

A 'final destination'?

Eleanor Staniforth

Centre for Migration Policy Research, Swansea University

Challenging the idea of 'settlement' in sub-Saharan African 'transit migration' to Europe

1. Introduction

Research into migration has typically taken a sedentary approach to the phenomenon, focusing on the departure & integration stages & neglecting the journey.

The 'transit migration' concept has become increasingly salient with the heightened focus on irregular entry to Europe in EU policy & has been used to justify attempts to prevent migrants from approaching Europe.

The concept has drawn researchers' attentions to the journey, but work has thus far been limited to migrants' movements outside the EU & the trail has been lost once migrants enter Europe, with the assumption being that migrants automatically 'settle' upon arrival.

This study posits that migration is a much more open-ended & contingent process than is currently recognised in research & policy.

This research aims to shed light on migrants' processes of decision-making once they have entered Europe, with regard to their intentions for settlement, onward movement or return to their country of origin.



CC licence: Flickr user: Petits Detachés

5. Talking about the future

The majority of participants aim to return to Africa one day. In some cases, this is a short-term goal whereas others intend to return upon retirement.

Permanent settlement is seen as undesirable by the majority who intend to come to Europe, work for a number of years & make some money for greater security & comfort 'at home'. Many are forced into longer stays than they envisaged due to European policies on regularisation (e.g. France's 10 year norm).

"Europe is for the Europeans. The weather, the culture... we can't... Even if we have work, something's always missing." (I, 35, Ivory Coast)

However, most participants aim to settle in the medium-term in a place where they can achieve their goals. Migrants feel pressure to have achieved a certain level of stability in Europe before planning a return to Africa: they cannot return 'empty-handed'.

The ideal for most participants could be described as 'circular migration', that is the ability to circulate freely & legally between Africa & Europe for trading, work, or to visit family.

Settlement is highly contingent upon changing contextual circumstances. Those who may have appeared to have 'permanently settled' 5 years ago are now reconsidering their position in light of the Europe-wide recession & Africa's improving economy.

2. Research questions

1. How do sub-Saharan African migrants frame their intended destinations before reaching Europe?
2. What are their expectations of life in Europe & to what extent does the reality coincide?
3. Why do migrants move on from their initial point of entry to Europe? Or, in the opposite case, why do they decide to stay?
4. What factors govern their decision to leave & their 'choice' of subsequent destination?
5. How do migrants talk about the future? Is there an intention for onward movement?
6. To what extent can migrants be said to 'settle' in Europe?

4. Attitudes towards onward movement within Europe

Why stay?

Age: societal pressures to settle/ exhaustion/ feeling that they have 'moved around enough'

"I really have to leave [Spain], honestly. Because I mean, when you... you can be planning, planning, planning, sometimes you also think about, I mean, your age. You know? I'm not yet married." (E, 37, Nigeria)

Linguistic ties: extra effort of learning new language seen as 'time wasted'

Place investment: 'better the devil you know' attitude/ no desire to 'start again from zero'

Social networks: contacts provide support/ increased opportunities for work

Place attachment: feeling 'at home'

"It's not just the language. In fact, it's like I'm at home [in Paris]. You can find all the foodstuffs you want, there are other Africans to comfort you [...], even if you want to send a message to Africa, it's quickly done" (Y, 36, Nigeria/Benin)

Financial situation: no money to leave/ in employment

Legal issues: need to accumulate uninterrupted residence for regularisation (France)/ need to work & pay social security to renew papers (Spain)

Hope: that economic situation will improve/ regularisation will come soon

Why move on?

Economic situation: lack of jobs/ poverty

Reality vs. expectation: experience of Europe on the ground does not match positive expectations prior to arrival – migrants continue to seek 'the real Europe'

"We here in Europe don't have wives, children, money, nothing. [...] I've wasted my whole life here." (M, 24, Mali)

Impossibility of achieving goals: perceived or actual lack of opportunities for work, education or training

Perception of better things elsewhere: greater ease in obtaining regularisation/ more work opportunities

"So I said OK, let me try... then I heard that Spain was giving out documents, so I decided to just come and put in" (J, 39, Nigeria)

Desire for change: adventurism/ desire for new experiences e.g. language learning

Social networks: presence of social networks elsewhere/ desire for distance from compatriots for greater independence

3. Methods

85 semi-structured interviews conducted in Madrid, Spain & Paris, France from June 2012 - June 2013

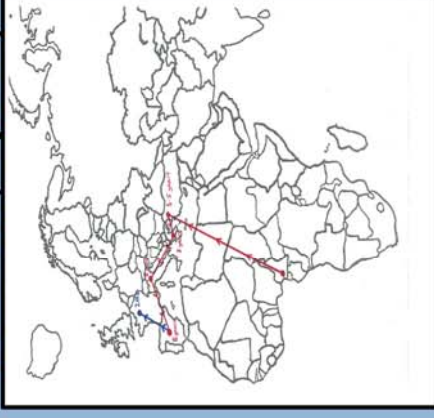
Participants recruited on basis of region of origin (sub-Saharan Africa)

Recruitment through engagement with NGOs & migrant activist groups

Interviews supplemented by observation & informal conversations with other migrants

Evolution of migrant journey 'followed' through continued engagement with participants via telephone, email & social networks

6. Case study: a journey



- 2001: Aged 24, H leaves Cameroon to travel to Turkey to study on the advice of a friend who is living there.
2004: Struggling to adapt & in financial difficulties, H quits his studies & moves on to Greece:

"When an immigrant travels, he has a migration project in mind, and if that migration project hasn't yet been fulfilled, he carries on moving, looking for a place where he can fulfil it, looking for a place where things'll be easier."

2005: Having spent almost 2 years unsuccessfully looking for decent work in Greece, H moves on to Italy.

2007: H decides to move to Spain as a friend tells him there is a lot of work there.

2010: H marries a Spanish woman & obtains regularisation in Spain.

2012 (August): H is studying at university & hasn't considered leaving Spain. He is looking for work & seeking to settle.

2012 (November): H has not yet found work & is starting to consider onward movement to France.

2013 (January): H moves to Paris. He is now working despite having no legal right to do so. He now wants to settle in Paris.
He justifies his change of heart with regards to onward movement thus:

"The economic crisis has followed me through Europe. [...] I can't live somewhere where I can't work. I wouldn't be a man if I just lived off my wife's salary & did nothing all day."

This case study illustrates the constantly changing & open-ended nature of migration. Migrants who once appeared settled may decide to move on as a result of changing economic & social contexts & personal circumstances.

Contact details

Eleanor Staniforth
Email: eleanorstaniforth@gmail.com
Twitter: @E_Staniforth