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Return migration and development

The significance of migration cycles

Jean-Pierre Cassarino

Scholarly approaches

In 1974, in his essay on the sociology of return migration, Frank Bovenkerk mentioned the existence of numerous academic writings that in the past had dealt with returnees' patterns of reintegration in Puerto Rico, Ireland, Italy and Jamaica, to mention but a few. He also studied a variety of concepts aimed at capturing the essence of return in migratory processes (1974: 5). His conceptual essay preceded the works done by Gmelch (1980), King *et al.* (1983) and Kubat (1984), who also produced key findings on return migration, across various disciplines. The academic attention paid to return migration grew together with the heightened policy debates on the return of migrant workers that followed the adoption of more selective immigration policies in the West as a result of the 1973 crisis.

These introductory remarks are important as they help one realise that as early as the 1970s, return migration was far from being a new topic for migration scholars. In addition, migrants' motivations to return home, on a temporary or permanent basis, as well as their manifold patterns of reintegration constituted the main issues at stake. Together these made up the core research interests of many scholars across various disciplines.

By all means, return migrants constitute a highly heterogeneous group of actors in terms of migration experiences, length of stay abroad, patterns of resource mobilisation, legal status and life plans. Their heterogeneity stems from a variety of conditions that determined their return motivations and, at the same time, impacted on their propensity to reintegrate or not. These aspects have been addressed with reference to labour migrants (King *et al.* 1983; Kubat 1984; King 1986; Galor and Stark 1990; Stark 1996; Thomas-Hope 1999), migrant-students (Glaser and Habers 1974), women returnees (Kuschminder 2014), highly skilled migrants (Lowell 2001; Cervantes and Guellec 2002; McLaughan and Salt 2002; Vertovec 2002; Wickramasekara 2003) and entrepreneur-returnees (Cassarino 2000; McCormick and Wahba 2003) but also repatriated refugees and asylum-seekers (Allen and Morsink 1994; Koser and Black 1999), as well as irregular migrants subject to a removal order (de Bree 2008; Strand *et al.* 2008; Van Houte and de Koning 2008; Sward 2009).

Concomitantly, patterns of reintegration have become more diverse. These patterns are most certainly reflective of the returnees' migration experiences in their former countries of

immigration. They are also shaped by the social, economic, institutional and political conditions migrants encounter in their home countries upon return.

To various degrees, scholarly approaches to return migration share the basic assumption that return migrants' patterns of reintegration are shaped by three interrelated elements: the context in migrants' home countries; the duration and type of one's migration experience abroad; and the factors or conditions (whether favourable or not) in the host and home countries that motivated return – namely pre- and post-return conditions (Cassarino 2004). Taking into account these three elements (place, time and pre- and post-return conditions) is critical in showing how different variables combine to shape return migrants' patterns of reintegration in their countries of origin. Such considerations are important if one wants to understand how and why returnees' patterns of reintegration differ from one another.

The significance of the migration cycle

However, these three elements do not suffice to explain the reasons for which some returnees manage to reintegrate in their countries of origin and to contribute to development whereas others do not. For example, if we take the time variable into consideration, we may hypothesise that migrants who returned to their countries after having lived for a reasonable time abroad, say 10 years, will have more opportunities to mobilise the tangible (financial) and intangible (skills, networks) resources needed to reintegrate. Vice versa, we may consider that those who lived for a short period of time abroad will be less likely to invest their past experience of migration into their reintegration process. This hypothesis is valid albeit not fully explanatory.

Comparative field surveys carried out in the framework of the Return Migration and Development Platform (RDP)¹ have shown that this hypothesis does not apply consistently. This is because the question is not only about the duration of the experience of migration, so much as the social, political, institutional and economic conditions that impacted on return migrants' migration cycle. A migration cycle comprises three distinct stages: emigration (pre-departure conditions), immigration (conditions whilst abroad) and return (conditions after return). Linking these three stages into a cycle is a prerequisite to identifying three types of migration cycles.

A migration cycle is *complete* when migrants consider that it is time to return owing to factors and conditions that are subjectively viewed as being favourable or positive to their life plans. They feel they gathered sufficient tangible and intangible resources to carry out their projects in their home countries. They have also developed valuable contacts, as well as acquired skills and knowledge that can add significantly to their initiatives. These migrants not only opted to return, they also had the opportunity to evaluate the costs and benefits of return, while considering the changes that occurred in their countries of origin at institutional, economic, social and political levels. Some of them may maintain their residential status in their host countries with a view to securing their cross-border mobility.

Conversely, a migration cycle is *incomplete* when unexpected factors and conditions prompted migrants to return when they intended to stay abroad for longer. Their length of stay abroad was too short to allow tangible and intangible resources to be mobilised. They decided to return but their option was taken owing to unfavourable or negative reasons – examples being unexpected family problems, ostracism and lack of real opportunities for social and professional advancement in host countries. Migrants having an incomplete migration cycle consider that the costs of remaining are higher than returning home, even if

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few resources were mobilised before their return. Hence, resource mobilisation in receiving countries remains extremely limited and the returnee will tend to rely on resources available at home in order to reintegrate.

A migration cycle is *interrupted* when disruptive events compel them to return. They intended to stay abroad for longer. However, unlike migrants having an incomplete migration cycle, they never had the possibility of weighing the costs and benefits of their return, for factors external to their own volition prompted them to leave their destination country. For some, this may result from their asylum application being rejected, the unexpected non-renewal of a job contract or the loss of a job due to the economic crisis or removal from the territory of their destination country.

It is clear that the three above-mentioned types of migration cycles make up a rough plot of the plurality of conditions faced by return migrants. However, the significance of this exercise lies precisely in emphasising that, regardless of the heterogeneity characterising return migrants' experiences and profiles, migrants' autonomous decision and readiness to return impact on their likelihood to reintegrate. This impact is empirically observable.

These considerations have concrete and significant implications for policy-making when it comes to defining, for example, measures aimed at offsetting the incompleteness of the migration cycle. Particularly in the current context marked by the resilience of adverse economic conditions in Western destination countries that negatively impact on migrants' likelihood to complete their migration cycle and on their option (if any) to return. Such a decision also springs from a personal evaluation of these circumstances. In a similar vein, over the last two decades or so, the temporariness of labour migration has gained tremendous momentum in current bilateral and multilateral talks on migration matters. The drive for temporariness (Cassarino 2013), which is enshrined in current labour migrant schemes and circular migration programmes (Castles 2006; Anderson 2010; Holgate 2011), invariably raises a host of critical issues when it comes to understanding whether the (temporary) duration of the experience of migration will foster the completeness of foreign workers' migration cycles and their ensuing reintegration in their countries of origin, be it permanent or temporary. Public authorities will be faced, at a certain point, with the need to ensure that the abovementioned drive for temporariness will not jeopardise the social and occupational reintegration of their returning nationals.

Likewise, these considerations are of paramount importance in realising that the abrupt interruption of migration cycles might well have severe consequences for the reintegration of migrants, regardless of the factors that contributed to their interruption. This unequivocal statement raises additional challenges both for countries of destination and of origin, especially (though not only) when migrants are removed or expelled from the territory of their destination country (e.g. rejected asylum seekers, irregular migrants). Over the last few years, various academic institutions and research centres have carried out field surveys based on interviews with individuals who were compelled to 'return' to their countries of origin through assisted voluntary return (AVR) programmes. The common rationale for their research endeavours was to provide empirical evidence of the social economic and psychological conditions of these individuals. Moreover, they set out to assess the impact of both readmission and AVR programmes on the patterns of reintegration of migrants in their countries. In other words, they tried to fill in a knowledge gap that has so far characterised the implementation of policies aimed at removing, either coercively or on a so-called voluntary basis, foreigners subjected to a removal order by the authorities of a destination country (Sward 2009).

For instance, Jun de Bree observed, within the framework of a field survey carried out in Afghanistan with 'AVR returnees' that interviewees are faced with poor employment and

housing conditions back home. Her field survey showed that 93 per cent of the sample declared that ‘they are restricted in their mobility within Afghanistan, either because they or their family had personal issues with the Taliban or Mujahedeen, or because of a general feeling of insecurity due to violence, crime and (terrorist) attacks’ (de Bree 2008: 16). Insecurity and economic and social instability in Afghanistan are the most frequent factors cited by her interviewees, *vis-à-vis*, their intentions to leave the country again – with 89 per cent of them expressing their desire to return to the West. An evaluation report directed by Arne Strand, based on interviews with Afghan ‘voluntary returnees’, confirms their desire to re-emigrate abroad, owing to harsh, insecure conditions and poor economic prospects in Afghanistan (Strand *et al.* 2008: 46–7).

In a similar vein, in a comparative study based on a large number of interviews carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Togo, Marieke van Houte and Mireille de Koning showed that social and political tensions in the country of return, along with a lack of safety, accounted for their interviewees’ desire to re-emigrate – even as obstacles to do so exist (Van Houte and Koning 2008: 34). These factors greatly jeopardised the interviewees’ possibilities of reintegrating socially and professionally.

Needless to say that these investigations are crucial to understand how the ‘voluntary’ dimension and the so-called ‘sustainability of return’ – which constitute key elements supporting the adoption and political legitimisation of AVR programmes – have been addressed in concrete terms in the above case studies by governmental and intergovernmental organisations as well as by other agencies. Most importantly, these investigations provide a basis for a sound reflection on the priorities that have been identified in the current management of international migration and on their implications for migrants.

Policy priorities versus return migrants’ realities

There is no question that ‘return’ stands high in the priorities that have been identified in the current top-down management of international migration. However, this is not because return is viewed as a stage in the migration cycle. It is because return has been narrowly defined in the lexicon of governmental and intergovernmental agencies as the act of leaving the territory of a destination country.

In the European Union (EU), this vision of return has been presented as an ‘integral part’ of the instruments geared towards dealing with unauthorised migration and protecting the integrity of immigration and asylum systems in most destination countries (European Commission 2005: 2). Since the early 2000s, return policies of the EU and its member states have been predominantly, if not exclusively, viewed as instruments for combating unauthorised migration, while defining return as ‘the process of going back to one’s country of origin, transit or another third country’ (European Council 2002: 29).

This understanding of return is, of course, reflective of the normative construct that the agenda on the management of international migration has consolidated, for it not only reinforces the centrality of the state, but also rationalises its security-oriented methods and means of implementation. In the parlance of the EU, return merely refers to the act of removing unauthorised migrants and rejected asylum-seekers from European territory. Moreover, it does not take into account migrants’ post-return conditions, let alone their human and financial potential as participants in development.

Over the last two decades, this security-driven vision of return has invested official discourses and means of action with an extraordinary sense of rationality, so much so that mixing return with expulsion or readmission has become commonsensical. This terminological

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confusion results from a political construct that, in turn, finds its roots in the growing politicisation of international migration movements in Western countries, the ensuing adoption of selective laws regarding the conditions of entry and (temporary) residence of labour migrants asylum-seekers and refugees, the reinforcement of border controls and the heightened debates on national sovereignty and identity. This is not the place to delve into these complex causes. Suffice it to say, these policy measures have gradually altered the meaning of return while deflecting policy attention from migrants' rights and aspirations (Cassarino 2004). Their adoption has been detrimental to the exploration of the link between return migration and development. More worryingly, their gradual acceptance and consolidation have been contingent on sending to oblivion past research and theoretical findings able to explain the relationship between return migration and development.

For example, the politically constructed dichotomy opposing 'voluntary' with 'enforced' return is emblematic of these recent policy developments. Its acceptance by policymakers and stakeholders has been astonishing, although it hardly reflects the composite nature of return flows and returnees' realities in the broadest sense. This dichotomy, as it stands now in current political rhetoric, is shaped by a receiving-country bias. Neither conditions in countries of origin nor reintegration are properly considered. Finally, despite the seemingly impeccable reference to voluntariness, the line between 'voluntary' and enforced return can, in the end, only be a blurred one, given the security-driven purposes it serves.

Future challenges

There are inescapable facts and evidence when it comes to dealing with the return of migrants and their reintegration. Defining concrete policy measures aimed at ensuring the completeness of returnees' migration cycles will, at a certain point, be a key challenge that migration and development stakeholders in both countries of origin and destination will have to address. Admittedly, this challenge is all the more daunting when considering the consensus on which the current security-driven 'return' policies have been premised over the last few decades. Addressing the completeness of returnees' migration cycles implies questioning such a consensus by rethinking the policy priorities that have been considered to date.

Such a rethink would also be contingent on a basic precondition: the necessity to make a clear-cut distinction between return and expulsion or removal, for these different conditions decisively affect the likelihood (or desire) of individuals to reintegrate. It is time to recognise that the following categories cannot be mixed together under a uniform heading of 'return': migrants expelled or removed from abroad and migrants who return to their countries of origin. There is a substantial difference between return (viewed as a stage in the migration cycle) and expulsion that can no longer be ignored, analytically or in practical terms. As long as no distinction is made, the policy debate on the link between return, reintegration and development will remain biased by security-oriented priorities, if not spurious. As long as no distinction is made, current 'return' policies are not return policies.

In summary, realising that a migration cycle's degree of completeness or incompleteness strongly shapes migrants' capacity to reintegrate in their countries of origin is a prerequisite to establishing a credible link between return migration and development. Empirical data confirms that the more complete the migration cycle, the more prepared for return migrants are. In this light, the issue at stake is to foster the legal, economic and institutional conditions for ensuring the completeness of returnees' migration cycles, not to ensure at all costs that migrants return for good.

Endnote

- 1 The Return Migration and Development Platform (RDP) promotes comparative research at the European University Institute (Florence, Italy) and disseminates empirical data on return migration, reintegration and returnees' conditions in the broadest sense. The platform is available online at: <http://rsc.eui.eu/RDP/> (accessed: 3 March 2015).

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