

Intending to return and returning: does context matter?
A comparative study of Senegalese and Congolese migrants in Europe

Focusing on Senegalese and Congolese who have migrated to Europe, this study examines the effect of economic and political context in origin and destination countries on migrants' initial intention to return and their eventual return. It compares the case of migrants from these two African countries with different political and economic evolutions. This comparison is based on the quantitative biographic dataset of the Migration between Africa and Europe (MAFE) project, which includes surveys in origin countries and Europe, and qualitative interviews with returnees in Dakar and Kinshasa. The study accounts for migrations occurring in different periods, for various reasons, and through more or less complex routes. Results reveal the important role of origin and destination contexts for the question of return. Quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal that migrants have less intention of returning at their time of arrival and are less likely to return during times of instability in their origin country, in particular in DR Congo, and when opportunities to enter to Europe are restricted. In sum, it appears that the hardest it is to migrate to Europe and the less migrants intend to return and do return.

Introduction

Over the past decade, return migration has become increasingly prominent in the academic international migration literature (Carling et al., 2011). However, because of the dearth of data, the return of Sub-Saharan migrants to their origin country has not been well studied. In particular, the role of economic and political context in migrants' origin and destination countries has not been studied. The literature focussed on other geographical areas raises the effect of the context in origin countries on the intention of migrants to return. In the case of Maghreb (de Haas and Fokkema, 2011) and the US (Marcelli and Cornelius, 2001), it has been argued that individuals leaving an economically or politically insecure context are more likely to consider staying abroad definitively. Difficult conditions in the origin country are also likely to have a negative effect on migrants' chances to return. In addition, researchers mention the role of context in destination countries for return migration – assuming that immigration policies that become more restrictive over time, discourage migrants to return (Massey and Espinosa, 1997; Massey and Liang, 1989).

Using a mixed methods approach, this research aims to better understand whether context plays a role: (1) on whether Senegalese and Congolese migrants intend to stay temporarily or permanently in Europe at the time of their arrival; and (2) on the realisation of return migration to their origin country. We consider the case of Sub-Saharan migrants in Europe, comparing migrants from Senegal and DR Congo – two countries with very different political and economic evolutions, and distinct social norms and migratory traditions. The context does not only refer to the country of origin and to the period of migration, but also to the reason for migration, the complexity of routes to reach Europe and the legal status of migrants in Europe.

The quantitative data for this study comes from the Migration between Africa and Europe (MAFE) project, which collected life-histories of migrants and return migrants in origin and destination countries. The results are interpreted in the light of qualitative analyses of nearly one hundred semi-structured interviews conducted with returnees in the regions of Dakar and Kinshasa during several field trips between 2009 and 2012.

Objectives and hypotheses

This paper has two objectives. Firstly, it aims to quantify the propensity of Senegalese and Congolese migrants who spent more than one year in Europe to intend to return at the time of their arrival in Europe, as well as their propensity to realise a return in a perspective of long term to their countries of origin. Secondly, it investigates the determinants of these two phenomena (intention and realisation of return).

On the one hand, it is expected that migrants are less likely to intend to return at the beginning of their migration in the following situations:

- when the conditions in their home country are deteriorating, which is especially the case in DR Congo after 1990;
- when they migrate to improve their living conditions; and
- when they did not reach Europe easily and when they do not have a legal status at destination, the human and financial costs of migration having been very high.

On the other hand, it is expected that migrants have lesser chances to return in these situations:

- when the conditions in their home country deteriorate while they are in Europe;
- when they are undocumented; and
- when they had to follow a complex route before arriving in Europe.

Data

This study is based on quantitative data of the biographic MAFE-Senegal and MAFE-Congo surveys, collected in 2008 and 2009 using almost exactly the same questionnaires. Therefore, they are strictly comparable. These data provide two major advantages for studying the determinants of the intention and realisation of return of Senegalese and Congolese migrants. Firstly, they are transnational, which means that they have been collected in both origin and destination countries. Senegalese migrants were surveyed in France, Italy, Spain, and in the Dakar region, while data on Congolese migrants were collected in Belgium, the UK, and the Kinshasa region. Secondly, the MAFE data are biographical. Questionnaires allow the collection of retrospective individual trajectories of migrants, revealing year by year, their housing, family, administrative, professional situation, etc. These data make possible the analysis of the determinants of returns, which requires information both on the life course of migrants already returned and on the trajectories of those who are still abroad. The samples comprise 713 Senegalese and 521 Congolese migrants, among whom 104 have returned in the case of Senegal, and of 86 in the case of DR Congo.

Qualitative interviews conducted with Senegalese and Congolese returnees are complementary to quantitative analyses. They allow the understanding of migrants' strategies taking into account the social, cultural, political, economic and historical context.

Methods

Descriptive analyses are firstly carried out, which include Kaplan-Meier analyses for the propensity to return.

The determinants of the intention to return are analysed through a logit model taking into account migrants' characteristics at the time of their arrival in Europe as well as the circumstances of their migration to Europe.

The factors influencing actual return migration are analysed using an event history analysis (discrete time model), taking into consideration not only the circumstances of their migration (intention to return, motive for migration, and so on), but also migrants' characteristics from the time of their arrival in Europe until their eventual return or time of the survey.

Main results (tables in annex)

Controlling for migrant's characteristics, results indicate that Congolese migrants who arrived after 1990 are less likely to intend to return at the time of their arrival, but not the Senegalese. This result reveals that the political and economic crisis in DR Congo in the 1990's has had an important effect on migrants' intentions to return, which is not the case in Senegal. Nevertheless, analyses on actual return show that Senegalese who are in Europe after 1990 return less than those who were present before the 1990's, which means that the intention of these Senegalese has evolved over time.

Then, migrants from both countries who had to take complex routes to reach Europe are less likely to have the intention to return at the beginning of their migration and less likely to realise a return. This result illustrates that the more difficult it is to reach Europe and the less migrants return.

An interesting result is related to the motive for migration. It appears that Senegalese who have migrated to improve their living conditions are initially more likely to intend to return, but do not have important chances to return in the facts. However, Senegalese and Congolese migrants who went to Europe to study were likely to intend to return but only the Senegalese actually did return, while Congolese changed their mind, which can be related to the less stable context in DR Congo. Also, Congolese individuals who have migrated for political reasons are not likely to return, even if it was not their initial intention.

Finally, undocumented Congolese migrants are less likely to have the initial intention to return and to return compared to those who have a legal status.

Conclusion

In conclusion, context in origin countries has an effect on migrants' strategies regarding return to their origin country. Indeed, migrants do not want to return when they have left a difficult context. They are less likely to return when the situation in their country is becoming more difficult. Context in destination countries also plays an important role for the intention and the realisation to return. Given the restrictive immigration policies, migrants know that it will be difficult to migrate again if they chose to return and if their reintegration process is problematic. To recap, the hardest it is to migrate to Europe and the less migrants intend to return and do return.

References

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Annex: Quantitative results

a) Determinants of intention to return at the time of arrival in Europe (logit regression, weighted results)

Variables	Modalities	Senegal		RD Congo	
		Gross effects	Net effects	Gross effects	Net effects
Motive for migration	Family (ref)	1	1	1	1
	To improve living conditions	2,03*	2,23*	0,52	0,56
	Professional reason	5,25**	4,77**	16,81***	44,60***
	Studies	14,78***	12,78***	17,88***	13,03***
	Political reason	/	/	0,85	1,54
Legal status	Documented (ref)	1	1	1	1
	Undocumented	0,77	1,15	0,09***	0,36**
Complex route	No (ref)	1	1	1	1
	Yes	0,33*	0,34*	0,11***	0,18***
Period of arrival	Before 1990 (ref)	1	1	1	1
	After 1990	0,56**	0,74	0,24*	0,17***

***: p<0.01 ; ** : p<0.05 ; * : p<0.10

Controlling for: age, sex, education level, row of migration, destination, family situation, material situation

b) Determinants of return (discrete-time event history analyses, weighted results)

Variables	Modalities	Senegal		RD Congo	
		Gross effects	Net effects	Gross effects	Net effects
Motive for migration	Family (ref)	1	1	1	1
	To improve living conditions	0,66	0,73	1,20	2,07
	Professional reason	2,28	1,08	2,46	2,96
	Studies	2,93**	4,66*	3,68**	3,13
	Political reason	1,00	1	0,07***	0,07**
Legal status	Documented (ref)	1	1	1	1
	Undocumented	1,05	0,67	0,01***	0,02***
Complex route	No (ref)	1	1	1	1
	Yes	2,43	1,30	0,04***	0,24*
Period of arrival	Before 1990 (ref)	1	1	1	1
	After 1990	0,44***	0,69	0,18***	0,23***

***: p<0.01 ; ** : p<0.05 ; * : p<0.10

Controlling for: age, sex, education level, row of migration, destination, family situation, material situation, migration duration, initial intention to return, professional situation and economic situation