coups d'état* and interethnic confrontations that punctuate the political history of CAR, Chad, Angola etc. result from the struggle for the control of those abundant riches – riches that simultaneously have little positive effect on the living conditions of those in the region (De Herdt 2011). This situation furthermore provides favourable conditions for the survival banditry seen in many cross-border zones. The unequal spatial distribution of natural riches is also behind the strong regional disparities and unequal territorial development of Central Africa. In DRC, for example, in order to make their fortune, foreign and indigenous populations congregate in the big business centres for coltan (Goma, Nord-Kivu), copper and cobalt (Kolwezi and Likasi in Katanga), and diamond (Mbuji Mayi). The

location of the resources and the infrastructure built for their exploitation also has a demographic effect, causing an overpopulation in the Congo–Nile ridge. If nothing is done, the rate of natural growth of 2.5 or 3% per year will lead to a doubling of the population within a period of 25 years, with destabilising consequences. This very great demographic pressure is behind the deadly conflicts in the Rift, where the population density is almost 400 inhabitants per km². Many-sided conflicts have stemmed from rivalries between herdsman and farmers, as well as the fight for control of gold mines. Territorial divisions inherited from colonisation can also have a negative impact on relations between neighbouring states and/or among countries themselves.

Added to this turbulence is that caused by Islamist terrorist groups^[2], which constitute a real threat to the territorial integrity of numerous countries, as in Cameroon and Chad. In this it resembles what has happened in East Africa, where the Somalian Salafists Al-Shabaab have established a regime of terror. By imposing a mode of control based on crime and violence these transnational groups have a negative impact on the circulatory migration that has, since ancestral times, been an integral part of the way of life for numerous African populations.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF MIGRATION

The composition of flows has diversified over the years, becoming less and less male, with the recent emergence of women and young people on the scene. Central African women make important contributions to household resources and food and nutritional sovereignty based on their agricultural activities – of the 70% of the active population involved in agriculture, 53% are women. In many places on the African continent, however, women are more and more involved in voluntary migration of short and long distances in search of other incomes. The phenomenon of international exodus reaches back to the 1980s, a decade in which international mobility was linked to the suppression of discrimination. In Cameroon, for example, the repeal of laws requiring women to have marital authorisation to leave played an important role in the female exodus towards towns within the interior, but also abroad, notably from Douala and Yaoundé (Kamdem 2015b). Whether sex workers, students, domestic workers, single or married women benefiting from family reunification, migrating African women both power community life in the country of welcome, and act as guardians of group culture and as links with the country of origin (Sathoud 2006; Kamdem 2015a). Central African women are also implicated in displacement and forced migration linked to insecurity as a result of the effects of climate change and of conflicts, in which they pay a heavy price, including that of rape in times of war (Braeckman 2012; Amnesty International 2009).

For Africa's young people – around 45% of the population are less than 15 years old in the majority of countries on the continent – the crisis in employment and the lack of prospects push many into following the rural–urban exodus or towards international migration. This results in unexpected levels of migration in numerous countries in the region, often compounding existing tensions in areas such as the Great Lakes between 'indigenous' and 'foreigner', such as is the case for the migrant diggers engaged in artisanal and diamond exploitation in Mbuji Mayi or in excavating coltan in Kivu. These young people swell the ranks of the 38 million African young people between 18 and 24 years who are unemployed, and who represent a considerable portion of [the 75 million recorded globally by the International Labour Organization in 2013](#). Drawing a parallel with the Arab Spring, many observers see in this hopeless youth 'a time bomb' vulnerable to other exploitation. According to the World Bank, [around 40% of those who join rebel and terrorist groups are motivated to do by the lack of alternative employment](#).

A NEW APPROACH TO 'GOOD GOVERNANCE' OF AFRICAN MOBILITIES

More than ever before, the insecurity that prevails in Central Africa is a strong contributor to human mobility. Given that these new mobilities represent a break with traditional movements, and thus cannot be understood based on classic frameworks, something new is required. Our new approach must be based on an understanding of 'mobility' rather than 'migration', in order to better reflect the diversity of the circulation of human capital. We need to study both external but also internal migrations, and look in particular at the impact of these movements on urbanisation. To do so we need to produce good quality statistics, the dearth of which is an obstacle to understanding the scale of migration (voluntary or involuntary), despite the fact that population movements within the continent are of far greater volume than those oriented towards the North. The scale of displacements of people in the Great Lakes region

or in the interior of DRC, for example, cannot be compared with the flows towards Lampedusa or the Canary Islands via the Maghreb (Lututala 2007; de Haas 2008; Lessault & Beauchemin 2009). To this end, we should take a regional approach to producing reliable statistics, taking as our model the Réseau Migration et Urbanisation en Afrique de l'ouest of 1993, under which simultaneous enquiries were held in eight countries (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal). In compiling these statistics we should focus on women and young people, whose aspirations and movements are less documented.

As soon as they are thought of on a wider spatial scale, migrations can be a central element of processes of regional, national, and even local development. The major challenge for the political authorities is to better integrate them into broader development strategies. Putting migrations into their historical context would also allow us to better understand their development over a long period of time. This approach tackles a deficit of comprehension of the depth and movements of population in former times linked to colonial development (e.g. Mossi towards Cote d'Ivoire, Chadians to Cameroon and Gabon) or to political considerations (e.g. Congolese from DRC expelled from Angola in 1973). By collaborating on a regional basis we can make circular migration in Africa an alternative to exodus towards Northern countries, encouraging inter-African cooperation on matters of mobility as a shared ambition. This could be a salutary response to the often degrading treatments to which African migrants are subjected on the routes which lead towards the West, and an answer to the continual demand for mobility for work, notably amongst the young. By better documenting recent immigration towards the continent, too, we better appreciate its positive and/or negative impacts, including that of the large-scale and long-term arrival of European populations on the continent: French in Morocco, Portuguese and Brazilians in Angola, Italians in Libya, but also Asian migrations, e.g. Chinese towards Mali and Cameroon. The authorities must pay attention to the challenge of staying open to external migratory flows which are linked to globalisation, while preserving national interests.

NO ONE CAN BE SAFE WHEN THEIR NEIGHBOUR IS IN DIFFICULTY

We should aim towards the better legal protection of migrants, including the displaced, refugees, and migrant workers, within the framework of a more solid and better integrated continental or regional politics. Regional solidarity, i.e. between different territories linked by geographical proximity, should prevail – as no one can be safe when their neighbour is in difficulty. Only regional cooperation will allow us to face up to security challenges that are directly linked to development challenges. Linking migration with development is above all about correcting the gap which results from reducing our understanding of globalisation to the circulation of goods and capital, and taking into account neglected lessons from history, notably the decisive input of inter-African migrations to the development of prosperous countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon and South Africa. It is regrettable that after nearly 40 years of debate on the free movement of people in the ECOWAS space, few significant advances have been noted.

We need, too, to pay more attention to the role those in the diaspora can play in development. The material contributions made by migrants, or social remittances, according to Lewitt (1998) are three-fold: family solidarity, social contributions and economic investment. The progressive dependence of villages on the sending of money by migrants, community organisation and the social control exercised by the village community mean migrant associations can take charge of development in places of origin (Kane 2010; GRDR 2012; Fall 2016). These migrant associations have multiplied and diversified and play, far more so than the State, an important role in the survival of zones of (rural) exodus.

As Kofi Annan, then secretary general of the UN, said, 'peace and security in Central Africa as elsewhere cannot be imposed from outside'. Central Africa's situation is complex because peace and/or security are not simple local issues; rather, they are linked to the interests of developed countries who defend these interests while supporting or working against political actors. Making operational the elements which will better govern is certainly not easy but it opens the path to deeper migration policy responses by taking into account the diversity or specificity of population movements. When thought of at a geographical level, migrations become a central element of the regional – even continental – development process. The faint-heartedness of states on the African continent to integrate regionally, even continentally, which represents the single alternative to the fight against insecurity, has compromised development. Central Africa, whose recurrent conflicts are sources of insecurity and forced and voluntary mobilities, is representative of this failed response. Until these recommended

solutions are written into a global or at least supra-national framework, which requires the collaboration of all actors, this failure cannot be appropriately addressed.

NOTES

[1] Strictly speaking, Central Africa comprises Angola, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), São Tomé and Príncipe and Chad. I include, for geopolitical reasons, Rwanda and Burundi. Note that the Communauté économique des États de l'Afrique centrale (CEEAC) includes ten countries: the nine given in the UN definition plus Burundi.

[2] These groups include Al-Mourabitoun, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda, and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

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