Return Migration, Reintegration and Sense of Belonging: the Case of Skilled Ghanaian Returnees.

Abstract

The presumption that return migration is simply the act of going ‘back home’ often underestimates the complexities of the process including return migrants’ feelings of belonging. Indeed, return migration is increasingly becoming an important phenomenon in international migration discourses. However, attention to return migration studies have so far focused primarily on areas such as the developmental contributions of returnees in the home country, challenges of return migration and reintegration, and transnational practices of return migrations concerning identity and belonging. Hitherto, while the focuses of these studies have been on return migration and or reintegration of return migrants, there is little, or no attention given to how return migrants construct a sense of belonging during the reintegration process. This study filled this gap by examining the relationship between belonging and reintegration and how returnees define and construct belonging and reintegration using skilled return migrants in Ghana as a case study. The study employed different qualitative approaches in gathering data from return migrants, non-migrants, experts, and institutions engaged in the study. Specifically, in-depth semi-structured episodic interviews, focus group discussions, egocentric network maps, and expert interviews were used. The data was analysed using the grounded theory approach.

The key findings of this study showed that returnees’ definitions of belonging fall under two categories: individual belonging (place belongingness) and social/collective belonging (politics of belonging). Within these categories, belonging was defined in relation to being accepted, feeling at home, not being treated differently, and having responsibilities and ownership. Individual belonging was thus expressed via feelings of attachments to Ghana as a place via memories of cultural and family heritage. Social/collective belonging was observed through
ways in which the people in the home society include or exclude returnees based on traits, such as accent and fluency in the local language, the degree of ‘Ghanaian-ness,’ and the tendency for returnees to compare situations in the home country with experiences abroad.

The respondents defined reintegration in three ways: as flowing with the home country system or vibrating at the same frequency as the home society, as adapting to the home society’s standards while maintaining one’s own standards, and as accepting differences. The return migrants’ conceptions of reintegration thus suggested a two-way process of adaptation in which both the returnee and the return society must take action for reintegration to occur. Also, the study revealed that the relationship between a sense of belonging and reintegration is two-fold. First, belonging (individual/place belongingness) constitutes an additional reintegration dimension. Second, belonging (social/collective belonging) functions as an embedded feeling in the dimensions of reintegration except the individual/place belonging dimension.

Apart from the main findings, the study revealed that the determining factor for migration by the study participants was education. However, the study found that return intentions only translated into an actual return after the incidents of return triggers. Post return challenges for the respondents included return shocks that centered on cultural practices and social expectations. The study also highlighted return migrants use of strategies to deal with return challenges.