

Talking at cross-purposes? On ambiguous relationships between international policies on return and reintegration and their local conceptualisations in Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal

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Talking at Cross-Purposes?

On Ambiguous Relationships between International Policies on Return and Reintegration and their Local Conceptualisations in Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal

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SUMMARY

This *Working Paper* explores and compares return to and reintegration in Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal while setting different positionalities of migrants against migration and return regimes and broader socio-economic inequalities. The *Paper* first highlights the trajectories and motivations of migrants and returnees, including a group-centred perspective on the continuous relevance of relations with the communities of origin. Then, it relates migrant journeys to diverging national political economies and policies. Differing return policies on the one hand and conflicting interests and expectations of the involved actors on the other create unequal options and expectations of mobility. The case studies show that diverging experiences of return, thus, not only depend on the individual situations, such as differences in age, gender, legal status or social class, but also the broader social context, the existing economic situation—and finally the politicised relations and interests between stakeholders in the migration and return processes. The findings on circular mobility and division of labour respectively widen the perspective on return and reintegration policies, which have traditionally been shaped by a uni-linear uni-directional bias.

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Main findings

AVRR programmes cannot be isolated from national and international policies

Individual migration trajectories are, on the one hand, shaped by spatial impositions of power on mobility and the human agency of individuals and communities navigating geopolitical hierarchies. Migration policies and the interests behind them, on the other hand, differ in the Global South and the Global North. Due to power asymmetries, they are nevertheless mostly not intermediated.

Unskilled migrants are often more vulnerable to a downward spiral of poverty

Unlike skilled workers, unskilled migrants cannot easily capitalise on their class status or social and transnational networks. Our results suggest that for migrants, social class is not fluid. Cases, where lower-class groups access the international labour market and lift their socio-economic status, are an exception.

Skills obtained abroad are often not compatible with locally required skills

Skills acquired abroad did not contribute to the country's development as foreseen in AVRR policies. The transfer of ideas and businesses might, on the contrary, make it more difficult for the individual to adapt to an everyday experience of corruption and favouritism.

Return preparedness depends on the characteristics of and relations to a migrant's home community

Beyond the characteristics of the individual migrant, it is the remittance receivers' economic, social class, educational background and the way the two interrelate in managing resources (incl. remittances) and expectancies upon return that is decisive for building up reserves and setting up the required conditions for an eventual return.

Circular return or migration improves resilience and decreases vulnerability

Circular mobility and division of labour have often been overlooked. An availability of legal pathways for transnational movements is nevertheless crucial. The common characteristic of returnees who built and maintained livelihoods back home was their ability to engage in cyclical return.

Next to political constraints and the individual's agency, the role communities play is key

The analytical challenge to define the sustainability of return and reintegration programmes is partly due to the prevalent oversimplified bipolar—migration versus return—policy model. Replacing normative models with a more descriptive model of circular migration and transnational networks is a prerequisite to conceptualising policies better adapted to the situation on the ground.

Acknowledgements

This *Working Paper* is part of a four-year research project at BICC called 'Trajectories of reintegration: the impacts of displacement, migration and return on social change', funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). All views expressed are nevertheless the author's sole responsibility and should not be attributed to any other institution or person. All respondents (locals, officials and experts) have been granted anonymity, though their names are known to the author. In addition to using pseudonyms throughout the *Paper* to protect all respondents, as little information about time, place, and characteristics as possible is mentioned. The interviewees' readiness to discuss and their openness was remarkable.

I met extraordinary people who showed great endurance and humour under the toughest circumstances. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all who shared their stories and granted me access to their lives. This study would not have been possible without their support. The list of experts from international and national organisations, universities, institutes, government bodies, NGOs, religious representatives and activists from civil society is too long to be named, but their contributions were too important to remain unmentioned. The line between giving valuable comments and co-authoring original ideas is not always easy to draw. It is probably more adequate to compare this *Working Paper* to one of those murals in Buddhist monasteries where each painter can claim partial authorship than to see it in line with the classical Western concept of rather monadic authorship. Contributors—as the local counterparts and assistants—are acknowledged above and in the methodology section.

Finally, my special thanks for logistical support go (in alphabetical order) to Johannes Behrens, Micha Hummes, Andreas Isensee, Henriette Kötter, Martin Mauthe-Käter, Stefanie Scharf, Katharina Stepping, and their teams at BMZ, Julia Bradu Renault, Mona Hafez, Abdourahmane Kamara, Christoph Klement, Kwasu Sillah, David Tette, Benjamin Woesten, and

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Introduction: 'Va-et-Vient' [Coming and Going]

*'Those that die along the way do not come back to tell their stories.'*¹

In 2019, Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo declared a Year of Return. It was meant to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of African slaves in America. The target group was people of African descent (mostly African-Americans). They were encouraged to return to their homeland to reclaim their identity (Yeboah, 2019). Furthermore, the initiative was to encourage people in the diaspora to settle and invest in Ghana to boost the country's development (Rabaka, 2020).

In the same year, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) commissioned the Migration and Diaspora Programme to harness the positive impact of regular migration and diaspora. The programme reflected the goals of the German government's migration policy, which was to leverage the economic potential of regular migration, address the causes of irregular migration and support migrants who are trying to return and reintegrate into the labour market (Biehler et al., 2019).

The change in the German government in 2021 led to a modification of these goals: The focus on migration and return was to be a so-called 360-degree approach that targets migration as re-migration (personal conversations with officials, 2022). In August 2021, German diplomats in the Gambia explained this with a considerable cooling of relations between the Gambia and Germany after a flight destined to bring in Gambian deportees from the European Union was denied landing rights. The incident, among others, led to public discussions inside the Gambia around the question of whether the Gambian government was trying to protect revenues created by remittances or whether it was trying to deflect from its failures to foster the economic development of the Gambia ahead of upcoming elections (Takambou, 2021).²

This *Working Paper* focuses on examining the challenges 'voluntary' returnees face in Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal that result from often-conflicting individual and institutional geopolitical positionalities with regard to 'voluntary' return. It shows how many of the current assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes (AVRR) are exemplary for a uni-linear, uni-directional, ahistorical (non-diachronic) bias as they focus on return from OECD countries to the country of origin (Wadud et al., 2017).³ To overcome this bias, the *Paper* proposes to look at the larger picture by examining both unassisted and assisted returns. Second, it scrutinises the support of informal networks and assesses official assistance from a diachronic and transnational perspective. Third, it suggests that return is an all-encompassing, dynamic process of social change to be dissected into individual dimensions rather than be treated as an isolated event in time and space. Fourth, this *Paper* juxtaposes and interrelates national with international policies, including an analysis of different yet uncommunicated concepts and the politics behind them. Last but not least, the *Paper* ends with an analysis of how migration management policies frame the agency of actors but also discusses how de facto strategies reach beyond the targeted outcomes.⁴

Analytical Approach and Scope of the Study

This *Working Paper* is part of BICC's project 'Trajectories of reintegration—The impacts of displacement, migration and return on social change'. This project aims to generate empirical knowledge about reintegration assistance's 'sustainability' and provide evidence that may contribute to more comprehensive development cooperation initiatives.⁵

3 \ Today, the IOM views reintegration to be sustainable when 'returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity' (IOM, 2022).

4 \ Due to the *Paper's* considerable length, the author has structured it according to modules: The goal was to make the chapters each a stand-alone (not including the Introduction and the Conclusion). This inevitably causes repetitions for those reading the entire *Paper*.

5 \ The question of defining sustainability has haunted development aid for decades. This did, nevertheless, not harm its recurring popularity

1 \ 26 September 2022, migration NGO worker, Busunya

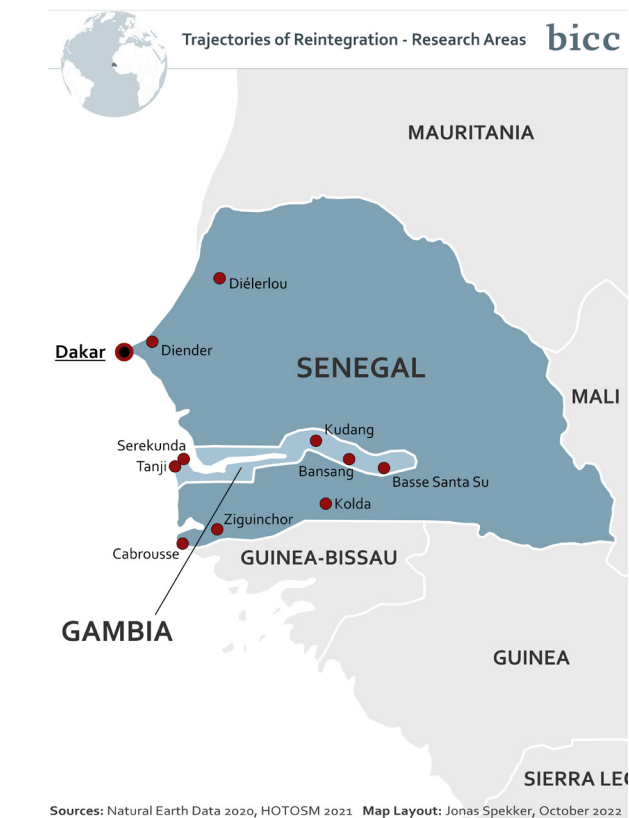
2 \ Some diaspora members, on the contrary, argue that it is the obligation of each country to take their citizens back after all legal rights to stay have been exhausted (Bah, 2022).

Our research, first, questions which different livelihood strategies returnees apply from a bottom-up perspective; second, it examines the influence of social and biographical factors in the return process and third, it relates reintegration trajectories to different types (and durations) of formal and informal assistance.

To analyse in depth how returnees navigate the geopolitical context of migration governance, we consider it crucial to assess '... everyday and embodied sites and discourses through which transnational economic and political relations are forged and contested' (Williams & Massaro, 2013, p. 753). To understand how returnees navigate the geopolitical context of migration governance, we borrowed from the feminist geopolitical scholarship. They argue that it is crucial to connect the political representation to 'geographies of everyday life' with the ways 'in which the nation and the international are reproduced in the mundane practices we take for granted' (Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 171). According to this theory, it is critical to link the essential to political representation and 'geographies of everyday life' (Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 171). Everyday practices can be observed in 'mundane practices' that reify these representations on the national and international level (Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 171). This perspective enabled our analysis to look into the reproduction of geopolitical relations and at resistance to them (Ashutosh & Mountz, 2012).

The expectations of migrants, returnees and remainers are embedded in and conditioned by the wider context of perspectives on migration and return that prevail in the respective societies. They differ between the countries of origin and destination regarding the social, political and economic position of

in politics (Caspari et al., 2003; Kürzinger, 1997). Borrowing from forestry, a common definition of sustainability requires any resource taken out of a system to be replaced (replanted) in the future. The above-mentioned IOM definition fits this analogy if income is considered the resource and if income abroad is replaced with income at the place of origin. Instead of elaborating on this analogy, this *Paper* will end with a descriptive scenario of what might be called a de-facto sustainable model. It describes how migrants themselves try to resolve a contradiction inherent in IOM's suggested solution—namely the income, security or human rights gap, which usually makes migration a subjective necessity rather than a free choice among viable alternatives. Against this backdrop, our findings suggest that definitions need to acknowledge existing circular movements respectively transnational livelihoods.



the persons transcending national borders and the relations with respective receiving communities. To understand these differences of perspective on and conceptualisations of migration, return and reintegration, we distinguish three interrelated levels: first, the individual-to-individual level according to the respective actors' backgrounds, second, the respective national implementation level of policies, and third, the interstate policy levels. Our qualitative fieldwork was, thus, conducted with Ghanaian, Gambian and Senegalese voluntary returnees (with and without the support of assisted voluntary return and reintegration [AVRR] programmes), their networks and families, and experts respectively government officials alike. In the following, we will highlight the lack of consensus, as much as the differing interests and expectations of the actors involved, which often, according to our results, undermine reintegration initiatives.

In the subsequent subsections, we scrutinise the processes that frame the everyday experiences of migrants and their positionalities and concretise where power is produced, reified and negotiated. We discuss the everyday experiences of return, referring to different individual cases that set the stage for analysing the relations of return, national development and the importance of circular movements. Before this analysis, let us provide some brief information about our data collection and methodology.

Data Collection and Methodology

The findings of this *Paper* are based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal between September 2019 and October 2022.

The research team conducted in-depth qualitative interviews, informal conversations and observations with around 500 respondents. The biggest group of respondents were returnees who either labelled their return as voluntary themselves or whose return was labelled as such by (inter)government actors. Their ages ranged from 12 to 70 years. The sample covered individuals who went to neighbouring countries in West and North Africa, headed to the Middle East, North America and—including multiple transit countries—Europe. During our research, we learned that returnees were a very heterogeneous group, from highly skilled persons, students, traders and asylum-seekers to low-skilled labour migrants. Any recognisable yet sometimes unavoidable generalisation below should, thus be taken with a grain of salt.

The author and the respective local team conducted the interviews in English, French and the respective local language. Besides these life stories of returnees, we also collected statements of members of the hosting community, INGO staff, government officials, and decision-makers on the international and national levels. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling and systematic serendipity. Access to respondents who had received AVRR support was facilitated by international organisations such as the IOM and the GIZ. Informal contacts and local community organisations provided access to those without official support, which was extended through the snowball method.



Sources: Natural Earth Data 2020, HOTOSM 2022 Map Layout: Jonas Spekker, October 2022

Our participative, dialogical research provides representative, ideal-typical cases without claiming statistical representativeness. The cases illustrate the interactions of returnees with the current structures of return and reintegration. The study tried to adhere to the principles of approaching the field in the most unbiased and reflective manner possible. We paid attention to differences in ethnicity, gender, age and diversity. The locations (see maps) were chosen accordingly after consulting with experts and our local team. We guaranteed the anonymity of all respondents by giving them pseudonyms, tried to establish an atmosphere of trust and sought an open dialogue. All respondents were informed orally and on paper about the study's content, objectives, conditions of confidentiality and opportunity to withdraw their consent at any time.

We systematically included serendipity in our research methods, meaning that we allowed for coincidences not only to happen but to routinely follow the opportunities they provided. In contrast to random

sample methods, we talked to bystanders, like family or friends, who were present during the interview or observations. The idea of systematic serendipity is to follow the people—and allow people to follow you. When a shepherd passes by, you ask him or her about livestock activities; when you encounter people washing their clothes, you ask about sanitation, sewage or who owns the land where they dry their clothes or the gender or age division of such work. Serendipity is, in sum, not evaded but systematically sought after. Preliminary results were, furthermore, in line with the grounded methodology approach, constantly acknowledged and continuously integrated into the progressively adapted research design. Finally, we adapted our research to the Covid-19 pandemic that halted not only the movements of migrants, returnees and those aspiring to but also of the research team.

Dynamics of Migration in the Region

Migration and remittances are omnipresent issues throughout West Africa. The Gambia, Senegal and Ghana have a long tradition of national, regional and international migration. A high percentage of its nationals either migrate themselves or support or depend on someone who migrated at one point in their lives. Contrary to an often-biased perception, migration flows in West Africa are neither unilinear nor is Europe the epicentre of migration. By now, Senegal, the Gambia and Ghana are as much countries of destination (for migrants from the subregion) as countries of origin: Over 90 per cent of those migrating within Africa stayed in West Africa, reflecting the 'history of mobility within the subregion' (IOM, 2020, p. 19). Whereas historically, most migration flows were regional due to commerce, forced labour and circular nomadic routes (Grillo & Mazzucato, 2008), migration patterns have extended geographically in recent decades. Migration in West Africa nowadays, in sum, remains translocal, transregional, and transnational.

Migration History

All three countries have a longstanding pre-colonial tradition of internal, regional and international migration and return (Rodney, 1980).⁶ Movements linked to seasonal work, transhumance, interregional trade, warfare and different religious campaigns moved people, ideas and goods throughout times (Brooks, 1975; Nugent, 2002). In other words, the regional movement of people did not originate in colonial rule—it rather extended established patterns. European trade posts were (merely) adding new nodes in already pre-existing networks in the region.

As the headquarters of French West Africa (Afrique-Occidentale française, AOF), Senegal had, for example, been the traditional hub of administration and formation for a region stretching from the Atlantic coast to Niger. Many civil servants were trained in Senegal, which means that a considerable number of Senegalese were sent to different posts in AOF, and people from all corners of the AOF were brought to Senegal.⁷

6 \ This is also recognised in various policy pieces (cf. Volker, 2018).

7 \ Movements included the territory of L'Afrique-Équatoriale française (AEF). This means that Senegalese went all the way to Gabon and vice versa.

Until today Senegal remains the home and the destination of thousands of African migrants.⁸ The history of whole regions in Senegal is deeply interwoven with migration. Respondents of our study in various communities in northern Senegal, for example, estimated that 90 per cent of the money that circulates in their environment stemmed from migrants. Various studies show that migration patterns differ according to ethnic groups (Ndione, 2018, pp. 32-34). Migration, nevertheless, is not confined to only those areas and those ethnic groups that have a long-established history of migration. Nowadays, such movements have become a common strategy to encounter economic hardships and political desperation among nearly all ethnic groups.⁹

Within the British colony, the Gambia was under the administration of Sierra Leone until 1888. Despite being geographically isolated from other British colonies, it was not cut off from its vicinities. On the contrary, the border fostered regional movements, as groups across the border—connected through common culture and language—used it to avoid taxes, customs or recruitment for forced labour or into the army (Nugent, 2007). Today, the Gambia, is often regarded as one of the counties with an exceptionally high per capita emigration ratio. But the number of emigrants surpassed those of immigrants only in 2010 (Altrogge, 2019). In 2018, about the same amount of people left as entered the country (IOM, 2020, p. xiv).¹⁰ Like in Senegal, migration to greener pastures has become a widespread solution strategy. Since autocratic President Jammeh was voted out of office, international donors and neighbouring Senegal have increased their support for the Gambia.¹¹ The country's economy has nevertheless

8 \ 'La stabilité politique et économique du pays contribue à en faire une destination privilégiée en Afrique de l'Ouest' (Ndione, 2018, p. xxvii). Until three decades after independence, more people migrated to than from Senegal (Ndione, 2018, p. 7).

9 \ In expert interviews, Senegalese officials stressed that traditional migration hubs, like Matam and Bakel region and ethnic communities that were historically the first to migrate, like the Soninke and Haalpu-laar ethnic group, have now been joined by various other groups. New studies confirm and regions these dynamics in the Tambacounda, Sedhiou and Kolda region (Ndione, 2018, pp. 50-52).

10 \ As a crown colony, Freetown did not only serve as an administrative and economic hub but was and still is home to the oldest Sub-Saharan University, Fourah Bay College. Until the middle of the 19th century, the British forts in Gold Coast (Ghana) were, like Jamestown (Gambia), ruled by the governor in Freetown.

11 \ President Barrow had initially announced to hand the government over after a three-year transition phase, but he successfully ran for another

experienced a decline in recent years. Everyday goods and services, rents, real estate prices and inflation rose while industries closed. the Gambia has been steadily remaining among the bottom 20 of UNDP's [Human Development Index](#) (HDI).¹² Expectations attached to the democratisation process were, in sum, not met. On the contrary, the Covid-19 pandemic aggravated the reported everyday hardships as well as the hurdles for a successful reintegration of returnees.

Ghana also has a long and dynamic tradition of voluntary and forced outward migration at a national, regional and international level (Akyeampong, 2000).¹³ Up until the late 1960s, with a relatively prosperous economy and the government's promotion of pan-Africanism after its independence in 1957, Ghana was a country of positive net-migration, particularly attracting migrants from West African countries (Anarfi et al., 2003). During this time, very small out-migration flows took place from Ghana, when most emigrants were students or professionals. They usually left for the United Kingdom or other English-speaking countries (Schans et al., 2013). In the 1970s, however, large-scale international migration beyond the neighbouring countries started, when thousands of Ghanaians moved to Nigeria as a result of the oil boom in the country and the political and economic instability in Ghana since the mid-1960s (Kleist, 2018). In the early 1980s, a mix of political oppression and widespread poverty, coupled with the expulsion of almost two million Ghanaians from Nigeria, led to rising numbers. Large groups of educated and politically engaged Ghanaians left the country and sought asylum, mostly in Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States (Schans et al., 2013). International migration from Ghana continued to increase steadily so that in the 1990s, Ghanaians became one of the main groups of 'new African diasporas' (Koser, 2003).

mandate for five years. Before the elections in 2021, he announced a coalition with Jammeh's former APRC party. The move resulted in a backlash from his critics and a growing alienation from human rights activists.

12 \ <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>

13 \ In colonial and postcolonial times—just as the mentioned case of Gambia—regional migration was prevalent. Borders and border crossings were used in strategic ways to improve livelihoods (Nugent, 2002).

Diaspora Groups

The long history of migration equals longstanding connections to diaspora groups in- and outside the countries. Concerning migration to OECD countries, particularly the European Union, there are still considerable differences between the three countries (options, destinations, numbers of migration and returns): Nowadays, of the 31 million Ghanaians, around 1.5 million live outside Ghana. Seventy per cent of them stay in the ECOWAS zone. OECD countries follow on a much smaller scale (Mouthaan, 2019). Within OECD countries, most Ghanaian emigrants are heading to the United States, followed by the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany (Mouthaan, 2019, p. 20). Senegalese, on the contrary, principally go to France, Italy and Spain. Half of the Senegalese migrants are found in developing countries (Ndione, 2018). As concerns the Gambia, officially, 90,000 Gambians (equalling five per cent of the population) live abroad—principally in the United States, followed by Spain and the United Kingdom. The number of Gambians residing abroad in West African territory equals that in the United States (Armitano, 2017, p. 53).

The number of Gambians in Germany is estimated to be around 15,000 (Altrogge, 2019). Rather outdated estimates on Senegal suggest that 4,000 Senegalese live in Germany (Gerdes, 2007), while around 26,000 to 50,000 or up to 80,000 Ghanaians are thought to live there, including those that are unregistered (African Union, 2019, p. 95). According to Deubler & Schmitz, about 26,000 Ghanaians were registered in Germany in 2014, and an estimated 49,000 persons of Ghanaian migration background resided in the country then (2016, p. 11). That makes it Ghana's 5th largest diaspora, constituting the eighth most significant source of remittances seen from a Ghanaian perspective. Most are found in Hamburg—one-fifth of the diaspora in Germany is located there (Deubler & Schmitz 2016, p. 15). The German government considers Ghana and Senegal safe countries of origin.¹⁴ None of the three

14 \ Both are also so-called reform partners, which means that they are in a group of countries considered reform-oriented and, therefore, eligible for bilateral cooperation deals (Volker, 2018).

countries have been in the top ten of persons claiming asylum in Germany or being deported from Germany in the last ten years.

The relevance of return to these countries varies depending on the visibility of migrants in the countries of destination and according to diplomatic relations. According to German diplomats, European member states have different vested interests as different types of migrants arrive in the respective countries: Italy and Spain have high numbers of migrants but reportedly little concerns concerning criminal offences attributed to this nationality, while the United Kingdom and Germany have a high interest to repatriate Gambian nationals as reportedly they are often mentioned in relation to crimes there. German decision-makers estimate that around 6,000 of approximately 15,000 persons are eligible for return to the Gambia.¹⁵ Due to the small number of Senegalese in Germany, the issue plays a much smaller role in diplomatic relations between the two countries as compared to e.g. France. Likewise, the row over migration between Ghana and the United Kingdom is also not comparable to the situation in Germany.

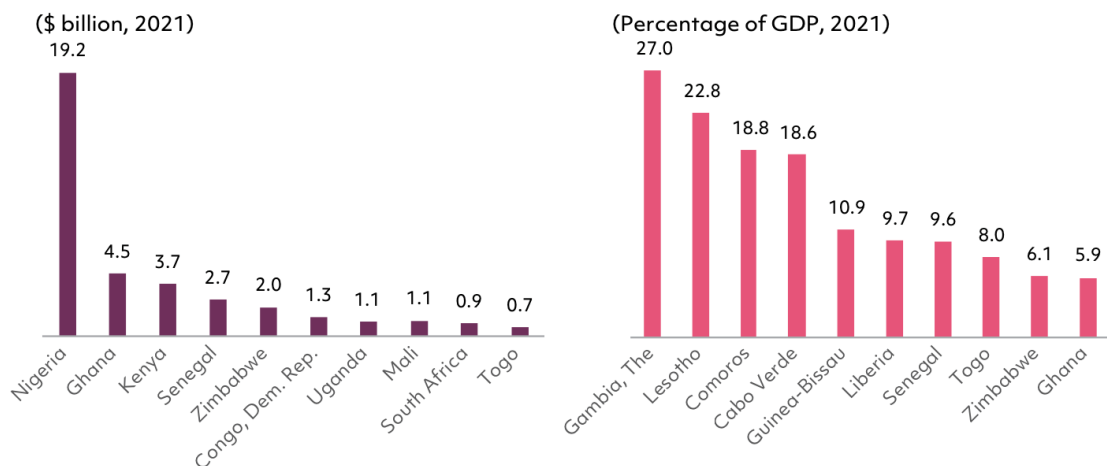
From the countries of origin's perspective, the issue of return and reintegration is first and foremost linked to the issue of remittances. The share of remittances in regard to its GDP, in turn, differs according to the national economy's size and strength. It is highest in the Gambia, where remittances in 2021 amounted to 27 per cent of GDP (see graph below), which makes it the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Senegal—with 9.6 per cent (ANSD reported 13%, in pre-Covid times in 2017, see Ndione, 2018)—it is nearly three times less. In Ghana, remittances only represent 5.9 per cent of GDP (see graph below). However, in absolute numbers, Ghana is the second and Senegal the fourth-biggest receiver of remittances in Sub-Saharan Africa. The significance of remittances is, thus, also high in the last two countries. This is

shown, for example, by the Senegalese government's effort to maintain strong links between the diaspora over generations: It has set up a programme to facilitate visits of second-generation migrants in France (see below). Ghana set up similar programmes for a less narrowly defined diaspora (see [Introduction](#)).

Policies and politics in destination countries usually assess foremost bilateral movements of goods and persons—rather than multilateral flows: According to IOM Senegal, Germany ranks 12th concerning remittances and 8th concerning return (Ndione, 2018, pp. 48; 71). In Ghana, remittances from Nigeria (US \$412 million in 2017) triple those from Germany (US \$120 million) (IOM, 2020, p. 57). Remittances from the top five countries to the Gambia originate from the United States, Spain, United Kingdom, Italy and Sweden. Germany is in sixth and Nigeria in seventh place (IFAD, 2016, p. 17). These numbers illustrate the transnational character of movements of remittances and people,¹⁶ which, thus, cannot be studied as isolated or unrelated phenomena. Migration movements are conditioned by the constellation of differing (inter) national politics and policies. Any assessment of return, in consequence, needs to consider multilateral, diachronic and intraregional factors.

15 \ This is a comparatively small amount, given the numbers of internal migrants in Gambia, or of the number of migrants from other similar countries to Germany: IOM estimates the '... number of internal migrants to be 236,084 out of an adult population of 1,022,839 ('adult' being defined as any individual above the age of 15), which amounts to about 23 per cent of the adult population' (Armitano, 2017, p. 44). Sierra Leone, as a Least Developed Country (LDC), had slightly more Gambian migrants than Germany in 2015 (Armitano, 2017, p. 53)

16 \ The numbers vary as the estimates differ significantly as shown in the IFAD paper. This is mostly due to the informal vs. formal ways of transferring money as discussed in a recent World Bank blog focusing on the question why remittances during Covid-19 seemingly increased instead of dropping as predicted in Gambia (Avdiun & Meyer, 2021).

Figure 1: Top Remittance Recipients in Sub-Saharan African Region, 2021*

Sources: KNOMAD/World Bank staff; World Development Indicators; IMF Balance of Payments Statistics.

Note: *Somalia and South Sudan are excluded due to data validity issue. GDP = gross domestic product.

*Ratha et al., 2022, p. 59

Backways to Europe

Since the 1990s until today, a large number of primarily young men facing economic and political crises in West Africa (see above) have migrated across the region into neighbouring countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). They often engage in seasonal work or trading, primarily temporary activities. Many intraregional migrants also stay put in their respective destinations due to the rules of the common market, which gives them the advantages of a regular status. Beyond ECOWAS, many Ghanaians, Senegalese and Gambians have traditionally been searching for better job opportunities in North Africa (Bredeloup & Pliez, 2011; Hamood, 2006; Kleist, 2018).

According to our studies, migrants to North African countries usually engage in construction work, day labour or, more seldom, supervision. In most cases, respondents explained that their trajectories were conditioned by the opportunities opening up along the way, and most of the interviewed irregular migrants reported having been engaged in circular migration. Historically, at varying levels, West African Sub-Saharan migrants were, in particular, actively

welcome to work in Libya during Gaddafi's time (Bredeloup & Pliez, 2011; Hamood, 2006). These established pathways—even as the conditions have deteriorated significantly—are still used by migrants now-adays. Furthermore, the patterns have been shaped by the political and legal conditions, in turn, conditioned by international relations at the respective moment of time—e.g. the Gaddafi-Berlusconi anti-migration deal of 2008 (Lombardi, 2011). As shown in the historical overview, migration and transnational networks of livelihoods in ECOWAS and North African countries, emerged as a strategy for dealing with economic and social challenges back home.¹⁷

The unequal access to safe and legal migration between Western countries and Africa is reflected in the strategies actors use to migrate and, in turn, for their trajectories of return (Kleist, 2018).¹⁸ In all three

17 \ While Senegalese and Gambians often ended up in Morocco, Ghanaians traditionally moved to Libya in search of better job opportunities (Kleist, 2018). Even after the Libyan civil war and the ensuing insecurity in the Sahel region, many young men headed north overland.

18 \ The current low in migration numbers is mostly related to Covid-19 regulations, which make international movements more difficult. According to our research, it seems to be only a temporary pause which might result in even higher numbers in the near future, once economic losses are compensated to a level that allows movements again. The drive to migrate might—in the long run—even increase considerably if losses or loans/debts caused by the pandemic cannot be repaid otherwise.

countries, we encountered a large number of cases that had taken the so-called backways (see Box 1). Many of them had never been in touch with officials: The mostly young men moved by working for some time to save money for the onward journey. As also described in the literature (Bob-Milliar, 2012; Mensah, 2016), some continued up to the Mediterranean.¹⁹ We encountered various cases that had attempted to cross repeatedly—some successfully—others who returned home after failing.

Besides the difference in legal access, the patterns of movements relate to a different tradition of pre-existing internal movements (Ndione, 2018, p. 50). These patterns, as mentioned above, are often typical for an ethnic group or a subregion. Experts interviewed in Ghana, in line with the mentioned pattern in Senegal, pointed out that the northern region has a strong tradition of seasonal migration inside Ghana, while the Akan (an ethnic group) traditionally make up around two-thirds of international migrants (NGO

Box 1

'It is like saying: go drink water'

Abdoulaye's parents struggled throughout his childhood. They did not have enough land to farm. Both his parents were old, he wanted to support them but did not see how to do it in the Gambia. Abdoulaye, thus, went to Europe, the El-Dorado for him and his compatriots. He used the so-called backway: He travelled without the required documents on an irregular route. It took him from Banjul, Tambakounda, Kayes, Bamako, Niamey, to Agadez. He stopped on the way because he did not have enough money. 'I had to earn the money on the way. People on the way told me about jobs in Libya. I spent one or two months at a place, sometimes a week. I found people that gave me some money and told me where to find work. That is how I arrived in Libya.'

His experience in Libya was harsher than expected: 'In Libya, they kidnapped me, beat me, tortured me and only freed me after a relative living abroad paid the ransom.' But even after he was freed, his stay in Libya continued to be difficult: 'In Libya, if you get caught, you will be deported. You do not go out on the streets. Otherwise, kids on the streets with knives and guns will rob you.' The risks in the North African country were multiple due to the reigning insecurity: 'They wanted to hire me as a fighter for a militia offering US \$1,000 to 2,000 a day.' The combination of risks convinced Abdoulaye that it was time to get out of the country: 'We escaped to Tripolis. From there, I took a boat, but they caught me and put me in prison. We escaped, and a big man took me into his house. I escaped again and took a boat; they rescued us on the river [sic] to Italy before the boat sank. There they put me in prison for four months.' In Italy, Abdoulaye got lucky: 'As a minor, they afterwards put me in a foster family. I went to school. Then I got work.'

Despite the relatively good start concerning his legal status, he encountered cumulative administrative hurdles: 'I worked well and was offered a contract, but the paperwork took forever. I got fed up and moved on. Went to the north of Italy, France and Germany. In northern Italy, I was always controlled and harassed by the police. In Germany, I had friends, found a school and wanted to stay, but they did not permit me—I had to stay where they [German authorities] told me [which was in another town].'

Finally, he decided to go back because he could neither get good payment nor peace abroad. His main problem, he explained, was the lack of papers. Abdoulaye got fed up with the legal barriers blocking him from getting regular work and decided to head back to the Gambia. There he complains about having been misled or at least left alone with the troubles of reintegration: 'When I was offered to return, I accepted. But ever since, they have not kept their promises. I went to the training. I went to the place they referred me to. I expected them to help me with capital for my business. The materials are expensive here. They did not give me enough to start a business; it [the sum] is like they tell me go and drink water'.

Even though his adventure was a personal and economic failure, Abdoulaye does not regret his journey: 'I learnt a lot of things I could not have learnt here. I want to work on that experience.' He acknowledges that his plans did not work out as he had hoped. During the entire trip, he never managed to send anything back to support his parents: 'There, the cost of living was higher than what I earned. If you do not engage in criminal activities, you cannot make more in Europe' (interview male migrant, GAMR52, 21 March 2022).

19 \ Despite the ongoing conflict and associated human rights violations, this practice could still be observed during our field research. We re-encountered it in Ghana, Gambia and Senegal alike—being most prevalent in Ghana, Libya is also a popular destination for Gambians and, to a lesser extent, to Senegalese who often—mostly for language reasons—prefer Morocco or Algeria.

worker, GHMR8, 7 October 2022). Our observations confirmed this estimate. They suggest that migration, similar to the cases in Senegal and the Gambia, has become a widespread strategy of building alternatives in the face of subjectively perceived deteriorating prospects for individual development (see [Introduction](#)).

Diénder, a village close to Dakar, is a case in point for the extent of the social impact migration has on local communities in general. An impact also observed in the Fulladu region in the Gambia (around Bansang, see [Senegal Gambia Map](#)) or the northern region in Ghana: Migration is an omnipresent issue in the daily lives of the community members. As elaborated in [‘Path Dependency and Group Pressures](#) below, this concerns the physical structure of the town as much as the psychological landscape of perspectives on and prospects for life. Virtually everyone in the community is related to a migrant. Most of the trajectories follow pathways established by preceding generations. Many of Diénder’s citizens who migrated moved to the same area in Tuscany, Italy. The case, on a second look, reveals another important factor, which today’s (aspiring) migrants mostly overlook: The moment in time in which the movements took place was decisive. Returned migrants from the village point out that things had been different back when they went there in the 1960s: ‘Before, it was not necessary to have a visa, you just paid 120,000 CFA francs [less than 200€] for the flight, and that was it. It was only after 1990 that everything became more complicated’ (interview male migrant, SEMR78, 2 April 2022).

The conditions that drove them out have not changed, as today’s young people stress: ‘There is no work here. We have nothing’ (interviews, observations, SEMR79, 3 April 2022). A respondent pointed out that the examples of success in the village were all set by migrants. Against this background, young adults thus wonder whether there are any alternatives to migration, as also the case in Box 1 illustrates.

Transgenerational and Transnational Livelihood Networks

A case that—in contrast to Box 1—illustrates how legal or legalised pathways can help to establish lasting transgenerational and transnational livelihood networks was observed in Senegal: The remarkable village of Diérlerlou lies at the end of an asphalted road north of Louga, a dry and arid part of Senegal between Dakar and St. Louis. Entering the village, one passes a health post and a maternity ward. The road to the centre is flanked by a bakery, small shops and women selling vegetables on the street. Sandy side roads lead to many fashionable and well-kept two-storey houses. A huge mosque marks the middle of the village. On the eve of the fasting month virtually the entire village, girls, boys, women, men—and some elders—are gathered inside. The whole place is buzzing with activities; everybody wants to help clean the mosque. People are sweeping dust, collecting pieces of rubble, or carrying sacks. A long queue of hands contrasting through the clouds of dust passes the rubble onto carts, and young men move the heavy carts away. Some elders, sitting in the shade just outside the premises comment on the action. A cameraman with a vest identifying him as the local news channel interviews the chief of the village, who readily responds, praising the spirit of collective collaboration and greeting those who cannot be present in person.

Women and children live in most of the houses in the village. Their spouses are abroad. The young men who can be encountered in the village streets explain unanimously that they also want to migrate and follow in their fathers’ footsteps. The extent to which the community stays tightly connected is demonstrated most clearly in the village’s own television channel. Streamed live to the diaspora abroad, it covers events like the described restoration of the mosque, which was built thanks to the donations from the association of migrants. It brings the interview with the village chief, also a former migrant, who is watching the activities together with other elders into the homes of those abroad. The contribution of the diaspora and the returned migrants is vital for the village, as the chief explains. The migrant

association steps in where the government cannot provide what is needed: ‘The government cannot do everything. The president [of Senegal] came to ask for my support [to be re-elected]. He promised to build the road, and he delivered. We do everything the government cannot do’ (interview male migrant, SEMR69, 3 April 2022).

Even though its inhabitants are scattered outside its premises, the social cohesion of the village remains strong. Rather than the village’s sense of community gradually dissolving and its social space shrinking, it nowadays extends into Europe. Not only through the local TV station or the donations coming in from abroad but also vice versa. The residents say they stand with one leg in the village and the other one abroad, settled on a firm fundament. The owner of the bakery at the entrance to the village, for example, declares that he is home both in Diérlou and in Portugal. Like most others, he wants his children to be raised and educated in the village—but he also considers sending them to Portugal to further their secondary education there. He explains that he does not prefer one country to the other but that he is firmly rooted in both places and that the ‘va-et-vient’ [coming and going] enables him to have a livelihood. The bakery was financed by profits made through import and export (interview male migrant, SEMR80, 3 April 2022). Even though it seems counterintuitive, the practice of coming and going is not detrimental but rather conducive to reintegration, as the following case shows:

Box 2

‘The next morning, I woke up and decided to go home’

Issa, one of the elders sitting in the shade, is happy to talk about his experience as a migrant who found his way to Europe. He recounts how he saved everything he could to send to his family. For a goat, for school, to build a house. He got married and went back regularly to look after the growing number of wives, children and livestock. His whole life remained centred in Diérlou: He invested in land, paid for the upbringing of his children, food and health costs, built a house, bought a car. His sojourn in Europe was quite extensive: he roamed France, the Netherlands, Germany and finally settled in Italy. Issa explains that it was easier there, in Italy, than in northern Europe. In

northern Europe, he explains, there were less informal jobs, higher costs, and the Senegalese diaspora was smaller. In Italy, he stayed with his kin and went from day labourer respectively ambulant salesman to shop owner. Year after year, he minimised costs, saved and sent. Every two or three years, he went home for a visit. For over thirty years, he lived like this. ‘One night, I could not sleep and thought about what I was doing there, cramped in a small room with two other men—and the next morning, when I woke up, I decided to go home. I told my colleague to sell everything for me, and I went to the travel agency asking for a ticket—and the same evening, I was on a plane home.’

In the courtyard of his spacious house, to which he had recently added a second storey—in preparation for his son and his family to move in once they returned from abroad—Issa urges visitors to taste the fresh milk that he produces. He proudly demonstrates the barns in his backyard where he keeps the cattle and walks on to his fields where he cultivates crops twice a year. The soil looks sandy, but Issa assures that it is good quality and that all that is needed to cultivate more are more wells and a better water distribution system for Diérlou. He continues to explain that he is part of the migrant association that paid for the maternity ward, the health post, the two ambulances, the nurse’s and her staff’s salary. He proudly presents all the common facilities, explains how much they had cost and how much money they still need to finish the new mosque. He adds that before the recent constructions, they had already raised money for a qur’anic school for the children. The wells might be next, but he stressed that the migrants’ association has to use the money according to the relevance things have for the community’ (interview male migrant, SEMR78, 2 April 2022).

Dissecting Dimensions of Reintegration

Return is a movement, in specific, a change of direction. It is the point in time when someone takes action to turn back to a place or space. A place or space that is defined by a state of things at a certain, namely a previous, point in time. The action of coming back is connected to and conditioned by the hope of arriving. This hope of arriving is, in turn, essentially derived from and defined by the experience of departing, of leaving something behind. What was left behind—material things and belongings as much as resided space, reified memories, relations and relatedness—substantiated individual identity and social belonging. Return, thus, encompasses the state of being before departure, the departure as such, and the process of return just as much as the state of being after return. Any analysis attempting to cover these stages needs to consider a multitude of factors—Factors that reach from individual to collective, local to global, individual to structural dimensions, factors that are ever-changing and dynamic.

If we consider these factors for a diachronic and multilinear assessment, the examples of Issa (Box 2 above) or the case of the binational bakery owner illustrate how investments made while abroad—be it the health post, maternity ward, school or mosque—helped the migrants to reintegrate. It helped directly and indirectly to remain part of the village's community. In other words, the possibility of commuting made it possible to establish a social position, preserve an identity over a period of time, reify one's belonging, maintain a physical place of residence, reserve a space in the community and—by all these means—lower the hurdles to re-integration. The investments not only helped to remain part of the community but also to put an infrastructure in place that enables migrants to return and reintegrate into something. Two issues stand out in this case: The sustainability of the reintegration in Diélerlou, first, seems to be directly related to circular movement respectively permanent transnational ties. Second, the role of informal assistance outweighs official return and reintegration programmes by far. Both issues have not been the focus of the current discussions on AVRR but seem to constitute important factors.

Return and Reintegration Programmes

The conditions upon which assisted return and reintegration take place, and the degree of success of the returnee's reintegration in the host community depend on a range of different but intertwined factors, as our results show. Our research, thus, suggests that return relies on several intersecting factors and dimensions. To dissect them further, let us have a look at the official support programmes framing individual pathways: AVRR programmes were designed to incentivise the return of migrants, especially those without a legal residence permit (e.g. undocumented migrants and rejected asylum seekers) and support their reintegration in the country of origin.²⁰ In cooperation with advice centres and other civil society groups in Europe and partner countries in Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal, (potential) returnees are supported through preparatory reintegration training, advice on employment opportunities (e.g. start-ups), or information campaigns about the dangers of irregular migration.²¹

In our expert interviews, we identified changes in the same directions across the three studied cases. They were all responding to analogous needs. The first and foremost priority is to generate income quickly. Experts and staff alike reported that returnees have mostly shown interest in immediate revenue opportunities. Our interviews confirmed that the

20 \ AVRRs are mostly devised by European states (European Return and Reintegration Network - ERRIN, European Border and Coast Guard Agency - EBCGA / FRONTEX). They operate in parallel to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). On the national level, there are service provider programmes funded by REAG/GARP (Reintegration and Emigration Program for Asylum-Seekers in Germany/Government Assisted Repatriation Program), and the 'Return to New Opportunities' programme in Germany (since 2017); the Return and Emigration Assistance from the Netherlands (REAN) (since 1991); the Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) (since 2008), the Assisted Voluntary Return of Irregular Migrants (AVRIM) (since 2009), and the Assisted Voluntary Return of Families with Children (AVRFC) (since 2010) in the United Kingdom.

21 \ In Ghana, Gambia and Senegal, the Ghanaian-German Centre for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration (GGC), the Gambian-German Advisory Centre for Jobs, Training and Reintegration (GGAC), and the Senegalese-German Centre for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration (CSAEM) provide on-site counselling regarding job- and vocational training opportunities for returnees.

returnees prefer trainings that give them quick money.²² International cooperation organisations in Ghana and Senegal, like the GIZ, have adapted their programmes accordingly. In Ghana, AVRRC courses were altered so the participants could engage in market activities straight after the training. The staff explained that the training had become shorter because it became clear that the monetary needs of the participants were imminent. Accordingly, the qualifications required were to enable them to put their products on the market and start selling them within a short time (expert interview, GHMR53, 15 February 2022).

Despite all this, experts lamented that the current AVRRC models still presume a unilinear, or one-way-movement: According to their and our observations, most remittances, investments, visits, departures and returns are circular in Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal. Reasons to return are as diverse as reasons to migrate. The same holds true for the motivation to remain or plans for further movements. Besides factors such as gender, age, social class, educational level, the existence and geographies of supportive social networks, the legal status during migration and after return and the availability of state-based return schemes further complicate the picture. Furthermore, movements are not singular but embedded and interdependent with/of other movements of family or network members. Our observations confirm studies (Samuel Hall Consulting, 2018) that showed that returning empty-handed might cause family rejection or other reintegration problems and that it puts returnees in a highly vulnerable position.

The mentioned need of quick monetary income is related to social pressure: Across all three country cases, we saw that the lack of patience to wait was due to pressure from the extended families. We observed a tendency for the families of returnees to have huge demands. Experts in the Gambia estimated that a returnee has to satisfy at least two or three persons on average and argued that these expectations do not take into account that it usually takes time

before a business pays off (expert interview, GAMR48, 28 October 2021). Our results, however, show an ambiguity: Even though returnees and their social contacts consider such empty-handed returns disgraceful, many return migrants were able to count on the support of family members, friends, colleagues and social organisations and networks. Our observation clearly indicates that this support is often directly related to previous remittances or investments, which had fostered the development of the community into which they reintegrated.

However, recent studies have also shown that those who ‘failed’ abroad were usually considered more of a burden for their families (IOM, 2018). We observed that this burden directly corresponded to the economic loss caused by the ‘failure’. If, on the contrary, economic costs were in balance, respondents reported that their families were happy to see them safely back home again. This was reported even when all the remittances meant for investment had been ‘eaten up’ and even though having returned meant a loss of future remittances for the welcoming communities. This shows the interrelatedness of the social and psychological dimensions of reintegration with economic aspects which, in turn, stretch back to the beginning of the migration process, to be analysed in the following.

Preparedness and Choice

Another critical point to take into consideration is the question of the ‘voluntariness’ of return in these projects. In fact, despite technically being a major part of AVRRC programmes, the extent of ‘voluntariness’ and ‘choice’ of returnees has been questioned (Biehler et al., 2019, 2021). Concluding that AVR returns are hardly voluntary, some authors have suggested only speaking of assisted returns (Kuschminder, 2017). Our general results confirm that involuntary return disrupts, slows and hampers migration projects but does not necessarily end them (Kleist, 2017b, 2018; Mouthaan, 2019). Some of the cases we present here

²² \ In one of many similar comments, an expert in Senegal stated: ‘Upon return, people need immediate help, and they [the returnees] do not usually show interest in long-term formation’, (expert interview, SNMR47, 26.10.21).

confirm that the label ‘voluntariness’ is more often imposed than sought. In other words, return was not experienced as voluntary when the process lacked a certain degree of (mental and/or physical) preparedness and when the individuals felt that no alternatives existed. A Ghanaian migration expert explained that this puts returnees into two categories: the successful ones that can move back and return with riches and the unsuccessful ones that have been deported and arrive with nothing.

One community-based organisation (CBO) worker confirmed this widespread differentiation with recommendations on how to avoid expectations: He explained that ‘if you act like a burger [person who returned to Ghana but still acts, dresses, speaks, behaves like a non-Ghanaian], you cannot escape it and, after all your money is gone, have no other choice than to migrate again. If you, on the contrary, tell everyone that you have come involuntarily, people will know you have no money and can save it [the money] to start—little by little—a small business’ (expert interview, GHMR41, 29 September 2022). This recommendation exemplifies a crucial distinction of returnees: by the level of wealth or income generated. Many unsuccessful migrants explained that they intended to go again to correct the mistakes they made the first time. Unsuccessful is, in this regard, directly linked to the ultimate goal reported by most migrants in Ghana, Senegal and the Gambia: To tap into the immense flow of wealth abroad and make enough to live a comfortable life back home. The goal is, in other words, to have a stable income after migration. Lacking such a stable income, families resort to the same strategy as before, namely remittances, which require re-migration.

Return and reintegration, as mentioned above, are multidimensional; that is, they are related to various factors. An academic of the Global South pointed out that it is as much about social status, economics, the aspirations of each individual person as about how this person wants to be seen (expert interview, GHMR48, 4 October 2022). Sudden and unplanned returns—as after the Arab Spring in Libya described below (Box 3)—often cause a considerable loss of respect for returnees among their close relatives. This is

mostly because their remittances had substantially improved the lives of extended families back home. Nevertheless, the very nature of the circumstances of return also plays a significant role. Even though many migrants reported that they were only seen as a source of remittances, many family members insisted that they were mostly worried about the well-being of their kin (see Box 3).

Box 3

‘My family were happy to have me back’

Amadou (33) was born in the northern part of Ashanti Kwahu region and has two children who live with their mother in Accra. Growing up with his grandmother after he lost his mother at the age of three, he stopped attending junior secondary school to help his grandmother, who was selling charcoal. After some years, he joined the truck driver who used to collect the charcoal from his grandmother’s place and arrived in the Accra neighbourhood frequented by Ghanaians from the northern part of the country. Working his way up in the system of referrals and references as a freelancer, he became an auto-mechanic specialising in electrics for trucks and coaches. He moved up and down the entire territory of Ghana as a mobile mechanic fixing buses when they broke down on the road.

At the interview in January 2020 in Accra, he recounted that he was sought-after in this profession. When Ghana’s first private transport line was set up to import VIP buses from China, the company wanted to hire him. For this, the company wanted him to travel to China to learn about the air conditioning and heating systems. He missed this opportunity because he did not have a passport. He explained that he then applied for a passport to ‘not miss this chance again’ and elaborated that ‘this is when the idea of travelling occurred to me’. When Amadou sought advice, a driver who had been to Libya recommended that he go there and helped him to arrange the journey. When embarking on this trip, however, he was lured into a trap and was held hostage on arrival in Libya before his family managed to pay his ransom through middlemen. After surviving the agony of incarceration, he made it to Tripoli, where he worked as a mechanic and in the construction sector for two years. Following the overthrow of Gadhafi, his family urged him to come back. Upon return, he found out that he had no savings: ‘I had been sending money home to my brother who, instead of saving it, had put it into a business that crashed. So, when I informed him that I would be coming home, he welcomed the idea but told me that my money had gone. I had sent roughly 3,000 Cedis (around €440) home. My brother had contributed to the upbringing of my children. The salary came out of the construction work. There is a measure [of the accomplished work] by the meter. We work in a group, and you share after you finish the work. You get between 1,000 (€145) and

1,500 Cedis (€220) for six months. We sleep at the site, and we are brought food. As a mechanic, I got 800 Cedis (€110) a month and slept at the company site. The company drained the water from the desert, and I did the boreholes. It was a good company.'

Amadou says that he still wishes to travel, to explore and find 'a better platform to demonstrate and use my abilities'. He explains that a friend went over the sea to Germany and is now doing well there. When the friend came back to his home town, he set up an electronics company. Amadou clarifies that many others from his village also went to Europe. When they came home for holidays, they built two-bedroom apartments. According to Amadou, this motivates him to go to Europe as well. Since returning from Libya, he has managed to establish a livelihood. He imports cars from the United States, then repairs and sells them for a commission. His family, he explains, '...were happy to have me back, still alive, even though I didn't bring anything'. After commuting between his home town and Accra for a while, he is now renting a single room there. He had to pay for two years in advance—and he makes around 500 cedis (€72) a month plus extras. If things go well, he plans to marry the mother of his children, who is currently staying with her mother (interview male migrant, GHR/M2, 22 January 2020).

Transnational Connectivity and Migration Motivations

Studies have shown that relevant work experience is a more important determinant of entrepreneurial activity amongst returnees than education or savings on their own (Black & Castaldo, 2009). This is in line with our research: Amadou's case, for example, demonstrates the role of skills to get back into his former field of activities. Other cases have also shown that skills and financial resources are highly important for reintegration. Many highly skilled returnees can get a foothold in the market of their countries of origin—in the Gambia, a significant number of them, for example, found work in international organisations. Our observations also showed that the benefits often remain below expectations; the interviewees also complained about difficulties imposed by either their state of origin (mostly due to corruption) or the EU country they had migrated to (Serra-Mingot & Rudolf, 2022).

Our observations also corroborate findings showing that return caused conflict and economic strain, especially for female members of low-income families for whom remittances play a central part (Kandilige

& Adiku, 2019; Mensah, 2016). Supporting existing literature, we found migration to be a means to become a proper and respectable adult man throughout all three countries—manifested in extensive social relations, which, in turn, reify hegemonic masculinity ideals. This relates to a wider-ranging argument about return processes involving renegotiations of gender identities, roles and norms—but also to the larger political framework conditioning these movements. The number of female migrants is growing, but—in Senegal, the Gambia and Ghana at least—is still much lower than that of men. In cases where women went to work as houseworkers abroad, often in the Middle East, this mostly did not change their status or position within the family like work abroad did for male migrants. Yet, the impact of migration on gender roles and relations is more significant than the number of female migrants suggests: Migration has often deepened traditional role models. This was most clearly demonstrated in the above-mentioned cases of Diérlerlou and Diénder where the division of labour got more and more cemented by and through migration. At least for the majority who chose to leave their families at home and assign all housework activities to their wives (numerous interviews 2019–2022).²³

When asked about their motivations to migrate or flee or their choice of paths, most respondents (around 500) said that they had no choice: Forcibly displaced persons see displacing forces coming from one side, which forces them to flee to the other. Job seekers see a failing economy in one place and hear about opportunities elsewhere. Ideally, migration should be a choice, not a necessity but, in fact, it is often related to deprivation and precarity (IFAD, 2016). In hardly any interview or discussion did respondents stress their agency. Their experience has mostly been shaped by the subjective impression of their horizon literally shrinking. They find themselves in a labyrinth of ever-shifting walls and moving obstacles.

²³ \ In many cases the autonomy of the wives at home increased due to a lack of daily control through the husband, but the traditional division of labour was reinforced—partly, as well, in reaction to the experiences (such as frequent divorces among migrant couples) the male migrants made it abroad. The same pattern was found, to a lesser extent, in Christian communities in Ghana.

A labyrinth of opening and closing dynamical economic, social, and legal spaces determining the way as in numerous dystopian or horror movies (e.g. ‘The cube’ or ‘Maze runner’). In the fight for survival, actors try to decode the rules of the games as they go along.

Like in this fiction, people on the move are not in the driving seat. If you were, for example, a Gambian living under President Jammeh, you had the option to be granted asylum. After he was ousted, regardless of whether you felt compelled to migrate due to the same reasons, you became an economic migrant. According to which side of the border your birth was registered in a Gambian Senegalese border village, the conflict on the Senegalese side could make you an internally displaced person or a refugee. In both cases, you could be staying with your family in the Gambia. These examples illustrate that it is largely the context which defines your status. They also show how the point of time and the question of routes define options for movements. Rumours or information about policies, change of laws, news about public solidarity, respectively xenophobia in the place of destination will, likewise, affect the choices of migrants.²⁴ As quoted above, ‘back then, it was easy’.

Migrants move for the lack of political or economic prospects, for their protection, a better future for their children or various other reasons. They, therefore, have a vision of where they want to move to. Yet, this does not mean that the details of the trajectory, like the question of how to get there, have been planned in advance: Much of their trajectory is determined on the go. According to our research, most migrants took spontaneous decisions, adapting their strategies to the circumstances in the respective location upon arrival. Most information given to people on the move before, during and after arrival is partial and incomplete. One migrant who had been in Libya explained their level of ignorance with the legal, social and economic space they moved in: ‘In the first year, you do not know anything. You do not speak the language and only follow those who know.

24 \ Throughout the three countries, experts as locals agreed that nobody lacked information about the risks involved. It is rather the way the information is processed. In Twi, the saying is ‘Obia ne ne shebre’ [my fate is not your fate] meaning that whatever happened to others does not necessarily need to happen to you.

You do not make any money [then]. Only in the second year do you understand how it works and can make money’ (Nkoranza discussion group, GHMR36, 28 September 2022).

Many actors in Senegal, the Gambia and Ghana regard migration and return as a rite of passage and some feature that has historically marked the region. Across the researched cases, our research showed that the threshold for unqualified young men to embark on an open-end and often risky trip was relatively low. Despite lacking individual monetary resources to back them up, networks of family, friends and regional compatriots were close-knit and strong enough—in other words, the individual connectivity was high enough—to facilitate migration and a gradual return.²⁵ The common pattern found, e.g. for the trips from Ghana to Libya, is such that the contact person in Libya sends only enough to make it to the next station. Once arrived there, the next transfer will be made—and so on. In this manner, it can be made sure that the prospective migrants move instead of spending all the money back home. Once they arrive at the destination, they pay back the loan.

Box 4

‘If there is no change coming, you have to embark on a journey’

Musa, a man in his 30s from the western Ashanti Kwahu region, explains that he had been ‘exposed to travel to Libya and other African countries’ since he was a teenager. He decided to stop school and went to learn in an electrical and houseware store. During his training, he did not receive any salary—which is common in Ghana. He stayed and ate at home during this time. Then he met a friend who had returned from Libya and who ‘...explained the details to me. So I cut the training short to join my friend and went to Libya in 2008. [First] I had to raise money with my family: 1300 Cedis.’ He managed to get through the desert with his friend, unlike others who died on the way and took up ‘the jobs that were available: construction work, plastering, rendering, security. The best thing to do is construction work—to get money. After three years, in 2011, I decided to go back home because I could not make enough money to reach Europe via the ocean.’ He explains that he decided to give up after a boat he had organised and paid US

25 \ For a wider discussion of the concept of connectivity see Etzold and Fechter (2022). Case studies on the Horn of Africa, among many others, confirm the relevance of transnational networks and connectivity (Adugna et al., 2022; Tufa et al., 2021).

\$1,000 to take him over the ocean never showed up. Taking the land route, he managed to hide some money from armed groups that prey on migrants: 'You usually get robbed. It depends on how well you can hide your money, otherwise, they will take it.'

He brought 3500 Cedis (510€) back and then lived in the family house using his savings for six months. Then he continued his formation at the electrics store. In 2014 for the Africa cup, he went through Cameroon to Equatorial Guinea and managed to get to Malabo. 'There, I was arrested and detained. I was arrested after six months and in prison for three months. Then I stayed three months with another Ghanaian who lived in the country and served as a guarantor [for me]. I got some work [but] then I got arrested again. They deported me and put me on a flight back to Accra. It was my first flight.' Up to now, Musa explains, he only works in small jobs. For now, he is managing, but if there is an opportunity, he is certain that he will take his things and try to reach Libya or Europe again. He explains that he would stay where he is now if he could make enough money. But in Ghana, he sees no chance to improve his skills or have a career: 'I wish to stay and better my life in Ghana, but if there is no change coming you have to embark on a journey' (interview male migrant, GHR/M3, 21 January 2020).

Reintegration Experiences and Psychosocial Factors

Our research did not find any significant tensions caused by competition for resources between returnees and non-migrants at the community level. Yet, there are clear indicators that communities with more positive perceptions towards reintegration usually have benefited the most from remittances and direct migrants' investments in the development of the community. On the part of returnees, studies have shown that those who had 'failed' at successfully establishing themselves abroad were usually seen more negatively and regarded as a burden for their families (IOM, 2018). This again stresses the relevance of the social and psychological dimensions of reintegration besides economic aspects.

The expectations of migrants, returnees and stayees are embedded in and conditioned by the larger context of perspectives on migration and return that prevail in the respective societies. They differ considerably between the countries of origin and destination as to the social, political and economic position of the persons transcending national borders and the relations with respective receiving communities.

Returnees are welcomed by the families (see [Box 3](#)), but they are under a lot of pressure, as shown in the last subchapter, which in turn, leads to frustration—such as the experience of broken-down cars or businesses respectively, the continuous lack of marketable skills (see below 'no love' quote)—and, finally, the reaction, which is the plan to try again, go back and correct the mistakes made the first time, which in turn relates to the conviction that greener pastures and an easier life awaits them in Europe. A counsellor for returnees in the Gambia summarised this vicious circle in the following way: 'The number one reason of migration is poverty. As there is no work, people are tempted to look for greener pastures elsewhere. They have seen that the neighbour has built a compound for his mothers. So what do they do? They just copy friends and do what they have done'. He went on to explain that it has become a typical mindset for parents to guide their children to go abroad and send money back: 'They will say, look at your neighbour, he went—and you are still here' (expert interview, GAMR50, 17 March 2022.).

In Ashanti, a region in Ghana where around two-thirds of migration originates from, parents will tell their children: travel, travel. A proverb says that the one who travelled widely is gathering knowledge. Every family wants to have a family member abroad as this heightens the family's status (expert interview, GHHR27/MR, 26 September 2022).²⁶ According to the just mentioned Gambian counsellor, the lack of information is less about the risks of migration than about wrong career guidance. They explain that people do not know the goals they are learning for. They do not know their skills because they are not taught about them in the education system. 'There is no road mapped. The curriculum [in the Gambia] does not match the labour market' (expert interview, GAMR59, 28 March 2022.). This criticism was also

²⁶ \ In Ghana, where funerals give everyone the opportunity to assess the success of the family organising it, all expatriates of the family are mentioned on the invitation with the respective location abroad indicated next to the name. Another example of the status associated with living abroad for the family at home: A social worker who went to visit Europe argued that is due to this pressure by the family that many prefer to stay in precarious conditions than to come back home (expert interview, GHHR27/MR, 26 September 2022). Both examples show that the mere fact that a family member is abroad is already raising the prestige of his or her relatives.

echoed in Ghana and Senegal in various interviews, where the interviewee described a prevalent preference for white-collar life-long office jobs provided by the government.

A social worker pointed out that AVRR aid is often not sustainable. In his experience, many returnees become a burden after the initial money that his organisation provided for a start-up is spent. In many cases, equipment deteriorated quickly due to bad maintenance or lack of management skills—e.g. for taxi start-ups, the expert reported that the car commonly broke down after a while because the returnees were ‘having no love for the cars.’ Having few other marketable skills, unskilled returnees ‘have nothing again’ (expert interview, GAMR60, 28 March 2022). Many returnees in all three countries added that they found themselves in a de facto worse situation than before: Being a failed migrant and, in some cases, the source of additional hardship caused to the family by their investments in their migration, looking at the expectations vested into them, many migrants would prefer to go back to their status before migration:

I came back sick and with less than US \$100 in my pocket. My situation was better before I left. The economy [in Ghana] is going down, and inflation is going up. I do not see that I can make it here,’

an unassisted returnee from Dubai who had been a stockbroker before explained (interview GHHR12/MR, 17 February 2022). He had sold most of his assets and belongings to finance his trip and had to start from scratch again. Others had taken on debts, sold cattle and land—sometimes without telling their parents. Others had to ask their families to pay ransom to be freed as a hostage (various interviews confirmed such stories). The case of Daouda is exemplary: Due to his father’s sickness, his mother had become the only income provider. She sold garden products from her own plot. Her income and what the family got to eat depended on the market prices. As there was often no food on the table, Daouda decided to sell the few assets he got from his uncle and left without telling anybody. Working on the way to earn his fare, he finally reached Algeria (interview male migrant, GAMR64, 30 March 2022).

There, he reports a precarious existence, so bad that he had to ask his mother to send money—which she could only raise by selling the garden. Now that he is back, the situation is worse than before: His mother has to rent a plot to farm for the market, and he received no IOM or other assistance (interview male migrant, GAMR64, 30 March 2022). How individuals can reintegrate, thus, depends to a large degree on their previous position, their networks and the financial losses or gains made during migration. Those who left good jobs and good networks behind could return more easily—in the Gambia, for instance, we encountered various persons working in the security, military, or police sector who could reintegrate into their networks. Many got re-hired or moved on to similar jobs. In many cases, additional skills—like languages picked up on the way—helped migrants move up the career ladder. The starting point upon return is also largely determined by the immediate daily obligations:

Those staying with their families do not have to worry about land or rent. Others bear stigma and shame [for being a burden to their families],

an NGO worker noticed. This comment illustrates neatly why psychosocial well-being, for most returnees, is foremost about their kin’s concrete everyday financial well-being and the resulting level of social pressure or support.

Politics of Return and Reintegration

Although the role of individual and social factors can hardly be overestimated, they are still conditioned by the political and legal framework. The framework, in turn, is set by interdependent national and international migration and return policies: Governments in the Global South have heterogeneous interests and policies as to migration and return, which are often invisible due to power asymmetries on the international level between countries of origin and destination.²⁷ An expert highlighted that there is often a contradiction between action and commitment by national governments: ‘The government makes public gestures, but nobody hinders anyone from going in any way.’ He argued that the state does not stand behind its own discourse about the risks of irregular migration. ‘In reality, the government sees it as a huge risk if the young unemployed persons did not migrate.’ The young people, he continued, are well trained but cannot find a job, for which they largely blame government politics. ‘They are just fed up with the state and just want to get out’. African politicians would not bring this issue up or oppose any reintegration and prevention efforts on the international level because ‘they know African realities and know that they [young people] will not stay but find a way to leave again’ (expert interview, GHMR48, 4 October 2022).

A quote from another expert working in Senegal suggests that this might be a structural issue:

Everybody has understood that return is big business and that they will get financial support. Return is spoken about on every level and everywhere. But migration it is a complex issue. Migration will continue. It is in the interest of the [national] government to foster migration even if they will not say it. The young graduates must be able to move to respond to their needs, and this is convenient for the government. Better than to have them back home protesting is to let them depart. The necessary cumulative solutions are never discussed. There is a systematic conflict

27 \ These power asymmetries are also visible in the quantity and direction of remittances—many countries in the Global South cannot afford to lose this vital source of income (Ratha et al., 2022, p. 58). On a worldwide scale, remittances exceed official development assistance (ODA) by three times. This is probably understating the actual value. The world bank estimates that informal flows amount to the same sum again. ‘Informal channels, such as friends and relatives of recipients bringing money ... on short visits, constitute a significant, albeit unknown, proportion of the true sum of remittances’ (IOM, 2020, p. 54).

between the Global North and the Global South. A political dialogue among equals is impossible (expert interview, SNMR47, 26 October 2021).

These statements address two blind spots within reintegration policymaking: First, they show an abyss between partners on the international level, second, they highlight gaps between discourse and practice on the national level. There are two further issues within re-integration policies that are often overlooked: A third blind spot, on the local level, concerns a crucially divergent point of view: Policymakers typically see return and reintegration returnees as less vulnerable than remainers, while on a local level, they are rather perceived as possible sources of income—in other words categorically rich (cf. quote on burgers above). Finally, reintegration policies do mostly not address the diachronic dimension, that is the dynamical development of vulnerability throughout the migration and return process over time: In line with results from refugee studies that illustrate how multiple displacements drain resources and options of those affected (Horstmann et al., 2019; Rudolf & Schmitz-Pranghe, 2018), our observations in West Africa have shown that migration and return often start a downward spiral—often connected to the third point just mentioned—leading into heightened vulnerability over time.

The Role of International Migration Governance

In regard to migration and return policies, two-dimensional perspectives prevail. In the Global North, spatial (moving outside space A) and time criteria are combined negatively (remaining outside A) to define sustainable migration regimes for irregular migrants. Social, economic and psychological aspects are side-lined and only come into the equation when causing re-migration (to A). Re-migration, according to the IOM’s definition of sustainable return and re-integration, only represents a ‘failure’ if it occurs through necessity rather than choice.²⁸ Nevertheless,

28 \ Various scholars like Grawert (2018) and Koser and Kuschminder (2015) have highlighted the increasing interchangeability respectively equation of sustainable return and reintegration.

there is still very limited evidence on the conditions of returnees after return, which makes it very difficult to judge the impacts of sustainable return (Collyer, 2018).

Contrary to the perspective of northern governments, where, as just mentioned, re-emigration is seen as indicating a failure of the sustainability of return, scholars—in line with our examples described above—have shown that migration or return processes are not static.²⁹ For return to be sustainable, returnees need to retain access to the wider international professional and social networks in the places where they have worked and lived (Black & King, 2004). In most cases of mandatory return and for voluntary return without (subjectively perceived) alternative options (cf. [Box 1](#)), this is not applicable.

Assessments of migration and return in the Global South also evaluate economic benefits or costs, yet they less often disregard the non-economic causes and impacts of migration. Senegalese government officials, for example, point at the history of movements and the multifaceted way migration evolved in Senegal and the region. Return is regarded as part of a larger government endeavour to remain in touch with the diaspora and to foster its involvement in the development of the country:

We encourage the second generation to come to Senegal to get to know their home during their holidays—so that they connect again' (expert interview, SNMR87, 6 April 2022).

Return is coupled with reinstalling the primary residence inside Senegal. He went on to say:

[We can only speak of return after] you installed yourself again in the country. [After] your house is finished. [Then] you come back and tell them: [the community where you returned to] I have returned. That is return. This does not mean that they [the returnees] never leave the country again. If you [as

a returnee] go to France for a month's medical treatment, this is no [re-]migration (expert interview, SNMR87, 6 April 2022).

Having specified what distinguishes return, the official furthermore elaborated on the problems of accepting those that do not fall within this category—namely deported persons: 'Southern countries don't accept to have everybody or just anybody with an unclear status' (expert interview, SNMR87, 6 April 2022).

In the Gambia, an official from the Ministry of the Interior had a similar perspective. They argued that people do not leave because they prefer to live abroad but because

there are no opportunities here. Even for those that are educated, it is difficult to earn enough for your family. So we just go. We believe Europe is better. The cost of living here is so high compared to the income. Prices of commodities, even house rent, are increasing every day. We lack health care and higher education facilities—even the politicians send their children abroad.

But he also insisted that it is only temporary as 'everyone wants to go home' (expert interview, GAMR59, 28 March 2022). This implies that home does not change with migration.

Ghana's year-long return campaign included a full calendar of events (art exhibitions, visits to heritage sites, creative economy and trade conferences). The Ghanaian government considered it a great success. According to the Ghana Immigration Service, the total number of visitors from the United States (26 per cent of the visitors), the United Kingdom (24 per cent), Germany (22 per cent) and Liberia (14 per cent) grew considerably (Yeboah, 2019) from levels recorded in previous years. Ghana's year of return in 2019, foremost targeted member of the US diaspora regardless of whether the migration background was real or assumed.³⁰ This means that the characteristic identification marker of 'assumed descent' qualified persons categorised as African-Americans to participate in the year of the return programme. In exchange for receiving national identity, returnees were

29 \ Nowadays, return migration is seen as a stage in ongoing cycles of mobility rather than the final end-point of a previous migration (Kleist, 2018). Ever since the transnational turn in migration studies, migration is no longer regarded as a one-way movement between a point of origin and a point of destination. Attention has shifted to the ongoing interconnections of migration processes (Vertovec, 2009). Migration has different meanings and resonances that depend on place, history and circumstances (Rabaka, 2020).

30 \ Though the village of Juffureh has similar potential to attract Afro-Americans, the Gambian government has not yet launched any similar homecoming initiative as Ghana's year of return, which shows—even though we highlight similarities—that there are regional differences.

urged to help develop their new home country with their investments and skills: ‘The bottom line is that the year of the return was about bringing in resources’ (expert interview, GHMR48, 4 October 2022).

In sum, domestic politics and policies on return and reintegration in the destination countries in West Africa portray return as a chance to bring in skills, resources and innovations and foster development. This chance is only given if return is truly voluntary, planned ahead and, at best, does not exclude commuting or re-migration. Officials, experts and our interviewees throughout Senegal, the Gambia and Ghana also stressed the importance of having access to pensions and payments. Looking at the de facto blockades to engage the diaspora for the development of the country, they, in other words, advocated for a transnational reintegration solution: ‘If you cannot move with your social insurance and have to leave 25 to 30 years of retirement [benefits] behind,’ a Gambian state official explained, it becomes a barrier to return (expert interview, GAMR59, 28 March 2022).

National Migration Policies Facing Opportunity Gaps

Even though the long-term benefits of migration—whether regular or not—might be questionable, it is clearly an often viable short-term strategy to access new resources. Both individual households and governments can benefit directly from the transfer of goods, ideas and resources (Mouthaan, 2019). Throughout West Africa, communities abroad are mostly regarded as income providers (Bob-Milliar, 2009; Bob-Milliar & Bob-Milliar, 2013; Kandilige & Adiku, 2019). As mentioned before, this concept extends from temporary migrants to different diaspora groups. While citizenship in the Global North refers mostly to a community of loyal taxpayers entitled to state services through residence, nationality or both, Ghana, Senegal or the Gambia, in contrast, define the community of citizens mostly by direct or assumed kinship – sometimes, as in the case of the Afro-American diaspora, regardless of residence or nationality.

Focussing on the benefits of people rather than nation-states, many in the Global South point to the longstanding tradition of human migration. A Gambian government official explained:

We cannot stop people from moving; it is a fundamental human right. Return is part of the migration circle—if you go, you have to come back. No matter how long I stay in Germany, that does not make me a German. But if I come back, how do I integrate? Opportunities should be there first. Before bringing them back. Otherwise, it will be a failure, and they will head straight back [to Europe]. In Europe, at least, you have access to certain things.

The official also made the point that work is underpaid in the Gambia: [The] monthly salary is not sufficient. Even as a director, you cannot pay house rent’, and remuneration should match the individual’s qualification if any prevention is to work (expert interview, GAMR59, 28 March 2022). As long as this is not the case, migration remains a viable choice.

Many returnees, NGOs and government officials agree that the salary gap is one major impediment to return and one of the greatest difficulties upon return. A fisherman in the Gambia explained:

I could make €20 an hour in Germany, and here I might not make it [same amount] in a week (male migrant, GAMR20, 8 September 2021).

Considering that prices for items such as mobile phones or other imported goods are comparable to the Global North, it is clear that the differences in salaries pose a significant barrier to reintegration. An official from the ministry of labour in Ghana put it like this:

Who wants to have an unpleasant job in a factory abroad where you work like a slave? If they had good salaries here—who would like to work in a miserable job nine to five abroad? Nobody. If they had a good, well-paid job, and government housing [in Ghana], nobody would leave (expert interview, GHMR57, 17 February 2022).

This is speaking to the argument of a critic who claimed that the ‘situation in Ghana is currently difficult. Oil prices are going up. The abyss between rich and poor is getting bigger and bigger.’ He confirmed

the aforementioned hypothesis about the combination of internal and external political and economic factors—namely a disillusion at home versus the potentially paradise-like situation abroad—being a major drive for migration, ‘...we do not see the dividends of democracy here [in Ghana]’ (expert interview, GHMR55, 16 February 2022).

This was confirmed by returnees (to Ghana) in 2022, when inflation rates soared in the country:

By the time you sell your products, your profit is not enough to restock your goods. So your capital is diminishing.

The interviewed returnees, AVRRE beneficiaries, also lamented that aid was not flexible enough:

We took up loans. [But] The business plans have been developed without knowing about the rise in prices. Now only those with capital can manage (female migrant, GHMR28, 15 September 2022).

A rather successful entrepreneur in Kumasi, who managed to build up a metal workshop added that he had paid 25 per cent interest, which nearly broke his neck and that he would never take up a loan again (male migrant, GHMR21/MR, 23 September 2022). We observed similar cases in Senegal and the Gambia. A Gambian aid worker stated:

[As a returnee] You want fast money and you will be easily discouraged if it does not come. What returnees mostly want is free money—not loans (expert interview, GAMR48, 17 March 2022).

On the question of closing the salary gap, the debate on migration and development has been swinging from the developmentalist optimism of the 1950s and 1960s, to more pessimist views in the 1970s and 1980s and back again towards a more positive attitude in the 1990s and 2000s (de Haas, 2010). At the time of writing, the governments of migrant-sending countries largely dismiss concerns on issues such as the so-called brain drain and instead focus on the potential of transnationally oriented migrants as actors of development. Through their remittance-sending practices, migrants are considered a more effective instrument for income redistribution, poverty reduction and economic growth than large, bureaucratic development programmes or development aid (de Haas, 2010). However, our empirical evidence and

that from other studies points to a more heterogeneous impact of migration on development (Agunias, 2006; Appleyard, 1992; Binford, 2003; de Haas, 2005). Recent views celebrating migration as an efficient form of self-help development from below should therefore be taken with a pinch of salt—not least because such views shift the attention away from structural constraints that fall within the responsibility of states (de Haas, 2010; Gamlen, 2014; Kleist, 2008, 2017a; Sinatti, 2015).

Return for Development vs Deportation

It can be hypothesised that until the salary and livelihood opportunity gap is closed, return is often only partially voluntary. According to the figures available to IOM—which is only a fraction according to our observations (see discussion of backways)—with a ratio of 774 to 620 in 2017, more persons were forced to return to Ghana than returned voluntarily (IOM, 2020, p. xv).³¹ In the Gambia, there were 930 cases of AVRRE between 2015 and 2017, 2,645 were ordered to leave the European Union (26 per cent leave each year from there) (IOM, 2020, p. xv). The German Ministry of Interior counted 204 cases per year from 2016 to 2018 (Wissenschaftlicher Dienst, 2020, p. 12). In 2021, 90 Senegalese citizens were deported from Europe, 20 of whom were from Germany (Eurostat, 2022).

The geography of deportations requires understanding the political relationship between the states involved. In fact, deportations or mandatory returns are not only a matter of the receiving (deporting) country, but they also require the cooperation of the country of origin’s government of the individual to be deported. Although most governments accept the return of their citizens, in some cases, this can be problematic and provoke resistance. Yet, improving cooperation on the return and readmission of migrants has been a key element of the European Union’s response to the 2015 migration crisis, which includes efforts to foster returns to West African states (Zanker et al., 2019).

³¹ \ Migration in Ghana is not limited to international migration. There is also a high number of internal migrants. The majority of internal migrants (58%) are female (IOM, 2020, p. 31).

On the level of international cooperation, the language of readmission agreements is designed to hide the asymmetry in power relations between states, continuously emphasising the idea of ‘partnership’ (Collyer, 2012). But the power asymmetries are observable in the different perceptions of the acceptance of readmissions/deportations by the regional governments.³² The Gambian government is, for example, not always credited with blocking deportations as proof of its commitment to the rights of the diaspora. On the ground, some people see it as a betrayal of their compatriots stranded abroad. Others argue that many deportees are criminals who cause problems everywhere. The issue is often considered insignificant in relation to pressing national problems.

The elections in the Gambia, for instance, have been more about the new alliance of Barrow with APRC (Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction, which is the party of former President Jammeh) and perceptions about him selling the country out to Senegal and international donors. Political activists lament that the government does not act in the interest of the common people

They [the government] cannot access the remittances as they can access aid. Only through the transfer fees—which are therefore high. That is why they are not interested in acting in the population’s interest (expert interview, GAMR17, 6 September 2021).

The following quotes of government officials illustrate some issues that remain undiscussed yet, according to various expert interviews, turned out to be important to national staff implementing AVRR programmes. A Senegalese high-ranking civil servant argued that it is difficult to agree on the definition of return migrant

What is it? Return migrant? Is it linked to the question of residence or duration? People go there to work.... Sustainable return is not about never leaving the country again but having a residence in Senegal.

... A lot of studies have shown the positive impact of migration, and if a status is not clear, they cannot just accept returned persons. ...Patterns of migration have changed. Regions have changed, types of migrants have, therefore, also changed. The government does not want to focus on irregular migration: When they talk about integration, the focus is on those who come back after ten years to invest in the country ... Those who have failed, in their heads, they will still search for the next option to leave the country [and try to reach Europe] again (expert interview, SNMR87, 6 April 2022).

A high-ranking official from Ghana wondered about the definition of return being sustainable only if the persons stay put. He explained that AVRR programmes usually exclude the option of return to the country of destination. Otherwise, the funds need to be paid back according to the regulations of IOM.

Staying put means that you are imprisoned. Migration is a right. It is a right. Even if you have a house and a salary, you will still move. [Because] Culturally, it means that you are exposed to external influences, [which makes] you become more civilised. It is a prestige thing to go to a place that is more developed (expert interview, GHMR57, 17 February 2022).

Against this background, it is noteworthy that ECOWAS members’ regional policies have fostered the freedom of movement by lowering administrative hurdles while EU-African migration policies have done the opposite. This is—at least partly—related to the perception that migration is a human right (see quote above). It also relates to the wider argument that

governments do not want people to point fingers for bringing those back that do not want to return. They only accept a programme after being told that it is about bringing in qualifications and training and building up capacities (expert interview, GAMR59, 28 March 2022).

³² \ Deportations, which are increasingly conducted in collaboration between governments, private companies, and development agencies, respond to and reproduce global asymmetric power relations (Collyer, 2012, 2018). They have a key role in the international management of populations, which has consequences for state relations and reproduces hierarchies of power within the international state system. Only exceptionally governments in the Global South block deportations (Zanker & Altrogge, 2022).

To date, there is little consensus among policy-makers, academics and practitioners on how to best define and operationalise migrants' reintegration (Bilgili & Fransen, 2019). In fact, perceptions of migration, return and reintegration vary greatly between the countries of origin and destination regarding the social, political and economic position of the persons transcending national borders and the relations with the respective receiving communities. In our bottom-up approach, we saw that most actors regarded these categories—refugee, returnee, migrant, irregular, etc.—as gateways. Gateways, they can access depending on the individually available set of skills, connections, networks, and chance. From the perspective of most interviewed persons, the latter is often interpreted as 'the will of God'. This subjective perception of a landscape that is believed to be navigable in direct correlation to each person's individual agency stands in stark contrast to models, concepts and policies that highlight discriminatory or exclusive practices. A sole focus on barriers neglects options that exist in different times and spaces.

Our research revealed that actors' decisions regarding migration and return are, on the contrary, hardly ever only a reaction to structural barriers. They are always also a product of individual factors—looking at structural barriers is only half of the equation. For one, there is the motivation to depart: Individual aspirations are formed by comparing one's situation with the situation of others (cf. [Path Dependency and Group Pressures](#)). Second, looking at the trajectories, we observed that the options for migration were drawn from exemplary cases in the immediate neighbourhood of actors rather than being influenced by legally defined pathways. Trajectories, in other words, are led by examples, and the examples are subjectively assessed by and with social contacts. Third, analysing the factors determining the choices abroad and upon return, we saw that the number and quality of choices regarding aspirations, pathways, stay abroad and eventual return is mostly determined by and through the social and economic situation of the extended family (cf. [Box 3](#)). The fact that a large

number of cases of migration and return happen completely under the radar of the national governments and international organisations within the region, finally, corroborates the idea that structural barriers only have a limited impact on the trajectories of migrants. In other words, rather than being constrained, actors (mostly young men) usually find ways and means to overcome barriers (e.g. to raise the necessary funds to travel during travelling).³³

Sustainable Re-integration?

The same holds true for return. The cases where reintegration has generally worked smoothly have been where migrants found ways and means to circumvent unilinear A to B stay-put-politics. We observed reintegration to work best where migrants were able to commute back and forth; and when they were able to prepare and plan their return according to their own terms. Our results indicate that rather than hindering transnational movements, rigid migration and return policies did foster irregular movements. Local experts and persons on the move stressed this point time and again:

Migration has been there for a long time. People went on holidays and came back. The policies to have stiff restrictions for a visa made people resort to back-ways (expert interview, GAMR67, 31 March 2022).

Numerous times, across all three countries, we heard statements confirming this: 'My father [in the UK] has not visited us for ten years because he does not have any papers,' as a Ghanaian recounted (migrant family, GHMR24, 16 September 2022).

Assessing the everyday experiences of return, our study, on the one hand, showed the crucial role of international politics and legal frameworks in the return process. The results, on the other hand, also indicate that local concepts of potentials, benefits and risks of (migration and) return crucially shape strategies of the actors involved at the social, political and economic levels. The respective concepts—such as

33 \ According to our observations it is an unintended consequence that the attraction of a destination increases the more difficult it seems to reach it. The logic goes that the more secured and shielded it is, the more opportunities are inside and the more worthwhile and profitable it is to get to the tap (of wealth).

migration as a right or a rite of passage (see examples)—differ between the countries and communities of origin and destination, whose characteristics need to be analytically integrated. The narratives of returnees recounting how they navigate the arena of migration management accordingly show a high ability to circumvent the presence of the state, but they also show how states succeed in curtailing migrants' mobility by denying or granting access to the national territory. As aforementioned, feminist-geopolitical approaches point to the need to connect political representation and everyday life to contextualise how these dimensions interrelate and how migrants deal specifically with the state (and other) actors involved in the (return) migration infrastructure.

What was found to be the major obstacle to reintegration? A common feature of lower-class and unskilled migrants who return from African and Middle Eastern countries is that they raise fewer resources (if any at all) than their documented counterparts overseas and do not usually have the chance of a regular return home. This has multiple implications for the migrants and their families. On the one hand, several of our interviewees who had migrated to the Middle East or Libya explained how, upon their return, they had encountered unexpected situations. As Amadou's case (cf. [Box 3](#)) illustrates, it was only upon his return from Libya that he realised his financial investment back home had been mishandled and lost. Other respondents in a similar situation to Amadou's reported that all their capital sent home had disappeared upon their return (focus groups discussion, GHMR36 28 September 2022).³⁴

34 \ The exploitative contracts that many of these migrants have to accept (due to their lack of papers) in most cases do not allow them to send more than meagre amounts back home. This partly explains why often no reserves are formed during migration from which migrants could profit upon return.

Yet, the drive to remigrate to try and correct the mistakes is not limited to uneducated or unqualified migrants. Many interviews indicate that it is less about the individual skills than the question of where they can be put to use:

*It is also a failure of government when you become a minister the first thing you do is to send your children abroad. You do not believe you can make it here. The general perception is that you cannot' (expert interview, GAMR59, 28 March 2022).*³⁵

Experts, as well as returnees themselves repeatedly argued that the expectancies from the families of returnees are huge. 'If you start a business, the family expects you to take care of all their needs' (expert interview, GAMR60 28 March 2022). Seeing no options for a sustainable reintegration, many prefer to start in another part of the country or to re-migrate.³⁶

35 \ In Gambia, Senegal and Ghana, many cases of educated and rich persons that were rejected several times and then decided to resort to the backways were reported.

36 \ Two of our respondents, one returning from the Middle East by his own means and the other one from Europe with the support of an AVRR programme, described how their fiancées (sometimes with children) had 'moved on' with another man during the time they had been abroad. Losing one's home meant that they had nothing to return to and that they had—upon return—fewer resources that helped them to integrate or to stay put. This was linked, in both cases, to the lack of remittances and also to the lack of regular visits. In cases of frequent visits and regular remittances—like in most cases in Diélerlou—there were fewer reports about broken-up relations.

Relating Migration, Reintegration and Social Change

As mentioned before, migration and return are long-standing realities in West Africa, touching all parts of society.³⁷ The role of family and the social network into which returnees have to reintegrate is ambiguous and well-documented (King & Kuschminder, 2022). With migration touching so many different parts of the economy, politics and everyday life, this *Paper* illustrated how it, thus, has a large impact on social change and, vice versa, constitutes a vehicle for social change.³⁸

Path Dependency and Group Pressures

Expectations and motivations, as just mentioned, are often related to individuals feeling group pressure. How does such pressure concretely manifest itself? Abraham, for example, an irregular migrant from southern Senegal recounted how his mother kept telling him about other young men in the neighbourhood who supported their mothers after having tried their luck elsewhere. He felt obliged by his family to go to Dakar, which he did not want to do. 'They will say look at them, they made it there and sent money home' (interview male migrant SNMRYB4, 15 September 2021). After spending some time in Dakar, he became ill, felt bewitched and returned home to get cured. He explained that his mother continued to push him to go on a boat to Europe. He finally agreed but was caught and put in prison on the Canary Islands. After his return, he fell ill again, blamed mysterious forces, and decided to remain to recover fully. He is home now and resists any further attempts to convince him to migrate: 'I will just stay here'

37 \ 'C'est dire qu'au Sénégal, le phénomène de l'émigration internationale s'est fortement généralisé et touche toutes les couches de la population active, en particulier les jeunes, en milieu rural comme en milieu urbain' (Ndione, 2018, p. xxviii).

38 \ A lot of the social changes supposed to be due to external migration setting the pace for a rural exodus can also be seen in places that have not been affected by external migration. In villages in the Casamance, southern Senegal, a region that has been plagued by a 40-year-old conflict, you can see that those who went away to stay with family nearby, mostly did not return. Most parts of the young generation stay away even after the conditions changed. They only come back for harvesting. Just as most other villagers, they had to change their livelihoods by combining rural and urban life to make ends meet. The bottom line is it is not possible to turn the clock back and to return to the status quo ante, but that conditions and plans change over time: In the words of the correspondents, things did not go the way they had imagined (various observations and discussions, 2022).

(interview male migrant SNMRYB4, 15 September 2021). His example is remarkable insofar as he opposed his mother as much as he could and as openly as the local traditional value system allowed it. His case is otherwise very typical of a group pressure that virtually all interviewed young men reported about.

This pressure builds up after the fruits of migration are manifested in new phones, the construction of new houses, or when any other signs of wealth are detected and associated with migration.

Those who travelled, they build nice houses. Before, in the villages, all houses had grass roofs—now they have iron sheets. It is too many. If you go to the villages, all the new houses have been built by backway travellers,

a young man in a rural area of the Gambia reported (male migrant, GAMR64, 30 March 2022). In Ghana, a focus group in another very rural area similarly argued that only migration gives access to capital necessary to start a business:

You see the house in front of us [unfinished two-storey building]? It is built by a migrant from Italy. Can you make it if you stay here?

The others answered: 'There is no way. There is no work here in Ghana. It is no good.' (focus group discussion, GHMR38, 28 September 2022).

In another case, Arano, a young male engineer running his own small construction company, pointing out landmarks and building in his village Diénder in northern Senegal, stated that all bigger, newer and modern houses were built by migrants. His community showcased a high prevalence of migration that had been going on since the 1970s—mostly to Italy (see above). Many men had migrated to work in the same factory in northern Italy. Back then, they explained that they were welcome. 'We got language courses, professional training, help to find houses—we got a good salary.' Today, they try to convince the generation whose education they financed with their remittances not to follow in their footsteps. 'Because today everything is different [in Europe]' (male migrant, SEMR41, 20 September 2021). Like in Diélerlou, the men argue that they want their children to learn their local values and get a Senegalese education.

Those who took their families to Italy, another migrant explains, stayed there. Having financed the home, the car, and a lifestyle that surpasses that of virtually all villagers that stayed behind, it is nevertheless difficult to convince the next generation that they do not just want to block their individual development: 'They [our children] think we are mean. They do not listen to us' (male migrant, SEMR40, 20 September 2021).³⁹

As demonstrated in Arano's case, advice from parents or the community to prospective or de facto migrants seems to have been largely irrelevant. The catch 22 challenge, exemplified in the case of Diénder, ex-migrant parents are facing is that their migration histories are manifested evidence that supports narratives of a necessary link between success and migration. The only reported exception, where advice seemingly led to a change of mind, were those who came back and reported that they did better after return than in exile.

The assumed direct correlation between migration and wealth works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Most respondents agreed that those who did not send anything back did not want to help. From the perspective of the migrants who have to send money back, the pressure is immense. They report that you turn into the enemy if you do not send anything. Very few agree that it might be possible that the migrants are in no position to send anything.

They will not believe you. Even if you explain, they will think you have [something] because you are abroad,

focus group discussion participants agreed. Even though experience gained abroad counts, it ultimately boils down to the wealth acquired, as a returnee reported:

You might – in a dispute – brag 'have you travelled' telling him he is just a villager– and he might reply 'and what did you bring from there' saying we are all the same (focus group discussion, GHMR36, 28 September 2022).

In Ghana, those who have not brought anything back are called a 'useless person' or labelled as someone who did not make it — '*Wa mo bora*' ['you did not make it' in Twi]. In the Gambia, we heard about cases where those who had not made it were rejected entirely by their family. They were not even allowed to live in the compound and were considered to bring bad luck. In other words, individual failure does not change the narrative of a generalised 'abroad' being El-Dorado, but it puts the blame on the individual. This means that it is up to the individual to try again and correct the mistakes [made the first time] (focus group discussion, GHMR30, 26 September 2022). In all three countries, returnees who do not help others are considered mean. The respondents also virtually unanimously agreed that it is believed that those who advise against going abroad try to harm you and want to withhold opportunities from you (see paragraph above).⁴⁰

The self-fulfilling prophecy also works because those who did not make it cannot tell their stories, as an NGO worker dealing with mostly Libyan migrants explained. 'Even if they agree that people died—when we bring in migrants who talk about their [own] stories—they will ask: 'do we not have a graveyard here' implying that people die everywhere and that every individual's fate is different. One person told me once: 'You just show pictures. I saw it [myself]. I stepped on a corpse—but I went on, and I still have to go [again]' (expert interview, GHHR27/MR, 26 September 2022).

The narrative repeated by most non-migrant residents throughout all three countries studied is that those who made it abroad live in 'greener pastures' that 'life over there is easy', and that those who do not send anything home are 'mean' or 'selfish'. A returnee who had lost his eyesight during his odyssey through Ivory Coast, Libya and Egypt recounted how he was labelled a 'useless person' who 'did not make it abroad as the others' because of 'attending bars and getting involved with cocaine' (male migrant, GHMR44,

39 \ Given that the de facto material evidence contradicts such a discourse, it is understandable that young people sees little reason to listen to parents' advice to stay instead of migrating.

40 \ This is related to a widespread belief that bad luck and continuous failure are caused by envious family members or neighbours. To avoid any such witchcraft, many migrants reported to have never disclosed their plans to their families and tried to keep it a secret as far as possible.

30 September 2022). In reality, he claims, he had sent 40 to 50 per cent of his income to the family criticizing him now. Oblivious, he added, of the fact that it had been their ‘softness’ and ‘poverty’ that made him migrate in the first place, also forgetting that he had decided to invest the ‘remaining little money he had into his brother to continue travelling on to Israel whose [continuous] support their family relied on entirely.’

Circular Movements vs the Idea of Return

According to our observations, returnees are quite interested in keeping doors open.⁴¹ The results show that choice rather than necessity defines the success and the sustainability of return and reintegration. This is also confirmed in the literature. In their study on the pre- and post-return experiences of Ghanaian international migrants, Setrana and Tonah (2016) looked at returnees’ assets and labour-market participation and found that many maintain ties with the host countries for the sake of businesses and other benefits which may not be available in the home country. This is also confirmed in observations in recent studies (Bob-Milliar & Bob-Milliar, 2013; Olivier-Mensah, 2019; Olivier-Mensah & Scholl-Schneider, 2016) which, like our own research, found that returnees prefer to keep their options for re-emigration open.

When Abdoulaye (Box 1) arrived in Italy, he was still underage. He had made his way to Libya without consulting with his parents. Being a minor, he was sent to a foster home, received an Italian education, and then trained as a waiter. His employers were pleased with his performance, but due to delays in the paperwork necessary for getting a contract, he worked informally instead. On his way, he primarily relied on strangers who helped him to find a job to make a living and eventually finance his onward journey. He travelled to northern Italy, France and

then continued to various sites in Germany. Experiencing difficulties concerning questions of residence, he accepted an offer to return. He says that he does not regret the years spent abroad because he would not want to miss the experience and the skills gathered. Yet, he never made enough money to send anything home for his family even though working hard and economising in any possible way, like eating and sleeping in the restaurants he worked to save rent and food expenses.

He nevertheless holds that the money paid to him was not sufficient:

I worked in a place where we had hundreds of customers every day. The waiters here do not know how to serve well. I want to open a restaurant with European standards in a good location. I have already inquired about the costs and prices of other restaurants in the area, and found a place [close to Senegambia hotel]. Professional machines cost a lot; they only gave me little. It is not enough to live but too much to die.... They gave me a loan. But getting 5,000 Dalasi is like saying go and disturb yourself. I have more stress with than without the loan. I could not start a proper restaurant with the money, so I opened a street stall. I paid the person for the lot and the building of a small box—but then the proprietor [who was not represented by the middle-man] tore it down. He said the papers were not correct—he tore the box down.

Even though he had not been able to send any remittances, he came home without feeling obligated to make it up to his parents, debts or social expectations—He insists that he will not abandon his dream but keep trying no matter what.

Trajectories and Access to AVRR Programmes

The problem of underaged unaccompanied young males on the move described above seems underestimated. Our research, for example, in a random sample

41 \ Our research in Ghana, Gambia and Senegal illustrates those local concepts of identity, belonging, and citizenship have a considerable impact on the everyday practices of exclusion respectively inclusion of newcomers (including returnees) and deserve further in-depth elaboration.

at a construction site in the Gambia's central economic hub Serrekunda found the majority of workers to be young men and underaged boys from the Gambia, Guinea-Conakry and Senegal. They were between 13 and 25 years old. Some had made it from there to Mauretania, Mali, Algeria, Libya, Niger and back. Others planned to follow their steps. Similarly, as in the recounted urban centres in other West African countries, young men, including returnees, often stay in the urban centres in the Gambia to raise money for their (next) attempts to reach greener pastures. All of the individuals encountered at the construction site moved across the region in irregular ways and had not been registered or supported by international organisations. Looking at various other observed cases, we suppose that the extent of irregular migrants—including those returning—is vastly underestimated. Two out of three cases of our random case studies encountered were off-radar. We estimate that the number of migration movements might be up to three or even five times higher than accounted for in official statistics.

The migration trajectories are more regional and transnational than what is usually reflected in statistics on migration. This holds true for the countries of origin and transit: Besides being a country of origin, the Gambia is a transit country for migrants from Guinea-Conakry and southern Senegal. The Gambia and northern Senegal are bridgeheads for onward migration to countries such as Mauretania, Algeria and Libya. The migration that we encountered turned out to be circular rather than unidirectional. It also became clear in our study that the time frame of individual migration trajectories is much longer than most projects on returns, reintegration or early warning last.

Within the dynamics of circular migration, the phenomenon of not identifying as a subject eligible for official aid abroad or upon return such as AVRR—especially from international organisations—is widespread. 'I never thought of myself as a 'returnee'', a Ghanaian who had been to Dubai explained when asked whether he considered applying for help with IOM as a migrant or GIZ as a returnee. He had worked in the financial sector in Ghana and had sold all his belongings to migrate to Dubai. He could not find

work there and fell ill. After a while in Dubai, he went bankrupt. He had to raise money in Ghana for his treatment there and to finance his return later on.

His example shows that a general lack of information is not directly related to education as could be assumed. Like the awareness of possible routes, dangers and expected benefits, migration policies and the options created by their implementation, it is mainly a question of networks and what information is filtered and processed by them. In Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal, this means mostly that the information needs to arrive through personal contact. This relates to the belief that personal connections do not open pathways but are the pathway itself. Whatever structure there is, it is up to the person with a function or a role in it to make things work.

To gain access to AVRR measures—as for anything else—it is, therefore, necessary to have a contact first. Those without any personal contact with an INGO, NGO, or CVO working on migration and those who do not identify themselves with the terms used by these organisations are least likely to have the necessary contacts. In Basse Santa Su, the Gambia, various migrants interviewed had asked about possibilities to participate in measures whose description matched what professionals call AVRR. One of them, after it was explained to him that there is a local AVRR office in town, said:

I even stood in front of the sign [large cardboard next to the central bus station], but it had not crossed my mind [that it concerns me]' (interview male migrant, GAMR10, 30 March 2022).

Warnings about risks in irregular migration are less listened to than homemade success stories.

They will look at success rather than failure. And this puts social pressure on the others [to migrate as well], a Gambian official explained (expert interview, GAMR59, 28 March 2022). Another Gambian expert explained that most awareness campaigns are futile as the prospective migrants are well aware of the risks:

Talking to them about risks is a waste of time. They already know them. Each neighbourhood you go to will tell you we lost this amount of people in the Mediterranean, or the desert or to criminal gangs.

Social media is full of photos of people buried without names' (expert interview, GAMR60, 28 March 2022).

However, in some cases, there are also some shortcomings influenced by education. A programme officer of an NGO in the Gambia argued that the system has an inbuilt blind spot for those moving under the radar. According to him, most of the backway migrants come from *madrassas* [local Islamic school]. They are not always literate and do mostly not know how to approach NGOs, government institutions or international organisations. As they move without registering with an authority and have never been registered with IOM, they drop out of the system.

We can only facilitate those that have been brought back by IOM. [But] Those who came from Libya [without the IOM assistance] have been traumatised and many have serious illnesses. We have to ensure that they get medicine and treatment. You need to have the flexibility to include those as well (expert interview, GAMR67, 31.3.22).

It should be noted that the office in question had even found a solution to work around the structural mismatch between the IOM request for documenting the return for eligibility and the complete lack of any documentation by the aforementioned young men by checking their story through other migrants that had met them abroad or on the way back.

These aspects need to be considered as a pre-conditional factor when assessing the role of education, personal and family expectations (see *Commuting Reintegration*), financial resources available, respectively obligations like debt for the question of preparedness. In assessing the difference between officially assisted versus non-assisted support, each dimension (see Vollmer & Schmitz-Pranghe, forthcoming) plays out differently according to how migrants and returnees relate to authorities and programmes—i.e. those staying under the radar. Strategies differ according to the level of awareness of options and how they are taken—i.e. through personal contacts. It also depends on when these dimensions play a role during the process, that is at the stages of start, transit or return. Preparedness differs according to these

intersecting factors. Both awareness and preparedness change dynamically over time. Assisted and unassisted migration and return, thus, need to be seen as two sides of the same coin, as migrants might switch from one to the other.

What does this mean for official assistance? Random surveys with focus groups in the Gambia, Ghana and Senegal showed that probably less than one out of three cases received external assistance. As indicated by the case worker in Basse (second last paragraph above) referring to traumatised, sick and unregistered returnees, AVRR is also needed by those not assisted. The cases highlight difficulties in reaching them. Here another observation comes in: We found many existing general solidarity networks that remained unconsidered by AVRR but helped returnees' reintegration. The advantage of these was that they did not exclude the communities of origin—or that they were not primarily addressing returnees. Such an exclusion is often counterproductive as the hosts feel discriminated. The advantage of existing networks—such as mutual loan schemes—is plain to see.⁴² Professional support of such everyday networks could potentially work better than newly imposed ones.

Commuting Reintegration

On a comparative macro level, the cases show that migration has been a typical feature for all three countries. The role of remittances in all three regions is significant: Ghana and Senegal, for instance, complete the trio led by Nigeria of the countries with the highest remittances in Sub-Saharan Africa (Volk, 2018). Yet, this migration is not mainly heading to Europe. There are more Senegalese migrants in the Gambia than in Germany, and remittances stemming from the least developed country the Gambia to Senegal exceed those from OECD countries such as Germany, Switzerland or Canada by 15 times (Ndione, 2018, p. 71). And yet, migration flows to Europe seem to get more attention than these regional ones.

⁴² \ Local networks in general are not hard to find, associations like the various ASCs (Association Culturelle et Sportive) in West Africa, numerous religious and civil society associations in Congo or mutual credit systems by females often found in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Migration is a symptom of a myriad of issues linked to underdevelopment:

It is not a small problem—migration is about everything: work, prices, family, politics—everything (male migrant, GAMR12, 3 September 2021).

We encountered that the opinion of returnees on whether or not to give it another try changes with the available options. During the economic crisis in 2022 in West Africa, we observed a heightened interest to leave again. It might seem counterintuitive, but in many cases, we heard that most of those who did not make it were thinking how to do it (better) next time. This is related to the previously mentioned increased pressure from the families that are both in more and bitter need of remittances as—at the same time—literally eating all resources sent home, which, in turn, are needed to terminate the problems related to living from hand to mouth (cf. [Path Dependency and Group Pressures](#), last paragraph).

The [Diérlerlou](#) case shows that migrants who went to Europe when no visa was required were more often commuting and less often staying abroad permanently. Many respondents explained that the walls (physical or other) to overcome also function as a barrier to return. This was confirmed in other, similarly transnational communities, like the mentioned case of [Diénder](#). Successful returnees had managed to invest continuously, married, built a house, established a livelihood at home—with constant visits and remaining in touch—before returning. In the most successful cases, migrants had organised themselves in an association that financed infrastructure, which the government did not provide: ‘The government cannot do it all. We [association of migrants] complement what they cannot do’ (male migrant, SEMR69, 2 April 2022). In the case of [Diérlerlou](#), this included a health post, maternity ward, nursery, *madrassa*, mosque, ambulance and medical staff. Even in a village where such associations are less powerful, the ground for successful reintegration was—or is being—set before return: In the described case of [Diénder](#), most wealth indicators, such as big houses and cars, are directly connected to migration. ‘90 per cent of all the money here comes from migration’ (migrant family, SEMR84, 4 April 2022).

Returnees who made it were able to reject family demands: ‘You simply have to say no’ (male migrant, SEMR35, 16 September 2022). They usually had planned ahead, accumulated capital, were in a senior position (age), better trained, experienced in work and already had the necessary know-how to run a business. Men are said to be more prone to say no, but we found many cases they did not and could not find this to be a general pattern. It is nevertheless clear that also the class, economic resources and education of relatives played a crucial role: The better the relatives are connected, the less they are in need, the more they can assess chances and risks adequately, the higher the chances that they are supporting rather than draining returnees’ livelihoods.

This points back to the question of the wider context reaching beyond the individual or group level. A Gambian NGO staff member argued that the current programmes only address the symptoms of a deeper underlying structural misbalance:

It [backway migration] will go on because of the EU protecting [its] farmers’ products. This kills local farmers. If a young man makes an effort, no matter what, his eggs or his chicken will be more expensive than imported products. What is the essence of education if you cannot even produce toothpicks and every nail has to be imported? On the other hand, the European Union pays €50 for each ton of tuna. The government officials reap the benefits, and the whole nation suffers. It boils down to leadership. We have all it takes to develop our country. All we need is the rule of law, investment in the productive sector, agriculture, education, processing, storage (expert interview, GAMR60, 28 March 2022).

Ghanaian officials from the Ministry of Labour similarly criticised that sustainable AVRR programmes would require a socio-economic programme to build up infrastructure, provide housing, develop a national industry and adequate well-paid jobs rather than start-up initiatives to ‘synergise skills and system’ (expert interview, GHMR57, 17 February 2022).

Conclusion: (Re)integration in Continuous Transnational Networks

Our results show that relations between policies and migrant mobility are multifaceted. Migrant journeys, regardless of the migrants' age, gender, legal status or social class, are always geopolitical journeys. As migrants navigate the different geopolitical terrains, they are authors of their own narratives and of expressions of broader geopolitical relations at work that structure their mobility (Ashutosh & Mountz, 2012). The cases cited above show different ideas and experiences of return, which depend not only on individual situations but also on the broader politicised relations and interests between national governments of both sending and receiving countries. The migration trajectories discussed are shaped by spatial impositions of power on mobility and the human agency of individuals and communities navigating geopolitical hierarchies. To assess the power relations involved—respectively the bandwidth of agency within it—both interrelated dimensions need to be taken into account and related to the respective local social context.

In other words, the cases presented here illustrate the need to simultaneously dissect and relate the interdependent roles of skills, class, gender, geopolitics, legal status and networks for return and reintegration (cf. [Dissecting Dimensions of Reintegration](#)). Cases throughout all three countries also exemplified that the patterns of movements are formed by a combination of national factors such as political oppression and widespread poverty—and external factors such as the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in the millions, the war in Libya or news about the need of manpower abroad (cf. [Dynamics of Migration in the Region](#)). As concerns studies on highly skilled migrants who made it to the Global North, our findings confirm that unskilled migrants cannot easily capitalise on their class status or social and transnational networks (cf. [Politics of Return and Reintegration](#)). This corroborates doubts about the fluidity of social class in general, although the cases also show that it is, in exceptional cases, possible for lower-class groups to capitalise on networks to access the international labour market. The crucial point is that these migrants have to resort to more-hazardous step-by-step pathways and hardly ever succeed in

overcoming irregular statuses. They are, therefore, exposed to a higher risk of suffering human-rights abuses—both in transit and in the destination countries.

It is, furthermore, important to bear in mind that highly skilled migrants also have to navigate the geopolitics of return and that their ideas of development do not always fit what might be defined as Senegal's, the Gambia's or Ghana's national economic interests in political discourses.⁴³ While skills acquired abroad appeared to be helpful for reintegration, according to our observations, the importance of being able to resort to (pre-)existing social networks—and combining both new skills and old networks—played an even bigger role in this regard. Moreover, skills obtained abroad were often incompatible with locally required skills and did not contribute to the country's development as foreseen in AVRRO policies. Our results show that highly skilled migrants who were returning from the Global North had greater difficulty adapting to the everyday experience of corruption and favouritism than developing ideas and businesses.

Differentiating how migrants navigate governance regimes in their everyday life from a bottom-up perspective also underlines the relevance of looking beyond political constraints and individual agency and into the specific role of the communities involved. Beyond the characteristics of the individual migrant, it is the remittance receivers' educational background and social class and the way the two interrelate in managing transfers that is decisive. A feature common to migrants, regardless of their different skill levels, concerns the sustainability of their remittances in building up reserves for their eventual return. In many cases where investment in real estate or businesses was remotely controlled, this evaporated into thin air once the sender came back. How this

43 \ Many highly skilled returnees emphasised the desire to 'develop home' as one of their motivations to return. This fits the discourse of the Ghanaian state (e.g. year of return), the Senegalese government (e.g. diaspora engagement programmes) and the German (as well as other EU) states—for instance, their Migration for Development programme. However, most cases encountered showed that there is a discrepancy between the hopes, their everyday experiences and their contribution to the development of their countries of origin.

affected the reintegration process at the social, economic or political level was yet again dependent on the respective characteristics and the social fabric of the receiving communities.

This, in turn, finally illustrates the multidimensional impacts and the crucial role of the lack of legal pathways for transnational movements—such as trips home—regarding individual, community and geopolitical aspects. The counter-example—those with a legal status abroad—also proves the relevance of this matter. The common characteristic of the few returnees whom we encountered who have managed to build and maintain houses and businesses in Ghana, the Gambia or Senegal was their ability to engage in cyclical return: They were able to uphold a stable amount of income from abroad, to personally check their investments and to commute back and forth to their respective, multiple places of residence. The positive impact on development and family sustenance of such cyclical return is only possible with a legal migration status, which allows people to circulate. Yet, based on the conditions of AVRR schemes, for instance, circulation is not the goal of the states in the Global North, which directly questions their real interest in development. Just as for the analytical challenges to define the sustainability of return and reintegration programmes within a bipolar model—namely migration versus return—the solution for migration policies might lie in reconceptualising normative and unrealistic models—and to replace them with a more-descriptive model of circular migration and transnational networks.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AOF	<i>Afrique Occidentale Française</i>	AOF
APRC	<i>Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (The Gambia)</i>	APRC
AVRR	<i>Assisted voluntary return and reintegration</i>	AVRR
BICC	<i>Bonn International Center for Conversion</i>	BICC
BMZ	<i>German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development</i>	BMZ
CBO	<i>Community-based organisation</i>	CBO
CFA	<i>West African Franc</i>	CFA
ECOWAS	<i>Economic Community of West African States</i>	ECOWAS
EU	<i>European Union</i>	EU
GDP	<i>Gross domestic product</i>	GDP
HDI	<i>United Nations Human Development Index</i>	HDI
INGO	<i>International Non-governmental Organisation</i>	INGO
IOM	<i>International Organization for Migration</i>	IOM
NGO	<i>Non-governmental Organisation</i>	NGO
OECD	<i>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</i>	OECD
UNDP	<i>United Nations Development Programme</i>	UNDP

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