



Development Interventions, Education and the Migration Choices of Young People in West Africa

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MIGCHOICE: Testing the impact of interventions on migration decision-making in West Africa

African migration is overwhelmingly intra-continental. Within West Africa most migrants move within the sub-region, including longstanding seasonal and temporary migration between inland and coastal areas¹. Migration to Europe has grown in recent decades, and become a matter of significant European policy concern. But there is a need to better understand the relationship between poverty, livelihoods and mobility. This study seeks to understand how development interventions at a range of scales impact the choices people make to move or stay, or influence their choice of destination. **How and to what extent do development interventions affect people's migration aspirations, decisions and movement?** MigChoice is a

collaboration of African and European academics and is funded by FCDO in conjunction with IOM.

Why this Policy Brief?

Numerous development interventions are aimed at young people as 'potential migrants'. The EU is currently committed to spending up to 10% of its Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (around €8.9bn) on 'addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement' as well as 'supporting migration management and governance'.² This briefing focuses in particular on the relationship between choices about mobility and education – whether secondary, vocational and higher. It is often assumed that it is the least educated, and those lacking skills, who have no choice other than to migrate in or from West Africa, but this is far from the case, even if many of those we spoke to have been unable to complete the education

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/africa-migration-report-challenging-narrative>

² https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0298_EN.html

they wanted. A range of development interventions in the region currently focus on vocational training in particular, but this briefing shows how these interventions have mixed results, and do not always target the source of the problem.

Our evidence

Over an 18-month period from 2019-21, MIGCHOICE researchers talked to dozens

of young people aged 18-35 across fifteen field sites in three West African countries – Guinea, Senegal and The Gambia. The conclusions here are drawn from this in-depth and ethnographic work across the sites, as well as interviews with local leaders and policy-makers, and the long-term engagement of ethnographic teams with people and institutions in these sites.



Key messages

1. An inability to continue with education, rather than a lack of education per se, is more likely to be associated with migration.
2. Development interventions focused on vocational and skills training are unevenly accessible to young people, and have mixed results.
3. There is a particular problem of follow up from vocational training interventions, which are typically project-based rather than medium-term, and in the context of programmes linked to migration are increasingly implemented as ‘emergency’ measures.
4. Vocational training often do not target the source of the problems that lead to migration, as they are perceived by young people. These include lack of equal access to opportunities and resources, problems that are unlikely to be impacted by development interventions alone.



Education and young people

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest out-of-school rates of any world region, with nearly three out of five young people of upper secondary school age not in school, compared to a third globally and just 6% in Europe and North America.³ Completion rates for secondary education are correspondingly low – ranging from just under 50% in Nigeria and South Africa to 26% in The Gambia, 16% in Guinea and 12% in Senegal, with fewer young women completing upper secondary level than young men, and negligible progress over the last decade⁴. Educational quality at all levels is also variable, with many teachers and pupils in the region disengaged from learning. But is poor education the reason why people choose to migrate? Our research suggests a number of responses:

A significant number of young people abandon their studies, including in order to migrate

In our research, we found many young people who had started secondary and even tertiary education, but had not finished it. There are numerous reasons for this – for example, many parents have a lack of economic capital to finance children's education; state schools are often overcrowded with staff shortages and absences, whilst private education is beyond their reach. In some cases, rejection of school by young people in

areas of high outward migration reflects the fact that migration is already seen as a desirable goal, and traditional education – beyond basic literacy – is seen as of little use to pursue this goal.

Others must abandon education if they cannot migrate

By contrast, some are compelled to move if they are *not* to abandon education. In rural areas of The Gambia and Guinea for example, young people must relocate to urban centres or even the capital city, find a place to stay and someone to support their daily living, in order to continue their schooling. In francophone Africa, this relationship is institutionalised in the historical practice of '*la tutelle*' – a patron who would support education. But such patrons are often unavailable locally, unless you have a strong social network, and leaving school to start work in petty trade is favoured instead by many young people and their families.⁵

Educational achievement and life prospects are heavily gendered

Fewer girls in the region attend school than boys; fewer young women complete upper secondary education than young men. But there is vulnerability for young men too. In 2015, just 8% of young men were recorded as achieving a minimum level of proficiency in reading at secondary school leaving age – similar to the rate of 9% of young women.⁶ Challenges continue after leaving school. It is young men who have

³ <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/data-resources/>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See also Newman 2019
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S073805931830275X?via=ihub>

and (pp.30-31): <https://www.rabat-process.org/fr/activites/publications/publication-immobilite-sociale-versus-mobilite-sociale-les-causes-profondes-de-l-emigration-internationale>

⁶ <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/data-resources/>

to engage with negotiations over land or fishing rights. Young men – especially first sons – may also be expected to provide for themselves and their families from an early age. Young women are seen as having more stable roles in (re)productive life, even if they may be excluded from certain kinds of knowledge; by contrast young men often face greater uncertainty. The social dynamics around livelihoods between young men and women, and between young and old indicate that social relations are in the process of negotiation and change, but precarity is a constant theme.

Those who obtain qualifications find they do not help them to get a job

It is often assumed that those who do complete their education are more likely to find work, and hence less likely to move. That is not the perception of many young people. On the contrary, a common theme of interviews was that jobs only go to those with connections – regardless of their level of education. As a young respondent in Louga put it:

“You see someone who has completed high school and higher education in order to be at the top and to work - but where he should be, they put someone who doesn't even have qualifications! It's frustrating and there are people who wonder why they should study if you can't even find a job” [Louga, Feb 2020]

In particular, there is a strong perception that this has changed across generations. In the post-Independence era, well-educated men and women did find jobs, often within the state administration or state-related companies. Following structural adjustment and prolonged economic crisis, this is no longer the case. One young man interviewed in Guinea who had a scholarship to study in Morocco reported coming back to realise “nobody

was waiting for him”. He is now doing one internship after another, often unpaid. In Senegal, this is known as *‘la benevolence’*, working for free in order to build up your CV – a phenomenon not unknown in Western Europe. A related phenomenon involves individuals not abandoning education, but seeking multiple education pathways in parallel, to get access to work, to become mobile, or to multiply their connections (*‘avoir des bras longs’*).

Much migration is a response to this lack of opportunity

In practice, migrants who have returned, and those who are actively seeking to migrate, rarely frame this as being about a lack of education or lack of development per se. But they do talk of lack of *opportunity*, especially when faced with perceived responsibility to families and others, or in the context of social norms and expectations, including regarding family obligations to be honoured. Migrants – both regionally, continentally and internationally – include those with no education, but also others whose education has been interrupted, as well as some seeking educational opportunity. It is not that those who fail to achieve secondary, or vocational, or higher education are more likely to leave. Rather, those who are most likely to leave, are those who perceive a barrier to their advancement, or to becoming the person that they or others expect them to be. Migration is seen as a way of removing these barriers.



The role of vocational training

In the knowledge that education levels are low, and that this seems at least to be *associated* with migration, many development interventions have been implemented over recent years that seek to promote education, and especially the vocational education of young people. For international organisations, donors and NGOs, the problem is seen as lying not only with low levels of education but also with the lack of appropriate training, and a mismatch between available training and areas of labour market need. These areas of skills need include the agri-business, digital economy, construction, mining, and the oil industry (following the recent discovery of oil in Senegal). However, this vocational training is often viewed with scepticism, disinterest or frustration by young people themselves.

For many young people, vocational training doesn't substitute for migration

A common theme in our interviews was of young people seeking to participate in vocational training so that they could gain skills and connections that would be useful to them in the future wherever they might be. But they were clear that the training would not directly get them a job. As a result, the perception is that they still have to do whatever they can – small jobs, internships, further vocational training, small business deals, and in some cases migration in the sub-region or beyond – whenever a further opportunity presents itself. Vocational training may widen choice, but choices remain hugely limited, and opportunities must be seized when the present themselves.

⁷ Centre de Formation Professionnelle – Vocational Training Centre

Vocational training is seen as being 'captured' by the more privileged

One of the complaints that young people have about vocational training is ironically that it is difficult to access. Training programmes often require you to already have a certain level of education; worse, they are sometimes perceived as only being available to those with connections. Vocational training is particularly inaccessible to young people leaving Koranic schools, as one teacher in Louga remarked:

“Most of the emigrants who are in Europe come for the most part from Koranic schools. [...] It is written “CFP⁷ of Louga”, but in French, the [young people] leaving the daara will say to themselves that this is not intended for Koranic school students. MDL⁸ is not written in Wolof or Arabic, so the young people leaving the daara do not think they will go there. They can pass in front of the door every day without thinking of entering” [Louga, January 2020].

In turn, vocational training is often perceived as highly gendered, reproducing stereotypes around young men and women's role in society, adding a further level of inaccessibility for some.

Vocational training often has little follow-up, so does not alter individuals' long-term prospects

A common characteristic of development interventions is that they have time-limited funding, meaning that training is implemented as a project, but without any long-term commitment. An exception was found in our analysis of the Don Bosco training centre in Kankan, Guinea – here, there is a long-term commitment, and a larger number of students appearing to

⁸ Maison du Développement Local – Local Development Hub

stay locally and develop careers in the crafts they have learned. Elsewhere, vocational training programmes often last only a few weeks or months rather than years, and generally do not lead to recognised qualifications. They are ephemeral; in turn, many young people seek to attend numerous programmes even if they overlap – the opportunity they provide is ‘in the moment’, rather than long-lasting.

The lack of follow-up is made worse by the emphasis on ‘urgent’ interventions rather than long-term development

A growing characteristic of development interventions aimed at migration and development in West Africa is their framing in ‘emergency’ rather than ‘development’ terms. This worsens the problem of lack of sustainable impact. A member of the EU delegation to one of our research countries explains:

“In fact, the question of vocational training, employment, support for business, this was something that was already dealt with in some projects financed by the European Union under other instruments, for example the European Development Fund, without necessarily making a link with migration. But the emergency fund gave us more means, ...” (online interview, Sep 2020)

These kinds of interventions typically have even shorter time frames and are about tackling vulnerability and need in the here and now, not the long term – even if there is a long debate on bridging the gap between emergency and humanitarian action and sustainable development.



What do young people think about migration and development?

A further key finding from our study was that the focus on vocational and skills training for young people reflects a misunderstanding of the key barriers to development. In practice, many of our interviewees have quite a sophisticated view of development, and the barriers to it, as well as to migration itself.

Access to resources – land, fisheries, for example – is key

From the point of view of those providing skills training, or promoting development interventions, the lack of development is framed as a lack of education, confidence or understanding on the part of young people. From the point of view of young people themselves, completely different things are perceived as barriers to development – especially access to land (or in the case of our field site in the Sine Saloum delta of Senegal, access to marine resources).

Migration is a potential route to resources

In the context of a lack of access to resources, migration is the one thing that young people are (sometimes) able to do that can overcome the barriers. Mobility here encompasses moving to the mining towns either during the season or for some years in the Upper Guinea area. But it also encompasses engaging in business selling products from Guinea in Mali for example, or working for a family member in Cote D’Ivoire, given strong ethnic ties across both borders. More visible is abundant evidence of the effectiveness of migration

in generating resources, from the Italian restaurants of cities such as Louga and Dakar, through to even quite isolated rural areas. As a respondent in Kerewan, The Gambia put it:

“After three or four years [from the point someone goes to Europe] you see changes... ‘Oh! You have travelled! You ran from the village!’ Most of these mansion buildings you see here are built by youths who migrated. Someone who after three or four years started to build a good house for his parents, started to buy a compound for himself in Kombo...” [Kerewan, Feb 2020]

Development interventions rarely influence access to resources

By contrast to migration, development interventions are sometimes seen as leaving little trace beyond the period of intervention. As one local community organiser in Louga relates:

“There are projects that only exist in name but in reality they have no impact on the population and there are billions that have been invested while they do not capitalize anything at all ... The development approach must be changed, we have talked about results-based management, but nothing.” [Louga, Feb 2020]

Indeed, some major public interventions in agriculture and fisheries are seen as exploitative and delivering little value to farmers or fishermen. An example that stood out in our research is how *pirogues* (small boats) had been made available to young people to support transportation businesses. But the conditions of using the pirogue, e.g. getting licenses, not only meant they could not earn a living but were described as costing money.

Development interventions may exacerbate unequal access to resources

In both Senegal and The Gambia, public investments in tourism were seen by some respondents as having benefitted only the owners of tourist establishments, who were said to come from outside the local community (or abroad). The working conditions for those employed are poor as the work is extremely low paid and contracts are precarious, thus the value added from tourism income only benefits the owner of the hotels or resorts and is taken outside of the community.



How useful are development interventions to promote skills?

Interventions focused on skills are often marginal to young peoples' lives or to areas of demand

Public and international interventions in favour of development (including, but not limited to skills training interventions) are often perceived as being either marginal to the lives of young people, or worse, to contribute to their marginalisation, even if they offer a temporary source of income generation and activity.

For example, in the Saloum Delta conservation projects are underway, which were reported to have significant impact on environmental sustainability but to leave little room for young men of the community to establish themselves. In Dakar, one senior representative of an international organisation commented how vocational training for women has

been dominated for decades by the ‘Three ‘C’s’ – *coiffure, cuisine, couture* (hairdressing, cooking, sewing – compared to mechanics for men) whilst another highlighted the lack of attention to demand for skilled men *and* women, for example, in the growing oil sector.

Migration is seen as offering a way of imagining a better economic situation, negotiating family dynamics, reducing uncertainty, and overcoming social immobility

Migration is a way of doing something for your family, or earning money, and carving out a position within the social structure, especially for young men. Migration is about succeeding and overcoming barriers. It is not a matter of whether a young person ‘chooses’ to migrate or not, but nor is it ‘forced’. In conditions of huge uncertainty and flux, young people perceive that they must take their chances where they can. So some go to the mines, some to the cities; some stay; some go to Mali to do business and stay for a few months; some come back when their family call. Development interventions may touch on this, but they are unlikely to be the deciding factor.



Moving forward

Overall, the examples provided in this briefing demonstrate that whilst education is intimately tied up with choices about migration and mobility, it is often an inability to continue with education, rather than a lack of education, that is more likely to lead to migration. In some cases, this reflects a shutting down of opportunities that leads to no choice but to migrate; in others, migration is itself the way to pursue educational opportunities.

In this context, although development interventions focused on vocational and skills training are of value, they do not fully address the situation that young people find themselves in. In particular, they are often unevenly accessible to young people, and are time-limited with limited follow up as a result of being funded as time-limited projects.

Tackling these issues is not straightforward. For example, many of the entrenched inequalities that influence migration cannot be fixed simply by vocational training alone. However, a shift towards more comprehensive support to improve the accessibility and quality of education over the medium term, rather than discrete, time-limited ‘interventions’ could go some way to address concerns raised by young people in this study.