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# West Africans in the Netherlands\*

Magali Chelipi-den Hamer



Source: Reuters – Photo: Mike Hutchings

*Everyone is a foreigner somewhere...*

abroad for business reasons, being put in jail, witnessing violence, fear and panic. For Amani, the trigger was an encounter with a friend. When he met him, he was in jail in Nigeria for having published a controversial article. 'My friend was a professional boxer who lived in the US, but who regularly came back to Nigeria. He told me that I did not deserve the kind of treatment I was getting. He told me that even if I did not like the idea of leaving my country, it was the best option for me. He arranged everything. Because he had to box in Germany, he could get me a three-month visa and a plane ticket to Frankfurt. Once in Germany, I filed an asylum claim. When I learnt that it was rejected, I took a train to the Netherlands. I did not know anyone there'. For Aissatou, the trigger was fear. After witnessing her mother's death in her village (killed in a crossfire) and the unexplained disappearance of her father and husband (both known locally as political activists), she fled to Conakry and found shelter in a convent. One of the nuns helped her and her child to flee the country by having them board a boat with the help of a crew member. There were two main reasons (not mutually exclusive) why respondents left their country: 1) they wanted to seize an opportunity giving them better life prospects; 2) they did not feel safe enough to stay where they were. In the study, some respondents had time to secure money, documentation and travel plans, while others left in a hurry, and could hardly secure anything.

## Mobility

The choice of destination country depended on which opportunity respondents followed (work, studies, relationships), where this opportunity led them, and which information they had of the context in the country of destination. In the study, half of the respondents ended up in the Netherlands by accident. They could have ended up anywhere if other circumstances had applied. Some stayed first in other European countries (France, Germany, the UK, Spain), then followed a lead that led them to the Netherlands; others ended up in the Netherlands after following advice; some were bitterly misinformed. The other half came to the Netherlands for a specific reason (business, marriage); they could not have ended up in another place. In the case of Ibrahim, for example, he ended up in the Netherlands because the Utrecht second-hand car market was well known in his country of origin, where he used to work in his uncle's car business. He was therefore used to travel to the Netherlands for short periods to buy second-hand vehicles and to export them back. It is during his fourth trip that he got robbed. 'I had 15,750 US\$ with me, mostly my own money and my uncle's, but also from investors, 4,000 US\$, which I had to pay back. I could not go back with debts, so I decided not to return after the expiration of my visa. I started working and saving to pay back the investors'.

## Different Types of Support Networks

Respondents received different types of support from different types of groups at different stages of their migration. They were able to activate certain resources at certain points in time but not others, and whom they relied on varied across contexts and individuals. They faced different situations and opportunities at both sending and destination country; they had different life stories, different individual characteristics, different personal networks, and hence different obligations related to them. In this study, familial networks have played the most important role in making the journey happen, while extra-familial networks have played the most important role in making respondents' stay last in the Netherlands and in helping them to cope once they were in difficulty (to the exception of cases of family forming where familial support was dominant).

In their first years in the Netherlands, many respondents lacked the extensive networks that crossed origin and ethnicity. They were usually not comfortable in addressing the Dutch institutions directly, and relied on various intermediaries to make the liaison. They rarely went to the doctor alone for instance. They first sought advice within their community, and then went to the doctor with someone they knew. Intermediaries offered direct assistance or helped respondents to liaise with formal institutions. Fatou used the services of an association to divorce an abusive husband. She had left Ghana to marry him but while she was quite an independent woman there, her husband did not want her to work in the Netherlands. He was constantly diminishing her, and even beat her up from time to time. 'I left my husband several times. I used to live on the streets with my children, or I stayed at friends' places for short periods. But I always felt obliged to go back to him. I did not have much here and my husband was much more introduced than me in the Dutch society. He could play with the rules much better'. Fatou was eventually helped by an association that provided her with shelter and legal advice. She divorced her husband and received custody of her children after a bitter fight. In this study, legal and medical advice seemed to be mostly provided by West African and non-West African institutions; daycare and food by religious institutions; and mid-term accommodation, moral and social support, by compatriots and by other Sub-Saharan Africans.

I found little evidence of financial assistance. Financial support from strong tie and familial networks was usually limited to the purchasing of the plane ticket and to administrative costs for the visa. Weak tie networks activated in the Netherlands – associations, churches, individuals – had limited resources and they rarely used them on an individual basis. Respondents mentioned several times that West African associations were less enthusiastic today than a few decades ago, partly because most of them faced financial problems, partly because members were quite disconnected from the reality of the newcomers, partly because of financial strains.

Moral support often lasted. Most respondents have kept regular contacts with their family in their country of origin, and quite a few are visited on a regular basis by parents, siblings and children.

## Institutionalized Support: Scope, Chain Assistance and Emerging Obligations

Surveyed institutions in the Netherlands usually made a strong point in minimizing their role in migrants' decision-making. They limited themselves to information and contact providers; they did not choose for the migrant. They considered migrants active agents of their own migration process and expected them to choose the one option that fits them best. As a legal worker pointed out: 'What I do is explain to rejected asylum seekers the possibilities of returning to their country of origin, unless there is a risk for them to go back. I also explain to them the possibility to go somewhere else in Europe and to file another asylum claim. There are still technical breaches in the Dublin Convention,<sup>16</sup> and in practice, someone can still open a second asylum procedure in a second European country without being persecuted. I also tell them that even if they decide to stay irregularly, they need a minimum amount of money'.

Support is usually limited in time and in response to a specific need (such as food, short-term accommodation, daycare, or legal advice). Migrants usually sever their connections with support groups once their problem is solved. Churches and associations may provide accommodation for a few nights, but no more: first, they cannot afford more; second, they do not want to create a dependency. As a Dutch priest explained: 'We may help migrants for one or two nights by accommodating them in hotels or at other aid institutions. We do not have our own shelters, so we rent rooms for a few nights or we send migrants to free houses. We do not provide long-term accommodation'.

In most cases, there is no expectation of payback. The gap is just too huge between newcomers in need and support groups to make any kind of payback possible. Most non-West African supportive networks base their support on altruism, and humanitarian principles. Bounded solidarity seems to be quite limited at the institutional level. Many West African NGOs expect migrants to pay a monthly fee to be able to get benefits. When they provide a service, they expect everyone to pay the fee. There are indeed some exceptions, but West African institutions generally protect themselves from excessive demands.

Support networks interact with each other and there are many examples of chain assistance, i.e. support groups referring their clients to other support groups and getting their clients from others. Non State institutions interact on a regular basis with State and non-State institutions: for medical assistance, with hospitals, GGD, doctors, medical associations; for social services, with public welfare, associations, churches, community leaders; for legal assistance, with the police, immigration services, legal council, associations; for accommodation, with associations, churches and individuals. Several respondents pointed out that rejected asylum seekers were directly referred to non-State institutions by immigration officials. 'Dutch officials give our address to rejected asylum seekers. Migrants come to Amsterdam with a piece of paper, show it to a bus driver, and end up here'.

Acknowledging the existence of referrals and interactions between support groups says little about the quality of chain assistance. I heard several times that people were misinformed and wrongly assumed that an institution had the capacity to offer a service (this was especially true when migrants were given tips about shelter possibilities). The capacity for help is also limited. There are indeed churches and NGOs that attempt to provide the basics to newcomers in need, but there are only a few, with limited resources, and they cannot absorb everything.

In sum: institutional support networks have an influence on migrants' lives once they are in the Netherlands but this influence is limited in time and scope and should not be over-estimated. Support is for a limited period of time, in response to a specific need. Bounded solidarity is quite limited at the institutional level. Associations and churches help, 'according to their means', and support usually does not last. They generally limit themselves in delivering a specific service and in providing contacts.

## Social Interactions among West Africans:

Scope of Support, emerging Obligations As noted earlier, familial networks played quite an important role in making the journey happen. They usually did not expect any payback per se, unless they took a loan to pay for the journey, in which case respondents were expected to reimburse. Yet, a certain form of payback occurred. Rather than strict reimbursements, respondents 'rewarded' those who helped them, 'according to their means'. This took the forms of financial remittances, goods or services, and benefited their benefactor directly or indirectly.

An implicit set of obligations emerge when one is given the opportunity to migrate to Europe. Nearly all respondents who were helped by a family member in their journey to Europe paid in turn for a younger brother to get to Europe or the US. In the case of Mossi, his older sister paid for his plane ticket. She used to work as a nurse at a hospital in Burkina Faso, and she was married to a wealthy man. 'She considered that it was a gift and she did not expect anything in return.'

Sub-Saharan African migration in the Netherlands, has never been a main focus of research among scholars, probably because of its relative small size compared to other migrant groups. In 2004, Sub-Saharan African migrants accounted for 150,000 legal residents in the Netherlands, which represent five per cent of the migrants legally registered in country. There have been a few studies on Ghanaians, Nigerians, Cape Verdeans, Somalians and Ethiopians, but compared to the bulk of literature on Turks, Surinamese, Moroccans, and Dutch Antilleans – the ethnic groups that together account for one million residents and that consequently receive the most attention – there are not many. Sub-Saharan African migrants remain marginal in number and in policy considerations. There are however several rationales for studying Sub-Saharan African migrants in the Netherlands: 1) They arrived fairly recently in a context of strict migration policies (1980s-1990s) and they therefore exhibit different integration patterns than migrants who came four decades ago, at a time when the legislation was much more flexible than today; 2) they tend to leave the Netherlands after a certain period of time. In 2004, the number of Sub-Saharan Africans leaving the Netherlands surpassed the number of Africans coming in; 3) their migration pattern is different from conventional expectations based on the explanatory effect of historical ties and social linkages in the migration process. The settlement of Burkinabes, Malians, Guineans, Senegalese, Nigerians in and around Dutch cities reflects the need to search for new explanations for these migration patterns.

This contribution is based on a research undertaken in 2005 that explored West African migration patterns with a focus on the networks that facilitated their journey and their initial stages of integration. What triggered their departure from their country of origin, and what type of support networks could respondents rely on? What circumstances did they face once in the Netherlands, and what type of networks were they able to activate? What was the scope of support, and to what extent have obligations emerged from such social interactions? The study shows that respondents received different types of support, from different types of groups, at different stage of their migration, which shaped the distinctive features of their individual trajectories. An interesting aspect is the support settled West African migrants give to West African newcomers, which suggests the existence of a regional collective identity. Limited resources, however, pose serious constraints on this type of support.

## Who are we talking about?

Most respondents were young men in their late twenties when they arrived in the Netherlands. Most had an occupation and had attended post-secondary school in their country of origin. In the Netherlands, the majority experienced periods of illegal residency (expired visa or rejected asylum claims) and mentioned working without a residence permit. Some succeeded in securing documentation relatively quick but some were without documents for quite a long period. When legal status was secured, it was mainly by marrying a legal resident or by working in the formal sector at the time when work permit was disconnected from residence permit.

## Reasons to Leave, Trigger, Choice of Destination Country

The variety of individual stories that came out of the interviews shows the multiplicity of migration patterns. They also show that respondents were able to activate certain resources at certain points in time, and that these resources were not homogeneous across contexts and individuals. Migration was usually triggered by a special event: an encounter with a key person, the need go

When I was settled, I rewarded her. Like any normal African'. Mossi migrated in France for his studies when he was in his mid-twenties. A few years later, he moved to the Netherlands. His sister was a key player in his migration by paying for his plane ticket and by offering him the opportunity to go to Europe. In turn, Mossi was a key player in making his brother's migration happen: 'I was the first to migrate in my family. Now I have a brother who migrated too. I helped him, financially and administratively. He is currently studying in France'. Another example is the case of Youssou. His oldest brother paid for his plane ticket to help him go to Europe. When he was finally settled in the Netherlands, Youssou started sending money regularly to his family. A few years later, he facilitated the trip of his young brother to the US. 'I do not expect any reimbursement for that'.

Interestingly, these examples show that respondents did not facilitate migration in the country where they were in. In fact, many respondents made a strong point in facilitating migration while avoiding burden. Ouattara's brother was living in Germany. He arranged everything for him to come to the Netherlands, the plane ticket and the visa. However, he did not want Ouattara to go to Germany: 'not to be too much of a burden for him'. Solidarity stayed bounded, 'according to the means'. This gives another insight into chain migration theory. By suggesting that international migration is self-sustaining through the use of social networks, it is assumed that once someone has physically migrated, the ties he has with his social network transform into a resource that can be potentially activated by the persons he knows. The costs and risks associated with migration lower for them, as they expect the first migrant to take care of them in the new country. The three examples presented above illustrate the self-sustainment of international migration, but show that it is not necessarily confined to the same country. More West African migrants in the Netherlands do not necessarily lead to more West African newcomers in the Netherlands, as the theory tends to suggest, but may lead to more West African newcomers in Germany, France or the US. This highlights the difficulty of managing migrants' flows, making provisions and controlling borders at the state level.

In the first stages of integration, several respondents were helped by West African individuals, and mentioned in turn that it was because of their personal story that they were now keen on helping other West Africans. Respondents were newcomers themselves, ten years ago, and they know that starting a new life in Europe is far from easy for an African. Solidarity emerged from a sense of shared experience, and was generally bounded by the limits of the Sub-Saharan African community at large, which crossed country, language, and religion. During fieldwork, I heard stories of a Ghanaian helping a Ugandan, a Malian helping a Burkinabe, a Nigerian helping a Malian. As a Nigerian respondent explained: 'I hosted a Malian once, for a few days. Someone had given him my address. We could not really communicate properly as he spoke only French. He wanted to register for a master's degree program but he was short on finance. He was expecting money from Mali but it was slow to come. I eventually linked him up to a Camerounese association. I knew they spoke French so I introduced him to them. I usually try to provide networks so newcomers can move on'.

We already mentioned the importance of providing contacts. By helping 'according to their means' and by facilitating interactions with other individuals and support groups, they assume migrants eventually move on and get out of their precarious situation.

There are indeed personal costs involved when supporting migrants: 'I had people who needed an address for arranging their papers, so I agreed to register them at my home address. I also sometimes offered temporary accommodation to students, before they are able to get a room in campus. Of course it is a cost for me. The more the people, the more tax and the more electricity. I never collected anything from anyone, you know, this is part of the deal when you help people, but I remember having to force people to remove

their names from my address once they were settled and once they had their documents. They would not do it otherwise!'

Like institutionalized support, individual support is also limited in time and scope. One reason is that most good-willed individuals have families and cannot really bear much extra cost in addition to their own expenses. Support was limited to short-term accommodation, contact provider and general advice. In rare cases, it involved some petty cash. Interestingly, support was never been taken for granted and varied widely from individual to individual. One respondent had to call the brother of a friend in Germany to find temporary accommodation in France. He clearly felt a need to be introduced in a social network to be able to make his claim.

While an implicit set of obligations emerged among family members when it came to facilitating the journey, there was usually no obligation emerging from the interactions between individuals and West African newcomers. The socio-economic gap was just too huge between the two groups.

In sum: West African migrants do indeed assist newcomers and help them to cope once in the Netherlands. Bounded solidarity emerges from a sense of shared experience, as the same migrants who provide support today were provided help ten years ago. Yet, assistance was limited in time and scope, and findings can be compared with the ones in the previous section. Support was limited in time and to a specific service (short-term accommodation, contact provider and general advice), and varied widely from individual to individual.

## Mobiliteit

### Conclusion

This contribution has explored the influence of support networks in the migration process of West African migrants to the Netherlands and how these contribute to the distinctive features of individual trajectories of migration. Respondents received different support at different stages of their migration. Strong tie and familial networks played the most important role in making the journey happen, while weak tie and extra-familial networks played the most important role in making respondents' stay last in the Netherlands, and in helping them to cope once they were in difficulty. Institutional support networks had an influence on respondents' lives in their initial stages of integration in the Netherlands but this influence was limited in time and scope and should not be over-estimated. Support was for a limited period of time, in response to a specific need. Bounded solidarity was quite limited at the institutional level. Associations and churches helped, 'according to their means', and support usually did not last. They generally limited themselves to delivering a specific service and to providing contacts. At the individual level, solidarity emerged from a sense of shared experience, and was generally bounded by the limits of the Sub-Saharan African community at large, which crossed country, language, and religion. If they previously received help from family, there is the mute expectation that respondents return the favor by facilitating the migration of another family member (usually a younger brother). There was no such implicit set of obligations when respondents received help from support groups once in the Netherlands.

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\* Based on this research, two articles are forthcoming:

-Chelpi-den Hamer, M. (2008) 'Migration Patterns and Influence of Support Networks: A Case Study of West Africans in the Netherlands, *Gender, Technology and Development (in press)*

-Chelpi-den Hamer, M. and V. Mazzucato (2009) 'The Role of Support Networks in the Initial Stages of Integration: The Case of West African Newcomers in the Netherlands', *International Migration (forthcoming)*

\*\*The Dublin Convention provides that an asylum claim can only be filed in one European country, and the results of the claim procedure are valid in all EU countries.