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Migrant transnationalism: Two-way flows, changing institutions and community development between Ghana and the Netherlands

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1 Introduction

Migrants are increasingly leading transnational lives, impacting the institutions² that shape local economies both in their place of residence as well as in their home communities. Scholars of transnationalism argue that advances in information and communication technology, cheaper air travel, and modern capitalist production relations of the past half century have given rise to new and increased flows of people, goods, money and ideas that connect seemingly disparate locations of the globe (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Portes 1998; Vertovec 1999; Levitt 2001). Although migrants have been linking communities of origin with those of residence throughout history³, the intensity of these contacts, made with greater frequency and speed have resulted in qualitative changes in the way people organize their social lives (Foner 1997) and produce social, economic and cultural processes that cross borders of nation-states. As such, transnationalism brings into question notions of space where social, economic and cultural phenomena are assumed to overlap perfectly on one geographic space, usually a village, region, agro-ecological zone or nation (Mazzucato et al. 2004; Pries 2002).

This paper reports on an interdisciplinary research program conducted at the University of Amsterdam and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Ghana TransNet program⁴, which uses a transnational perspective to study how migrant linkages with their home country affect the institutions that shape the economies of both their place of residence and their home communities. The program

takes the case of Ghanaian migrants based in the Netherlands and their networks with people back home.

Studies on migrants are of two kinds. There are those that study migrants from the perspective of the developed country in which they live. These studies focus on migrants' actions in the receiving country as testimony of their integration or lack thereof within the country's economy and society (Snel et al. 2004). A second type of study focuses on how migration affects the development of countries from which they come. These studies focus on migrant remittances as a source for development of their home country (Ratha 2003). This paper argues that to fully understand the processes involved in migrants' lives as they relate to creating a livelihood for themselves in the receiving country and their participation in home country affairs, one needs to adopt a transnational perspective, that is, to study both contexts and the linkages that exist between the two contexts.

Much has been theorised about transnationalism (for overview articles see *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1999 22(2) and Vertovec 2001), yet empirical studies giving equal attention to both home and receiving country contexts are still at a burgeoning stage (Mazzucato 2005). The popularity of the concept of transnationalism has led to some abuse of the term. It is often used merely as a synonym for 'international'. In section two thus, the use and operationalization of the concept in the Ghana TransNet research program is specified, and the resulting simultaneously matched sample (SMS) methodology is described. Section three presents some background information about Ghanaians in the Netherlands. Section four gives examples of empirical results obtained from the program that are arrived at due to the use of a transnational perspective and an SMS methodology. Section five summarizes the main findings.

2 A transnational research program

In the “Ghana TransNet” research program, migrants’ simultaneous engagement in two or more countries is directly taken into account in the methodology (Mazzucato 2005). Lives of migrants are researched by studying contemporaneously migrants and the people they transact with, who are located in various nations, be they friends, family, colleagues or others⁵. This we call an SMS methodology.

The program is composed of three projects based in three important nodes of Ghanaian migrants’ transnational networks: Amsterdam where most Ghanaians in the Netherlands reside, Accra, the capital city of Ghana where most migrants have lived or passed through, and rural to semi-urban villages in the Ashanti Region of Ghana to which many migrants trace their roots. A fourth, smaller project was based in Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti Region. The projects investigate how transnational networks affect economic activities and institutions in each of these locations.

The program consists of two phases. First, a network survey based on 17 name-generator questions was conducted among 100 Ghanaians living in Amsterdam from which a sample of 29 networks was selected based on individual characteristics of the migrant (sex, age, wealth and education) and network characteristics (size and density). There exists no baseline survey of Ghanaians in the Netherlands and a large number of migrants are undocumented. The survey was thus conducted by randomly selecting migrants encountered through different gateways (church, community leaders, hometown associations, randomly encountered migrants in markets or at the workplace). The diversity of gateways helps ensure the inclusion of diverse “types” of migrants.

The second phase consists of various research methods employed simultaneously with the members of 29 networks who reside in the three main research locations. This resulted in a total of 115 respondents. First, a transaction study recorded all transactions on a monthly basis conducted in eight domains (housing, business, funerals, church, health care, education, communication and community development projects) during the period July 2003 to June 2004. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out on the eight domains. Third, life histories were conducted, focusing on crisis moments throughout people’s lives and how they resolved them. Fourth, observation and

participation in social events were employed in Amsterdam from June 2002 to February 2005 and in locations in Ghana from May 2003 to August 2004.

3 Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands

The focus on Ghanaian migrants partially fills an important gap in studies on migrants in the Netherlands because these latter studies have almost singly focused on guest workers and people from former Dutch colonies⁶. Both these groups have a much longer history of migration in the Netherlands; however, increasingly new groups are migrating to the Netherlands (van Kessel and Tellegen 2000), which exhibit different dynamics and face different contextual factors than these older migrant groups. Ghanaians are an important group amongst the new migrants. In 2003 there were around 18,000 Ghanaian migrants recorded in the Netherlands (<http://statline.cbs.nl>), but because there are also a large number of undocumented migrants, this number is seriously underestimated⁷.

Ghanaian migrants provide a case study of economic migrants, which differs from the case of Moroccan and Turkish “guest workers” recruited to the Netherlands in the 1960s to help the country deal with a labor shortfall during a period of economic boom. First, guest workers were given official status upon arrival and were part of the state system from the very beginning. Second, they are now of pension age, make use of the Dutch welfare state, and have children already of working age that form the second generation.

The main difference with Ghanaian migrants, and all new migrant groups entering the Netherlands since the 1980s, is that they need to contend with a state that from the beginning, albeit to varying degrees, has wanted to keep them out. They started arriving in the 1980s when the economies of Ghana as well as of Nigeria, where many were working, were experiencing an economic downturn. Most migrants are still in their prime working years, they consist of both women and men and the eldest of the second generation are now reaching high school completion. Furthermore, due to stringent migration policies of the Netherlands, a large number of Ghanaian migrants have “illegal” status. Both the fact that they are a relatively “young” group and that many do not have legal status, means they make relatively little use of the Dutch welfare state.

4 Results from an SMS methodology

Below we expand upon some salient results that represent some new contributions to the literature on migration and that could be investigated with the help of the SMS methodology.

4.1 Two-way flows

Studies on migration and development singly focus on one-way flows: what migrants do for the home country. The exception are studies on the brain drain, or the departure of highly skilled people that lead to a loss of human capital for migrant sending countries (Mensah *et al.* 2005). However, other flows that go from the home country to the receiving country have hardly been studied.

While it is known that people in Ghana help migrants in supervising their house construction, manage their businesses (Smith and Mazzucato 2004) and take care of migrants' children, we have found that Ghanaian migrants also receive services from people in Ghana that are fundamental for their ability to create a living in the receiving country. These services have not been discussed in the literature until now because they are often not visible whereas having a dual focus allowed us to zoom in on them.

Interviews on crisis moments in people's lives revealed that for migrants, crisis events in the Netherlands often necessitate people in Ghana to conduct services for them (Mazzucato 2006a, 2006b). These events are: taking care of paperwork in Ghana in order to obtain residency and working documents for the Netherlands through legal channels, finding a marriage partner to obtain documents in the black market having failed getting them through legal means, retrieving money from a marriage deal gone wrong and getting out of prison. Each of these events requires a service in order to resolve the problem. Finding a marriage partner necessitates having people in one's network who know an eligible and trustworthy candidate and can negotiate the deal. Getting good advice on a candidate results in avoiding a marriage deal gone wrong. Such people in advisory roles can be both located in Ghana or in the Netherlands.

In the event of a marriage deal gone wrong, one needs intermediaries to mediate between the migrant and the marriage partner to try to put pressure on the marriage

partner to return the money that was paid to him. Also in this case, mediators can be located in Ghana or in the Netherlands. Even when mediators are located in the Netherlands, they are most effective when they can exert pressure on the marriage partner through his or her network members in Ghana. An example is Harvey, at the time under the age of 18, who had arranged to be adopted⁸ by a Ghanaian man living in the Netherlands. After paying Euro 4,000, or half of the agreed sum, the man left the Netherlands. Harvey's parents in Kumasi visited the family of the potential adopter and through them, were able to exert pressure on the man to return the money. After two years, Harvey's parents succeeded in doing so.

Getting help to be released from prison also requires various services. Some services are conducted by network members in the Netherlands such as contacting a migration lawyer and making sure the case gets handled with rapidity. However, there are other services that are deemed equally important, if not more, having to do with religion and invoking the help of a powerful pastor who may help them get released. Pastors in Ghana are reputed to have special powers especially for migration issues. One respondent, who was put in jail in the course of the research, asked her father and mother to attend a prayer camp of one such pastor in Ghana to help her with "her problem". Her father and mother went to the prayer camp for two weeks where they fasted and prayed all day and made financial donations to the pastor. Shortly after this event, the respondent was released from prison. Another respondent obtained the same services from her mother to help her with obtaining her papers as she had been waiting over 10 years for them.

Services from people in Ghana are also needed to obtain papers through legal channels. Requirements instituted in 1996 by the Dutch government regarding the legalization of birth certificates⁹ necessary to obtain a long-term visa, were virtually impossible to fulfill in a country such as Ghana where the registration of births only recently became common practice. This pushed visa applicants to amend and create documents in order to provide the necessary documentation, giving rise to a booming economy of detectives (on the part of the Dutch embassy) and counter-detectives (on the part of migrants), the former trying to discover inconsistencies in applications, the latter helping migrants to make sure their documentation was consistent. These counter-detectives are people in a migrant's network who wait in lines (often for days at a

time) at the Dutch embassy to get and hand in the appropriate forms or collect visa verdicts, make appointments at various Ghanaian institutions to pick up documents, to make sure records give consistent information, to change records if they are inconsistent and finally, to follow the detective from the embassy around to make sure that he receives the same information as that which was put on the application form.

All of these services result in thousands of hours that people in Ghana spend on conducting services for people in the Netherlands as a consequence of Dutch migration policies. These are hours that people take out of their other productive activities. Research interested in calculating the costs and benefits of migration should take these activities into account. In our own research, these services have emerged as a finding that we had not anticipated beforehand. We have identified them and have gotten information attesting to their importance for the ability of a migrant to create a livelihood in the Netherlands. Given stringent migration policies in all European Union countries, we believe this to be a more general finding. Future research is needed in order to try to quantify these services, for example through time allocation studies, in order to conclude about the prevalence of these services.

4.2 Changing institutions

A prime example of an institution impacted by transnational dynamics is funerals. Funerals are multi-sited events in which migrants overseas play important roles in the organization, financing, and practice of ceremonies. As a result, funeral practices are adapted in the home country to accommodate and include transnational elements. Furthermore, funerals are moments of intense exchange and redistribution of resources (time and money) within communities (Berry 2001; Goody 1962). At the transnational scale, this results in flows of goods, money and people that have an impact on different economies around the world.

Migration and development studies that take a quantitative approach to remittances generally ignore funeral remittances (Black *et al.* 2003; Russell 1986; Taylor 1999) partially due to a 'western' bias not to consider funerals as also having an economic component. Funerals are predominantly conceptualized as cultural rites and have thus been almost exclusively studied by anthropologists. Furthermore, the nature of funeral spending is fragmented

over time, space and different people, making it difficult to collect quantitative funeral data with one-off questionnaires (Mazzucato *et al.* 2005).

We studied the case of a funeral held in one of the research villages of a family member of one of the migrants. Being located simultaneously in the main nodes of activity relating to the funeral, we were able to follow the flows of money and people around the world that this funeral engendered (Mazzucato *et al.* 2006). To our knowledge, this has not been done before.

Funerals are one of the main ways in Akan¹⁰ culture to gain prestige and respect for oneself and one's extended family. The scale of and performance at a funeral determine whether prestige or shame is bestowed on the family of the deceased person (Van der Geest 1995, 2000; De Witte 2001: 24-29). It is thus of great importance to have a grand funeral in one's hometown. However, in order to accomplish this, one has to have the approval of village elders and the extended family. For a migrant, this approval depends on being perceived as having helped the family and/or community through the remittances he was able to send during her migration period.

Thus many financial and material resources are dedicated to funeral ceremonies, which last three days, with hundreds, sometimes thousands of guests, entertained with food, drinks and live music. In fact, the more money people have, the more they spend on funerals. Families with migrants overseas are reputed to have the most grandiose funerals. Indeed, the two cases of a migrant from our sample having to organize the funeral of a close family member showed that it involves considerable amounts of money. One migrant spent 4 times and the other 7 times her monthly income. Other cases encountered in the Ghanaian community in Amsterdam confirm these findings.

The case we followed in detail showed that virtually all the costs of the funeral were born by the migrant in the Netherlands who spent approximately Euro 6,500 on this event (Mazzucato *et al.* 2006). Following where and on what the money was spent, the largest amount, 40%, went to businesses based in Accra such as a printing press, T-shirt factory, mortuary, coffin maker, ambulance services, dancing company, paint seller, undertaker, video production company and transport company. A further 20% went to businesses in Kumasi such as a chair and mattress rental establishment, tailors, liquor stores, cement sellers and

transport services. Twenty percent went to village businesses such as a bar, vegetable and meat sellers, and local brewers. Importantly, one fifth of the money spent on this rural funeral went to national and multinational companies such as Vlisco, KLM, Guinness, Coca Cola and calling card companies, making this rural funeral have a transnational impact.

The research also followed the interactions between migrants, their network members and their home community. In the community people, businesses and organizations mobilized themselves in such a way as to appropriate as much of the funeral funding as possible. Villagers hosted and fed funeral guests and then put in claims for reimbursement to the funeral organizers, amounts that the organizers felt to be slightly inflated. Local bars increased their inventory in order to serve funeral guests and earned on the funeral weekend the equivalent of four months' worth of income. The local church organized a special collection during the funeral and earned 15% of its annual earnings in donations.

Migrants on the other hand, needed to borrow money from their network members based in the Netherlands in order to finance the funeral. They also collected two large boxes worth of second-hand clothing to cater to the expectations that they bring gifts to all. They also arranged with their network members in the Netherlands, for them to substitute them in their house-cleaning jobs so that they would not lose these jobs during their absence.

In return, migrants earned respect as well as rights for themselves and for their extended family in Ghana. Berry explains about funerals that "in coming together to honour the dead and share funeral expenses, people assert claims to family membership and the right to share in the enjoyment of family property" (Berry 2001:111). In this case, the migrant who mainly funded the funeral, the eldest sister of the deceased, has established her right as an important member of the extended family and essential family matters must now also be discussed with her. Her large investment in the funeral is a way for her to re-establish and legitimize her position within the family and home community despite the great geographical distance separating her from them.

Migrants thus are actively engaged in their home countries ultimately impacting the lives of their network members as well as the communities where they come from. One of the main reasons for them to remain engaged is

the respect that is earned through having a grand funeral back home for oneself and one's extended family members. A grand funeral is dependent on the migrant's remittance-sending behavior and her contributions to the funerals of extended family members.

4.3 Community development

Remittances from migrants to developing countries have received increased attention since the end of the 1990s. Remittances outstrip foreign aid. Increasingly, thus it is recognized that remittances are an important source of development financing. Development organizations such as Oxfam, or Dutch bilateral organizations such as Cordaid, ICCO and Nuffic (the Dutch branch on Oxfam), recognize that remittances have a more direct effect, as migrants use their linkages with home communities and regions to channel their aid. This interest has given rise to numerous studies on projects that migrants finance through hometown associations, churches or other community organizations that they organize in the country in which they reside (Henry and Mohan 2003, van Hear *et al.* 2004, Lopez *et al.* 2001). However, few studies actually evaluate the effectiveness of such initiatives by going to migrant hometowns and studying the effects of the development projects financed by migrants. Being situated in both receiving and sending contexts, we looked into this issue by studying migrant-financed initiatives both in terms of what they require of migrants as well as how they are carried out in migrant home communities (Mazzucato and Kabki 2006).

In Amsterdam alone there are more than 20 Ghanaian hometown associations. The main objective of these hometown associations is to help members in settling in the new country. When an association is well established and its members are no longer living from hand to mouth, it is common for members to organize special collections for a development project in their home area. Such projects range from building a school, clinic or market, to bringing electricity to a village, from collecting and sending medical equipment or school materials for hospitals and schools, to helping build asphalt roads connecting villages to major centers.

Hometown associations can only be created when there is a sizable body of migrants from that area. Associations in Amsterdam have anywhere between 10 to over 200 members; however, the number of active members is

substantially lower. Not all migrants are organized in associations. This is especially the case of migrants coming from small villages. Yet they too engage in financing development projects. One case we studied was of migrants from one village, who are scattered around the world (the Netherlands, US, UK, Germany and Italy). They organized a special collection to raise funds for the electrification of their village after a village leader had contacted one of the migrants. Together they raised Euro 5,000 and sent the funds to the village development committee.

A rapid appraisal survey of 26 communities in the Ashanti Region (Kabki et al. 2004) showed that migrant support is not evenly distributed among communities. Some communities succeed in obtaining support from migrants for development projects, while other communities, received little to none at all. Size seems to explain the differences between communities, with smaller communities (between 3,000 to 7,000 inhabitants) securing far more migrant support than mid to large communities. We explored why size made a difference.

Size accounts for various characteristics relating to both the hometown community and migrants. On the migrant side, we found that large associations, although they are those with more funds available, were prone to internal rivalries and disputes. By the same token, on the hometown side, these funds from large associations were more likely to be squandered or spent in ways that were non-transparent, eliciting distrust of migrants towards the hometown leaders and thus the discontinuation of a project. Large associations aim for larger projects because they have the means, because the hometowns are larger, often regional capitals, and thus can host larger projects such as a hospital, making the stakes to be had by squandering funds greater. Furthermore, because projects are large, organizational and management skills are necessary, but not always available. Finally, large projects bring greater prestige, and therefore more power struggles, than smaller projects. Projects tended to be thought up by the association members overseas and then delegated to the home community; thus a top-down approach. In all cases of projects in the three medium to large communities that we studied, all of which have an association in the Netherlands, the projects were abandoned and never reached completion.

Smaller communities, instead, have migrants who are not organized in associations, or in very loose associations (for example with no constitution, no voting for association

positions, etc.). Not having many migrants, the funds raised are moderate, and the projects funded are lower profile than those in bigger communities. In the cases we studied, there was always a very strong tie between migrants and home community leaders. Migrants were still oriented towards their home community as they were still susceptible to possible sanctioning from the home community. These stronger linkages between migrant and home make it easier for the home community to place a request. Thus, the projects were based on a bottom-up approach. The projects studied in these smaller communities reached completion or were still actively working towards completion.

These findings indicate that migrant-financed development projects are not a sure recipe for successful development projects, as is assumed in the new mode of "doing development through migrants" propagated by many development organizations. There are various issues to be considered when development organizations join forces with migrant associations. First, development organizations need to cater to the needs of smaller-scale projects relative to large-scale ones. This may mean having to adapt modes of administration and accountability as the paperwork required by development organizations are often not realistic for a small-scale project. Second, development organizations need to realize that migrants constitute a group with its own interests and objectives, which has consequences for the distribution of power at the local level both amongst migrants in the West, and amongst groups associated with migrants in the home communities. Finally, national level data for Ghana show that most remittances are received in central and southern Ghana, while the poorest live in northern Ghana (Mazzucato et al. 2005). This should trigger a bell for development organizations: financing migrant-initiated development projects may not be working towards their goals of equity and distribution. It is important that development organizations first study the distribution of remittances in the countries where they operate in order to determine whether migrant-initiated projects help achieve their distributional objectives or do the opposite.

5 Summary

Simultaneity and networks are two aspects that theoretical literature identifies as distinguishing transnationalism from other areas of study. Ghana TransNet is the only research program to date that has operationalized these

concepts by studying different locations *simultaneously* that are connected by the flows between migrants and their network members. This article reviews some of the findings that came out of using an SMS methodology.

First, transnational flows between migrants and network members back home are two-way flows. Migrants indeed send remittances back home, as is emphasized in migration literature, but they also receive many services from network members at home that are necessary for migrants to be able to make a living in the receiving country. We have identified these services. Further research is needed to quantify them to determine their prevalence and whether they have a positive or negative impact on the home country economy.

Second, transnational flows impact the institutions guiding economic behavior both in the receiving and home countries, resulting in changing institutions. One such institution is funerals in Ghana which absorb much time and resources - increasingly so as migrants become the main financers of funerals. At the same time, funerals are one of the main reasons why migrants remain engaged with their home communities and continue to send remittances there.

Third, the program followed migrant-initiated development projects by looking at both the migrant associations and the home communities where the projects are implemented. Not all initiatives are equally successful, nor are all communities equally able to attract migrant financing. It is important for development organizations to understand the dynamics behind migrant development initiatives and realize that these do not necessarily concur with the organization's objectives of equity and distribution.

Endnotes

1 This paper reports on results of a collaborative research program between the University of Amsterdam (AGIDS), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (AOE), Amsterdam Institute for International Development (AIID), and African Studies Centre Leiden, in the Netherlands and the Institute of Statistical Social and Economic Research (ISSER), in Ghana entitled 'Transnational networks and the creation of local economies: Economic principles and institutions of Ghanaian migrants at home and abroad' (Nederlandse

Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO) grant number 410-13-010P).

2 Institutions are defined similarly to North (1990) as those commonly held categories such as rules, laws, or norms of conduct that guide people's actions and define the structure of economies.

3 Some authors (Pries 2002, Portes et al. 1999) give examples of transnational phenomena that pre-date the revolution in information and communication technology: 17th and 18th century artists, scientists and aristocrats in Europe whose existence entailed traveling constantly throughout Europe; transnational networks of Muslim scientists in the 18th century; Venetian, Genoese and Hanse merchants throughout medieval Europe; and Portuguese, Dutch and English commercial representatives engaged in international trade during successive stages of the European colonisation of Africa and the Americas. However, a critical and historical assessment of different waves of migration in New York (Foner 1997) argues that although the phenomenon can be traced in different periods, recently, new processes and dynamics are in place.

4 www2.fmg.uva.nl/ghanatransnet.

5 Transactions are defined as communication (through telephone, post, cassettes, physical travel, or computer) or movement of goods or money.

6 Important exceptions are Gorashi (2003) and Koser (1997).

7 A reliable estimate of total Ghanaians in the Netherlands in 2000 is 40,000 based on Ghanaians in the Netherlands who registered to vote for the presidential elections in Ghana in 2000.

8 Although less common, adoption was also a way to obtain residence and working permits. Respondents have indicated that it is now more difficult for these adoptions to work. Indeed most cases encountered were of marriages.

9 In September of 2004 the Dutch *Raad van State*, or Supreme Court, declared this practice to be against the Dutch constitution and it was subsequently abolished. However, the application of a long-term visa continues to be a process in which the help of people in Ghana is necessary.

10 One of the major ethnic groups in Ghana that comprises the largest number of Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands (Nimako 1993) and which traces its roots predominantly to the Ashanti Region.

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