

Migrants change the appearance of Morocco

Hein de Haas

July 2005

MDR Working Paper No. 5
“Migration and Development Revisited”
A WOTRO/NWO research project

e-mail: h.dehaas@maw.ru.nl

Hein de Haas, Ph.D.

CIDIN (Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen)

Radboud University Nijmegen

PO Box 9104

6500 HE Nijmegen

the Netherlands

Tel + 24 361 3058

Fax + 24 361 5957

Migrants change the appearance of Morocco¹

The large scale migration from Morocco from the 1960s onwards has led to a sizeable Moroccan Diaspora in Europe. The consequences of this migration are considerable. Migrants form a latent but increasingly powerful pressure group. Their money transfers to home are a crucial source of hard currency. Through fear of losing this, the Moroccan government has relaxed its patronizing attitude to migrants which it maintained until recently. Currently holding a charm offensive, the Moroccan government hopes that migrants will remain committed to their fatherland. In the meantime, Morocco has little interest in a decline in emigration to new destinations such as Spain and Italy.

by Hein de Haas²

Until recently, when Moroccan migrants crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and arrived in the northern port of Tangier they would invariably have to deal with corrupt customs civil servants who wanted to profit from their alleged wealth. In the car travelling through Morocco to their native village in the Rif Mountains or in the south, again they encountered numerous controls by gendarmes and policemen often demanding their own toll fee. And to obtain documents such as passports or birth certificates a difficult path had to be trod to pass through a maze of rent seeking civil servants.

All this gave the migrant the impression that he wasn't even really welcome in his own country. The Moroccan government seemed only to be interested in the contents of his wallet. For the rest, migrants were expected to remain silent. Those who voiced their criticism in Europe about the Moroccan king or government were frequently harassed or threatened during their vacation in Morocco.

This has all changed in recent years. Customs procedures work much more smoothly and are much less corrupt than in the past. There are welcoming adverts on the radio and television, and the Moroccan and even Spanish motorways even have service centres specially fitted out for Moroccan migrants-on-vacation. And the politically critical migrants are hardly ever bothered anymore. Also in the inland areas there is less harassment and corruption. Everything seems to be focused on allowing the annual summer vacation trip, which is known in Morocco as the 'transit' operation, to run as smoothly as possible.

This change points to a shift in attitude of the Moroccan government towards migrants. The former can no longer afford to treat migrants, who are increasingly becoming more vocal and aware, as passive remittance senders. Their political and economic importance for a country as Morocco with so much migration has simply become too great.

¹ This article is a revised and extended translation of a Dutch-language article "Migranten veranderen het aanzien van Marokko" which appeared in *ZemZem* (2004, Vol 1, afl 1, pp. 57-63), a Dutch periodical on Islam, North Africa and The Middle East. The author retains full copyright on the text.

² Hein de Haas is a post doctoral researcher at the at the Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen (CIDIN) of the Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands. E-mail: h.dehaas@maw.ru.nl

Emigration policy

Morocco is an outstanding example of an emigration country. At the moment there are more than two million Moroccans living in Europe of a total population of 30 million people. Since the 1960s, the Moroccan government has strongly encouraged emigration on both political and economic grounds. Migration was seen as a tool for national development and as 'safety valve' to relieve political and economic tensions.

The Moroccan government thought that migration would reduce poverty and tension in the underdeveloped rural areas. It was therefore no coincidence that emigration was particularly encouraged from Berber areas which were notorious for their rebellious attitude to central authority. Besides the northern Rif Mountains, migration was encouraged from the southern Sous valley and the oases of South Eastern Morocco. The reasoning was that the money transferred back to Morocco emigration would make an immediate contribution to the prosperity in those regions.

The strong economic growth in Western Europe in the 1960s resulted in great demand for unschooled labour. Initially migration from the newly independent Morocco, since 1956, focussed mainly on the former colonizer, France. Much of this migration took place via Algeria, which remained a French colony until 1962. Often the Moroccan labourers departed to France together with their former *colon* employers. After 1965 Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany also became significant destinations.

An important reason why the Moroccan government encouraged migration was the expectation that the emigrants would invest the money they earned in Europe in enterprises in Morocco, and in this way would make an important contribution to the economic growth of the country. This included the expectation that in due course the migrant workers would return to their native country. However, precious little of this last expectation was ever realised.

Encouraging emigration was a success, though one wonders whether people would have left even without this policy. The oil crisis in 1973, the subsequent economic recession and the closure of European borders for migrant workers did not result in the expected reduction of immigration in Europe. Due to political instability and severe repression and the lack of economic prospects in Morocco only a few migrants returned. A large group of migrants decided to settle more or less permanently in Europe. This resulted in large scale family reunification during the 1970s and 1980s.

Fortress Europe

Contrary to all earlier expectations, there were no signs of rapidly decreasing migration after the family reunification process was completed at the end of the 1980s. Second generation Moroccans appear to prefer a partner from their ancestral country. This family formation continues to perpetuate migration. In spite of the formally closed borders and the 'Fortress Europe', undocumented migrants have been able to find their way to Europe often using devious routes and with the help of migrated family and friends.

Even though they were officially not welcome, employers in the building sector, market gardening and the low schooled service sector such as cleaning companies and

the hotel and catering industry were in fact eager to snap up this cheap migrant labour. Another development was the new (legal and undocumented) migration of labour to Spain and Italy, which mainly since the 1990s, has increased considerably.

The combined effects of family reunification, family formation, undocumented migration and new labor migration to Spain and Italy explain why the number of Moroccans abroad has increased sevenfold from 300,000 in 1972, on the eve of the recruitment freeze, to 2 million around the turn of the century. Despite the increasingly restrictive immigration policies of European destination countries, the number of Moroccan migrants in Europe has shown a remarkable persistent stable increase of about 64,000 people per annum.

If we count the second generation and naturalized persons as well, then there are about 780,000 Moroccans living in France. With about 300,000 Moroccans, the Netherlands has traditionally been the second destination country. France has recently lost its position as primary destination country to Italy and Spain. Both countries have fast growing Moroccan communities of between 200,000 and 300,000 people. These figures do not include the numerous undocumented Moroccan migrants living in southern Europe, which count at least 100,000 to 200,000 persons. Belgium and Germany also have considerable Moroccan communities, about 200,000 and 100,000 people, even though these are growing less rapidly than elsewhere. There are smaller Moroccan communities in United Kingdom (50,000) and Scandinavia (10,000). Outside Europe the Arab oil countries also traditionally draw temporary migrants. In recent years the United States (85,000) and notably the Canadian province of Quebec (70,000) have been exceedingly popular under the well-educated migrants. And finally there are about 400,000 to 700,000 Jews of Moroccan descent living in Israel.

The Promised Land

The continuing demand for labour in Europe and the limited scope for development in Morocco continue to maintain the high motivation to migrate under the Moroccans. Time and time again opinion polls show that the the majority of the young people aims to emigrate. The fact that many undocumented migrants - as a consequence of legalisation purges or marriage - are often able to obtain resident status after all, reinforces the idea that it is still worth while risking the crossing. The slightly improved prosperity does little to deter. Ambitions rise quickly among young people with a better education. These aspirations cannot be fulfilled in Morocco, because of the high levels of unemployment and the general lack of prospects for improvement in living standards, while the prosperity and opportunities in Europe continue to attract, ever visible via the satellite dishes which are installed everywhere and the success stories told by migrants when they return for a holiday.

From the coast near the cities of Tangier and Tétouan on the North-Moroccan coast Moroccans can easily see Spain on a clear day: the Promised Land is only fourteen kilometres away. The Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Mellillia on the northern Moroccan coast literally represent “Europe in Africa”. Those with money and contacts arrive in Europe with a tourist visa or a false or borrowed passport. This is the elegant method. Many poorer young people take the risk, usually for a fee, of hiding in a lorry or a migrant’s van or of hiding in a fishing boat, a *patera* and crossing to Spain at night, the most dangerous option.

These migrants don't just come from Morocco. Since the 1990s Morocco has increasingly developed into a transit country for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. From large parts of Africa ambitious young people make a long, perilous journey to eventually reach the north of Morocco and then to risk the crossing. Anyone who has witnessed how busy the summer 'transit' season is in the Spanish and Moroccan ports in the Strait of Gibraltar, knows that it is a hopeless task to check all the traffic.

Most of these transit migrants, who originate from countries such as Senegal, Mali, Congo and Côte d'Ivoire, enter Morocco at the border east of Oujda. Although their destination is usually Tangiers, where they wait to cross the Strait of Gibraltar, some migrants who fail to enter Europe seem to settle in Morocco on a semi-permanent basis.

Spain is the main entrance to the Schengen area for African immigrants. Many manage to reach the other side, but the waters in the Strait of Gibraltar are treacherous. Each year many hundreds or perhaps thousands of Africans drown. A real human smuggling industry has evolved. According to would-be migrants who I interviewed at the end of 2003, a crossing between the baggage in a van costs from about five to six thousand euros and the dangerous crossing by *patera* costs a thousand to fifteen hundred euros.

With the continuing migration, the total amount of money and goods that migrants send back to Morocco has increased steadily. Between 1968 and 1992 the total amount of money transferred by migrants to Morocco rose from 23 million dollars to 2.1 billion dollars. This made emigration the most important source of hard currency for Morocco and even exceeded the income from tourism and the export of phosphate. The actual amount is probably even greater because much money and many goods are sent through informal channels.

In the 1990s there was an ominous stagnation in the money transfers. It was generally feared that this was the writing on the wall for a future decline. After all, the second generation would be less inclined to send money to Morocco and migration seemed to be past its peak.

Courting the Diaspora

Considering the crucial importance of migration for the Moroccan balance of payments and internal prosperity and peace, this prospect was reason for the Moroccan government to radically change its attitude to migrants. Until then, Moroccan migration policy was geared to maintaining close control on the Moroccan migrants in Europe. Integration in Europe was not looked upon favourably. So it was that former King Hassan II expressed his displeasure at the introduction of voting rights for foreigners in Dutch municipal elections in 1986 and he advised Moroccans against going to the polling stations. The education offered in their own language and culture and sending Moroccan teachers and imams was seen as an instrument to prevent integration and the dreaded alienation of the native country.

It is impossible to renounce Moroccan citizenship. In order to emphasise the 'Moroccan-ness' of migrants, in official representations they are then always referred

to as *Marocains Résidant à l'Étranger* (MRE), or 'Moroccans residing abroad'. All migrants, including their offspring used to be emphatically considered by the Moroccan government as their *subjects*.

This was the means to ensure that the money transfers did not dry up. A second important factor was that by means of these political controls the Moroccan government wanted to prevent migrants from organising themselves politically abroad and as such from forming an opposition to the monarchist government from other countries. By establishing a control apparatus in the form of embassies, consulates, mosque committees and government controlled 'migrant societies' such as the infamous *Amicales*, the Moroccan government attempted to keep an eye on its subjects. Loyalty to Morocco and the King was first and foremost and political troublemakers were harassed.

In the early 1990s there was a growing awareness in governmental circles that this patronizing policy had failed. Instead of more involvement, the policy aimed at control and suppression had resulted in increased alienation between migrants and the Moroccan government. When on vacation in Morocco migrants did not get the impression that they were being protected, but more that they were being stripped bare.

This awareness resulted in a change in policy, the government attempted to take a more positive attitude towards migrants in order to reduce their distrust and to renew their involvement in Morocco. In this the government is trying to promote itself as explicit partner and coach of the migrant. Even though the Moroccan-ness of migrants is still emphasised, there is no longer any official animosity towards the integration of migrants in Europe. Now this is even considered to be a desirable development, because correctly positioned migrants can play a key role in attracting investments and stimulating trade. And the more prosperous migrants are in a better position to send larger sums of money to family and friends in Morocco. As a consequence of the last fifteen years of considerable political liberalisation, also the fear for political activism from outside has diminished.

The patronizing attitude has largely been replaced by the active courting of the considerable and unabatedly expanding Moroccan Diaspora. Instead of inert money senders, the Moroccan government is increasingly taking the approach to migrants that they are potential entrepreneurs who need to be convinced that they should invest in Morocco. In 1990 the government established a Ministry for 'Moroccans residing abroad' as well as the *Fondation Hassan II pour les Marocains Résidant à l'Étranger*. The objectives of this foundation are to strengthen the bond between migrants and Morocco by informing and assisting them in various ways both while they are in Europe and when they are on vacation in Morocco.

More importantly it seems that migrants can pass through boarder controls considerably faster than in the past and that they are no longer harassed. The number of holiday makers has been increasing considerably over the past few years. It has also become easier and much cheaper to transfer money to Morocco because of an expansion, encouraged by the government, in the number of branches of Moroccan

banks in Europe, fiscal measures which favour migrants and devaluations which increase the value of foreign currency.

At first glance this policy seemed to be successful. Since 2000 there has been a spectacular increase in money transfers to 3.3 billion dollar. However it is not clear to what extent this increase is a result of the new Moroccan policy. The new labour migration to Spain and Italy and the recent large scale legalisation purges in these countries are also factors which could explain the increase.

The money transfers from migrants have become even more important in the last ten years. In 2002 they represented 6.4 percent of the Gross National Product, 22 percent of the total value of the imports and six times the total development aid paid to Morocco. They also exceed the value of direct foreign investments, which in many cases are much more unstable.

Upside down

Various studies show that migration and money transfers have resulted in a considerable reduction of poverty in Morocco. Migration has turned life completely upside down in the areas the migrants left behind. International migration from the northern Rif, the southern oases and the Sous valley, and, recently, emergent emigration regions such as the Khenifra (to Italy and Spain), Laârache (to the UK and Spain) and the Tadla plain (to Italy), have enabled many of those who stayed behind to considerably improve their standard of living, has enabled their children to study and not infrequently, to start a business.

Migration has also had far-reaching social consequences. For minority and poor groups, such as the black population in the southern oases (*ḥaratīn*), migration has often enabled their socio-economic emancipation. The image of emigration regions being passively drip-fed with migrants' money is not always accurate.

Often the migrants' expenditure and investments have in fact resulted in an economic *boom* which has created work for many of the non-migrants. Urban-oriented consumption and investments of remittances in housing and private enterprises (shops, commerce, hotels, coffee houses, crafts, transportation) by international migrant households have accelerated the growth of medium-size and large towns located in the emigration regions such as the Sous and Rif. Consequently, the employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in such migrant boomtowns have subsequently created a reverse movement of internal migrants from outside these regions.

Pressure group

Even so in Moroccan policy circles disappointment prevails concerning the migrants investment behaviour. The general complaint is that they seem only to consume and hardly ever invest in productive enterprises. Besides the fact that this is a rather pessimistic image, the disappointment is probably due to over optimistic expectations. The emigrants can never solve the country's economic problems on their own. And also the expectation that they would be able to establish new factories and large scale high tech farming businesses, was in hindsight, not at all realistic

considering the poor investment climate in Morocco. It is difficult to get a loan and the relationships concerning property ownership are often not unambiguous.

There seems to be an increasing awareness that migrants will only invest or return when the general obstacles discouraging investment, such as excessive bureaucracy, corruption and legal uncertainties have been dealt with. The Moroccan government's current charm offensive and symbol politics in the form of advertisements to welcome migrants will not convince migrants to invest as long as the conditions for investment remain poor.

The interest that Morocco has in keeping the migrant community involved would appear to be pushing the Moroccan government to embark upon more general reforms. In this the Moroccan migrants form an increasingly important latent pressure group. To this end, the current King Mohammed VI announced a number of measures in 2002 which should considerably simplify the process of establishing a company. Sometimes the influence of migrants is much more direct, such as in bringing social problems and political taboos into the public domain. For example, migrant entrepreneurs now openly complain about bureaucracy on national television.

Immigration control is a high-ranking issue on the EU agenda, which has put its relation with Morocco under considerable stress. In recent years, and in particular after the terrorist attacks Madrid in May 2003 - in which several Moroccans were involved - immigration is increasingly linked to security issues. In direct negotiations between EU's member states and Morocco, the issue of re-admission of undocumented migrants is a pressing issue. In particular the northern Rif Provinces are seen as a source of multiple problems: poverty, drugs, smuggling, radicalism, and undocumented migration. Support for Moroccan border control and regional development programs are seen as an essential tool to reduce emigration pressures. This runs rather contrary to the Moroccan vision, for which migration is a vital resource for development and a safety valve that relieves political and economic tensions.

Above all Moroccan migration policy is focused on the endeavour to keep the hen with the golden egg alive, on the one hand by continuing migration and on the other, courting the Diaspora. It seems that in the next two decennia migration will still have a crucial role to play in alleviating the pressure on the labour market and in generating money transfers and investments. Even though the open emigration policies of the olden days have been abandoned and the Moroccan government might pay some lip-service to the restrictive European Union immigration policies, in actual fact the Moroccan government has little interest in reduced emigration while European employers are in need of their labor. In the meantime ambitious young people continue to leave the country and it is unlikely that the Moroccan government will want to, or be able to stem the tide of emigration.