Changing aspirations for voluntary mobility and immobility in times of crisis

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Abstract

According to the “aspiration-ability” model of Carling (2002), the distinction between aspirations and abilities points to a differentiation between two categories of non-migrants: people aspiring to migrate but lacking the required abilities (“involuntary non-migrants”), and people not aspiring to migrate (“voluntary non-migrants”).

Discourses, perceptions and migratory and geographical imaginations might have an impact on aspirations. We ask whether the economic crisis in Europe and its consequences on the conditions of migrants might change the aspirations of non-migrants. In times of crisis, involuntary non-migrants might become voluntary ones, considering immobility as a better alternative to migrating to Europe with uncertain working and living conditions.

The EUMAGINE project investigates the impact of perceptions of human rights and democracy on the migration aspirations and decisions of 18–39-year-olds in Turkey, Morocco, Senegal and the Ukraine. The survey and in-depth interviews, carried out in 2010 and 2011, included questions on perceptions of life in Europe, international migration aspirations and discourses on international migration. This paper will present results of the data gathered in 4 research areas in Morocco: the Togdha Valley, the Central Plateau, Tangier and the Eastern High Atlas. More specifically, it will explore changing aspirations among non-migrants in these areas.

Theoretical focus

Migration aspirations and decisions occur in certain circumstances combining what Carling calls the emigration context and the immigration interface (Carling, 2002). They take place in a particular social, economic and political context, and the ability to migrate depends on the “requirements, costs and risks” of a particular way of migrating (ibid: 13). Migration aspirations and decisions can fluctuate with time according to the circumstances and/or to people’s changing perceptions of their
opportunities in a specific place, and information and ideas can cause “feedback processes” that can stimulate migration or cause immobility (Mabogunje, 1970:11).

Besides information and ideas on migration and other endogenous feedback mechanisms -such as the emergence of migrant networks and a migration industry, and the flows of remittances- de Haas (2010) identified other second-order effects of migration. These “contextual feedback mechanisms” (ibid) are processes that indirectly shape communities at a social, cultural and economic level.

Feedback mechanisms can have a positive effect on migration in the sense that “each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent decisions are made, typically in ways that make additional movements more likely” (Massey et al., 1998:45). This was described in the cumulative causation processes of migration introduced by Myrdal (1957) and developed by Massey (1990). According to the theory of cumulative causation, beyond the interdependency of the micro-, meso- and macro-level factors of migration, in a temporal perspective, migration decisions shape contextual structures, and this leads to more migration incentives and decisions (Massey, 1990). However, other feedback mechanisms can have the opposite effect and can weaken or reverse the existing migration dynamics (de Haas, 2010).

Research testing this hypothesis is still scarce and has mainly focused on endogenous feedback mechanisms at the level of networks. Garip and Assad (2013) concluded that network mechanisms generate “positive feedback loops” when migration is perceived as successful in the sending communities, however if migration experiences are perceived negatively by the majority, this can call into question the theory of cumulative causation of migration. Engbersen et al. (forthcoming) explored the undermining effects of migrants’ perceptions of macro-factors in the receiving and sending context on migration aspirations in the community of origin at the individual and community levels. However, more research is needed to understand how the process works and how endogenous and contextual feedback processes are interconnected in different emigration contexts and immigration interfaces.

The context of the economic crisis and its consequences on the conditions of migrants might change life and migration aspirations of non-migrants. In times of crisis, previously involuntary non-migrants may become voluntary non-migrants when they start considering immobility as a better alternative than migrating to Europe under uncertain working and living conditions. The question analysed in this paper is to what extent the economic crisis in Europe and its consequences on the opportunities and conditions for migrants might change migration aspirations of non-migrants in the context of Morocco, where Europe may be considered a region where many people want to migrate to achieve better life conditions. Beyond looking at the impact of the changing European context on
aspirations, this paper provides more insights on how migration feedback processes work from the perspective of the sending regions.

Data and Methods
This paper analyses the data gathered in 2010 and 2011 for the EUMAGINE project in four regions of Morocco. EUMAGINE studies the impact of perceptions of human rights and democracy on international migration aspirations and decisions in four major ‘source’ and ‘transit’ countries, namely Morocco, Senegal, Turkey and Ukraine. The project collected 320 in-depth interviews and 8000 surveys, using a random sample of the population aged between 18 and 39 in 4 regions in each country -500 surveys and 20 interviews in each region. The research regions were selected according to their migration history or to a specific human rights situation. In Morocco, Tangier was selected because of its strong immigration history and its historical connections to Europe; the Togdha Valley was chosen because of its high emigration rate; the Central Plateau, in contrast, has a more recent and lower emigration history; finally, the Eastern High Atlas is a geographically remote, economically isolated and underdeveloped area.

The analysis of this paper is based on the 80 qualitative interviews carried out in Morocco. These provide insights on longitudinal changes in perceptions and aspirations of non-migrants that the survey did not collect. The interviews were mainly conducted in colloquial Arabic –Darija. Tamazight was also used when necessary. The interviews were transcribed and translated into French. The qualitative data was coded and analysed using Nvivo software. The survey results have been used to support the analysis of the findings of the qualitative work.

Findings
Europe is still perceived as a place of opportunities, social justice and democracy in the four Moroccan research areas under study. Positive references to Europe are often linked to the lack of these elements in the Moroccan context despite the improvements observed in recent years in the four regions.

The perceptions of Europe as the “Promised land” co-exist with contradictory and negative views of the region as a hostile environment. These are strongly linked to the negative experiences that Moroccan migrants can face in Europe, especially in times of economic recession. Through information gathered from their personal migrant networks, from returning migrants and from the media, non-migrants perceive migrants’ integration problems. Non-migrants attribute these
difficulties to the different cultural and religious values that migrants encounter in Europe, to the lack of opportunities that they face because of the segmented labour markets, and to the difficulties in getting a residence and working permit. In the past, these drawbacks were counterbalanced by the opportunities of self-improvement, which had their starting point in finding a job in Europe. This has now changed with the current scarcity of employment opportunities in times of crisis.

Negative perceptions of Europe are generally more present in Tangier, Todgha Valley and the Central Plateau region than in the Eastern High Atlas. These regional differences are related to their geographical and historical connection to Europe—for instance, in regions with a strong connection to Spain negative perceptions of the situation in Europe are more pronounced than in those with more connections with France. The lack of local opportunities also play a role, especially in the Eastern High Atlas, where informants still perceive temporary migration as a way of improving their living conditions in their severe local context.

At an individual level, the changing perceptions of migration to Europe can reduce the feeling of relative deprivation of non-migrants when they compare their situation in Morocco with the difficulties experienced by many Moroccan migrants in Europe. This “relative satisfaction” (Yitzhaki, 1979) beyond the income level is mainly observed on people with more opportunities, that is, on those with a higher level of education, those who are employed or have a small business and in the regions with more local opportunities—Tangier and Todgha Valley. The analysis suggests that migration aspirations remain, however, for those who still see migration as a way of escaping precarious living conditions, for students and for those with close family members abroad. In general, migration aspirations are linked with concrete individual opportunities perceived in the country of origin and abroad.

At the community level, migration is still seen as the way to succeed and improve one’s situation. This is especially the case for those groups who are unemployed or want to improve their working conditions—not only regarding their salaries, but also their access to social rights or employment stability. Particularly interesting is the case of the students. Unlike in the past, this group tends to perceive more opportunities in Morocco than in Europe, where they consider that they would not be able to reach the employment status corresponding to their qualifications. However, the opportunities in Morocco tend to be considered more accessible to those who have a migration experience. The experience and knowledge that migration provides is seen as the key of their future success in Morocco.

The discourses in the different research areas show other shifts in the mainstream culture of migration, especially in those regions with a longer migration history. Migration can lead to change
and improvement of living/working conditions, but life as a migrant is not easy and has many constraints. Migration is still considered positive but only in a particular immigration interface and emigration context; in other words, immobility is more valuable than undocumented migration in a context of crisis in Europe, and close family migration networks in destination are seen as more important than in the past in the migration projects. Other destinations than the traditional ones to Spain, France, Belgium or Italy are often mentioned and sometimes seen as more valuable than migration to Europe. Besides imaginations of Germany as a country without economic recession, the United States of America are often mentioned especially by the students, and Russia is perceived as a place with new employment opportunities.

Especially but not exclusively in the Todgha valley, discourses differentiate between the successful former migrants and the failed more recent ones. The former were good workers who invested in the community of origin building houses and opening shops, they bought presents and made loans to members of the sending community. The latter are selfish, and often unemployed or even homeless in Europe, and they obtain reduced positive outcomes of their migration in terms of incomes and quality of life.

**Conclusion**

Changing perceptions of migration to Europe are shaping migration aspirations. In a context of economic crisis in Europe involuntary non-migrants in Morocco tend to become voluntary ones and the opportunities to migrate affect the aspiration to migrate.

This analysis also shows how in a particular context, ideas and information on migration (first order endogenous feedback mechanisms) are processed by non-migrants and have an effect on second-order contextual feedback mechanisms at a social and cultural level. The information on migration from Morocco to Europe in a particular emigration context and immigration interface shapes perceptions of migration of non-migrants. This has an effect on their feelings of relative deprivation and satisfaction when they compare their situation to the one of the migrants in Europe in times of uncertainty. This has an impact on the mainstream culture of migration at a community level and on the individual migration aspirations. This feedback loop affecting simultaneously the social, economic and cultural domains of the community in origin illustrates the inter-relationship between endogenous and contextual feedback mechanisms (fig 1).
The analysis also points out that besides positive or migration-undermining effects, feedback mechanisms may also have a "self-correcting" effect on migration aspirations, when migration is still seen as valuable for success in life but, in a particular temporal and geographical emigration context, migration aspirations and decisions are postponed, new destinations are considered and particular migration interfaces are preferred or discarded.

References


