Internal migration and rural livelihoods in West Africa

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Introduction

Any research in developing countries that aims to analyse the impact of rural migration on economic development and/or living standards in the area of origin should take into account that the livelihoods of the people involved are characterised by *risk spreading* more than anything else (Stark 1991). As I will try to show in this paper, this is especially valid for rural households in West Africa. Poor rural households in developing countries have three principal options to improve their livelihoods: 1) agricultural expansion/intensification or 'natural resource based activities'; 2) diversification into non-agricultural sources of income or 'non-natural resource based activities'; and 3) migration to other agricultural areas or to urban areas (Carney 1998; Ellis 1998). These are not separate, mutually exclusive paths. The vast majority of rural households or families in West Africa follow at least two of the three strategies simultaneously (Brycesson 1999). Moreover, the three strategies are linked in various ways and should be investigated likewise. This essay focuses on the way rural out-migration in West Africa is linked to the other two rural livelihood options and to different levels of livelihood security. I will use the 'sustainable rural livelihoods' framework, as developed by Scoones (1998) and others (e.g. Carney 1998), to identify gaps in our understanding of the consequences of migration in the area of origin. The geographical focus will be on West Africa.

Historical background & Geographical setting

Mobility is not a new phenomenon in West Africa, but the patterns of mobility have changed radically since the late 19th century. Before the advent of colonial rule, migration patterns mainly consisted of short-distance migration by (groups of) farm households looking for fertile land. Long-distance migration was undertaken by a much smaller flow of traders and (in certain epochs) warriors and slave raiders (Cleveland 1991: 222). According to colonial historians, who projected the Euro-centric model of 'Völkerwanderung' on West Africa, medium to long-distance migrations of larger entities ('Völker') as a result of warfare were also common in the precolonial era. Little empirical evidence has been found to sustain this model, however, and it is most likely that the search for fertile land was the main impetus for migration before the advent of a colonial export oriented economy along the coast of West Africa (Lentz 1994). In the course of the 20th century, short-distance migration of farmers continued, but in addition, rural dwellers started to engage in long-distance migration in search of employment or better agro-ecological conditions (Cleveland 1991: 222). This shift in migration patterns was a response to colonial policies (including taxation, see Weiss 1997), increased labour demand in the coastal export economy, improved infrastructure, transport and communication, deteriorating agro-ecological conditions, crises in the subsistence-oriented agricultural economy and increased cash needs (commoditisation). In the early decades of the 20th century, much of the population movement consisted of 'forced migration' to work in mines and the construction of roads, railways, harbours, etc. (for a Ghanaian case-study, see Thomas 1973).

In the West African interior savannah, a long dry season keeps rural people relatively unproductive for part of the year. In precolonial times, this period was used for celebrations, house maintenance, hunting, fishing, gathering, the fabrication of local crafts and (on a small scale) trading. With the advent of above structural socio-economic changes, seasonal migration became an alternative opportunity (or a force) to make some money in the slack season. Since the late 19th, but especially in the course of the 20th century, the relative importance of domestic agricultural production (including livestock production and other natural resource based activities) in the livelihood portfolios of rural households gradually gave way to non-agricultural income 'at home' as well as 'away' and to income from agricultural labour in neighbouring agro-ecological zones (predominantly seasonal migration from the subsistence oriented interior savannah to the export oriented forest and coastal zones). By the end of the 20th century, on average, about half the income earned by rural households in West Africa still came from agricultural production. This figure excludes remittances from agricultural labour elsewhere and it should be noted that large variations exist across countries and regions (Brycesson 1999).

Sustainable Rural Livelihoods

Before I go into more detail about the relation between migration and rural livelihoods in West Africa, let me introduce the framework of 'sustainable rural livelihoods'. This framework was developed in the late 1990s in a collaboration between the British Department for International

Development (DFID), research institutes (a.o. the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton) and NGOs. A definition of a sustainable rural livelihood is provided by Carney 1998: 4).

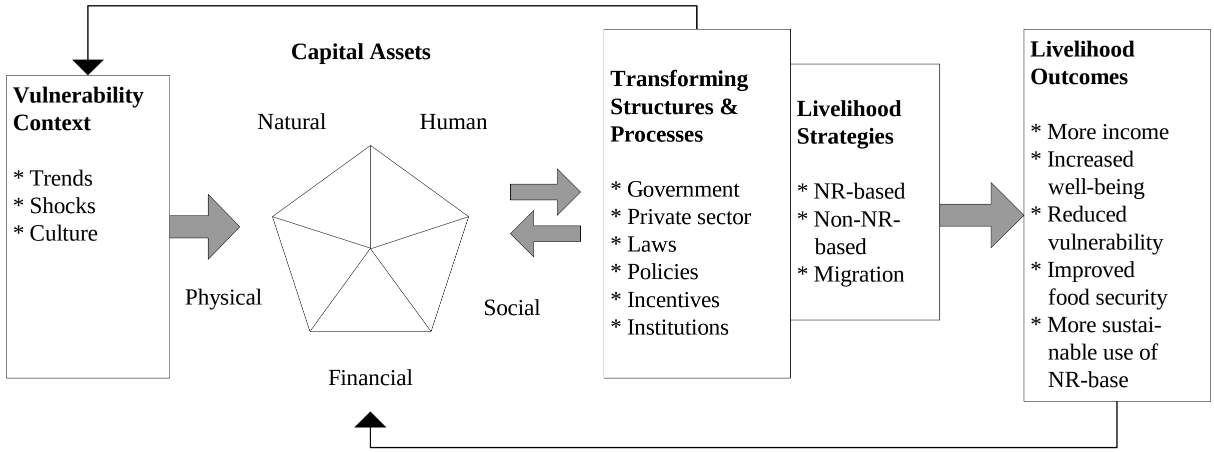
"A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base."

Figure 1 shows the framework of sustainable rural livelihoods. I want to highlight a few aspect that are relevant for this paper:

- The unit of analysis in this framework is the household or extended family/lineage.
- Migration is one of the three livelihood strategies open to rural households.
- The 'livelihood outcome' of migration (and other strategies) flows back into the 'capital assets' of households, which in turn fuels the livelihood strategies in a new cycle.[1] This part of the framework analyses the consequences of migration on rural households' livelihoods.
- By classifying households' assets base in natural, human, social physical and financial capital, the researcher is helped to avoid a narrow focus on one specific aspect of rural people's livelihoods (e.g. crop yields or monetary income).
- Households operate in larger structures (vulnerability context), but they have the capacity to influence these structures (cf. Gidden's structuration model, in Goss and Lindquist 1995).
- The framework as it is presented below is normative (and thus unsuitable for academic research) in the sense that the extreme right box only includes positive livelihood outcomes. By leaving the livelihood outcomes open for real-life situations, the framework becomes suitable for use in academic research.

[1] In a different vocabulary, this idea was already launched almost decades ago by Wood (1981: 340-2).

Figure 1: Sustainable rural livelihoods: Framework



Source: Carney (1998: 5)

Units and level of analysis

When one analyses the relation between migration and rural livelihoods, one looks at people rather than resources or geographical areas. Moreover, one looks at people in their specific entities of social and economic organisation. People do not operate individually, but in larger kin groups. Therefore, the unit of analysis should be the household or – if households are defined narrowly as those eating from the same pot and living in the same house – the geographically dispersed family networks. By focusing on multi-spatial social entities, the analysis moves away from the individualistic models of neo-classical economists. A good analysis should combine the ‘agency’ of behavioural models at the micro-level with a thorough understanding of the political and socio-economic structures at the macro-level within which rural households eke out a living. Structural-historical analyses of unequal development in West Africa provide essential insights in the underlying causes of migration (for Ghanaian case studies, see Thomas 1973; Plange 1979; Shepherd 1981; Sutton 1989; Cleveland 1991).

In empirical migration and livelihood analysis, especially when different types of households are to be compared based on a survey, one has to use an appropriate ‘working definition’ of households. The concept of households varies over space and different research areas may require different definitions. In the set-up of the research, the researcher should make sure that individual tendencies within households (e.g. the seasonal migrant son who uses part of his earnings on personal expenditure) and collective tendencies between households (e.g. inter-household transfers and the temporary ‘exchange’ of children) are not ignored. One can do this is by dedicating separate sections in the survey to these questions, by designing separate surveys for different household members, by unstructured interviews with different household members and perhaps most importantly, by interviewing household members in the area of origin as well as the area of destination.

Risk and livelihood vulnerability in West Africa

To understand the link between migration and development in West Africa, one should realise that the actors in this play face substantial insecurity no matter which of the three broad livelihood path(s) they follow. A subsistence farmer is subject to low output and high climatic risk. When he cultivates cash crops, his average output may be higher, but marketing risks are added to the climatic risk. Moreover, a crop failure does not only mean that he will have no income, it can also mean that he loses his investment (e.g. chemical fertiliser, tractor hire).

Most rural households that engage in non-agricultural income generating activities have very small profit margins, especially when they engage in activities that require little capital investments (more competition). Risk profiles vary per occupation, but are usually high relative to expected yield.

The third option, migration, be it seasonal or non-seasonal, is usually risky, too. Returns to internal migration can be relatively high (as compared to the money they can make if they would stay at home), but employment opportunities for seasonal migrants depend on a variety of factors like climatic conditions, the state of the economy in the receiving area and the flow of seasonal migrants (usually larger after bad agricultural seasons in the source areas). If the migrant's endeavour is not successful, it may even be difficult to maintain him/herself and earn money for the return fare. An advantage of dry seasonal migration in farm households is that it relieves pressure on the available foodstuffs (David 1995: 18).

People who migrate for longer periods also face several risks. Those who migrate to farm independently in other agro-ecological zones often have uncertain land tenure arrangements. If they grow cash crops, they face marketing risks in addition. Agricultural labourers and migrants who engage in non-farm activities (as labourers or as self-employed in the informal sector) are usually among the most vulnerable in the receiving area. Migrants with high levels of formal education are the exception. If they find formal sector employment (e.g. in the civil service), their income is relatively secure.

Many rural households in West Africa nowadays invest in the education (human capital) of at least one child beyond the primary school or secondary school level. By investing in education, rural households actually invest in future migration and deagrarianisation. If this person later finds a secure job, the whole family is expected to benefit. Typically, s/he will pay the school fees for next generation relatives and s/he will assist the family financially when the need arises. Rural households usually also try to make sure that at least one son (in 'virilocal' patrilineal systems where girls marry 'away') stays in the village to farm the family land, to maintain usufruct rights to land, to provide a home to return to for the dispersed family and in many cultural settings to maintain the ethnic identity.

West African households have responded to the high risks in separate livelihood strategies by 'putting their eggs in different baskets'. They try to diversify their livelihoods both occupationally and geographically and in such a way that the covariate risk between individual sources of livelihood is low. Households that only diversify occupationally are still very vulnerable to trigger events that strike at a regional level (e.g. a drought). If mutual supportive links between home and destination (rural as well as urban) are maintained, the geographic dispersion of households reduces livelihood vulnerability.

In the migration process, migrants usually do not abandon farming forever. "They keep one foot on the farm" (Roberts 1997, in de Haan 1999: 29). If they migrate to urban centres, they maintain links with their home communities by regular visits, by securing land tenure rights, by sending remittances, by hosting and helping new migrants from their communities, by rotating with brothers in the home community, by sending their children to stay with relatives at home, etc. Such dispersed kin groups who maintain strong reciprocal ties can be labelled "multi-spatial households" (Tacoli 1998: 70) or "multi-local households" (Cases *et al.* 1985: 8). Caces *et al* divide this type of households in one 'co-residential' and one or more 'shadow' household components, tied together by 'commitments and obligations' (ibid.). In West Africa, a testimony of the geographic dispersion of households, rather than migration of entire households, is that one rarely sees abandoned houses or villages, like for example in Mediterranean countries.

Migration and the sustainability of rural livelihoods

The low returns to labour and the risk-proneness of the natural and economic environment in West Africa have implications for the study of migration. Causes of migration, patterns of migration and especially the consequences of migration cannot be studied in isolation from the other livelihood strategies that people follow and their level of livelihood security. Wood (1981: 341) was already aware of that, but his plea for a more integrative approach to the study of rural migration has not been followed. Within households, resources flow between productive activities. A few examples can illustrate such flows: livestock sales or non-farm income may be used to pay the lorry fare for seasonal migrants; remittance income may be used to invest in non-farm activities and education; dry season non-farm activities may be used to buy farm inputs in the beginning of the rainy season, etc. As I have tried to indicate before, the general level of livelihood security in West Africa *forces* households to combine livelihood options. To make it sound less pessimistic, let me add that West African households seem to be quite good at juggling with sources of livelihood.

For some households, migration is a survival strategy while for others it is an accumulation strategy (see Baker 1995, in Tacoli 1998: 75). In the poorer segments of society, seasonal migrant income and remittances from non-seasonal migrants are used to make ends meet: to fill the food gap in the hungry season in the months prior to the new harvest. Savings and remittances among these households will mainly be used for the upkeep of the family (survival). When households are able to meet food needs through own production, savings and remittances can be used for non-food consumption and investment in education or productive enterprises (accumulation). Davies (1996) provides an excellent analysis of the differential causes and consequences of different livelihood options (including seasonal and permanent migration) between vulnerable and secure households. A similar differentiation of the migration experience according to levels of livelihood security is provided by de Haan (1999: 26) who argues that better-off households are *pulled* out by opportunities while poor households are *pushed* out by rural poverty. From the link between migration and the level of livelihood security, we will move on to the link between migration and the other two (local) livelihood options.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, much migration research focused on the economic effects of migration on source areas of migrants. Research was carried out in European source areas as well as in source areas in developing countries. Much research involved international migration, but some studies, especially in developing countries, also looked at the linkages between rural-urban migrants and their home villages. De Haan (1999) gives an extensive overview of the diverse and contradicting findings. Remittances were found to vary from very small to situations in which rural households depended heavily on migrant income. Other impacts also varied greatly between case studies. De Haan’s main conclusion is that the impact of migration on source areas is context dependent and that no easy generalisations can be made.

As the sustainable rural livelihoods framework in figure 1 indicates, there are multiple links between migration, the asset base of households and indirectly (through the asset base) other livelihood strategies. Earlier research on the impact of migration on source areas was especially interested in the link between migration, remittances (including savings) and agricultural production. In virtually all case studies (except for example Oberai and Singh

1980), no or little positive impact on agricultural production was recorded. Researchers also looked at the link between migration, remittances and other investments. Little money was usually invested in productive activities and if so, it was usually in small enterprises in the service sector. In West African case studies, this was not any different. Most remittances and savings were directed to the maintenance of the family (e.g. Adepoju 1974; and for Ghanaian case studies, see Caldwell 1969; Beals and Menezes 1970; Lentz and Erlmann 1989; Gyasi and Ayivor 1992; Twumasi-Ankrah 1995; Abdulai 1996).

This brings me to an important point in my analysis. It is very questionable whether the multiple links between migration, asset base and non-migration productive activities have been studied adequately. In a context where the subsistence margin is very small, direct survey questions about the use of remittances do not expose the complex interactions and flows between productive activities. Most rural people try to make ends meet from year to year. They juggle with a variety of sources of food and income. In bad agricultural years, migrant income will be needed to supplement farm income (typically by buying food). In good agricultural years, migrant income will first be used to balance decreases in asset base of previous years (typically by increasing the stock of domestic animals that they have sold in bad years). It is only after a sequence of good years that structural investments in agriculture or non-agricultural production can be made. After the Sahelian droughts of the 1970s and the early 1980s, many rural areas in West Africa *have* experienced sequences of good years in the 1990s and even though the region has not experienced a 'Green Revolution' like parts of Asia, farmers in many areas in West Africa have been able to improve their agricultural performance, for example by investing in animal traction and improved soil and water management. Simultaneously, rural households in West Africa have diversified their livelihoods to become less vulnerable to climatic stress. Future research should analyse the role of remittances in these two processes in a more in-depth and longitudinal way. In one of the rare cases where this happened, migrant income was found to be a necessary condition for *in situ* development (Tiffen 1995). The sustainable rural livelihoods framework seems to be a suitable tool for such an analysis.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show why research into the consequences of migration on source areas in poor and risk-prone environments should focus on the *multiple links* between migration on the one hand and in situ livelihood options on the other. Simple survey analysis (structured questionnaires) may not be sufficient if a thorough understanding of the flows between productive activities is the objective. Survey findings should be supplemented by in-depth and longitudinal analysis in the area of origin as well as the area(s) of destination. If the sustainable rural livelihoods framework is used in studying the impact of migration on the source area, it might be possible to escape the impasse in this field of research. Combining this framework with Mabogunje's (1970) migration system theory and recent insights in the functioning of social networks could result in what could be called a ‘dispersed livelihood system’ approach. It has to be realised, however, that such an approach calls for a ‘celebration of complexity’, which is not always desired in certain academic disciplines. It will require a lot of fieldwork, typically to be carried out by human geographers or anthropologists.

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