

Population & Societies

From Europe to Africa: Return migration to Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo

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In Europe, it is often assumed that African immigrants intend to settle permanently in the host country. Is this really the case? Do migrants only return home when they are encouraged or forced to do so by the authorities? Using data from the MAFE research programme (Migrations between Africa and Europe), Marie-Laurence Flahaux, Cris Beauchemin and Bruno Schoumaker analyse the factors behind the return migration of Senegalese and Congolese migrants leaving Europe.

Very few countries, either of origin or destination, record international return migrations in their national statistics. When information is available, it indicates that – depending on the receiving country and the period concerned – between 20% and 50% of immigrants leave the country within five years of their arrival, either to return home or to move elsewhere.[1] As these flows are rarely measured, many people are unaware that they exist. In France, for example, entries into French territory are tracked via the residence permits issued by the administration, but exits, and more especially return migrations, are estimated very crudely.[2] The lack of available data means that the factors associated with return migration are also poorly understood. In contrast to “managed” returns, i.e. expulsions or departures encouraged by governments through cash allowances, “spontaneous” return migrations, freely decided and undertaken by the migrants themselves, receive very little attention. The MAFE research programme (Migrations between Africa and Europe, Box 1) enables us to study return migrations to Senegal and Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), two countries with contrasting economic and political situations.

A decline in returns

The MAFE project recorded a wide range of information on respondents’ migration histories, including, at the time of their arrival in the host country, whether or not they intended to return home at a later date. Among those who arrived in Europe between 1960 and 2009, around half planned to return home. These return intentions have evolved over time: the proportion of potential returnees fell from 51% before 1990 to 41% after 1990 among the Senegalese, and from 64% to 36% among the Congolese. Of course, return intentions – especially those reported respectively – are not an accurate reflection of actual returns. They nonetheless reveal a genuine downward trend in return migrations.

This trend had already been observed in France, for migrants of all origins, between 1968-1975 and 1975-1982, via an indirect estimate of returns based on census data. [2] More recently, data from the Belgian national register suggest a similar tendency for Congolese migrants: among those who entered Belgium in 1991, 18% had already left two years later; ten years on, the proportion had fallen to 8%. [3] Estimated rates of return based on MAFE data collected from households in Dakar and Kinshasa also confirm this trend, notably in DR Congo. [4]

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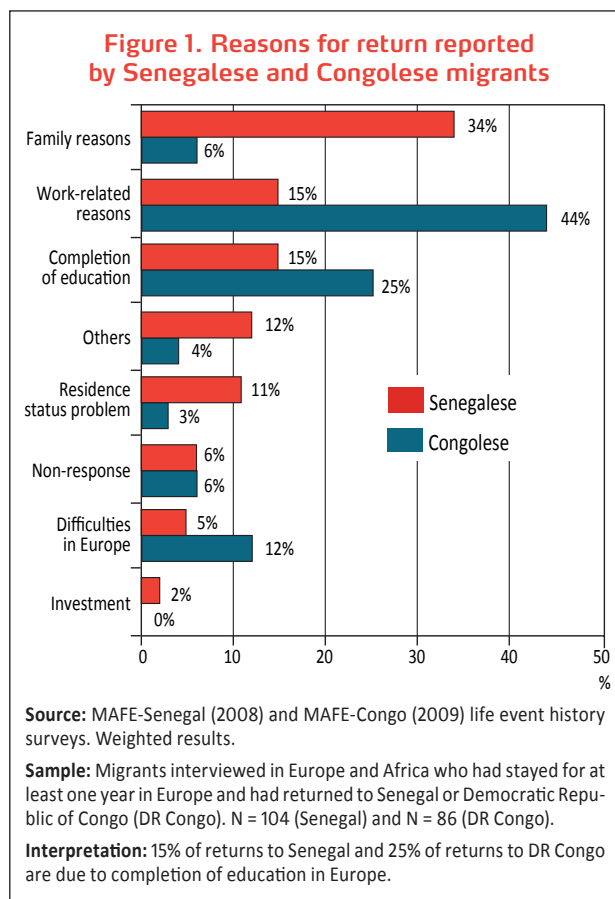
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The decrease in returns can probably be explained by two factors. The first is linked to the relative deterioration of the socioeconomic and political climate in host countries. The case of DR Congo is emblematic. In the 1970s and 1980s, most Congolese migrants were members of the elite who migrated to Belgium, the country's former colonial power, to work or study. The migrants' stay was often temporary, since they were confident of returning to employment and acceptable living conditions in DR Congo. In the 1990s, however, the political and economic situation in DR Congo deteriorated dramatically, and migrants started leaving the country for different reasons (linked more to political and family-related factors than to education). And these migrants were less inclined to return home to a country in turmoil. The second factor concerns changes in the destination country. With the gradual closure of the European borders to migrant workers, migration strategies have evolved. Migrants who, in the past, were free to come and go (for example, Senegalese citizens did not need a visa to enter France until 1987) now tend to settle more permanently. At the same time, returning home has become a more perilous option: migrants know that if they fail to rebuild their life in their home country, it will be difficult for them to leave a second time. Moreover, the right to family reunification has made it easier for certain migrants to settle in Europe.

Most returns are spontaneous

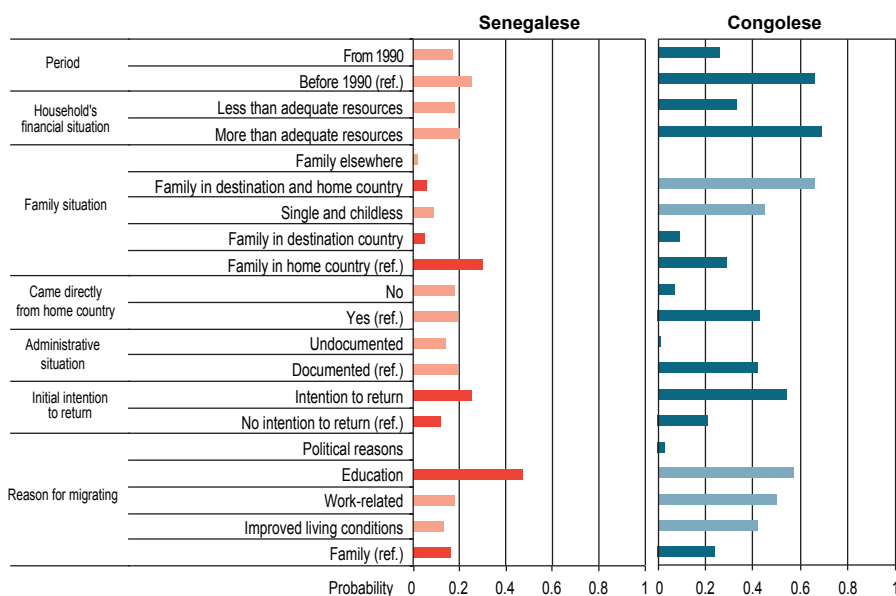
The reasons for returning vary across countries of origin (Figure 1). But whatever the country, returns are mainly for personal reasons. Most migrations are spontaneous, with deportations or returns encouraged by the host country representing only a small proportion. Focusing on France and the period 1975-1982, Zamora and Lebon [2] reached the same conclusion: they estimated that, for migrants of all origins, "managed" migrations could account for no more than 20% of total returns. According to the MAFE survey findings, Senegalese migrants mainly report returning for family reasons (34%), whereas a large share of Congolese migrants mention work-related reasons (44%). For migrants from both countries, completion of their studies is the second most frequent reason for returning home, accounting for 15% of returns to Senegal and a quarter of returns to DR Congo. Only a small minority of returns are motivated by problems in Europe (5% in Senegal and 12% in DR Congo). Last, returns linked to "problems with residence status" concerned just 11% of Senegalese and 3% of Congolese migrants. These are not all expulsions: the respondents' detailed answers show that some undocumented migrants decide to return home on their own initiative.



The harder it is to migrate to Europe, the greater the reluctance to return home

In fact, the lack of a residence permit is not a major determinant of return migration. All other things being equal, undocumented Senegalese migrants are neither more nor less likely to return home than those with legal residence status (Figure 2). Congolese migrants, for their part, are very unlikely to return home if they are undocumented: the probability is just 1% after 10 years, versus 42% for legal migrants. Why is it that undocumented migrants, especially those from DR Congo, go home less often, despite living so precariously in Europe? It is because the decision to return depends both on future freedom of movement and on the prospects of reintegration in the home country. Undocumented migrants are reluctant to return because they know that they will be unable to leave again if they fail to reintegrate. The difference in propensity to return between undocumented and documented migrants widens with the degree of uncertainty about successful reintegration in the home country, as illustrated by the Congolese case. In sum, the barriers to settlement in Europe – embodied at individual level by the lack of a residence permit – do not encourage migrants to return home and may even keep them "trapped" in the destination country. These same factors help to explain why migrants whose journey to Europe was long and complex, often because of border

Figure 2. Probability for Senegalese and Congolese migrants in Europe of returning home within ten years



Sources: MAFE-Senegal (2008) and MAFE-Congo (2009) life event history surveys.

Calculation basis: Years live in Europe by migrants interviewed in Africa or in Europe. N = 8,041 (Senegal) and 5,893 (DR Congo).

Method: Discrete time event-history models (logistic regression); control variables: sex, educational level, order of migration, visit(s), type of destination, material and occupational status of migrants in Europe. For detailed results, see [6].

Interpretation: All other things being equal, a Senegalese migrant whose family is in the home country has a 30% probability of returning home within ten years of his or her arrival in Europe, versus 5% for a migrant whose family is in Europe. The results that are significantly different ($p < 0.1$) from the reference modality (ref.) are in dark colours, the others in lighter colours.

closures, are less likely to return home. Congolese migrants who entered Europe via transit countries have a 7% probability of returning home within ten years, versus 43% for those who migrated directly from their home country (Figure 2). People for whom the human and financial costs of migration were high are more reluctant to leave, as they have no wish to repeat the experience. These findings echo those of other studies which suggest that increasingly restrictive migration policies may cause migrants to postpone or cancel their plans to return home. [5]

Migrants need to prepare their return

Not surprisingly, the Senegalese and Congolese who reported intending to return home when they first arrived in Europe are twice as likely to return as those who did not. The migrants who return are generally those who migrated with the ambition of developing new skills and who know that the knowledge acquired in Europe will be useful for their future prospects in the home country. Senegalese migrants who left home to study have a 47% probability of returning home within ten years of entering Europe, versus just 16% for those who migrated for family reasons. Returns are also linked to migrants' socioeconomic status, since resettlement in the home country can be expensive. Congolese migrants living in Europe in households with "more than adequate" resources have an almost 70% probability of returning within ten years, versus 33% for those in less well-off households. Last, a return is always more likely among migrants who have left their

Box. The MAFE research programme

A comparative project. The MAFE research programme (Migrations between Africa and Europe) collected information in sub-Saharan Africa and in Europe. In Africa, the surveys focused on non-migrants and return migrants, and in Europe, on migrants who had arrived at least one year previously. The same questionnaires were used in the different countries involved, so that return migrants interviewed in Senegal and in Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) can be compared with those still living in Europe at the time of the survey.

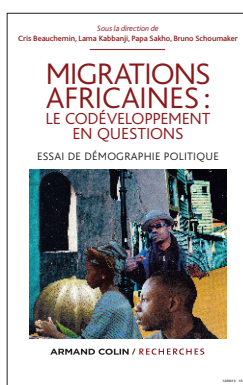
An event-history survey. The MAFE project recorded life event histories including detailed information on individuals' lives – migration history, family history, educational and occupational trajectories, etc. – every year since birth. It is thus possible to compare, at any moment in time, the situation of migrants who have not returned (but who may do so) with those who have already made the journey home. In other words, the comparison does not concern the respondents' situation at the time of the survey, but follows them over time using quantitative event-history analysis techniques.

Samples. The MAFE-Senegal survey (2008) covered 1,668 individuals, including 193 returned migrants in Dakar and 606 migrants in Europe (France, Spain, Italy). The MAFE-Congo survey (2009) covered 2,066 individuals, including 322 returned migrants in Kinshasa and 428 migrants in Europe (Belgium and United Kingdom). All respondents were aged at least 25 at the time of the survey and were native-born citizens of Senegal or DR Congo. Only migrants who entered Europe as adults (age 18 and above) were included in the analyses presented here.

Definition of return. "Return" migrants are defined as people who have returned to live in their home country for a period of at least one year, or for less than a year if they intend to resettle there. People making shorter visits to the home country for family or work-related reasons are excluded.

For more information on the MAFE programme: <http://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/>

partner and children in the home country because family reunification in Europe is not possible or because they had only planned to stay in Europe temporarily. All in all, Congolese and Senegalese return migrations represent a substantial flow, with most migrants leaving of their own free will. These return migrations from Europe are highly dependent on the economic and political situation in the home country. Migrants are more likely to go home when their future prospects in the home country are good and when they have been able to prepare their return. Barriers to immigration tend to lower their propensity to return home.



Since the mid 2000s, the immigration debate in Europe has focused primarily on migration from Africa. Yet the movements of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa remain poorly understood, and the attention they have received is out of all proportion to their actual statistical weight.

Alongside border controls, the concept of co-development has emerged as a new political option, combining migration management and promotion of development in the migrants' home countries. This book examines the ambitions of co-development policies in the light of survey findings, exploring the links between migration and development in sub-Saharan Africa. Analysis of policies, based on the study of official European and African texts and on interviews with practitioners, is associated with analysis of population behaviours as revealed by the interviews with migrants and, above all, by the original data collected for the MAFE project (Migrations between Africa and Europe). This book is an essay in political demography which, through the detailed study of populations, aims to challenge the assumptions underpinning migration and development policies.

Armand Colin / INED, 2013, 344 p., € 29.

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Abstract

The MAFE surveys (Migrations between Africa and Europe) reveal a downtrend in return migrations, notably among migrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). A large majority of returns are spontaneous, rather than forced or encouraged by the host country. Only 16% of Senegalese migrants and 15% of Congolese reported returning home because of difficulties in Europe, including "problems with residence status". Decisions to return home are strongly dependent on the prospects of reintegration in the home country. Moreover, the barriers to immigration set in place by European countries tend to lower migrants' propensity to return home.