

# INTRODUCTION

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In a global world in which some 125 million people migrate from one country to another every year, modern African “ethno-national” diasporas are quite different from the “old” black diasporas which historically emerged out of the slave trade.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary migrants are very much in touch with their homelands, to which they often remit money on a regular basis. They also have a political role to play in both their homelands and the countries to which they have migrated. They can contribute to development and reconstruction in the former, especially in impoverished enclaves, island micro-states and war-ravaged countries which are particularly prone to exceptionally high emigration flows. They can also help to alleviate the sufferings of their fellow countrymen at home during humanitarian crises. In a failed state like Somalia, for instance, nationals who took refuge abroad provided a kind of welfare system during the civil war for those of their relatives who had remained in the Horn of Africa after 1991. In the same way, the Malians of Kayes who were living in France demonstrated how important a part expatriates could play by their interventions in Mali during the droughts of 1973 and 1984. And in Lesotho, where a state of famine was declared in April 2002, some analysts argue that the food crisis was caused, not by drought or bad harvests, but by a drop in remittances.

As public aid and structural adjustment programmes have proved unable to develop the continent, the issue is: are remittances going to “save” Africa? Before discussing this question, the author intends to provide a context within which funding from nationals living abroad can be seen as a positive factor. Financial transfers to the homeland by migrants have several advantages for the recipient countries:

- They can contribute to sustainable development since they are more endogenous than international aid;
- Through community networking, remittances can help to reduce poverty and the other detrimental effects on society of a globalisation process dominated by market values. They narrow the trade gap and break the isolation of countries in which foreign investment is low;

- Such transfers assist African countries with debt servicing, increase foreign currency reserves, and partly compensate for the flight of capital. According to the World Bank, the total value of official remittances reached US\$80 billion in 2002, as against US\$60 billion in 1998, and it is likely to continue to rise. This is less than the amount earned by the oil trade, but probably equal to the turnover from drug trafficking. Of course, such inflows cannot be compared with fixed investments. Migrants' financial transfers are not sufficient to pay off the Third World's debt or to reverse the flight of capital from developing countries.<sup>2</sup> But unofficial remittances that are sent via friends, relatives or private courier systems could amount to two or three times the official figure. As private capital flows have declined, they have become the second-largest source of external funding for developing countries after foreign direct investment (FDI);
- Remittances account for a substantial proportion of the incomes of states. In Mali, for instance, they funded 81% of the trade gap and contributed 17% of public aid to development in 1991. Since the 1980s, money sent from abroad has represented three times the average amount provided by official aid in Lesotho. In Cape Verde during the last decade, funds sent home by the diaspora were four times the value of international aid that stood at US\$325 per capita in 1990.

The analysis of the effects of remittances, must also include research at local level. A serious impediment to such a study is that developing countries are not fully aware of the opportunities offered to them by the presence of some of their citizens in other countries, and moreover they do not consider the "brain drain" as a potential asset. Some of them still see their nationals abroad as a nuisance, because migrant communities often represent a political threat to authoritarian regimes at home. The role that African diasporas can play in the development of their countries of origin is not obvious, and is dependent on the way in which they invest their money. Moreover, the contribution of migrant communities to democratic transitions at home remains doubtful. It is also important to remember that remittances can be used to launder money, support terrorist activities and mask the activities of organised crime syndicates.

This study attempts to assess the strategic value that remittances have in African countries situated south of the Sahara. In the first part, the focus is on political interaction between migrant communities and their homelands. Conspiracies, armed struggles and voting lobbies are not the only forms such interventions take: more subtle patterns of politics in exile are developed through ethnic

transnational networks, cultural exchanges and economic influence. All things being equal, the relative significance of remittances to a national economy can confer a political role on a country's diaspora, especially if the contributions made by the expatriates come with conditions.

Yet numbers are not the sole determinant of influence in the homeland, as is shown by the case studies in the second part of this monograph. In micro-states such as Cape Verde, the Comores and Lesotho, which depend heavily on their diasporas, the political and developmental effects of financial transfers are largely contingent on the receptivity of the homeland's government. Any link between migrants' political involvement and political transitions at home is questionable, because internal pressure is the main force for change. In Cape Verde, the diaspora played a major role in bringing to an end the one-party system in 1991 because the state was ready and able to channel remittances towards promoting foreign investment. But in the Comores, the diaspora seems to be as disorganised as the state. Lesotho is an intermediary case. These examples illustrate how difficult it would be to make generalisations on the impact that migrant communities have on governance and development at home.

Moreover, one should be aware of the possible criminal use of diaspora networks for money laundering, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, scams or terrorist activities. The globalisation of mafia-like syndicates, which is analyzed in the third part of this study, can have severe consequences for migrant communities, as in Nigeria. But one should not overemphasise the criminal elements among those Africans who are part of the diaspora. Since the countries of the industrialised world have closed their borders to refugees and migrants, a good number of aliens have become "illegal": that is, they have been denied citizenship or formal residence permits. Yet illegality is different from criminality, illegitimacy or unreliability. The focus of the police on illegal immigrants tends to outlaw any informal economic activities, including the sending of remittances. And cultural stereotypes of foreigners, especially black people do not help industrial countries understand the value of transnational expatriate networks, whether legitimate or criminal.

## Notes

- 1 By referring to diasporas in the plural, as opposed to the singular 'black diaspora', the author refers to migrant communities that have a common origin (such as a national or ethnic background), and that produce trans-national networks connecting them with their homelands. For an historical review, see M-A Pérouse de

Montclos, *Les diasporas africaines et leur pays d'origine*, *Esprit*, 27 (300), 2003, pp114–24.

- 2 In Nigeria alone, the World Bank estimated that US\$15 billion could be found in foreign bank accounts at the end of the 1990s; but, according to other sources, the sum may be as much as US\$55 billion.