



Migration, Youth, and Land in Benin

Making the connections work for inclusive development

Phenomenon of migration in Dogbo and Klouékanmè

In Benin migration is a historical phenomenon of the past decennia that is predominately taking place within West Africa. In a national context of demographic growth, with a large percentage of youth, and an agricultural driven economy, (seasonal) migration is part and parcel of the tradition of people of Dogbo and Klouékanmè (Couffo department). Situated in the more densely populated South-West of the country, both municipalities have more migrants leaving for other destinations, than receiving immigrants from elsewhere. In some villages, every family counts at least one family member to have either tried to migrate or has migrated.

Historically as well as to date, the primary destinations for migration in Benin are either within the country - to the departments of the Zou and Collines or to cities like Cotonou, Parakou and Bohicon - or to the neighbouring countries, such as Nigeria, Togo and Ghana. In the past, people left their home villages to do seasonal work on the coffee or cacao plantations in Ghana and Ivory Coast. Nowadays, Nigeria is becoming a more and more popular destination for migration, though the flux towards Ghana and Ivory Coast have not disappeared entirely. Moreover, while agricultural remains an important sector in which migrants work (in the country and in neighbouring countries), the increased popularity of Nigeria and the Beninese cities is related to the rise of new sectors for migrants to work in, like the building sector (painting, brickwork, tiling, carpeting, decorating, etc.) and domestic work sector (predominantly done by young women). This research has shown a striking difference of migrants from an ethno-cultural Fon environment giving preference to setting out for Fon destinations, like the departments of Zou or Collines (Benin), while migrants from the ethno-cultural Adja

environment prefer to go to the Benin cities or destinations outside the country for activities other than agriculture. This shows how the cultural background, the traditions in migration as well as connections with certain destinations play a part.

The quest for land determines the face of migration

The research shows that in the predominately agricultural societies of Dogbo and Klouékanmè, the insufficient access to land is an important driver for migration in search of better living conditions. The difficulties to access land are multifaceted. With the demographic growth in the region, there is a growing demand for land. The most common trajectory to gain access to land to cultivate and to build a livelihood is still through heritage or purchase of land (land ownership). However, this requires financial resources and patience (inheritance usually only happens after the head of the household passed away). Furthermore, heritage poses additional difficulties, like plot fragmentation and cultural exclusion of women from their heritage rights (patrilineal society).

At the same time land is viewed as an investment and in the absence of registered land rights large property owners are too afraid of land claims to rent or bail (méta-yage) their lands to users. Simultaneously, such land users, which are often youth and women, equally fear land owners to reclaim their lands at any given time, refraining them from investing in the soil or in their equipment for cultivation. Consequently, a lot of land is not exploited to its potential (either for agricultural or other purposes). Land tenure security as well as formalisation of land user rights could be a solution to this issue.

On top of that the profitability of agricultural is weakening and insecure. There is no policy in place to enhance the productivity of the land (professional equipment, commercialisation and/or fertiliser). The low prices of the crops in relation to the hard labour has a demotivating effect on the younger generation. The same tomato is worth more on the Nigerian market than in Benin. This situation is aggravated by climate change with heavy rains, unpredictable seasons and exhaustion of the soil threatening the harvest. Consequently, people's motivation to migrate is a mix of the search for agricultural work elsewhere, but also to learn a different and more sustained profession, for instance in the building sector. After all, in the building sector you receive at least some income for each day worked.

The preceding leads to conclude, that the insufficient access to land particularly hampers youth and women, because they are less likely to inherit, buy or rent land to cultivate to make a livelihood. It should thus not come as a surprise that the stereotype migrant is a young man, aged between 15 and 20, who either has not enjoyed schooling or drops out prematurely to set out for a new destination. If these young men leave unmarried, most return to their villages to marry. Particularly when it concerns migration within the country the connection with the village of origin remains strong, with the migrants returning on a regular basis. In such cases, their wives become the factual head of the household when their husbands are working elsewhere. However, in certain cases migrants truly install at their new destinations, buying land, building houses and bringing over their family, only rarely returning to their village. A small group of young women migrate to the cities to do domestic work, but this is far less common than migration by young men.

Dynamics on the ground

The effects of the migration from Dogbo and Klouékanmè are multifaceted, to some extent even aggravating the situation that encourages migrants to leave. To start with, leaving at the age of 15 usually means that these migrants prematurely drop out of school without a diploma. The decision to migrate is often encouraged by the success stories of predecessors. However the research shows that these success stories are rare. More commonly, migrants have to in debt to finance their departure, with the risk of accumulating debts, also related to (continued) efforts to keep up the appearances of success. This suggests a pathway towards poverty.

In those rare cases of success, the individuals are indeed potential investors to the village. These migrants tend to buy land back in the village, as an investment, to (have someone) cultivate the land or to build a house on it. Furthermore, a known practice for these migrants is to return on motors, which they rent out for others to exploit as local transportation, thereby contributing to local economic development. However, in the absence of formalised land tenure through property and user rights, these new land owners have the same fears for claims on their land when renting this out to others for agricultural or economical purposes. And thus very often, these new land owners prefer to view the land as an investment, demarcating their property, but without using its full economic potential. Consequently, one can argue that successful migration that leads to land investments in the village of origin contributes to a vicious circle that encourages people to migrate in the first place: an increasing difficulty to access land to make a livelihood.

Conclusions: Youth, Migration and Land in South-West Benin?

To conclude, migration is a decade old and accepted phenomena in Benin that takes place predominately within the country itself or to the neighbouring countries of Nigeria, Togo and Ghana. The insufficient access to land through property or user rights is a strong driver for migration. This particularly hampers youth and women, because they are less likely to inherit, buy or rent land to cultivate to make a livelihood. Encouraged by the success stories of predecessors in the village, it is mostly young men that set out for a new destination to earn a living, mostly in agriculture or in the building sector. If the migration is successful, this is in the end notably to the benefit of the individual rather than the community. The research suggests that in the absence of formalised land tenure through property and user rights, successful migrants invest in land in their village of original, but will not exploit it to its full economic potential out of fear for claims by others. As such, successful migration contributes to a vicious circle whereby the access to land is increasingly difficult and scarce, reinforcing the prime motivation for people to migrate elsewhere in search of employment opportunities. There is a strong need for secured land tenure through formalised property and user rights to reverse the trend(s).

This paper is based on a research done by M. Elieth Eyebiyi in 2018, made possible by LANDac, VNG International and its partners from the Projet d'appui à la gestion Foncière Locale (PFL) in Benin.