

‘The saga of the returnee’: return and reintegration experiences of Ghanaian returnees from Libya

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Introduction

Return migration has been factored into the Ghanaian development discourse and planning especially since the 1990s. As a country, Ghana has initiated programmes to encourage return of both Ghanaians abroad and ‘friends of Ghana’ for development purposes. These include the Emancipation Day celebrations in the 1990s (aimed at helping African Americans and people of African descent to return to Africa and Ghana), the Homecoming Summit in 2001 (to harness skills and resources of Ghanaians in the diaspora to help with national development), the establishment of the Non-resident Ghanaian Secretariat in 2004, the Joseph Project in 2006 (aimed at encouraging the transfer of financial and human resources to promote socio-economic development through return and reintegration), the Investment Summit in 2007, and the drafting of a Diaspora Engagement Policy (currently awaiting cabinet approval), among others. Return and reintegration programmes in Ghana have also been driven by Western governments (UK, Netherlands, Germany), international as well as intergovernmental organisations such as the DFID, the Centre for International Migration and Development (CIM), IOM, and UNDP. The predominant focus has, however, been on return and reintegration of migrants from Global North. We argue that this lop-sided focus meant that state and non-state stakeholders were ill-prepared for the return and re-integration of Ghanaian migrants from Libya.

History of Ghanaian migration to Libya

Libyan oil exploration and production, together with its mines and farms served as pull factors for most immigrants mostly from the country’s immediate southern neighbours (Mali, Chad and Niger) prior to the 1990s (Spiga, 2005). Post-1990s saw increased participation in immigration by other sub-Saharan African countries such as Ghana (de Haas, 2007). Libya was not a preferred destination for many Ghanaian emigrants until the mid-1980s (Bob-Milliar, 2012; Akyeampong, 2000). This was, however, necessitated by the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in 1983 and 1985 with the majority of emigrant Ghanaians migrating to other parts of the continent including Libya (Akyeampong, 2000). According to Bob-Milliar (2012), these movements were also boosted by a bilateral agreement entered into between the Libyan and Ghanaian governments to send Ghanaian teachers to teach English in Libya. In all, 200 teachers were sent in two different batches between 1983 and 1984 but the agreement was abrogated in 1986 due to varied but unofficial reasons (Bob-Milliar, 2012). However, both skilled and unskilled Ghanaian migrants continued to migrate, on their own, into Libya to seek other opportunities (Bob-Milliar, 2012). Even though at the initial stages the Libyan authorities offered employment to only highly skilled Ghanaian immigrants, the awareness of the availability of livelihood opportunities for other low skilled migrants further increased the number of Ghanaians entering Libya through formal and informal routes such

as the Sahara desert (Anarfi & Kwankye, 2003; Akokpari, 2000). This practice continued but Libya later transformed from a destination country into a transit country to Europe for some Ghanaian migrants (Lucht, 2012; Brede Loup, 2012; De Haas, 2008).

Also, in response to United Nations sanctions against it between 1992 and 2000, Libya attracted sub-Saharan African nationals by removing the impediments such as residence permits or visas for non-citizens entering Libya (GDP, 2009; de Haas, 2006). These were replaced with a Medical Certificate, as the only requirement. Although the government of Libya relaxed its stringent immigration laws, irregular migration into the country was on the increase. As a result, the Libyan authorities intensified the implementation of immigration control policies by clamping down on irregular migration (de Haas, 2006). Thus, prior to the 2011 Libyan political crisis, the Libyan authorities were already dealing with irregular immigrants through forced repatriations. Between the period 2000 and 2012, for instance, 12,201 Ghanaians were deported to Ghana from Libya (NADMO, 2012 Cited in Bob-Milliar, 2012). The 2011 political agitation and the subsequent unrest, therefore, coincided with these immigration practices.

Life of Ghanaian migrants in Libya

Ghanaian migrants in Libya mostly occupy very low socio-economic positions relative to the native population partly due to their irregular migration statuses and differences in cultural and linguistic characteristics (Naik & Laczko, 2012). A high percentage of the returnees interviewed for the 'Migrants in Countries in Crisis' (MICIC) study held low-skilled jobs in Libya, such as labouring, farming and construction. The MICIC research reveals cases of racism, discrimination, name-calling, robberies and casual attacks by Libyan youths, arbitrary arrests and detentions, lack of access to rental accommodation, inability to access the formal banking system and lack of protection by Libyan security services. The 2011 crisis in Libya exacerbated these precarious living conditions. The study finds a profound loss of property, suffering from both physical and mental harm and even loss of lives of Ghanaian migrants in Libya and wider adverse effects on migrant households in Ghana.

Methodology

The study adopted mainly qualitative research methods (in-depth interviews and focus group discussions) among thirty-two participants from six categories of actors (return migrants, family members, civil society organisations, community leaders, intergovernmental organisations, government authorities). Data was analysed thematically with the support of the NVivo software (Version 20). Cassarino's (2004) 'resource mobilisation and the returnee's preparedness framework' was adopted to guide the analysis.

Return and re-integration amidst unpreparedness

The role of the state

The Ghana government, through its diplomatic mission in Libya, liaised with international partners to provide transportation and relief services to trapped Ghanaian migrants in Libya. The mission in Libya, however, faced major challenges around a trust deficit between migrants and embassy staff and this was further exacerbated by a lack of national policy on evacuation of nationals from countries in crisis. Some migrants contested claims by the

Ghana embassy to have coordinated assistance to support the evacuation and repatriation of trapped Ghanaians from Libya. Abraham (GH/M/08; a 52-year-old return migrant) described officials at the Ghana Mission in Libya as *'useless, they don't help anybody. The officials in Libya do not help at all'*. Migrants complained about lack of support from embassy officials and recounted their desperate reliance on social media to embarrass the government of Ghana into eventually chartering flights to evacuate them. When the Ghana government finally agreed to evacuate its nationals from Libya, three Liaison Posts were established in Salum on the Libyan-Egyptian border; Ras Ajdir on the Libyan-Tunisian border and Tripoli; and these were managed by the Ghana Mission in Libya to aid the evacuation process (Bob-Milliar, 2012).

The National Disaster Management Organisation (NADMO) has a direct mandate to coordinate all disaster management activities in Ghana. It draws its funding from government subvention. NADMO's role was evident during the 2011 unrest in Libya. However, the lack of adequate financial support for returnees and misinformation exposed some staff of NADMO to the risk of physical attacks when returnees erroneously perceived them as hoarding relief money that they were entitled to. Part of the agitation by returned migrants allegedly emanated from what they reported as broken promises by international institutions, working jointly with their national government. Some return migrants claimed that they were promised US\$500 each upon return by the IOM in Libya and others were promised support towards a sustainable reintegration into their communities.

Also, the existing disaster management organisation (NADMO) does not have a mandate to evacuate trapped nationals from abroad. This limits the organisation's ability to provide support until such nationals have physically arrived in the country. Fundamental challenges faced by NADMO were compounded by the lack of a formal reception centre for the purposes of receiving large numbers of distressed individuals and the completion of immigration, healthcare and security assessments. This necessitated the hosting of returnees in a military sports stadium (Elwark Stadium) that is largely exposed to the elements, especially in cases of adverse weather conditions. Logistical challenges constrained thorough assessments against the effects of trauma and the delivery of therapies against psychosocial and post-traumatic stress disorders. The health of staff of NADMO was also compromised because of prolonged exposure to very ill returnees who were not diagnosed quickly.

The role of civil society and private actors

Community leaders and some civil society organisations played a critical role during the return and reintegration phase for returnees from Libya. The director of Dormaa FM station, for instance, used the medium of radio to establish regular communication between migrants in Libya and their families in Ghana prior to their arrival in the country. This was achieved through phone-in sessions where migrants shared their distressing experiences with the local community. Trapped migrants also lobbied their members of parliament and government officials by phoning into live broadcasts at the peak of the crisis and making direct appeals for help in evacuating them. Their harrowing stories helped galvanise public opinion in

favour of government action to charter aircrafts to extract them from a country in crisis. Open communications channels were also maintained throughout returnees' journey from their arrival at the national airport until they returned to their various towns and villages.

The local radio station at Dormaa also run sensitisation programmes to help the community appreciate the circumstances surrounding the unplanned return of their relatives. This was meant to minimise incidents of rejection, humiliation and conflict between community members and returnees. Community leaders also provided support to the returnees, however, acts of criminality and antisocial behaviour posed significant challenges to their ability to provide these services. Such acts perpetuate stigma against returnees. Civil Society Organisations (CSO) such 'Scholars in Transit' collaborate with IOM and UNDP to deliver limited reintegration support to returnees but the support tends to be ad hoc and on a limited scale.

The role of intergovernmental organisations

The intergovernmental organisations such as IOM and the UNDP were constrained in their ability to help evacuate and reintegrate return migrants due to challenges with accurate data on the number of Ghanaians in Libya. This inhibited stakeholders' ability to prepare adequately to receive returnees without knowing the scale of the mass return.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that the crisis situation in Libya presented an unbridled chaotic situation where migrants' carefully tailored plans were thrown into disarray. The Ghanaian state and non-governmental and inter-governmental organisations were ill-prepared to assist these migrants on their 'forced return' and this frustrated their reintegration into various communities in Ghana. Many returnees in this study re-migrated to Libya during the crisis due to the failure of reintegration programmes in Ghana. The paper also finds that returnees in this study still have the aspiration to migrate back to Libya to fulfil their abrogated migration and livelihood plans.

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