Reflections on migration in sub-Saharan Africa

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Let us begin by considering migration in a largely arid African region not that far from major cities found in neighbouring regions. My short story is based on research work we did some years back. Over the past twenty years, net migration into the region has been negative – more people leaving than arriving - and the educational profile of school-leavers has been higher than, and the educational profile of adults lower than, those of adjoining regions. Employment is largely in the primary economic sector – agriculture and mining – and migration *within* the region toward its major rivers and mines is higher than across its borders. We concluded that since those that leave the region are younger and more highly qualified than those that remain, it appears that there is a flight of skills and of human capital that is not balanced by an equivalent inflow. This is probably one reason why the region's population was older than those of neighbouring regions. We also concluded that if the region is seen as one of the hinterlands of these neighbouring cities, then the importance to this region of ties with family elsewhere and of remittances to family at home and to childhood homesteads should not be under-estimated.

I have told this story, perhaps a common though not typical one in sub-Saharan Africa, with a hidden motive in mind: it could be about *international migration* between neighbouring countries, or it could be about *internal migration* within one country (which, in fact, it is, sorting out migration streams in the Northern Cape of South Africa). This is one of the main points made by the 2009 Human Development Report on mobility and development – that when we think of migration we need to think both about internal migration as well as about cross-border migration. Both types contribute to remittance flows and both contribute to brain drains, to diasporas where the better-educated not only leave sending areas for other countries but also for the cities of their native countries. The Report estimates that globally, using a conservative definition, 740 million people are internal migrants—almost four times as many as those who have moved internationally.

This focus on both sets of migrants changes the mobility profiles we have both globally as well as regionally. It also changes the nature of the policy challenges government now need to grapple with – not least since policy on migration now comprises migrants' human and economic rights and needs not only as foreigners in a new country but as strangers or newcomers in their own country.

The second main point that this UNDP Report makes also relates to national governments' policy on migration. Arguing that the ability 'to decide where to live is a key element of human freedom', the authors call on governments to reduce restrictions on movement within and across their borders, so as to expand human choices and freedoms. They argue for practical measures that can improve prospects on arrival, which in turn will have large benefits both for destination communities and for places of origin. The Report concludes: 'We began this report by pointing to the extraordinarily unequal global distribution of opportunities and how this is a major driver of the movement of people. Our main message is that mobility has the potential to enhance human development— among movers, stayers and the majority of those in destination societies.' (HDR09).

This clear and simple statement – backed up in the Report with evidence from a number of regions – needs to be qualified in a number of ways.

The first qualification arises from the distinction between *forced* and *voluntary* migration. When we say that 'to decide where to live is a key element of human freedom', we imply that a person is able to choose, is free to take a voluntary decision. As we know, many cannot. People displaced by insecurity and conflict face particular challenges. There are an estimated 14 million refugees living outside their country of citizenship, representing about 7 percent of the world's migrants. Most remain near the country they fled, typically living in camps until conditions at home allow their return. A much larger number, some 26 million, have been internally displaced. They have crossed no frontiers, but may face special difficulties away from home in a country riven by conflict or racked by natural disasters (HDR09).

 A second qualification emerges from an impression I gained during my reading of the UNDP report. There seems to be an underlying assumption that migration leads to higher status - that spatial mobility leads to social mobility. Certainly, the report does repeatedly use the caveat – all other things being equal – but a belief in the inherent progressive nature of migration in today's highly unequal world strikes me as too simple. China's *hukou* urban migrants come to mind, for example.

A third qualification arises from the danger of applying best practice policy models to regions where circumstances may differ substantially. Sub-Saharan Africa is a good example. An important statistic here, in fact, is the migration from other continents – not of people but of a number of development blueprints relating to regional cooperation, to urbanization and to urban governance. The development consequences in terms of practice have often been less than successful. In short, the implementation of context-independent formal policy

models – typically called "best practice" – will tend to fail unless *context-dependent practices* emerge.

How then to describe the sub-Saharan African context relevant to migration, and how does it differ from, say, the European context? I will now try to give an answer to these two questions.

Let us start with Europe and with a brief history of recent migration. After the Second World War which destroyed not only a large part of its potential labour force but also much of Europe's infrastructure, the political and commercial elites agreed to open their countries by way of recruitment drives for manpower. Some work was skilled, particularly in heavy industry, most however was in positions that were hardest to hold down and most dangerous. Migrants came from other European countries; from former colonies in the cases of France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom; and as a result of guest worker policies in the cases of Sweden and Germany in particular. Initially, these elites made certain assumptions about these migration streams, almost all of which proved to be false:

➢ Immigrants would be few in number;
➢ They would fill short-term gaps in the labour force
➢ Most would stay in Europe temporarily
➢ No-one assumed migrants would be eligible for welfare

As realization that these expectations were not true spread among European publics, from the 1970s, Europe's welcome to the world's poor was withdrawn. This did not however stem the streams – they have in fact accelerated since (partially as the result of new countries joining the European Union after 1990).

Two other points about this historical sketch need mention. The manpower shortages that these immigrants were brought in to solve were in old industries, often on their last legs and operating in their last few years. Between the 1970s and the beginning of the 21st Century, the transformation of European industries was accompanied by massive layoffs. In short, many Turkish, North African, and 'new' Commonwealth workers became redundant during this period, and opted to remain with their families in their European countries of employment. Secondly, the birthrate of native Europeans has been plummeting for years, and is now at the lowest levels ever recorded in any major region of the world (13). In addition, Europeans are old – a quarter of them are over sixty. As a consequence of these demographic factors, Europe is only able to maintain its size and dynamism by importing non-Europeans (14).

In contrast to Europe in which the era of rapid urbanization is past, Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing a process of urbanisation that is both extraordinarily rapid and enduring. In 1980, only some 27% of Africans lived in cities. This jumped to 38% in 2000 and is expected to reach 50% in the year 2020. These massive and sustained rural-urban migration streams create ties between the city and the countryside, simultaneously disturb and transform communities living in urban neighbourhoods and in rural villages close to the city and create massive and sustained streams of mainly internal – rather than international – migrants. The post-independence growth of African capital cities has no historical equivalent. Between l960 and 1980, Abidjan and Kinshasa reflected a sevenfold and a fivefold increase, respectively, in 18-20 years. Berlin in the period 1850 to 1910, the then fastest growing European capital, needed 60 years to increase fivefold whilst Chicago – between 1870 and 1900 - reached it in 30. This unprecedented urban growth was primarily politically driven, by public employment opportunities in the new states, by expanding urban education and by increasing urban-rural differentials in standard of living. Politics, moreover, was not only pulling Africans to their capitals. It was also *pushing* them there, as a refuge from civil wars, from rural banditry, and from an economically collapsing countryside. Escaping from war was a major reason for raising Luanda´s population from 475,000 in l970 to about 2 million in l990 and today it comprises some 6 million residents.

The global economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s drastically diminished the formal economy in these cities. In the late l950s and early 1960s, cities like Léopoldville and Lagos were cities of workers and employees. Now, African cities became leaders of the global trend of an informalization of urban labour markets, including substantially more self-employed - rather than wage-employed - adults than was the case earlier, due both to casualisation and informalisation of labour. The cities were powerless in the face of problems posed by this avalanche of fleeing immigrants and of informally employed residents. Their resources were collapsing as the formal economy diminished. Service delivery – water, sewage, waste removal, housing delivery and critically public transport – was taken over by informal groups. It was now that Africa became the continent of slums. African capitals and other big cities however did not collapse into general misery. They polarized, between the large impoverished majority and a small political and business elite, living in well-guarded villas, with ample private services, and bank accounts abroad.

So what does this tell us about the migration context for sub-Saharan Africa?

In the first place, the population of this region is growing and its urban population is exploding. Over the next 40 years, the world's population will grow by a third and will more than double in one in six countries—all of them developing and all but three of them in Africa.

Consequently, Africans are younger than Europeans and more are of working age. Over the next 40 years in fact, Europe's working age population will decrease by 23% and Africa's will increase by a staggering 125%. These trends suggest accelerating migration streams, mostly internal to the countries migrants come from (rather than cross-border.)

In the second place, while we know that people leaving poor countries have the most to gain from moving, only 3 percent of Africans live in a country different from where they were born and fewer than 1 percent of Africans live in Europe (popular perceptions in Europe notwithstanding). People moving out of poor countries and poor regions are the least mobile.

In the third place, the independent nations of sub-Saharan Africa have not had a happy childhood. One disaster after another rolled over the continent in the last third of the twentieth century, collapsing commodity prices, colonial wars, Cold War interference, local political megalomania, massive violence, AIDS, and so on. Africa has been more extensively affected than other continents by conflict and natural disasters and therefore by major flows of people displaced within and across borders. Forced migration accordingly is a major challenge, although most migration in Africa is not conflict induced and most Africans move for the same reasons as everyone else.

A final point to make refers to measurement. Given weak government and widespread informality in African cities and countries, there is little reliable demographic and little institutional data in the region. Not only is little known about population movements but also about the spatial distribution of populations in the numerous burgeoning cities of sub-Saharan Africa. There is an urgent need to improve these data and make them available to planning initiatives.

As a third and final part of these reflections on migration, I would like to focus on Southern Africa and on the central role being played by South Africa in the migration system within it. It has been argued that this part of the continent

> 'has constituted a coherent regional unit over the past century or so. The event which served as the catalyst for the melding of diverse peoples into such a unit was the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886. This initiated the building of Africa's single most potent economic force and attracted capital investment to other, less important focuses of development, such as the copper mines of Zaire (DRC) and Zambia, the farms and ranches of Zimbabwe, and the plantations of central Mozambique and southern Malawi. The links that were rapidly constructed to weld together the various territories of this region – and their societies – included ties of finance, trade, political influence, and, especially, migrant labour.' (Vail 1989:7)

As is well known, the South African governments before 1994 developed a migration policy and practice that severely curtailed the mobility of most of its inhabitants, implemented an immigration policy giving priority access to white migrants (and only temporary access to black migrants), and established for black South Africans apartheid homelands at some distance from the major urban and industrial heartlands of the country. After political transition in 1994, three changes in international migration are apparent. More immigrants from more diverse backgrounds, importantly now from African (and Asian) countries, are entering South Africa; immigrants are younger than before; and there is an increasing proportion of women in this migration stream (HDRP 2009/5). It is also worth noting, on the African continent, that though South Africa is not a sending or transit country for low-skilled labour seeking employment in the European Union (or North America), it is a country that has been experiencing a significant brain drain to these regions, a brain drain of highly skilled professionals, most notably in the medical professions, mine and mechanical engineering, and in the ICT sector (HDRP 2009/5: 24). The skills shortage currently apparent in South Africa is similar to that in the European Union. A second similarity with the European Union is the exaggerated image in the public consciousness of masses of foreign African immigrants, both documented and undocumented, flooding into the country. Though figures are difficult to obtain, some one and a half million foreign immigrants are estimated to reside in South Africa, making up about 3% of the population. These migrants have come for a variety of reasons, and carry a variety of intentions. These include the search for employment and wealth, the search for protection from dangers in their home countries, and the search for means to use South Africa as a transit country toward other countries. Most reside in the metropolitan centres of South Africa and many remit part of their earnings to neighbouring countries, with Mozambique and Lesotho standing out in available statistics. Zimbabwe is probably also an important receiving country though information is difficult to find.

Similarities with the European Union disappear when we consider internal migration streams. These are much larger than international migration streams and though importantly rural-urban in nature, they also include significant urban-urban and rural-rural streams. South African cities act as important magnets for many in poor rural communities, typically in former apartheid homelands. Gauteng province in which Johannesburg and Pretoria are located, and the Western Cape including Cape Town are the two main receiving areas, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, both poor and largely rural provinces, two of the most important sending areas.

A short exercise in quantification (BD 17.3.10) will give some idea of the proportions and volumes involved in these internal migration streams.

- In 1980, about one half of all black South Africans lived in apartheid homelands, today the proportion living in former homeland areas is about one third (of a total population of about 50 million).
- In 2007, a third of Gauteng's population (of 10 million) and a quarter of Western Cape's population (of 5 million) were born in another province.
- Over the period when the national population increased by 20%, increases in municipal areas mostly within homelands increased by 10% whereas those in metropoles rose by 40%.

Internal migrants overwhelmingly are young and of both genders. They come from provinces and areas where educational and health facilities are inferior to those in their provinces of destination. Most accordingly arrive with skills disadvantages and high expectations. Most in fact settle, at least initially, in poorly serviced informal settlements (slums) within the cities to which they have chosen to migrate. These migrants are in search of income and jobs – this is the primary engine of migration. When unemployment is high – even in urban receiving areas – a second engine of migration operates: the pull of superior infrastructure (including land and improved housing, water and sanitation, electricity, and better transport). The operation of this second engine has two important consequences: the first is that after moving, if the migrant hears of job opportunities elsewhere, he or she often moves on – raising the likelihood of continued mobility after arriving in a town or city. The second consequence is that the location of state subsidized infrastructure has a significant influence on the direction of migration flows. A final point is that most of these migrants belong to the "middle poor" since the most destitute typically cannot afford to migrate at all. Accordingly, though it makes sense to say that poverty is being exported from rural regions and imported into South African cities, an important grouping of the impoverished remain trapped in these rural regions.

Given the massive infrastructural programmes that have been completed by national and city governments since 1994, South African cities may not be as powerless as other African cities in the face of huge urbanization streams. Parallels nonetheless are apparent. Local governments are weak and their policies often have little more than a limited impact. Informality in the economy, in the housing and services sector and in security is widespread, leading to activities that are both invisible to the state, extralegal and sometimes corrupt. Though a number may be located elsewhere on a general developmental trajectory, South African cities are battling like their counterparts on the continent to succeed in urban formalization so as to be able to offer all their residents, both new and old, a better quality of life.

The series of violent xenophobic outbursts that took place in South African cities in May 2008 illustrate some of the worrying consequences of these migration streams, sometimes perceived to be pitting internal migrants (with entitlements) against international migrants (without such entitlements). At the time, government did little to reduce anti-foreigner sentiment. It also stuck to a migration policy that has been called *security and sovereignty centred* (30), implying that the treatment by the state of foreigners, particularly from Africa, will prioritize internal security concerns and the needs and interests of South Africans, rather than, for example, the skills and entrepreneurial shortages of the national economy and the needs and interests of urban residents that are foreign born. It is clear therefore that government intends continuing to treat internal migrants and international migrants differently.

If, as a number of commentators have proposed, the South African government should consider *migration mainstreaming* in all their policy proposals – in effect, to explicitly recognize and factor in migration as an essential aspect of policy-making in general - then both international as well as internal streams require simultaneous consideration. Given the continuing search by internal migrants for income and jobs in South African cities, given the forced migration streams that continue to traverse South African borders, and given the deep-seated culture of entitlement among many young South Africans, this is no easy task for government.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that the migration system of Southern Africa – that shaped 'Africa's single most potent economic force' over a century – is becoming a closed system within which migrants move back and forth, thereby establishing ties of mutual recognition and respect. Insofar as this is true and that both elites and rank-and-file are sharing similar rural and urban experiences, similar currencies and similar work environments, then the economic ties so established over time may well lead to the political acceptance of a regional rather than South African–centred approach to the lot of both international as well as internal migrants, not simply because of "best practice" policies of regional cooperation but as a result of more than a century of common economic experience.

So the gradual shift from rural-urban circulatory migration to rural-urban gravity flow migration where the migrant and her children accept an urban future for themselves may be accompanied by the emergence of a Southern African identity shared by both internal as well as cross-border migrants in this region.

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