

Chapter 1



NEW QUESTIONS FOR INNOVATIVE MIGRATION RESEARCH

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Over the past 15 years, African migration has become a hot topic for debate and research in Europe as well as in Africa. However, this interest has remained largely limited to the northbound migration flows originating from sub-Saharan Africa, either towards the Maghreb countries or, through them, towards Europe. This is striking in light of the fact that most African migrations are not directed towards the global North, but towards other African countries, while there is also substantial African migration to other world regions, such as the Gulf countries and the Americas (cf. Bakewell and de Haas 2007).

The excessive media coverage of supposedly Europe-bound African migration through the Sahara and Mediterranean is a key factor explaining the heavy over-representation of this migration flow in the mindsets of researchers and policy makers. It obscures numerically much more important forms of migration *within* the continent, and contributes to the ‘myth of invasion’ (de Haas 2007).

This myth is underpinned by perceptions of ‘hordes’ of ‘hungry’ sub-Saharan migrants trying ‘desperately’ to enter Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish enclaves on the northern Moroccan coast; imagined ‘mass’ arrivals on the Italian island of Lampedusa; and images of numerous sub-Saharan migrants being intercepted off the coast of the Canary Islands.

The recurrence of this myth of invasion is commonly fuelled by electoral campaigns in Europe and the generally journalistic and, at best, anecdotal nature of the evidence. This has led to a situation in which even many academic researchers largely base their perceptions of African migration on media images and generally refrain from rigorously applying methods and methodologies which would allow for an improved understanding of the nature, volume and trends of African migration.

Yet, we have to acknowledge the many methodological challenges facing researchers of African migration based outside and, particularly, inside Africa. Because of financial and institutional constraints, and the lack of funding for independent academic research, much research on African migration is largely defined, steered and funded by the institutions and interests of wealthy, ‘Northern’ countries or international organisations. Hence, the research and output tends to reflect their largely short-term control- and security-focused agendas. African migration research has tended to reproduce and justify Northern preoccupations with regards to migration, as is exemplified in the one-sided focus on trafficking, smuggling and illegal migration to Europe in many scientific and most policy accounts of African migration.

The high dependency on commissioned research is a more general problem of migration research, which is often guided by the short-term policy interests to ‘solve’ what are perceived as ‘migration problems’ or ‘migration challenges’, rather than trying to achieve a more profound understanding of the nature, causes and consequences of migration. Because policy-focused funding tends to be limited and short-term, there is little room to explore alternative conceptualisations and methodologies which would allow a more fundamental critique of the way migration is conventionally conceived in policy and research.

The biased nature and the weak empirical basis of much African migration research is the original motivation to compile this volume. This aim of this book is to contribute to the development of independent reflections on research *methodologies* and, particularly, the relationship between methodologies and our conceptualisation of migration issues both inside and outside Africa. This should contribute to the elaboration of a migration research agenda which is driven by relevant empirical and theoretical questions rather than by policy concerns focused on immigration control, or by ill-founded hysteria around alleged 'mass' migration from Africa to Europe.

A major difficulty facing African migration research is the lack of appropriate official and social scientific data as well as the frequent absence of appropriate sampling frameworks in the form of census or survey data. Official migration statistics are either patchy or simply non-existent and generally fail to capture most flows. There is a general absence of systematic research on emigrants and, particularly, immigrants in African countries. Moreover, the undocumented and irregular nature of much African migration, as well as the often vulnerable position of migrants within Africa, makes it difficult to approach and interview migrants. This renders it even more problematic to identify and sample migrants for quantitative or qualitative research. For these reasons, migration in Africa (and, in fact, many other less-developed regions of the world) does not easily lend itself to traditional research methodologies, such as large-scale, representative sample surveys. This partly explains why Africa has remained a blank on most migration maps.

In order to begin to fill some of these gaps, the chapters in this book show how several less-conventional and often cost-effective methods can significantly contribute to mapping migration in Africa and other less-than-ideal research environments, and how these methods can help to obtain valuable empirical data in contexts where appropriate sampling frames are often absent, migrant populations are difficult to identify or approach, and resources are limited. The book also addresses the more fundamental methodological and epistemological questions underpinning the different methods of data collection. Although the chapters are based on research conducted in Africa, the methods presented in this volume are also applicable to

migration research beyond the continent and in other fields of social scientific inquiry.

Preceding these empirical chapters, Chapter 2 lays out the general epistemological framework for this book. Its author, Stephen Castles, argues that we need to make a fundamental distinction between *methods* and *methodology* of research. These terms are commonly confused, but while they are closely connected, they are not the same thing. While research methods pertain to the specific techniques used to collect and analyse data, methodology refers to epistemological questions and the underlying logic of research. Castles argues that while most empirical studies specify the methods of data collection, migration researchers should also pay sufficient attention to methodological questions which address whether and how 'objective' or 'factual' knowledge can be generated.

Although methods and methodology are analytically distinct, the use of particular methods is intimately linked to methodological and epistemological assumptions or beliefs, though the latter are rarely made explicit in migration research. Methodology involves the systematic application of epistemology to research situations, and a particular methodological standpoint has fundamental consequences for the choice of methods. For instance, this becomes evident in disciplinary disputes about 'appropriate' ways of conducting research, such as the oft-contested need for representative sampling or the distinction between so-called 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' approaches. Castles suggests strategies to ensure that the choice of particular methods is better informed by the specific research questions at stake. While he insists that migration research should pay more attention to methodological questions, he also emphasises that the various research methods do not necessarily exclude one another and that combining and triangulating different methods can improve our knowledge and understanding of migration.

Following the general epistemological framework laid out in the second chapter, the eight empirical chapters highlight the distinctions and linkages between methodological considerations and the various methods that are used and often combined in the same study.

Most chapters are written by early-career scholars based in African universities whose studies – all based on original qualitative or quantitative empirical research – show how innovative methods

of migration research help map new and fascinating dimensions of African migration. The chapters are based on a selection of papers that were originally presented at a workshop on African migrations organised by the International Migration Institute (IMI) of the University of Oxford, and the Mohammed V University (Morocco) in Rabat from 26–29 November 2008. This bilingual English/French workshop was attended by approximately fifty participants from across Africa, Europe and beyond, and twenty papers, selected on the basis of an open call, were presented.

In brief, the chapters in this volume offer fresh evidence on rapidly changing migration patterns on the African continent. They do this by presenting innovative methodologies and methods of migration research used in eight different case studies in a range of countries across the continent. This volume brings together work from both Anglophone and Francophone researchers, allowing for a synthesis and comparison of methods across a range of academic disciplines while bridging linguistic and concomitant methodological divides, which have traditionally obstructed African migration research.

In Chapter 3, Mohamed Berriane, Mohamed Aderghal and Lahoucine Amzil present their study of recent migration between Morocco and Andalusia (Spain). They used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods and a multi-sited methodology comprising the simultaneous collection of data in origin and destination areas. The authors argue that such methods are necessary in order to capture the diversification and fluidity of contemporary mobility and the increasingly transnational nature of migrants' lives, in which movement no longer links one origin and destination country but involves networks straddling several countries. While international migration research has long been locked in a unidirectional spatial logic that has fixated movements in a single pairing of origin and destination, the multi-sited and multi-method approach used in this study is better able to capture migration empirically as a social process. By doing so, the study shows how Morocco and Spain have become articulating elements of a larger West-Mediterranean migratory sub-system which involves constant mobility between many places, challenging classic migration paradigms. The study also shows how

school surveys can be used as an alternative sampling method in the absence of official sampling frameworks.

Although remittances sent back home by migrants abroad have recently attracted massive attention from governments and international institutions such as the World Bank as a potential development resource, most analyses are based on official, national statistics on remittances flows or, in some instances, on large-scale representative household surveys in origin countries. Such methods generally fail to capture the underlying motives for remitting as well as the transnational social and economic ties between remittance senders and receivers. In order to address some of these gaps, in Chapter 4, Una Okonkwo Osili aims to improve understanding of remittances sent from the US to Nigeria based on a matched sampling surveying technique. This study used a unique data set – the US–Nigeria Migration Survey – both to investigate the likelihood that migrants initiate community transfers (‘collective remittances’), as well as to try to find out the total amount sent towards community development projects in hometowns.

A central research goal of the US–Nigeria Migration Survey was to illuminate the motivations for migrants’ remittances using a matched sample of migrant and origin households. Previous empirical work has dealt with the transfer of resources between the migrant and the origin family, using data on the migrant or using data obtained solely from the household of origin. However, theory suggests that a complete understanding of remittances and other intra-family transfers requires another methodological approach, simultaneously collecting data on both sending and receiving households. The matched sampling involved a first-round survey in the US and a second-round survey in Nigeria with a sub-sample of households connected to US-based households. The results indicate that migrants tend to send community-related transfers to more developed hometowns, and not to less developed communities, which does not seem to support the predictions of the altruistic model of transfers. It would have been impossible to attain these insights using conventional surveying methods.

While there has recently been a surge in attention given to trans-Saharan migration, this focus has remained rather Eurocentric and focused on what is perceived as a massive rise in the number

of sub-Saharan migrants heading towards Europe. However, Julien Brachet's study in Chapter 5 on (trans) Saharan migration in Niger demonstrates that migration researchers need to pay more attention to the place and importance of the 'journey' in migration. Brachet argues that the way in which the subject of 'migration' is approached empirically has a profound effect on the resulting data, but also that the choice of particular methods itself reflects the way migration is conceptualised. Whereas migration studies have long reduced migration to the fixed times and places of individuals' departure and arrival, this study reconceptualises transit as a significant part of, or moment in, the migratory process. It looks at the illegal taxations of migrants by Nigerian state officials along transit routes in the region of Agadez, and uses 'on-the-move' methods to allow for the production of valuable empirical knowledge. While acknowledging the importance of combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the study discusses the practical limits and ethical concerns involved in the oft-attempted quantification of transit flows. This also highlights that methodological choices cannot be discussed in isolation from the political dimension of research into migrations between sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb and Europe.

Based on fieldwork conducted in South Africa, in Chapter 6 Darshan Vigneswaran presents an innovative sampling and data collection strategy employed to study the use of corruption in the enforcement of immigration law in a context of predominantly irregular migration. The growing presence of large populations of undocumented and/or disenfranchised people in Africa exacerbates and complicates relationships between 'states' and 'citizens'. The author argues that governments do not simply struggle to define and limit informal migration, but that migration is also increasingly informalising African governance structures. While officials may feel less obligated to act within their official mandates, 'informal' migrants also possess strong incentives to disengage from formal governance structures, which may encourage corrupt behaviours. The chapter argues that these dynamics and the 'informalisation' of migration compel us to reorient the methodologies we use to study the relationships between governance, informality and migration.

The concealed nature of corrupt behaviour, and the disincentives potential respondents face to provide accurate accounts, confound

conventional research methods. To address this need for appropriate methods, this chapter presents an experimental data collection technique dubbed as ‘incident reporting’. This method combines a systematic spatio-temporal procedure for sampling observed instances of immigration enforcement with a process of using analytical benchmarks to categorise and code observations of informal behaviour by officials, using GIS (Geographic Information Systems) analysis. While paying attention to several safety and ethical issues, the chapter suggests that incident reporting could usefully be incorporated into the study of migration governance across multiple research sites in Africa.

As mentioned above, a lack of research funding and infrastructure is a formidable obstacle to implementing large-scale migration surveys in poor countries. However, as Agbada Mobhe Mangalu shows in Chapter 7, on the basis of his comparative analysis of the nature, direction and selectivity of Congolese migrations toward Africa, Europe, America and Asia, there is a potential to partly fill this gap with relatively modest means. He argues that the lack of nationwide studies on migration from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) explains why knowledge about Congolese migration has remained piecemeal and fragmented. This study shows how relatively small-scale quantitative surveys can make a valuable contribution to understanding contemporary African migration dynamics even when criteria of national representativity are not met. This particularly applies when the primary aim is to compare groups. The study draws on a survey carried out in Kinshasa, covering a random sample of 945 households and 992 individual biographies. It suggests that most migrants move to other African countries rather than other continents. With regards to selectivity, the study shows that low-skilled single male migrants primarily moving for economic reasons tend to stay within Africa, whereas highly skilled, married female individuals and those migrating for educational purposes are more likely to migrate out of Africa.

Isaïe Dougnon’s study in Chapter 8 on migration by Dogon and Songhai communities from Mali to Ghana highlights the added value of historical comparative research. The tendency, particularly in anthropological research on African migration, has been to study a single community, at a particular site and at a particular historical

moment. Instead, Dougnon compares migration dynamics as they have manifested over time and across ethnic groups. The historical perspective of his research allows Dougnon to show how and why the character of Dogon and Songhai migration changed from 'migration for prestige' to 'migration for survival'. Moreover, his comparative approach shows the diverging ways that the two ethnic groups have adapted to the Ghanaian context, each specialising in fields in which they felt they had the most talent and experience. The Dogon favoured colonial work over self-employment, and in the post-colonial period they found themselves in an unenviable economic situation, while the Songhai, who excelled in commerce, became key economic players in the fuel and building sectors, and the trade in foodstuffs. Dougnon's comparative approach thus elucidates the configuration of the ethnic division of labour within the immigrant community in colonial and post-colonial Ghana as a whole.

The limited availability of resources for conducting representative surveys has inspired Chapter 9 by Tara Polzer, in which she explores the potential value of non-random surveys. Based on an empirical study conducted in South Africa, which consisted of data collection on migrants through service-provider NGOs, Polzer discusses the added value and limitation of the use of non-random surveys in comparison with more conventional methods using random sampling. Conducting methodologically defensible, logistically feasible and affordable large-scale national surveys of migrants is a serious challenge particularly in many African countries. Based on the Migrant Rights Monitoring Project (MRMP) conducted in South Africa, this chapter outlines the pros and cons of working with and through NGOs which provide services to migrants in order to conduct a national survey on migrants' access to basic public services.

The chapter argues that although this method does not result in a sample which is representative, it can nevertheless generate useful knowledge. Some of the resulting limitations are outlined, including urban bias, nationality bias, documentation bias, gender bias and vulnerability bias. Polzer argues that these biases are problematic and we need to be aware of them, but that they are not necessarily much greater than is the case with more conventional methods. Furthermore, the chapter asserts that there are strong benefits of such NGO-linked methodology. Apart from being cost-effective, such benefits

include the formation of active and collaborative networks among organisations in the migrant rights sector; research capacity building within this sector; and the direct use of empirical data in local and national advocacy work. This equally exemplifies the inherently normative and political nature of methodological choices.

While misconceptions about irregular migration are commonly linked to the practical difficulties involved in identifying and approaching irregular migrants as well as the informal sectors in which they often operate, the mobility of children in Africa is perhaps even less understood. In his anthropological study in Chapter 10 on the mobility of children in West Africa, Abdou Ndao presents innovative methods allowing the study of this important form of African migration. The author argues that despite frequent attention paid to the mobility of children in West Africa, there is a lack of pertinent empirical data which explains why dominant ideas about this migratory phenomenon are based more on supposition than empirical knowledge. The ethnographic study presented in this chapter aimed to fill part of this gap. The study involved several institutions including West African development NGOs, searching to understand how the mobility of children and young people is organised in West Africa, notably in Bénin, Togo, Ghana and Nigeria. More specifically, the study aimed to understand the decision making, motivations, itineraries and strategies used by child migrants as well as the (perceptions of) the difficulties they encountered.

The ethnographic data presented in this chapter is based on innovative, play-related methods better adapted to the anthropology of children in West Africa than conventional methods. The empirical data presented here illustrate that the mobility of children cannot simply be explained by economic push, or be reduced to the category of forced migration. There is a huge gap between the overall positive mobility experiences of children and the stigmatisation of this phenomenon which is still regarded by many as trafficking. Children have agency and actively develop many tactics in order to respond to the challenges facing them. This study demands that the phenomenon of child mobility in West Africa be viewed in a more open and constructive way rather than conceptualising child mobility as a problem *per se*. The methodological inference is that in order to understand child mobility, we need to develop specific research

methods that take their experiences, perceptions and opinions into account.

A synthesis of the findings of the studies compiled in this volume leads us to three central observations. First, the findings challenge existing perceptions of the nature, magnitude and causes of African migration, which compels us to *ask new research questions* in order to capture new or, rather, as yet under-rated dimensions of African migration. In particular, the studies exemplify the need to go beyond official state perspectives. For instance, they highlight that, rather than a temporary or permanent movement from one particular origin to one particular, fixed destination, migration is a phenomenon in constant flux, in which migrants continuously circulate and regularly change plans according to changing circumstances. This draws attention to the process of migration itself rather than the conventional focus on either receiving or sending societies. This compels migration researchers to conduct research in the spaces travelled by migrants, in between perceived 'origins' and 'destinations', which often turn out to be multiple and changing over time, depending on experiences in place and spaces 'in between'.

The studies also highlight the importance of irregular or undocumented migration by men, women and children as a 'normal' and socially licit rather than an exceptional and socially illicit phenomenon. Several chapters also point to the existence of close, intricate and reciprocal linkages between irregular migration and endemic corruption among state officials, and between irregular migration and the large size of informal economies in most African countries. This further questions states' real ability to steer migration. However, the studies also show that most migrants, although living in often very difficult situations and being confronted with exploitative work conditions and hostile state apparatuses, do have agency and actively attempt to improve their destiny. This refutes conventional accounts representing African migrants as (rather passive) victims of warfare, poverty and other sorts of human misery.

Second, in parallel with the elaboration of new methodological perspectives on migration research highlighted in the second chapter, the book aims to explore various new methods for data collection which have recently been developed within the African research context. In particular, the importance of fluidity, informality and

irregularity in African migrations highlights the need for other methods which enable researchers to capture and better understand the magnitude, nature and causes of African migrations. Although we would endorse any call for better official statistics, it would be an illusion that official statistics will ever be able to capture the 'unofficial', informal and personal dimensions of African migrations. Several alternative methods are presented in this volume.

The chapters cover various key methodological issues including methods for random and non-random sampling drawing on a variety of data sources; single-sited, multi-sited, matched and 'on-the-move' methods for data collection; the use of spatial samples; and the use of non-conventional data sources such as information obtained through NGOs working with migrants. Several chapters present innovative methods based on studying vulnerable or difficult-to-approach migrant populations that traditional methods have difficulties capturing, such as undocumented migrants, child migrants, refugees and migrants who are 'in transit'. Two chapters focus on methods that allow us to measure the enforcement of migration policy and the role of officials' corruption in migration processes. Some chapters also critically consider the need for representativity and show different ways in which multi-method approaches and data triangulation can generate valuable knowledge on migration. The book also addresses crucial ethical and safety issues when conducting research among migrants in vulnerable positions, which makes it particularly important to consider the political economy of knowledge production on African migration.

Although the methods elaborated in this volume do not always correspond with the standard repertoire of social sciences and migration research, they testify to the creative and innovative ways in which researchers have started to overcome the manifold practical difficulties of African migration research while producing original information with reduced costs. It is important to emphasise that these methods are not only relevant for their capacity to overcome the practical difficulties of doing fieldwork in sub-optimal conditions; they also allow for answering research questions on migration phenomena, such as irregular migration, economic informality or the role of corruption, which conventional research methods largely fail to capture. In this sense, the merit and relevance of the methods

explored in this volume go well beyond the specific African context, as they can be applied in any setting with sub-optimal research conditions.

Third, besides explaining and discussing new methodologies and innovative methods for migration research in Africa and beyond, this volume also has a broader theoretical merit: it highlights the fact that empirical research on African migrations can also improve general knowledge of human migration and may further challenge the epistemological basis of prior research. After all, as Julien Brachet argues in his chapter, not only does the way in which the subject of migration is approached empirically profoundly affect the resulting data, but also the choice of particular methodologies itself reflects the way migration is conceptualised.

On the one hand, this is important in the light of the relative absence of African migrations in wider theoretical debates on migration. The contributions in this volume from the predominantly young researchers from different national backgrounds in Africa, Europe and elsewhere can be seen as an encouraging sign and proof of the creativity and imagination that researchers have recently deployed to consolidate a place for Africa in international migration research.

On the other hand, the innovative approaches presented in this volume uncover dimensions of migration which are not unique to African migration. The inherent danger in presenting a volume on 'African migration' is to suggest that African migration is essentially different from migration elsewhere in the world. Rather, we would suggest that, although the levels of irregularity, informality and fluidity of migration might be higher in various African countries than in other parts of the world, these are also 'normal' and possibly increasingly important dimensions of migration elsewhere in the world. To paraphrase Hoerder (2002: 8), particular migratory phenomena in Africa (and elsewhere) are unique in character but certainly not unique in kind.

So, while based on an analysis of methodologies and methods of migration research in Africa, the empirical and epistemological lessons to be drawn from this volume are also relevant to the study of migration more generally. In general, this endorses the broader critique on 'methodological nationalism' (cf. Glick Schiller et al. 1992) in migration research, characterised by the dominance of state

perspectives and the one-sided reliance on and belief in official statistics. This points to the need for a better understanding of migration as a complex social process rather than as a problem to be solved. We hope that the chapters presented in this volume will contribute to a shift in our perception of migration as well as improved creativity and imagination in applying methodological and methods of research in order to better understand the nature and magnitude of African and, in fact, global migration.

References

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