



ABOUT THE PORTAL BACK GROUND ERS

The Africa Portal backgrounder series offers brief background information and commentary on current policy issues of concern to Africans—especially in the areas of conflict, energy, food security, health, migration and climate change. Written by seasoned, up-and-coming scholars on Africa, the backgrounders are published exclusively on the Africa Portal and are available for free, full-text download. The Africa Portal is an online knowledge resource for policy-related issues on Africa. www.africaportal.org

CHILD MIGRATION IN GHANA: ISSUES, RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

BY MATTHEW I. MITCHELL

SUMMARY

- The majority of children who migrate in Ghana do so voluntarily and are involved in the decision-making process to travel.
- Independent child migration patterns in Ghana generally flow from the northern to the southern regions of the country. Addressing development imbalances between Ghana's northern and southern regions is key to improving conditions that lead to child migration.
- Although migrant children face numerous risks in destination areas in southern Ghana, many of them continue to perceive migration as a source of significant opportunity.

VOLUNTARY CHILD MIGRATION IN GHANA

On May 13, 2011, media in Ghana reported that 116 children between the ages of four and 17 were rescued from communities along Lake Volta—which links the country's northern savannah with the coast—after they had been trafficked from the country's Central, Eastern, Greater Accra, and Volta regions (Awuni 2011). Ghana is recognized as a source, transit, and destination for women and children who are trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation and domestic and commercial labour (Quartey, 2009:65). Despite this reputation, only a small percentage of children who migrate are trafficked as the vast majority migrate 'voluntarily' and often independently of their birth parents (Kwankye et al., 2009: 31).

These 'voluntary' migrant children move for a variety of reasons. Many are motivated by economic factors, which include searching for paid work or training or schooling. In some circumstances, children's independent migration is pursued for a variety of non-economic factors, such as societal norms and values about migration, marriage incentives, or the attainment of knowledge and status that often comes with being a child migrant.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew I. Mitchell

Matthew I. Mitchell is a Ph.D candidate in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University, Canada. His research examines the relationship between migration and violent conflict in the cocoa regions in West Africa. His work has been published in *The Research Companion to Regionalisms* (Ashgate, forthcoming). He is also currently working on a co-authored book manuscript—under contract with University of British Columbia Press—that examines governance strategies in mining sectors. Matthew gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance from the Africa Initiative Program, the Ethnicity and Democratic Governance Project, the International Development Research Centre, Queen's University and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

This backgrounder explores the issue of independent child migration in Ghana. It gives an overview of the flow of migrants from Ghana's northern regions to the south, as these patterns account for the bulk of children's movements within the country. Although the north-south migration of children has become widespread, as almost every household in Ghana's northern regions has a direct link with child migration to the south, this migration is a relatively recent phenomenon (Kwankye et al., 2007:24). A culture of child migration to the south is developing as these movements become a 'rite of passage' for Ghanaians in the north (Kwankye et al., 2007:25).

FACTORS BEHIND CHILD MIGRATION

Migration often occurs as a result of imbalances in development levels between origin and destination areas. These imbalances are striking in the Ghanaian case, demonstrated by stark differences in the levels of poverty between the relatively poor north and the rich south. Incomes are known to be two to three times lower for northern Ghanaians as compared to those from the south. These imbalances have persisted from colonial times into the present, as development priorities have consistently favoured the resource-rich southern regions over the north. Over the years, thousands of workers migrated south to work in the mining, cocoa and timber sectors. The resulting dichotomy has led to the north becoming a labour reserve for the south (Kwankye et al, 2007:5-6).

In recent years, the migration of northerners has been influenced by the increasing hardships facing their region. Agriculture has suffered due to unpredictable rainfall, highly depleted soil fertility, and increased demands on the land in the face of a growing population (Hashim and Thorsen, 2011:25). Migrants are also drawn by the strong economic growth in the labour market in the south. Interestingly, these migrations were historically undertaken by seasonal adult labourers from the north, but in recent years, younger children are taking their place (Kwankye et al., 2007: 4).

Although formal education is often considered to be an essential component of a conventional childhood, it is not necessarily viewed as an intrinsic part of childhood in many of the sending regions (Hashim and Thorsen, 2011:38). Only 13 percent of child migrants in Ghana's two largest cities – Accra and Kumasi – have received education beyond the primary school level (Kwankye et al., 2007:12). This lack of education means that most of the children are limited in their skill set, many working in menial positions, such as head

porters. Although some children are involved in some form of 'step migration,' whereby they move from an initial destination to another, the majority have only migrated once and generally remained in their place of destination for five years or less (Kwankye et al., 2009:25). Furthermore, while there are some observable gender differences, numerous studies show that both boys and girls are involved in independent child migration.

The term 'independent' child migration is somewhat misleading, as very few children migrate entirely independent of their family network. In the Ghanaian context, a range of family members living in rural households and elsewhere are often involved in the decision to migrate. Nonetheless, while some decisions are essentially taken by parents, many children decide to migrate against the wishes of their family, sometimes leaving the household without the knowledge of their parents.

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN MIGRATION

The decision to migrate is often fraught with negotiation, debate and even deceit. The risks associated with child migration increases when journeys are undertaken in secrecy, as children may not be able to count on relatives for financial support or employment in the destination area. In addition, due to the lack of familial support, children are often in danger of being cheated or lured into more dangerous places (Hashim and Thorsen, 2011:65). Researchers have highlighted three areas of risk that children face:

- 1** Work-related risks, arising from the nature of the work, which may often constitute a major source of physical and psychological threat for children;
- 2** Shelter-related risks, manifested in the struggle to find decent accommodation, at times exposing children to the additional risk of sexual violence and crime;
- 3** Reproductive health-related risks, putting sexually active migrant children in danger of sexually transmitted diseases and violence.

Notwithstanding the above-noted risks, child migrants are presented with numerous opportunities in their destination areas. Over three-quarters of children report that they were able to save money from their earnings, while more than half were able to send remittances back home (Kwankye et. al.,

2009:19-20). Aside from the obvious financial opportunities, many children also become more independent and embrace their new-found social status resulting from their migrant identity. On the other hand, some children also regret having migrated, due to financial problems, difficulties in finding employment, low incomes, challenging work, and general hardship in their new home (Kwankye et al. 2009: 29). However, notwithstanding the challenges and risks associated with migration, many continue to view it as a source of great opportunity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING REGIONAL IMBALANCES

Efforts and policies aimed at mitigating the risks and improving the opportunities of child migrants must target both the sending and receiving areas, as migration often stems from imbalances between the two areas. Although the northern regions will continue to trail behind the development levels in the south, the government needs to address the widening gap and increasing disparity among the population of these neglected regions. One area of comparative advantage for the regions might be increased investment in the shea nuts industry, as over two million people currently benefit from this sector. Although Ghana is already the world's second leading exporter of shea nuts, there is much room for growth in the underdeveloped industry, especially since some experts argue that shea butter could be an excellent substitute for cocoa butter in chocolate production (Aboba, 2011).

Aside from the need to improve the economic opportunities in the regions in question, efforts should also be made to sensitize parents and children of the potential risks associated with child migration, while encouraging children to acquire more education and/or training before migrating in order to improve their chances of finding better jobs in the destination areas (Kwankye et al., 2007:26). Ghana's Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs needs to retrain migrant children once in the destination areas so that they can develop new skills and get better jobs (Kwankye et al., 2007:25). Given the rapid growth of north-south child migration in recent years, it is clear that government and non-governmental organizations must prioritize and dedicate more resources to the education and skill development of migrant children.

At the same time, organizations and decision-makers must be cautious in addressing the issue and develop appropriate policies. As Hashim and

Thorsen (2011, 29) note, "...international advocacy has been effective in highlighting the plight of those children in particularly difficult circumstances. However, it has also resulted in a totalizing discourse where the diversity of children's experiences and work situations becomes treated as equivalent, reducing all working children to the status of victims and serving to shore up a characterization of them as without agency." Child migrants are often engaged actors in the decision to migrate, and generally view their choice in a positive light. Thus, while policy-makers and scholars must continue to address the plight of vulnerable migrant children, more research and policy needs to consider the varied, complex and dynamic processes behind the phenomenon of independent child migration.

REFERENCES

Aboba, Mathias. "Shea Nut More Beneficial to Ghana than Cocoa?" *Public Agenda*, Accra, March 11, 2011. http://publicagendaghana.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=848%3Amathias-aboba, accessed on June 21, 2011.

Awumbila, Mariama, Takyiwaa Manuh, Peter Quartey, Cynthia A. Tagoe and Thomas A. Basiakoh. *Migration Country Paper: Ghana*. 2008. Accra: Centre for Migration Studies, University of Ghana.

Awuni, Manasseh Azure. "116 Trafficked Children Rescued." *The Daily Graphic*, Accra, No. 18532, May 13, 2011, pp. 1, 3.

Hashim, Iman and Dorte Thorsen. *Child Migration in Ghana*. 2011. London: Zed Books.

Kwankye, Stephen O., John K. Anarfi, Cynthia A. Tagoe and Adriana Castaldo. "Independent North-South Child Migration in Ghana: The Decision Making Process." 2009. Working Paper T-29, Sussex, UK: Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of Sussex.

Kwankye, Stephen O., John K. Anarfi, Cynthia A. Tagoe and Adriana Castaldo. "Coping Strategies of Independent Child Migrants from Northern Ghana to Southern Cities." 2007. Working Paper T-23, Sussex, UK: Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of Sussex.

Quartey, Peter. *Migration in Ghana: A Country Profile 2009*. 2009. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.

Copyright © 2011 by The Centre for International Governance Innovation

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Centre for International Governance Innovation or its Board of Directors and/or Board of Governors.



This work was carried out with the support of The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), Waterloo, Ontario, Canada (www.cigionline.org). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial — No Derivatives Licence. To view this licence, visit (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/). For re-use or distribution, please include this copyright notice.

First published in 2010 by The Centre for International Governance Innovation



The Centre for International Governance Innovation
57 Erb Street West
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 6C2, Canada
www.cigionline.org

ABOUT THE AFRICA PORTAL

The Africa Portal is an online knowledge resource for policy-related issues on Africa. An undertaking by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), Makerere University (MAK), and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the Africa Portal offers open access to a suite of features including an online library collection; a resource for opinion and analysis; an experts directory; an international events calendar; and a mobile technology component—all aimed to equip users with research and information on Africa’s current policy issues.

A key feature to the Africa Portal is the online library collection holding over 3,500 books, journals, and digital documents related to African policy issues. The entire online repository is open access and available for free full-text download. A portion of the digital documents housed in the library have been digitized for the first time as an undertaking of the Africa Portal project. Facilitating new digitization projects is a core feature of the Africa Portal, which aims to improve access and visibility for African research.

www.africaportal.org

The Africa Portal is part of the Africa Initiative project.

AFRICA INITIATIVE

The Africa Initiative (AI) is a multi-year, donor-supported program, with three components: a research program, an exchange program, and an online portal. A joint undertaking by CIGI in cooperation with Makerere University (MAK), the Africa Initiative aims to contribute to the deepening of Africa’s capacity and knowledge in five thematic areas—conflict resolution, energy, food security, health, and migration, with special attention to the cross-cutting issue of climate change. By incorporating field-based research, strategic partnerships, and online collaboration, the Africa Initiative is undertaking a truly interdisciplinary and multi-institutional approach to Africa’s governance challenges. Work on the core areas of the initiative focus on supporting innovative research and researchers, and developing policy recommendations as they relate to the program’s core thematic areas.



57 Erb Street West
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 6C2, Canada
tel +1 519 885 2444 fax +1 519 885 5450
www.cigionline.org

