

DIALOGUE

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Focus:

Are migrants instrumental in political change in Africa?

Conflicts may well be the main reason for the current influx of refugees into Europe, but it is worth considering that refugees and diasporas in general can further crisis exit and the reconstruction of their home countries. These migrants have often been accused of supporting nationalist or terrorist movements, such as the Palestinian and Syrian-Lebanese diasporas, which largely funded Hamas and Hizbollah, and the Somalian diaspora in Sub-Saharan Africa whose Hawilad system funded certain armed opposition factions to the Siad Barre regime. Yet there are many other cases where they have helped play a peacemaking role with their economic, social and/or political remittances supporting such purposes as the re-establishment of a rule of law, national reconciliation and the holding of free, multiparty elections. There is also the outreach and lobbying work done by some diaspora organisations holding meetings, concerts, exhibitions and events to speak out against the injustices plaguing their home countries and inform public opinion in the host countries.

These different forms of transnational political engagement by migrants and the influence they can have on politics in their home countries and abroad are the focus of a co-authored book just recently published at the initiative of three DIAL researchers: Lisa Chauvet, Flore Gubert and Sandrine Mesplé-Somps. The book coedited also by Thibault Jaulin is entitled “Are migrants instrumental in political change in Africa? (Les migrants, acteurs des changements politiques en Afrique ?)”¹. It presents the findings of original studies by a dozen African and European researchers on the transnational political practices of Sub-Saharan African and North African immigrants living in Europe.

¹ Chauvet, L., F. Gubert, T. Jaulin, S. Mesplé-Somps (eds) (2018) *Migrants, acteurs des changements politiques en Afrique ?*, Deboeck supérieur, 240 p.



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Political engagement and activism in the diaspora

The first four chapters provide some illustrations of how immigrants engage from their country of residence in response to political events or when scandals break concerning leaders in their home country. One chapter describes how Egyptian emigrants living in Paris and Vienna rallied in response to the political unrest that started spreading through Egypt in January 2011, and the demands they voiced. Another chapter paints the portrait of two African activists – one Congolese and the other Gabonese – who lobbied hard against the Gabon, Republic of the Congo and Equatorial Guinea presidents’ “ill-gotten gains” in France. The question of the African diasporas exercising their right to vote from abroad and the influence of their vote in national election results is also addressed and illustrated by the experience of Malian, Senegalese and Tunisian immigrants. The analysis first discusses the lower rate of voter turnout by these three diasporas compared with that observed nationally. It then shows that remote elections galvanise primarily migrants in a stable situation in the country of residence who have maintained strong links with their country of origin. Individuals with dual nationality tend to be politically involved in both the host country and their home country: voting in elections in the country of origin and residence is therefore no zero-sum game, far from it. Lastly, although emigrants’ electoral preferences sometimes differ from the residents, their small numbers prevent them from being pivotal players in national changes of power. They are nonetheless courted by all the political parties, and their symbolic role in election campaigns is important.

Migrants as a vehicle for transfers of political norms

The next four chapters move on from the political activism of expatriate communities and the effects they may have on home country public policies and institutional systems to focus on migrants’ political influence at a more local level, through the ideas, behaviour and identity they help channel from their country of residence to their home country. Taking Mali, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Senegal, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt as case studies, the four chapters tend to concur that the experience of migration, especially when migrating to a democratic country, plays a role in changing migrants’ political preferences and consequently the political preferences or norms they leave behind them.

In the case of Mozambique and Cape Verde, for example, districts with a high rate of emigration abroad display a demand for political accountability (the need for politicians to account for their actions) and higher political participation than the others, especially when emigration is to countries with transparent, democratic governance practices. In the case of Senegal, an ethnographic study conducted in two rural villages shows the extent to which migrants’ perception of corrupt practices and local social and political hierarchies differs from their fellow citizens who stayed behind in the country. They moreover have the resources they need to challenge them. This study also shows that living abroad is not enough to “transfer norms”. An accumulation of cultural capital abroad (in France, in this case) is required to take part in redefining the rules of the game in Senegal. Winding up, two further chapters describe the influence that return migrants have on electoral participation by their friends and family and on their political opinions in the case of Mali, Tunisia and Morocco. Here again, this influence appears to be highly dependent on the environment in which the migrants lived during their period of migration: it is only manifest when they have returned from a democratic country.

Migration and emergence of African political elites

The last three chapters examine the extent to which the resources acquired during migration form capital that, on their return, can change the game by contributing to the emergence of new elites,

offering new ways of doing politics or altering the power set-up by challenging inherited hierarchies. As shown by the different chapters, many African heads of state and politicians have spent part of their lives abroad, like Ghanaian and father of pan-Africanism Kwame Nkrumah. Nevertheless, the question as to what this changes in the way business is done and political action remains to be seen. The three chapters each in their own way provide answers to the question, although obviously without exhausting the subject. One chapter draws on an original database built by the author, which documents the migratory histories of nearly 800 individuals who headed a developing country's executive body at some point from 1960 to 2004. These data show first the importance of the migratory phenomenon among the leaders, since approximately 70% of them migrated before they came to power. They then reveal that the countries whose leaders have lived abroad are more committed to democratisation processes on average than the countries whose leaders have not had such an experience.

The last two contributions take an ethnographic view, painting the portrait of an icon of the Malian diaspora and models of the Mauritanian and Senegalese Haalpulaar migrant communities in the United States. The study on Mali shows how the migratory experience drives the migrant's political involvement in his home country and the choice of political interests to defend. The study of the Fulani community reveals how different forms of social and political hierarchies combine and influence each other in a migratory environment marked by normative pluralism. In so doing, it shows how migratory pathways reflect both socio-political renegotiation and the production of inequalities.

The book therefore builds our understanding of the political effects of international migration in the African environment. It shows that emigration can amplify the voice of those who leave, in their home country, and help "push back the boundaries". Yet this depends on the migrants' characteristics and the circumstances surrounding their departure. Not all migrants "pass on" norms, values and ideas. Migrants' political influence also depends on the institutional structures in the source and destination countries. A number of contributions hence suggest that this influence can only be brought to bear, from the host country or through the channel of return migration, if the migrants live or have lived in democratic countries with a minimum of civil and social rights. However, this prerequisite is no guarantee, since not all migrants adopt the liberal values of the democratic countries in which they live. It would therefore be unwise to take too much of an idealistic or naïve view of the impact of emigration on the quality of governance in home countries or on the political ideas and behaviour of those back home.

Flore Gubert