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Exploring assumptions behind ‘voluntary’ returns from North Africa



Key points

- Over the last few years, the IOM, with funding from European states, has implemented ‘humanitarian’ return programmes for migrants stranded in North Africa. It has been assumed that the risk of further mistreatment, together with ‘reintegration’ projects, will convince returnees to remain in their country of origin, or that, if not persuaded to stay, returnees will at least decide to obtain a visa to travel – which will ultimately lead to safer migration.
- Recent ethnographic research conducted with returnees in Senegal emphasises that many returns from North Africa following ill-treatment are undertaken by migrants’ own means, without IOM support. This underlines the gravity of the abuses towards migrants in the region.
- Despite the abuses they endured in North Africa, research participants formed new plans of migration upon return.
- Leaving with a visa appeared unrealistic due to the costs involved.
- New dangerous routes are therefore likely to be taken by many returnees in the future, rather than migration becoming safer.
- The abuses towards migrants on new routes will create the need for more IOM ‘humanitarian’ activities. However, making migration safer requires preventing mistreatment towards migrants in North Africa.

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Background

One of the features of sub-Saharan migrants’ recent journeys across the Sahel and the Maghreb over the last few years has been the mistreatment of those who attempt to reach Europe. In Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Niger, sub-Saharan migrants have been abused, and sometimes even tortured, in official and non-official detention centres and at border points. They have also been the objects of forced labour by various groups, as well as sometimes being abandoned in the Sahara.ⁱ

This situation has led many migrants to return to their home country, sometimes assisted by international ‘humanitarian’ return programmes. Returns have typically been undertaken

through the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Assisted Voluntary Return programmes. These programmes aim to facilitate the return of, as well as sustainably reintegrate, migrants who are unable or unwilling to stay in host or transit countries and wish to voluntarily return to their countries of origin. Assisted Voluntary Returns have been implemented by the IOM since 1979, originally from Europe and progressively from other regions of the world and largely with funding from European and US governments. Worldwide in 2017, over 72,000 migrants returned to their country of origin as part of these programmes; among these returns, over two-thirds



Map of North Africa

took place from the European Economic Area (EEA). In practice, however, the voluntary nature of Assisted Voluntary Return has been challenged because for many stranded migrants, rejected asylum-seekers or irregular migrants, returning with the IOM is the only option or alternative to deportation. Additionally, the efficacy of reintegration programmes in many regions of return has been put into question.

Between 2017 and 2018, 5,300 migrants came back to Senegal from Niger, Libya, Morocco, and Mali through IOM Assisted Voluntary Return programmes.ⁱⁱ Besides returns themselves, as part of the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migration Protection and Reintegration in Africa funded by the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the IOM has organised 'transit centres' in Niger to temporarily accommodate and assist those opting for 'voluntary return', and has also organised awareness-raising activities on migration paths and psychological support for returnees back home.

Assumptions and claims have been made by European states and the IOM regarding activities such as Assisted Voluntary Return, transit centres, and awareness-raising activities on migration routes. These activities have been framed in humanitarian terms as 'protecting' migrants and 'saving lives'. Simultaneously, it has been assumed that migrants initially leave in ignorance of the dangers of the journey, and that the atrocities returnees are subjected to while travelling will deter them from leaving again. In short, it is assumed that the risk of further mistreatment, together with 'reintegration' programmes, will convince them to remain in their country of origin. Or, alternatively, if they are not convinced to stay put, it is claimed that returnees will at least decide to leave 'regularly' (i.e. with a visa), which will eventually lead to safer migration.

Recent ethnographic research I conducted with returnees in Senegal challenges these assumptions about 'voluntary returns'. The study involved an exploration of the daily lives in Dakar of migrants who came back from North Africa. Research participants, who were found through a standard snowball technique, returned from Libya, Niger, Morocco and Tunisia in 2016 and 2017. They were all men in their twenties and thirties, and were originally either from the Dakar suburbs or from rural areas of the country.

The study draws mainly on two bodies of research. First, recent historical and anthropological analysis of African mobility

emphasises the continued individual agency of those who aspire to migrate. Migration is often conceived of as an adventure, a moral experience, or even a rite of passage to become a full social adult. As such, it is considered to require a certain set of physical and mental skills, as well as the ability to take risks (e.g. Bredeloup 2013; Alpes 2017). Then, research on the rising migration industry (Sørensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013) highlights the propensity of this business to generate itself (e.g. Andersson 2014). Scholarship on the IOM

in parallel points to the recent expansion of the organisation's humanitarian activities (e.g. Bradley 2017).

Research findings

Mistreatment towards migrants in North Africa

Besides returns undertaken by the IOM, the research highlights the existence of self-organised returns – that is, migrants who came back from North Africa by themselves and at their own cost, without support from the IOM. Among them some had never heard of the Assisted Voluntary Return programmes, or even of the IOM as an organisation. The existence of self-organised returns underlines the gravity of the abuses perpetrated against sub-Saharan Africans in the region. Indeed, similar to IOM returnees, these migrants recounted experiences such as food deprivation and torture in Libyan and Moroccan detention centres, forced labour in the Sahara, and the extraction of large sums of money by state and non-state agents in Niger and Libya. Returnees overall insisted on testifying about the abuses that they had endured, as well as on showing the marks left on their bodies (including bullet wounds). Migrants came back because they did not have the strength and/or the financial resources to continue the journey. Returns were undertaken after several months, in some cases years, of travel and work in the West and North African regions, and after having spent en route sometimes up to CFA 700,000 (about £900).

How and where 'reintegration' projects can be accessed

Training and professional 'reintegration', funded by European states and involving the local government, were planned and advertised by the IOM following Assisted Voluntary Returns. However, once back in Senegal the overwhelming majority of research participants did not find a 'reintegration' project. Some of the IOM returnees said that promises had been made to them when leaving North Africa but that they had not been contacted since. Generally, returning migrants, who had sometimes heard of the existence of 'reintegration' projects through the Senegalese media, were keen on joining such schemes. However, they did not know how, nor where, these could be accessed.



Street scene in Niamey, Niger. Credit: Gustave Deghilage (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

As regards, more specifically, the planned involvement of their state in the delivery of 'reintegration', returnees were sceptical: the plight of returnees was perceived as not being a concern of the current government. The latter was similarly seen as unlikely to challenge the obstacles put in migrants' way or the abuses perpetrated towards them.

A necessary discretion

A key feature of research participants' lives post-return is the discretion they usually maintained in their neighbourhoods on both their homecoming and the sufferings they had endured en route. In contrast to the impression given by IOM's publicity on their awareness-raising about the dangers on migration routes, targeted at potential migrants and involving returnees, returns from North Africa and migrants' experiences were not discussed publicly. These aspects were only disclosed within the confines of the family or with close friends.

Discretion on returns and on the difficulties encountered in North Africa was necessary in part because of the frequent social disapproval of overland migration. Ill-treatment towards migrants in Libya has been widely covered in the media in Senegal. As a result, many consider that taking the Libyan route is foolish, and parents often tell their children to only leave by plane. Besides returnees having often left against parental advice, aborted migration trajectories had caused significant loss of resources for families. Parents frequently had to find money while their children were en route to allow them to pursue the journey, cross borders, as well as to leave detention centres. In fact, the economic and social consequences of returns for families, together with the need to generate an income, convinced many returnees to find accommodation in Dakar upon return, as opposed to joining the family home. Discretion on returns and the experiences en route was also essential for returnees to avoid challenges to masculinity. Indeed, despite the media coverage of migrants' situation in Libya and rumours of problems in other countries, some youths questioned the veracity of the stories they heard. Their conviction was that real 'men' should be able to overcome the obstacles on migration paths. This view was reinforced by the successful cases of arrivals to Europe, as well the narrative of individual success of those who made it.

Under these circumstances, returnees habitually did their best to reintegrate in the Dakar social fabric and give the impression that they had not left in the first place. Preventing returns becoming public was often possible because departures themselves had been kept private; as in other African contexts, migration projects in Senegal are usually kept confidential until arrival at the final destination so as to avoid others' jealousy and attempts at preventing departure. Returnees' focus was largely on generating an income. Maintaining a social life, including thinking about marriage prospects, was often considered secondary. Returnees' daily routines in this respect stand in contrast with those of

other Dakar youths who normally invest considerable amounts of time in both work and socialising. To accumulate resources, many returnees came back to their previous income-generating activities. These were often low-paying jobs such as working as a shoemaker, as a labourer on building sites, or street selling.

New plans for migration

Despite the abuses endured, the majority of returnees sought new plans of migration. New plans of departure were often framed in legal terms in the sense that returnees wanted to avoid the road that they had previously taken and instead leave with a visa. Simultaneously, travelling in this way was unrealistic for most research participants: direct visa applications from Senegalese nationals to European consulates are usually rejected. The safer way to get a visa is considered to be through a middleman. However, this, together with a plane ticket, amounts to about CFA 3 million (£4,000). Some of the returnees who had come back from Libya therefore talked of trying their luck via Morocco.

As seen, 'reintegration' projects were requested by returnees. However, aspirations and ideals to go to Europe seemed to be stronger than anything these 'reintegration' projects might offer. Research participants also considered risk-taking – including the possibility of physical death – as integral to the experience of migration. Thus, although the atrocities perpetrated in North Africa against sub-Saharan Africans have led to the emergence of new parental narratives against overland migration, these abuses and the necessity to backtrack have often not changed returnees' mindsets in the sense of deterring them from embarking on new journeys. Rather, participants displayed in their daily life endurance and mental strength, as well as hope in finally being able to succeed in reaching Europe. Return was considered more of a temporary stage of the migration process than the end of it.

Conclusion

As discussed above, 'voluntary' returns, including the experience of violence in North Africa, did not translate into aspirations of staying put, as hoped for by European states and the IOM. Also, the IOM's narrative on the need for migrants to only

leave with a visa does not fit well with the reality of European visa allocation in West Africa. One of the implications of these findings is that new dangerous routes are likely to be taken by many returnees in the future. And with the development of new routes, unscrupulous individuals ready to make a trade out of migration are likely to target travellers. In parallel, European states are likely to apply more pressure on their north African counterparts to prevent arrivals into Europe, with the risk that migrants continue to be detained and mistreated as part of international 'efforts' to 'manage migration'. This in turn creates the need for more so-called 'humanitarian' activities, such as IOM-assisted returns, transit centres, and so on.

The multiplication of 'humanitarian' activities might protect migrants en route and save lives, but will they in themselves make migration safer? Making migration safer would entail, for instance, facilitating visa applications to allow for documents to be obtained without a broker. Also, and importantly, it would involve preventing mistreatment towards migrants en route. This could start with European states and the IOM reflecting on, and addressing, the effects of the externalisation of European border control on the human rights and security of migrants in North Africa. In a context where abuses to some extent function as a deterrence measure, and where acts of violence towards migrants allow for the expansion of IOM 'humanitarian' activities, will European states and the IOM tackle this question?

Endnotes

i The alarming human rights situation of sub-Saharan migrants in the region has been documented by organisations such as Amnesty International. For an overview, see:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/12/mena-governments-must-end-discriminatory-crackdowns-and-abuse-of-migrants/>

ii <https://migrationjointinitiative.org/sites/default/files/files/pdf/factsheetoim-senegal2019.pdf>

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Dakar region during the rainy season. Credit: Anne-Line Rodriguez.

Cover photo: View of Dakar, Senegal. Credit: Jeff Attaway (CC BY 2.0)