

Reframing migration, social transformation and agricultural production in the northern savannah zone of Ghana

While migration is an important strategy adopted by individuals and households to improve livelihoods, there are contesting views on its root causes and actual developmental impacts. In Ghana, policy discussions on migration tend to narrowly focus on the economic drivers and impacts, thereby ignoring non-economic drivers and impacts of migration. Additionally, many of the narratives on rural-urban migration, which is the dominant type of human mobility in Ghana, focus on its negative impacts, especially the loss of farm labor which is usually presented as a major cause of declining agricultural production and food insecurity. This brief challenges such orthodox conceptualization of the links between migration, social transformation and agricultural production, with particular reference to the northern savannah zone of Ghana

(i.e., northern Ghana), a region with massive out-migration. Policy narratives tend to attribute out-migration from northern Ghana to economic factors such as the lack of employment opportunities and poverty. However, this brief argues that non-economic dimensions of social transformation, such as increased access to education, technological changes, social change, demographic shifts, political transitions and violence, also contribute to out-migration from the region. Additionally, policy makers and development practitioners tend to assume that out-migration inevitably causes declining agricultural production, food insecurity and underdevelopment. However, this brief argues that, if well managed, migration can contribute to improved agricultural production, food security and broader rural development in northern Ghana.



Business as usual for female migrants in Agogo, Ashanti Region, Ghana (photo: Mary Boatemaa Setrana).

Introduction

Although migration is an important strategy adopted by individuals and households to move out of poverty, diversify income sources and improve livelihoods (Awumbila et al. 2014), the actual drivers and welfare impacts of this phenomenon have been a source of debate in both policy and academic circles. As in other African countries, political and media narratives on migration in Ghana tend to narrowly focus on economic drivers such as unemployment and low incomes in migrant-sending areas (Teye et al. 2019). Similarly, many of the discussions on the impacts of migration tend to focus on economic factors, thereby neglecting equally important non-economic factors.

Additionally, the negative impacts of migration tend to dominate public discussion. It is often argued that rural-urban migration, which is the dominant type of human mobility, negatively affects socioeconomic development in both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving areas. In major migrant-sending areas, for instance, intractable challenges such as a shortage of farm labor, declining agricultural productivity and increasing food insecurity are attributed to massive youth out-migration, especially to urban areas. On the other hand, rural-urban migration is blamed for many problems, including pressure on social amenities, emergence of slums, increased unemployment, and declining standards of living in migrant-sending areas (Awumbila et al. 2014). Consequently, policy prescriptions tend to focus on discouraging people from moving from rural to urban areas. Indeed, some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Ghana sometimes provide financial incentives for young girls and boys who arrive in urban areas to return to their rural areas.

This brief is relevant because the northern savannah zone is a region with massive out-migration in Ghana. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, between 2000 and 2010, all the regions in the northern savannah zone (Upper West, Upper East, and Northern) experienced very high negative net migration, with the Upper West region recording the highest rate of out-migration in the country. The net migration in this region was approximately -300 migrants per 1,000 people (GSS 2012). This gives a net migration

rate of more than -30% (GSS 2012). Although current policy prescriptions tend to attribute massive out-migration from the northern savannah zone to climate variability and economic factors, such as lack of employment opportunities and poverty, this brief argues that non-economic dimensions of social transformation, such as increased access to education, technological changes, social change, demographic shifts, political transitions and violence, also contribute to out-migration from the northern savannah zone. Additionally, this brief does not totally reject the view that out-migration causes a shortage of farm labor, declining agricultural production, food insecurity and worsening welfare of households. Instead, it argues that, if well managed, migration can contribute to improved agricultural production, food security and broader rural development in northern Ghana.

Analytical framework

Much of the academic and policy discussion on migration has historically focused on its links with 'economic development' (Castles 2010). In recent years, some scholars such as de Haas and Fransen (2018) have criticized the reliance on the narrow concept of 'development' as a vehicle for explaining the drivers and impacts of migration. These scholars have argued that the concept of development and its conventional application to migration analyses tends to be biased towards income and demographic factors, thereby ignoring the role of non-economic migration processes, such as increased access to education, technological changes, social change, demographic shifts, political transitions and violence. Based on the recognition that migration is an integral part of social transformation, de Haas and Fransen (2018) proposed an analytical perspective which identified five key changes or transformations that can drive migration and its related impacts.

As shown in Box 1, the key transformations that can drive migration include economic transitions, technological change, political change, demographic transitions, and cultural change. While out-migration and return migration can trigger some of these transformations, they in turn can also shape migration decisions and patterns.

Box 1. Analytical Dimensions of Social Transformation.

1. Economic transitions - accumulation and use of land, labor and capital in the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services.
2. Technological change - application of knowledge through the deployment of procedures, skills and techniques.
3. Political change - the organized control over people, wars and conflicts.
4. Demographic transitions - the structure and spatial distribution of populations.
5. Cultural change - beliefs, values, norms and customs shared by groups of people.

Source: de Haas and Fransen 2018.



Young men and women in search of greener pastures in Ashanti Region, Ghana (photo: Mary Boatemaa Setrana).

Methodology

This brief largely draws on a literature review which was conducted during the inception phase of the *Resilience Against Climate Change - Social Transformation Research and Policy Advocacy* (REACH-STR) project, which is funded by the European Union. The review focused on theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence largely generated through peer-reviewed academic research, although in some cases, grey literature and reports generated by reputable NGOs were also reviewed. In addition, the authors of this brief used information from previous studies on migration and related climate and agrarian changes to support relevant points.

Findings and discussion

Review of the empirical literature and data from previous studies suggests that migration from the northern savannah zone is linked to various dimensions of social transformation, as discussed in the sections below.

Migration and social transformation in the northern savannah zone of Ghana

Migration is a common phenomenon in the northern savannah zone of Ghana. Current migration trends are rooted in historical antecedents, starting from the colonial era. In order to deal with the shortage of labor for underground mining work, cocoa production and railway construction in southern Ghana, the colonial administration designated the northern savannah zone as a labor reserve. From 1906 to 1927, the colonial government

employed both forced labor and labor recruitment policies to ensure migration flows from the northern savannah zone to southern Ghana. Labor migration increased since 1990 due to environmental change, increased spatial inequalities, and social transformation (Songsore and Denkabe 1995).

In view of the region's high level of poverty and food insecurity, youth, in particular, have increasingly migrated to the cash crop production areas and mining communities in the forest zone. An increasing number of youth also migrate to urban centers in southern Ghana. In 2018, about 49%, 56% and 55% of households in the Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions, respectively, had at least one migrant member residing and working in another part of Ghana. Although a larger proportion of migrants from northern Ghana are males, recent studies have shown that an increased number of young females, in particular, are migrating independently to urban centers in southern Ghana to work in the informal sector (Awumbila 2015; Darkwah et al. 2016; Teye et al. 2019). Using panel data collected from five main migrant-sending regions, including all the regions in northern Ghana (Upper West, Upper East, and Northern), Teye et al. (2019) demonstrated that the incidence of migration among men rose from 14.7% in 2015 to 21.8% in 2018, while the incidence of migration among women increased from 9.8% in 2015 to 15.9% in 2018. Their analysis showed that, within 3 years, the incidence of migration among men increased by 48% while the incidence of migration among women increased by 62%. The feminization of migration is partly attributed to urbanization and social change (Awumbila 2015). The remaining section discusses how migration from the

northern savannah zone is driven by interaction between economic and non-economic dimensions of social transformation.

Economic transitions and migration

There is no doubt that spatial inequalities in economic development and the concentration of manufacturing industries in cities of southern Ghana have contributed to the increased migration of youth to these areas, especially since the 1980s. Economic inequality has a dual effect on migration flows. On the one hand, such inequality increases relative deprivation and hence augments migration aspirations among youth in northern Ghana. On the other hand, poverty may also make it difficult for people without appropriate social capital to migrate from areas facing environmental stress. Recent studies in the northern savannah zone show that although there are people who choose to remain in places experiencing the impacts of climate change, because they are 'spiritually' attached to their communities (i.e., *voluntary immobility*), there are *'involuntary' immobile groups* who actually want to migrate from places experiencing environmental stress, food insecurity and poverty. However, they are unable to do so because they lack the financial resources, social networks and rights to embark on migration. Despite the fact that an increasing number of women rely on their own agency to migrate independently, some women are not allowed to exercise the right to migrate because migration decisions are still taken by patriarchs. Consequently, women and young girls tend to be among this *trapped* population because in addition to lacking financial resources to migrate, certain patriarchal norms make it difficult for women to migrate independently. Policies that seek to facilitate migration from poor and environmentally distressed communities are, therefore, needed to assist involuntary immobile (i.e., trapped) populations to migrate from places that are facing climate variability, poverty and food insecurity. Available data also suggests that in some contexts, broader economic development, characterized by improved transportation and communication, is contributing to increased north-south migration.

While the massive youth out-migration is usually seen as a developmental challenge in northern Ghana due to the loss of farm labor (Adaku 2013), remittances from migrants contribute to the improved welfare of household members left behind. The surveys conducted by the Migrating Out of Poverty Research Program Consortium in five regions of Ghana, including all the regions in the northern savannah zone, show that households with migrants tend to have enhanced household welfare compared to those without migrants (Teye et al. 2019). Many of the north-south migrants interviewed, even those in the slums, believed that migration to southern Ghana had benefited them and their families back home through remittances, as highlighted below in a statement made by a female migrant:

"It (life) is now better for me than before migration to Accra, because back home in the North I was not doing any work. Even though when I started working it was not moving on as well as I expected, I am now happily working, able to save

some money and remit some to my family back in the north. (In addition) my child has benefited a lot from my migration to this place because I am now able to provide for all his educational needs" (Awumbila et al. 2014, 25).

According to Awumbila et al. (2014), about 76% of migrants in the slums reported that they regularly sent money home to support household consumption and also for development projects. These findings suggest that facilitating the migration of some members of a household may contribute to improved livelihoods.

Technological changes/increased access to education and migration

There is also evidence that recent technological changes and increased access to education have contributed to out-migration from northern Ghana. Results from the surveys conducted by the Migrating Out of Poverty Research Program Consortium show that the propensity to migrate from northern Ghana is greater among people with higher levels of education than those with little or no education. Technological changes, such as the increasing use of mobile phones and social media, are also contributing to out-migration. While there is little research on the impact of migration on technological changes, out-migration and return migration can potentially impact migrant-sending areas through new and increased knowledge, technology and skills transfer from the emigrants and return migrants which can disrupt cultural norms around health, education and gender equality (FAO 2018). This suggests the need for programs that will facilitate skills transfer from emigrants and return migrants.

Political transitions and migration

Political/ethnic conflicts and violence are also responsible for migration from the northern savannah zone of Ghana. For instance, the Konkomba-Nanumba war and conflicts in Bawku have contributed to the displacement of thousands of people from northern Ghana. Some of the forcibly displaced people have moved to other parts of Ghana. It is evident that the presence of migrants can worsen conflict situations, as shown by the clashes between the Fulani herdsmen and local farmers in some parts of Ghana. Sometimes, emigrants also contribute to conflicts in the places of origin when they buy weapons to arm members of their religious and ethnic groups. However, there are situations where emigrants contribute to peace building efforts in their home regions (Nambe 2017).

Demographic changes and migration

Changes in population structure and distribution are responsible for migration from northern Ghana. With rapid population growth and urbanization, more people are migrating from small towns than rural centers. On the other hand, migration also influences demographic changes. For instance, recent reports from the Ghana Demographic and Health Surveys indicate that migration to urban areas and urbanization have contributed to declining fertility levels in the country in the last decade. This is because emigrants and return migrants are exposed to new technologies, such as

modern contraceptive use, which can reduce fertility levels. Additionally, rural-urban migration and urban lifestyles also contribute to the preference for smaller family sizes.

Cultural/social change and migration

Changes in patriarchal norms and values have contributed to changes in patterns of migration. Research conducted by Darkwah et al. (2016) and Teye et al. (2017), for instance, has shown that the increasing trend of female migration from northern Ghana is linked to social change, especially in relation to migration decision-making and gendered power relations in the household. In the past, married women in northern Ghana could not easily migrate without seeking permission from their husbands. Migration decision-making powers in many households were wielded by the male patriarchs. In recent years, poverty and the inability of husbands and other male patriarchs to provide the needs of female household members have weakened the ability of husbands to prevent their wives from migrating, as shown in the statement below by a husband that was left behind in Tamale:

“She (the wife) migrated because of poverty. If I had money to provide for her needs she would not have gone, but if I say she shouldn’t go and cannot provide for her needs she will tell me I don’t have anything to offer her. ... Even if I had a small business operating and she wanted to go I could prevent her from going but there is nothing like that” (Teye et al. 2017, 20). On the other hand, migration is also contributing to social change in northern Ghana. During the surveys conducted by the Migrating Out of Poverty Research Program Consortium in northern Ghana, participants of a focus group discussion in Tamale asserted that some return migrants sometimes come back with new lifestyles and dress codes that are considered

alien to the culture of communities in northern Ghana, where Islam is the dominant religion (see Darkwah et al. 2016).

Impacts of out-migration on agricultural production and food security

The impacts of rural-urban migration on agricultural production have been the subject of many heated debates in recent years (FAO 2018). In policy discussions in Ghana, out-migration is often portrayed as a major cause of a shortage of farm labor and declining agricultural production (Adaawen and Owusu 2013). Such assessments are simplistic, as they fail to recognize the fact that depending on the context, social transformation associated with the transfer of skills, knowledge and technology from the migrants to areas of origin can enhance agricultural production and broader rural development. As reported elsewhere by Huy and Nonneman (2016), remittances can be leveraged to offset the adverse impacts of out-migration by providing funds for hiring replacement labor for the loss of farm labor due to migration.

Additionally, out-migration and associated remittances have been found to enhance food security in parts of northern Ghana (Kuuire et al. 2013), including through positively contributing to improved purchasing power and agricultural investment. During a study in northern Ghana, Rademacher-Schulz et al. (2014) observed that migration in the dry season to more suitable farming areas and mining sites helped households to deal with food insecurity. These findings suggest that rather than simply discouraging young people from migrating, policy makers and planners should develop programs to leverage remittances for improved agricultural production and food security in northern Ghana as well as to improve the safety and security of migrants.



Young men on the move from arid northern Ghana to the forest zones in southern Ghana (photo: Mary Boatemaa Setrana).

Conclusion

The findings presented in this brief indicate that while north-south migration in Ghana is usually attributed to economic drivers, especially unemployment and poverty, non-economic dimensions of social transformation, such as increased access to education, technological changes, social change, demographic shifts, political transitions and violence, are also key drivers and at the same time impacts of migration from the northern savannah zone. Therefore, policies that seek to address the causes of migration and maximize economic impacts need to target both the economic and non-economic drivers and impacts of migration. Some people voluntarily choose to remain in places experiencing climate-induced food insecurity and poverty, because they are 'spiritually' attached to their communities. However, there are other people who want to migrate but are unable to do so because they lack the financial resources, social networks and rights to embark on migration. Policies that seek to facilitate migration from poor and environmentally distressed communities are, therefore, needed to assist the migration of involuntary immobile persons 'out of poverty'. The general belief is that massive out-migration from rural areas in northern Ghana is the major cause of declining agricultural production and food insecurity. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that, if well managed, remittances from rural-urban migrants can contribute positively to household food security in this region, through improved purchasing power and agricultural investment. Effective policies and actions are needed to achieve the positive impacts of out-migration from the northern savannah zone.



Cattle rearing as a livelihood strategy for migrant households in Dodowa, Greater Accra Region, Ghana (photo: Mary Boatemaa Setrana).

Policy recommendations

1. The government and development partners, who are currently implementing policies and programs that seek to address the root causes of migration, should be encouraged to focus on both the economic drivers (e.g., poverty, unemployment) and non-economic dimensions of social transformation (e.g., demographic shifts, social change).
2. Planning officials and policy makers should work with civil society groups to design and implement programs that can facilitate safe, orderly and planned migration from poor and environmentally distressed communities in northern Ghana.
3. Gender advocacy groups should work with traditional authorities to address patriarchal norms, which cause involuntary immobility among women from poor communities.
4. Government officials should work with nongovernmental officials to design new schemes and provide incentives to encourage north-south migrants to send financial and food remittances back home to improve livelihoods and reduce food insecurity.
5. In order to address the loss of farm labor due to youth out-migration, the government and development partners should assist farmers to modernize agriculture and increase farm mechanization. This will ensure that a reduction in the farm labor force does not affect agricultural production.
6. Instead of simply discouraging young people from migrating, policy makers and state planning officials should develop programs to ensure that remittances are invested in off-farm and viable agricultural systems that would contribute to improved agricultural production, food security and broader rural development in areas facing rapid rural-urban migration.
7. In order to maximize the developmental impacts of migration in both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving areas, it should be mainstreamed into the development planning agenda and development plans of district assemblies.



Out-migration of youth leads to uncultivated vast farmlands in Bosom, Western Region, Ghana (photo: Mary Boatemaa Setrana)

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Youth participation in the application of fertilizer in a maize farm in Tumu, Upper West Region, Ghana (photo: Mohammed Sakib).

Source

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