



# Straightforward critics or would-be candidates? International migrants and the management of local affairs and development: the case of the Senegal River valley

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**ABSTRACT** The Senegal River valley has long been one of the main sources of out-migration to international destinations in the country, and migrants' remittances are important for the survival of households and for the economic and social development of the area. Investments in home towns and a highly critical view of the ways in which local affairs are managed encourage migrants' active involvement in local development through associations and, increasingly, in local politics. This paper describes these processes in the light of decentralization in Senegal, and especially the transferring of competences on the use of state and public lands to local government.

**KEYWORDS** decentralization / international migration / local politics / migrant associations / remittances / Senegal / West Africa

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that international migrants from the Senegal River valley play a key role in the domestic economies of their home towns. Indeed, it is thanks to their remittances that many households have been able to survive the various ecological and economic crises the valley has suffered over the years. There is no doubt that emigrants are genuinely involved in the economic and social development of their locality. What is less clear, however, is how their commitment to local development translates into a desire to manage local affairs and drive development initiatives. This article aims to shed some light on the matter by showing how the wish to help can become a springboard to securing local power.

Oourossogui and Thilogne are both located on Route Nationale No 2 (RN2) in the Senegal River valley. The two towns were elevated to municipalities in 1990 and 1996 respectively, and are populated by the Halpulaar. Both have a significant number of residents living abroad, in Africa, Europe (especially France) and the United States.

Some of the data for this paper were gathered in the context of the Migration and Governance in Small Towns project led by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). Senegal is one of six countries involved in this project, with sites in Louga and Oourossogui. The data on Oourossogui were collected in 2008 from three focus groups<sup>(1)</sup> and 40 semi-directed interviews with former and current migrants, members of the local population and officials from community-based organizations.

1. One group of young men, one group of women and one of former migrants.

The data on Thilogne came from a series of semi-structured interviews with 13 international migrants who had temporarily returned to Thilogne and 13 residents from the locality, who were interviewed in August 2009.

In this paper, the terms “international migrant”, “migrant” and “emigrant” are used interchangeably.

## II. INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS: DEVELOPERS... BY DEFAULT?

Given their contribution to the economic and social development of their homelands, it may seem perverse to question the role of international migrants in the development of the Senegal River valley. However, we should remember why they originally left the area; they didn't go abroad in order to develop it, but because of their individual circumstances. Some go for personal reasons, like the 21 year-old from Ourosogui who claimed that: “*If you want to achieve something (build a house or get married), you have to try to emigrate.*” Individuals are also motivated by other people's stories; as the former deputy mayor of Ourosogui put it: “*People migrate out of envy.*” Envy (*hirdé*) has both positive and negative connotations for the Pulaar from the valley. In its positive sense, it makes people want to emulate others' successes – inspiring young men from the village to try their luck abroad so that they can build villas like their peers have done. This form of envy is a virtue.

However, migration from the Senegal River valley is more usually associated with the impacts of agro-ecological crises on local subsistence economies, which are based mainly on a combination of food crops and extensive pastoral systems. Hence the intensification of international migration in the 1970s, when Sahelian countries were among those hardest hit by severe drought, and rural households were left with few survival strategies apart from migration. This theory was developed by Stark and Bloom,<sup>(2)</sup> who talked of a new migrant economy in which one or more household members were sent away to minimize economic risks when times were hard and markets performing poorly. In this view, “... locational decisions...” are made “...by comparing their income opportunities at alternative locations.”<sup>(3)</sup> Migration is closely linked to economic and social development, although its positive or negative influence varies according to the historical context.<sup>(4)</sup> Remittances from abroad not only enable recipient households to pull through agro-ecological and economic crises, but can also impact on other households – in the Senegal River valley non-migrant households increased their production to meet the demand from migrant households, which could also provide them with loans when necessary.<sup>(5)</sup>

While their main priority is their own household economy, many migrants also invest in the economic and social development of their home town, using their surplus income to address serious deficits in the locality. For many, the new host country (especially France) serves as a brutal reminder of the lack of basic services and infrastructure back home – schools, health posts, bore holes, etc. – providing a different motivation from the reasons that originally prompted their departure.

Central governments are another beneficiary of this type of economic and social investment. They rarely have the resources to meet the social needs of local communities, and the state seems to have relinquished its sovereign mission of providing infrastructure in the Senegal River valley,

2. Stark, Oded and David E Bloom (1985), “The new economics of labour migration”, *The American Economic Review* Vol 75, No 2, page 175.

3. See reference 2, page 176.

4. Nyberg-Sorensen, Ninna, Nicholas Van Hear and Poul Engberg-Pedersen (2002), “The migration–development nexus. Evidence and policy options”, International Organization for Migration (IOM) Migration Research Series No 8, Geneva, page 7.

5. Taylor, Edward, Joaquin Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Douglas Massey and Adela Pellegrino (1996), “International migration and community development”, *Population Index* Vol 62, No 3, Autumn, page 406.

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contenting itself with a secondary role supplying human resources. Thus, migrants build the schools and the state sends teachers; migrants build health centres and the state sends nurses. In some places migrants also fund secondary schools, as in Ourossogui, where this was done through the Association pour le Développement d'Ourossogui (ADO). This pioneering body also funded a drinking water supply programme and built cereal banks, while emigrant associations from Agnam and other towns have even sent coaches back from abroad to provide transport for their secondary school pupils.

One 70-year-old migrant from Ourossogui, who had travelled to Ivory Coast and spent 30 years in France, spoke of the umbilical connection linking migrants to their home town:

“Emigrants hope that the young men from their town will follow in their footsteps. Local development is important to us all, wherever we come from. That’s why I hope we can meet the entry conditions for these countries ... Migrants can do a lot in the framework of decentralized cooperation. I’ve seen people from places like Wodobéré or Thiemping get their home town twinned with where they stay in their host country. That hasn’t happened here, but there is a branch of ADO in France which does a lot of development-type work.”

Migrants’ household remittances are not affected by their contributions to local development, which come out of any “surplus” they may generate. Those who make the biggest surplus put the most into local development. Thus, interviewees in both Ourossogui and Thilogne reported that migrants or branches of the village associations<sup>6</sup> in Europe or America contribute the most to development. As the 70 year-old former migrant quoted above told us:

“Every emigrant does what they can for the town (Ourossogui). People who go to France receive wages, while those who go to Ivory Coast are traders, so you wouldn’t expect them to put as much money into development. The people who went to France sent money back through the ADO to build School No 2 and set up a collective field. They’ve done loads of other things too. This year, they helped after numerous houses were washed away in the rainy season, and they send money for poor people during Ramadan too.”

The situation is similar in Thilogne, where this 31 year-old trader confirmed that “...emigrants have invested in education – they built the middle school and the secondary school, as well as the cemetery and dispensary.”

The question is, does this kind of investment colour the way that migrants view and judge the management of local affairs in their home town?

### III. INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS: CRITICS... BY RIGHT?

The municipalities of Ourossogui and Thilogne both come in for harsh criticism from emigrants about the way in which local affairs are managed, with claims that the municipal teams are incompetent, corrupt and only driven by their own interests.

6. The Thilogne Association Développement (TAD) for Thilogne, and the Association pour le Développement d'Ourossogui (ADO) for Ourossogui.

A number of emigrants who had temporarily returned to Thilogne (eight from France, two from America, one from Gabon, one from Ivory Coast and one from Cameroon) were interviewed. All expressed their dissatisfaction with the way in which the local council was run. Some of their complaints are presented below:

“People back home have no idea. We send money for specific projects but they never get off the ground. There’s no good reason for it, they’re just lazy.” (62 year-old emigrant living in France)

“There are plenty of people who’ll back me up when I say that the municipal team isn’t doing its job. It’s not doing any development activities. And as far as managing the municipality is concerned, all they’ve ever done is waste resources.” (58 year-old emigrant living in the United States)

“The municipal teams have never done any work. Their management leaves a lot to be desired. All they do is eat up municipal resources.” (54 year-old emigrant living in France)

“It’s a municipality in name only. It does nothing and has contributed nothing to development.” (41 year-old emigrant living in the United States)

This young man from Oourossogui confirmed the migrants’ low opinion of the way the last team managed the municipality:

“Emigrants even mistrust the mayor. That’s why they’re frightened of investing in development-type projects. They’d rather put their money into buildings. I’m not a migrant, but I often hear them say that they’re worried about the mayor’s policies. If you’re not on his side he can delay projects.”

Much of this criticism about the way in which municipalities are managed can be put down to the migrants’ status as local donors, which gives them a particular view of local problems. This is acknowledged by one member of the municipal team that was recently removed and replaced by a special delegation in June 2009:

“They fund projects and make donations, and in return they want things to be managed transparently. They’ve got a right to look at how the town is managed. That’s probably what makes them want to get more involved in politics. In fact, shaping the political context seems to be a determining factor in the way in which individuals behave politically.”<sup>(7)</sup>

Getting actively involved in managing local affairs, and thus in planning and implementing economic and social development, could seem to be a rational choice for migrants (especially those nearing the end of their time abroad). When talking about activism, especially among emigrant associations, some people argue that “...they are the best equipped to make the necessary changes because they know the problems and understand how decisions are made and local initiatives are run in their home region.”<sup>(8)</sup>

In reality, however, are these migrants purely motivated by an interest in local development?

7. Conway, Margaret (1989), “The political context of political behaviour”, *The Journal of Politics* Vol 51, No 1, Cambridge University Press, page 4.

8. Daum, Christophe (1998), “Développement des pays d’origine et flux migratoires: la nécessaire déconnexion”, *Hommes et Migrations* No 1214, July/August, page 69.

#### IV. MIGRANTS AND THE SCRAMBLE FOR POLITICAL POWER: ASPIRING CANDIDATES?

People seeking power at the local level not only need to be interested in local development in the broad sense but also be willing to assume responsibility for managing it. Migrants' interest in local development is evident both in what they say and what they do.

In the specific case of Thilogne, international migration and local politics interact on two levels. On the one hand, politicians ask international migrants affiliated to different branches of the Thilogne Association Développement (TAD)<sup>(9)</sup> for material support in the elections, and on the other, emigrants have become involved in the local political arena from their base abroad. One member of the municipal team who was voted out of office and replaced with a special delegation told us:

“Everyone knows that migrants have had a huge influence on political life in the municipality of Thilogne. They're major donors. But their influence isn't just economic, it's political too ... look at what happened in the municipal elections. Certain leaders fired off letters to every branch of the TAD asking for their financial, moral and political support in the elections. And some emigrants have made quite a name for themselves through their political activities this year. Two came back just for the elections (one from Gabon and one from France) and got themselves onto one of the party lists as councillors. Some gave money and had T-shirts and posters printed, and others spent their time here supporting candidates by lending them their car or giving speeches at all their meetings.”

These emigrants have shown their political commitment by giving particular candidates their time and money, two key resources in political participation according to Brady, Verba and Schlozman.<sup>(10)</sup>

However, the desire to get involved in managing local affairs is not expressed explicitly. One former migrant from Ourosogui, a 70 year-old who chairs the borehole management committee, dismisses claims that emigrants want to fill important positions on local management bodies:

“I've spent time in Ivory Coast and France – 30 years in France. At the moment I'm president of the town's borehole management committee ... I don't think migrants want to run things here; it's more a case of wanting to get involved in development at both local and national levels. I haven't seen any emigrants fighting to get these positions.”

Be that as it may, the municipality stayed in the hands of emigrants or their families from the time it was established until the elections of March 2009. One emigrant said that he wanted to run for mayor during these elections, and the most visible community-based organization, ADO, is run by a young man who has spent some time in Ivory Coast.

So what is the basis for this assumption that emigrants are seeking power? In their explanation of why individuals in the United States decide to turn to politics, Fox and Lawless argue that their willingness to put themselves forward as candidates is based on their belief that their experience abroad makes them better qualified for the job than those who stay behind.<sup>(11)</sup>

9. The Thilogne Association Développement (TAD) started as an association set up on 5 March 1968, l'Amicale des Ressortissants de Thilogne, which then gave birth to the Association des Ressortissants Sénégalais de Thilogne en France on 25 December 1985, before becoming the TAD in 1991. The association has two national branches, TAD Thilogne and TAD Dakar, and four foreign branches in France, Italy, the USA and Gabon.

10. Brady, Henry, Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman (1995), “Beyond SES: a resource model of political participation”, *American Political Science Review* Vol 89, No 2, June, page 273.

11. Fox, Richard and Jennifer Lawless (2005), “To run or not run for office: explaining nascent political ambition”, *American Journal of Political Science* Vol 49, No 3, July, page 652.

This perception is clearly expressed by one former migrant who firmly believes that international migration is not so much a matter of earning money but rather of acquiring “intelligence”:

“My parents were not migrants, but me, I decided to be a migrant. I’m a joiner by trade. I started off in Dakar and then went to Ivory Coast. I spent 18 years there and then went to Gabon, where I stayed for nine years before coming back to Senegal and setting up my own workshop. I reckon there are lots of advantages to emigrating. Even if you don’t make much money, you still learn a lot.” (Focus group of former migrants)

What he means is that he acquired his business sense: learning how to manage people and establish and exploit the networks needed to run an enterprise and achieve an objective. His comments about the knowledge acquired through migration make complete sense in the context of the river valley in general, and Ourosogui in particular.

Research on diamond workers from the Senegal River valley has shown their ability to establish economic, political and matrimonial networks in mining and neighbouring countries and use them to their advantage in extracting and marketing diamonds.<sup>(12)</sup> Some have also proved extremely adept at manipulating and reinterpreting certain traditional values and codes on their return to their home town,<sup>(13)</sup> skilfully sorting, selecting and using their sociocultural contacts in order to achieve their objectives. In what she calls “models of cultural influence”, Swidler shows that people’s action strategies are a product of their culture: symbolic experiences, mythic knowledge and rituals enable individuals to make sense of their experiences, choose how to behave and establish links in order to develop their strategies for action.<sup>(14)</sup>

Migrants who have developed an ability to get on with people, rework their cultural materials and accumulate financial resources while abroad are well equipped to enter the battle for local political power. And local people recognize that their stubbornness can be a decisive factor in the outcome of such tussles. Explaining the background to a conflict between the mayor of Ourosogui and people whom the municipality wished to remove in the early 2000s, one woman likened a former migrant who was concerned about their case to chewing gum because he gave no quarter, was tenacious and never dropped his guard. In her view, this was all due to his long stay in France.<sup>(15)</sup>

Furthermore, migrants and local people are united in ascribing what Mendras calls “charismatic legitimacy” to emigrants, “... based on belief in their exceptional qualities as individuals.”<sup>(16)</sup>

There is empirical evidence of migrants’ (or in this case, former migrants’) ability to gain access to power in their local municipality or rural community. For example, the elevation of Ourosogui to a municipality in 1990 “... seems to have been done in response to the wishes of former emigrants, who had put money into the locality but been unable to get involved in managing local affairs.”<sup>(17)</sup> These former diamond workers then redirected their energies into land and property production (initially in Dakar), using the decentralization process to consolidate their position, as the local authorities assumed extensive powers over local government land holdings previously managed by rural or municipal councils. The scope of their powers is illustrated by a recent affair in the department of Dagana, where a rural council allocated thousands of hectares of land in

12. Bredeloup, Sylvie (1993), “Les migrants du fleuve Sénégal: a quand la ‘diums’pora’?”, *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* Vol 9, No 3, page 206.

13. Sall, Mohamadou (2004), “Acteurs et pratiques de la production foncière et immobilière à Ourosogui”, PhD thesis in Social Sciences (Population–Development–Environment option), Université Catholique de Louvain, page 220.

14. Swidler, Ann (1986), “Culture in action: symbols and strategies”, *American Sociological Review* Vol 51, No 2, April, page 284.

15. See reference 13, page 217.

16. Mendras, Henri (2001), *Eléments de Sociologie*, New Revised Edition, Armand Colin, Collection U, Paris, page 147.

17. Sall, Mohamadou (2009), “Actions des migrants internationaux à Ourosogui. Du développement urbain à l’exclusion”, in Momar-Coumba Diop (editor), *Le Sénégal des Migrations. Mobilités, Identités et Sociétés*, Karthala, Paris, page 213.

Mbane to dignitaries in the liberal regime. Similarly, when Oourossogui's second municipal team took office in 1996, it used its prerogatives to complete the sub-division and development of lands that was begun by its predecessors, and allocated 534 parcels of land, mainly in the Moderne neighbourhood, which is highly sought after by emigrants from across the region. Questions have been raised about the transparency of this process, which resulted in an estimated 80 per cent of the houses and land in this neighbourhood being bought by emigrants.

Despite their noble ancestry, migrants from Oourossogui who had done well out of the African trade in diamonds and precious stones were unable to get a foothold in the village chiefdom because these positions were traditionally held by the three reigning Jalloubé families. Their only hope of changing the situation was through political reform – which they have succeeded in bringing about. The first elected mayor of Oourossogui was not a migrant himself but the younger brother of one of the richest migrants in the Senegal River valley, who made his fortune through the diamond trade. He is the influential owner of a real estate empire in Dakar and Oourossogui, where he has built the largest hotel in the Matam region (the Sogui). Oourossogui's second mayor, an emigrant who claims to have succeeded in the same trade, was elected in 1996 and then replaced by the first elected mayor who was re-elected in 2000.<sup>(18)</sup>

There are similar cases in several neighbouring local authorities, such as the council in the rural community of Ogo, which is run by another former emigrant who made a great deal of money trading in diamonds.

The town of Matam, some seven kilometres from Oourossogui, was made the main town of one of the newest regions of Senegal in 2002 (Decree No 6 of 15 February 2002). A river trading post and military fort in colonial times, it remained an administrative backwater for many years. Few of its inhabitants ventured abroad, and the urban renewal programme rolled out with regionalization has only recently started to take effect there. However, about 10 years ago, two people who had left Matam to work in France set up a charitable organization called the Fouta Santé association. It regularly sends a mobile health unit from France to the hospital in Oourossogui, bringing medicines and specialist doctors (ophthalmologists, gynaecologists and ENT specialists, general and dental surgeons, etc.) who spend a week at a time in Oourossogui providing consultations and treatment for thousands of patients, virtually free of charge.

A couple of years ago the president of this association, a nurse who works in a hospital in Paris, put himself forward as a candidate for the ruling Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS) in the municipality of Matam. He was eventually elected mayor of the town in March 2009, which saw several other towns and cities (including the national capital Dakar and regional capitals such as Saint-Louis) pass into the hands of the opposition.

This suggests that emigrants' economic and social involvement in their home towns may serve as a launch pad for their political ambitions, and that their financial standing can be a decisive factor in their accession to power if they do decide to enter the political arena. As one former migrant from Oourossogui, who lived in Gabon from 1992 to 1999, put it: *"Migrants have money, and money is power. When you've got money and you use it for good causes, it's only natural that people will be grateful and help you get the position you want."*

A social worker from Oourossogui confirmed that he is not alone in this view: *"...they use their financial and economic muscle to try to get into*

18. Who was then ousted by a coalition of candidates in March 2009.

politics and make things happen in their area, or to support politicians who don't have much money."

Research has shown that the type of people who can put themselves forward as candidates for election is closely related to the way that the electoral system functions.<sup>(19)</sup> This is certainly true in the Senegal River valley, as the current clientelist system, which is partly based on financial rewards for activists, gives the comparatively wealthy migrants an advantage over others who wish to get involved in local affairs but have never left the area.

It is probably this ability to manipulate the local political setting and function at various levels that makes international migrants such formidable players when they decide to enter the political arena.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

All this suggests that international migration is a precursor to involvement in local affairs in the Senegal River valley, and that social and economic development activities in their home towns give emigrants a solid entry point to seats of local power. This is not to deny that their investment in local politics is an important factor in fostering local democracy, which is itself an indicator of development in these areas. Some people argue that social and political investment by migrants could help create a better social environment in their home countries,<sup>(20)</sup> working on the assumption that migrants have the capacity to drive through economic, political and social reforms at the local level.<sup>(21)</sup>

However, in this particular context, it should also be noted that their involvement in – and more specifically, their desire to lead – local development may not be entirely altruistic. It is possible that their appetites may have been sharpened by Article 2 of Decree No 96–1130 of 27 December 1996 (regarding the application of the law transferring competences for the management and use of state, public and maritime lands to the regions, municipalities and rural communities), which could well encourage migrants to opt for a more settled existence as municipal mayor or president of a rural community. One response to President Abdoulaye Wade's call for greater agricultural productivity in Senegal (la Grande Offensive pour l'Alimentation et l'Abondance, GOANA) has been for those who can afford it to buy up land in rural areas and develop modern farms. The conflict over land in the rural community of Mbane shows that migrants who get involved in local politics will have to play a tight game if they are to avoid turning into land brokers.

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