



## Migration, youth and land in West Africa Challenges for inclusive development

By Gerard Baltissen, Mayke Kaag, Anouk Lodder and Griet Steel

### Policy pointers

- Current (policy) assumptions about West-African migration are too simplistic for generating sustainable solutions. A better understanding of migration patterns, their connections to land dynamics and livelihoods, and how youth are affected is needed to establish opportunities for, and impediments to, inclusive development in West-Africa.
- Promote access to land by young people for economic development and employment, address attribution rules and link youth to professional agricultural organisations.
- Develop relationships with the diaspora for guidance on land governance and land investments, information exchange on business partnerships and for investments in rural development.

### Is migration the problem?

As discussions on migration become ever more alarmist and narrowly focused on how to stop African migration towards the European Union, current policy debates often assume that providing access to land will discourage migration. But research has shown that this assumption is too simplistic. Despite fears of an 'exodus' to Europe, West Africa has significantly more migration movements within the region than to European countries. Instead of focusing on migration as a 'problem' this policy brief argues that a better understanding is needed of the complex interplay between migration and land dynamics, and how these factors help or hinder inclusive and sustainable development, especially for West African youth.

### Why the focus on youth?

In West Africa, the categories of people on the move are diverse, including refugees fleeing war and disaster, skilled and unskilled labour migrants, students, traders and pastoralists. As about half of sub-Saharan Africa's population is aged under 25, it is unsurprising that a substantial number of migrants are young people.

Young people may have specific reasons to migrate. Some move to become economically independent, influenced by factors such as economic instability, high youth unemployment, land scarcity, conflict and post-conflict transition processes, and climate change. Lack of land and appropriate inheritance systems have encouraged many to migrate to pursue livelihoods elsewhere, both in and outside of agriculture. Young people (and their families) may also see migration as a rite of passage – part of the process of becoming an adult (Box 2). Often, decisions to migrate are a family affair: families invest in their migrant sons and daughters – and expect a decent return.

### What are the key issues?

In West Africa, migration patterns cannot be understood without considering the geography of land-based investments,



(photo: Mayke Kaag)

### **Box 1. About the project**

This policy brief builds on the results of a LANDac research project called Migration, Youth and Land in West Africa: Making the Connections Work for Inclusive Development. The project aimed to analyse the various ways in which migration and land dynamics in West Africa are intertwined. Research was conducted in 2017 – 2018 by teams of local researchers in Mali, Burkina Faso and Benin and one of the LANDac partners in Senegal. Field reports were produced (Sow and Nelen 2018; Zizien, Louré and Sanou, 2018; Eyebiyi 2018; see also Kaag and Steel 2019) and the combined research outputs are presented in this policy brief.

### **Box 2. Patterns of youth migration in Burkina Faso**

In Béguedo in Boulgou Province in Burkina Faso, research participants noted that migration was an important sociocultural fact. According to one agricultural officer, at least 75 per cent of young people between the ages of 20 and 35 have had one experience of migration – and as many as 90 per cent of families have at least one migrant son (Zizien et al. 2018).

acquiring or using land for economic development. To understand patterns of migration, we must understand the connections to land and land dynamics and how youth are affected by them. A recent Netherlands Land Academy (LANDac) research project examined the links between youth, migration, land and inclusive development through four case studies in Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Benin (see Kaag *et al.* 2019; see also Boxes 1 and 2). It analysed how land-based investments and migration trajectories of West African youth and their families are interrelated, as well as the opportunities and constraints they face. For example, land-based investments can contribute to local and national economic development, offering new opportunities locally for unemployed youth. But they may also lead to displacement, forced evictions and marginalisation for others.

### **Access to land**

Most migrants, even those who have been absent for many years, keep in touch with their local community by sending remittances to family and for community projects. They invest in land and real estate, in both cities and rural areas. This can have a significant impact on both inclusion and exclusion processes. Youth are often particularly penalised by precarious access to land or a lack of appropriate rural financial services or appropriate inheritance systems. In areas where the

pressure on land is already high, such as peri-urban areas, land prices are soaring. Consequently, local youth find they can no longer afford to buy a plot locally and are pushed to more marginal areas to acquire land.

But high migration rates do not automatically mean that West African youth are no longer interested in agriculture. They may see no future in ‘traditional’ family-based subsistence agriculture. However, young people may be interested in family farms producing high-value crops. Agricultural diversification and well-developed value chains would also offer other job opportunities, such as in marketing and processing. But to take advantage of these opportunities, young people need the right skills.

### **Rural versus urban dynamics**

The case studies seem to indicate a rural – urban continuum where customary arrangements in rural areas offer security but also a less flexible power framework (gerontocracy), while urbanisation leads to more opportunities for new economic elites including migrants, but also to increasing inequality between old and new elites and poorer segments of the population.

Both rural and urban areas are targeted by migrant investments in land and infrastructure. Despite the higher pressures on land this creates, especially in (peri-)urban areas, migrant investments in housing and the like also create opportunities for local youth, such as brokerage and employment in construction (see for example Box 3). In low-pressure contexts in rural areas, migrant remittances often support families, but the case studies suggest that in

### **Box 3. Opportunities related to migrant investments in urban Senegal**

Project researchers spoke to a mason working on the third floor of a house in Keur Massar owned by a Senegalese migrant working in France. He said that construction had started in 2003 and that the second floor had been added in 2005. The ground floor was occupied by tenants and the second floor by the migrant’s family. It was only now that the owner could afford to finalise the third floor. One of the migrant’s younger brothers was overseeing the work.

Another young local entrepreneur said that he specialised in creating fashionable lowered ceilings with integrated lights. He mainly caters to modou-modou (a term commonly used in Senegal for Senegalese international migrants, which refers to someone who works hard under difficult circumstances) as local people cannot afford the price.



(photo: VNG International Benin)

many instances they do not significantly propel economic productivity – which can be partly related to a lack of opportunities for creating added value in the agricultural sector.

In rural areas, transnational migrants often stand out as importantly contributing to local livelihoods and as such are considered to be integrated in the local elite. In contrast, in urban contexts, migrants often appear to be one actor among many in a complex dynamic and fluid land market. They have some power because of their economic clout (even if their income is often insecure, as the example in Box 3 shows). But they tend to have less power locally, as they often come from other localities and consequently have fewer connections to local social and political networks.

In both rural and urban locations, for migrants seeking opportunities to gain access to land, their connections to the local community and wider diaspora networks are key (see for example Boxes 4 and 5; see also Kaag and Steel, 2019).

#### **Box 4. Land allocation for returning migrants in Mali**

In the village of Touba in the Koulikoro region, returning migrants (even those who have been absent for more than 20 years) are given access to family land or are allowed to acquire land. There is little opposition, especially if they have sent money to the community during migration. Access to land can be regarded as a reward.

#### **Box 5. Benin: an example of migrant opportunities**

‘Young people who migrate from Benin to Nigeria first stay only a season, producing tomatoes and peppers, and earn big. They come back to Benin with motorcycles and build a house showing that they have projects for returning to the village. Before moving again to Nigeria, they rent the motorcycle as a taxi and enable a village driver to earn money, they might use the money later to purchase land. After three years, the young migrant marries a woman in the village of origin. In most cases, the young family settles in the village, with the husband going back and forth. In some cases, his wife will accompany him in migration. Those who succeed in migration do so.’

Secretary General of Klouékanmè Municipality

These connections include, for example, proving their loyalty to their home community while away by sending remittances. Or – if they aim to invest in a different location to where they originally come from – they must rely on local brokers to create connections for them locally.

#### **Impacts on women**

Most migrating youth are male, and only a small percentage of migrants are female. When men migrate, women may become de facto household heads. But whether this translates into decision-making power on land use and the use of remittances is unclear, as women tend to remain under the custody of the extended family.



(photo: Mayke Kaag)

### Recommendations for further research

The dynamics described here offer food for thought on both the bottlenecks and possible ways forward. How can we make the migration – land nexus in West-Africa more profitable and productive for as many people as possible, and for young people in particular? The case studies indicate important directions for further research, including:

- The mapping of both positive and negative migration experiences
- Analysing longer-term processes of inclusion and exclusion in various migration contexts with a special focus on inclusion and exclusion in networks that facilitate access to land and networks that facilitate migration
- Investigating opportunities for circular migration and related migrant investments in productive and sustainable land use in their home community
- Analysing impacts of mounting land pressure and urbanisation on the nature of land conflicts, land tenure arrangements and tenure security, and the role of migrants in these processes
- Analysing the impacts of male migration on women's heritage, access to, and control over land in their home communities, and
- Investigating local and translocal/transnational livelihood strategies and how land dynamics influence them. Is land currently a productive asset in translocal or transnational livelihood strategies?

Further research would contribute to a more in-depth understanding of how migration influences land-based investments, and the other way around, and which policies are needed to make these processes supportive to development, for youth, their families, and for West-African society in general.

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For more information on this policy brief or the Migration, Youth, and Land in West Africa: Making the Connections Work for Inclusive Development project, please contact the LANDac secretariat ([landac.geo@uu.nl](mailto:landac.geo@uu.nl)).

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