

African Migration Europe Research Proposal

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Summary:

If you want to understand what is coming downstream, you have to look upstream. To understand African migrants in Europe we have to understand African migrations.

Historically migration was an established trait of sub-Saharan African agrarian societies to solve or mitigate ecological, demographic, and political and security problems. In slowly changing productive contexts, people were re-allocated to guarantee their access to resources. However, in the last half of the 20th century basic changes in the external conditions produced a propensity for a strong migration on the rural – urban axis and, as a result, a concentration of more than half of the population in urban centres. These massive migrations have been condition and consequence of crucial changes in the internal dynamics of African societies. At the same time, migration across national borders increased in volume and changed in composition whether intra or inter-continental. Actually, sub-Saharan Africa remittances of emigrants already exceed the volume of development aid. Whereas the development aid is largely appropriated by urban elites, emigrants' remittances reach further and directly more people in the social units. In addition, they are more elastic in their response to crises.

We aim to study these profound changes in African societies through a qualitative approach based on condition and consequence. This approach seems more appropriate to study non-linear complex systems with high instability than a cause-effect one, taking into account long-term as well as short term and rapid developments whose visibility often conceals the underlying slower changes.

We propose to develop a theoretical and methodological framework which allows an interdisciplinary approach to study the influence of external conditions changes, as produced by the ensemble of external interventions, on the internal dynamics of African societies:

- How these dynamics (slow and fast) of disintegration and collapse of peri-modern institutions and societies, both rural and urban, operate on the reproductive social units;
- How these social units relate to other social, political and economic units;
- How they mobilise external resources of all kinds (economic, relational, knowledge, spiritual power, political power, etc.) with ever diminishing results;
- How their inner workings produce conditions for some of their members to embark for national, international and intercontinental migrations;

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- How do social units “take decisions”, where do they get and what kind of information and how do they operate on an emotional, societal and spiritual level that is constitutive for them;
- How do religious dimensions interact with these levels.

The proposed approach will permit to analyse decision making without recourse to logic or rational decision-making models which may not be suitable. We will try to understand the dynamics of sending members off – the double mechanisms which operate conflicts and expulsion on one hand and belonging and protection that motivates transfer of remittances on the other.

We will, therefore, study different cases:

- Successful migration processes – what are the social units, how were decisions informed, how were they made and taken, how do they operate, how do they manage processes, how, by what recourse to which mythologies, are they interpreted;
- Unsuccessful cases, units which do not manage to send people off;
- Units that do not want to send people into migration;
- Unsuccessful cases of emigrants – what went wrong; how do they operate, how are they perceived

The overall picture should allow a better understanding of whom African societies send into intercontinental migration and how migrants are conditioned when they part, when they arrive and when they operate in their host societies.

Background:

The current research proposal comes in line with my recent academic research and areas of specialization.

In short, in recent years, I have been Chief Researcher and Coordinator of the following researches, funded by the European Union programmes and the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (Portugal):

- 2004-2008: Forced Migrations and Models of Humanitarian Intervention
- 1998-2004: Disintegration of African Agrarian Societies and their Potential for Reconstruction: Case Study of Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe"

Project:

If you want to understand what is coming downstream, you have to look upstream. To understand African migrants we have to understand African migrations.

Historically migration was an established trait of sub-Saharan African agrarian societies to solve or mitigate ecological, demographic, and political and security problems by re-allocating people in slowly changing productive contexts to guarantee their access to resources. In the last part of the 20th century, however, basic changes in the external conditions - as produced by the cumulative effects of trade, development aid and humanitarian assistance, as well as religious, political and security/military intervention - have influenced the internal dynamics of agrarian societies and produced a propensity for a strong migration on the rural – urban axis that has concentrated more than half of the population in urban centres. These massive migrations have been condition and consequence of fundamental changes in the internal dynamics of African societies which are characterized by a decrease of productivity, increase of violence and crime, accompanied by the decline of their capacity for intergenerational transfer of knowledge, values and norms, spread of diseases, collapse of modern infrastructure, decreasing food security and increasing parts of the population outside their productive contexts in refugee camps or on the run. The concentration of - mostly external - resources in urban centres attracted people away from their productive contexts in agriculture and related areas into cities where the dissipative structures of a dissipative economy allowed for a low-level secondary subsistence. This fundamental population shift weakened the rural economies and increased external dependency by concentrating people in cities that basically do not produce. This has been one the most important conditions that changed the intended “developmental” dynamics of African societies into the downward spiral of disintegration and collapse which has generated more visible turbulences like state failure, violent conflicts and forced migrations which can happen in combination with genocide or as its functional equivalent. As a secondary phenomenon, intercontinental migrations also increase. The higher visibility of fast processes and the weakening or disappearance of “partner structures” have drawn more attention than the underlying disintegration of societies.

The current change in international conditions on a scale rarely experienced before and with an increase of velocity, in short the “food and energy crisis”, has already started to undermine the precarious livelihood of urban populations who depend on the recycling of external, financial and material, resources. This will change societal dynamics in many ways – some of them difficult to predict. An increase of violence and forced migration will further reduce productive capacities. As urban families try to strengthen their ties to their rural communities, urban-rural migration will increase. The limited absorption capacity of rural economies (low productivity and scarcity of land) will put strong pressures on urban and rural populations with the consequence that (intercontinental) migration flows will increase substantially, maybe dramatically. In sub-Saharan

Africa remittances of emigrants already exceed the volume of development aid. On the contrary to development aid which is largely appropriated by urban elites, emigrants' remittances reach far more people in the social units directly, although a certain part gets lost in transaction – and they are more elastic in their response to crises.

This has implications for research.

Linear causal models do not work in collapsing societies with accelerating disintegration dynamics. Even multifactor models are not adequate as they imply cause – effect relations that can not be ascertained in collapsing critical subsystems.

Neither do statistical models using large numbers, given that data are ever harder to collect – most of them are manipulated anyway. In African societies even most “hard data”, including demographic basics, such as age, place of birth, when in contact with instances of modern power, are a matter of negotiation, not to speak of economic data like income or expenditure. Data production in Africa is subject to strong pressures of international agencies as well as of governments whose interests are directly linked to the material and financial flows they try to justify by their reports.

We therefore suggest a qualitative approach based on condition and consequence, which seem more appropriate to study non-linear complex systems with high instability and in collapse dynamics, than a cause-effect approach. We do not understand societies as systems; however, we can draw on systems theory for (peri-modern) (sub-) systems African societies use. This approach has to take into account long-term as well as short term and rapid developments whose visibility often conceals the underlying slower changes.

African (agrarian) societies have not produced individuals as industrialized societies did; that is, the processes neither of individualisation nor of individuation have taken the same route nor reached the same results. The social unit is not the individual but a reproductive (historically and ideally, productive) survival unit with stronger or weaker ties to other social units. The unit of analysis can therefore not be the individual but has to be appropriate social unit, originally the “family”. This model is so ingrained that even in foreign contexts, in the host countries; migrants tend to simulate the lineage model even if this implies uneven economic transfers between different members. These social units include their dead members who function as invisible, but real, actors. The inner workings of these social units can not be understood without their spiritual dimension. It is highly relevant that most migrants make contracts with the spirits before leaving. These contracts not only condition their behaviour in their host countries but also their decisions after their eventual return or how to proceed with their remittances.

This weakens theories based on the concept of the individual, like, e.g. motivation, attitude or decision making theories which are intra-individual psychological constructs. It also weakens the foundation of the network theories although these produce valuable knowledge.

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The differential of behaviour of shame based cultures, such as African or Asian, - which imply direct social relations within a reference group or with a specific public - in contact with guilt based cultures, such as Western European, - which do not -, can not always be accommodated within an "intercultural dialogue".

The familiarity and trust produced in agrarian societies and often destroyed in urban settings or in traumatized societies pose some very complex research questions. Trust in African societies includes ontological, transactional, interpersonal and relational (linguistic, ethnic, lineage, family) dimensions in societies where, outside of the "communities", the hunter-prey relation is gaining strength. African societies do not, however, produce the perception of risk in the same way as industrialized societies. The seemingly high-risk endeavours of intercontinental migration - as well as the apparent high risk behaviour in host societies - can in essence be interpreted as the result of "diversification strategy" by their social units that feel compelled to send off some of their members into the unknown in order to improve their chances. Simultaneously, they can also be an expression of breakdown of social relations in traumatized units. Rising social tensions manifest themselves as increase in latent and open conflicts which surpass the conflict management capacity and force their members to adopt "evasive strategies". These situations carry a heavy emotional load, perceived as shame by the potential migrant, at the apparent failure to fulfil his or her obligations within the group. Therefore men are usually the first to leave; in collapsing social contexts, the mother-child dyad is the last relation to break down, it usually even survives the physical separation between mother and child which it might have caused in the first instance.

In the general flows of international and intercontinental migration and specifically in the sub-flow of forced migrations that try to or effectively reach intercontinental destinations we often deal with traumatized societies - that is to say not only traumatized "individuals" but traumatized social units (on the side of the victims as well as on the side of the perpetrators). On both, individual and collective, levels, international and intercontinental migration therefore usually begin with a failure or rupture and rather in social and emotional turmoil than within a framework of "rational choices" or "opportunistic stratagems" that the concept of "strategy" seems to suggest.

Theories of development and the vast body of scientific knowledge in the development sciences produced inside the development paradigm are not particularly useful in understanding processes of disintegration and collapse that are accelerating and will spawn a surge in intercontinental migratory flows.

The current theories of development, humanitarian and security intervention, with their associated methodologies, provide filters of perception for researchers and intervention actors. As they have supposedly a universal approach, their reduction of complexity strips the "target" societies of their specifics and reduces them to "objects of intervention", the discourses of participation notwithstanding. They also serve to protect researchers from the often rather horrid realities they are dealing with. One of the most difficult methodological problems seems to be to adapt the aperture

of perception in field research to a level that permits the understanding of the studied societies without putting into jeopardy the existential integrity of the researcher.

The suggested theoretical and methodological approaches for migration research entail significant policy implications.

If the cumulative effects of trade, development cooperation, security/military intervention and humanitarian intervention, most of them in specific intervention formats and with specific intervention methodologies, most of them uncoordinated, with different timeframes, intervention areas, "target groups", etc., have contributed to the dynamics of destabilization and collapse dynamics, an increase of these interventions will possibly not be a very effective containment strategy. In the last decade the security/military complex has gained ascendancy on the development and humanitarian complex and on trade in strategic goods ("energy security"). Where the humanitarian complex has historically worked in close collaboration with the security complex and within security paradigms, in the last years the development complex has, even while still strongly denying its failure to "develop" sub-Saharan Africa, been repositioning itself more and more within the security paradigm – vide the change from "development" to "poverty alleviation" and "social inclusion"- and, more important, within the containment strategy to minimize intercontinental migration. The justification for more development aid, more humanitarian assistance and more security/military intervention will therefore have to be questioned.

We propose to develop a theoretical and methodological framework that permits an interdisciplinary approach to study how the changes of external conditions, as produced by the ensemble of interventions, influence the internal dynamics of African societies. How these dynamics (slow and fast) of disintegration and collapse of peri-modern institutions and societies, both rural and urban, operate on the reproductive social units; how these social units relate to other social, political and economics units; how they mobilise external resources of all kinds (economic, relational, knowledge, spiritual power, political power, etc.) with ever diminishing results; how their inner workings produce conditions for some of their members to embark for national, international and intercontinental migrations. How do social units "take decisions", where do they get what kind of information and how do they operate on an emotional, societal and spiritual level that is constitutive for them; how do religious dimensions interact with these levels. The proposed approach will permit to analyse decision making without recourse to logic or rational decision making models that may not apply in dynamics of disintegration. We will try to understand the dynamics of sending members off – the double mechanisms which operate conflicts and expulsion on one hand and belonging and protection that motivates transfer of remittances on the other.

We will therefore study different cases: successful migration processes – what are the social units, how were decisions informed, how were they taken, how do they operate, how do they manage processes, how, by what recourse to which mythologies, are they interpreted.

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Unsuccessful cases, units which do not manage to send people off. Units that do not want to send people into migration. Unsuccessful cases of emigrants – what went wrong; how do they operate, how are they perceived. The overall picture should allow a better understanding whom African societies send into international and intercontinental migration and how migrants are conditioned when they part, when they arrive and when they operate in their host societies.