



GLOBALISATION/LISA ÅKESSON

Dr Lisa Åkesson is a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute. She is responsible for the research projects “Money from abroad: Migrant remittances and social inequality in a transnational setting” and “The new developers? Circular migration in policy and practice”.



In a cafe, Midelo, Sao Vicente Island, Cape Verde.



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RETURNING MIGRANTS AND DEVELOPMENT: **CONTRASTING POLICY AND REALITY**

Lisa Åkesson contrasts the stories of three Cape Verdean returnees who have worked in Europe and examines some of the assumptions underlying the policies on migration, development and return that are currently being devised in Europe. She questions the idea that European influences are always beneficial for development.



Local residents of the village of San Filipe, Fogo Island, Cape Verde.

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THE ISLAND STATE OF CAPE VERDE, some 400 kilometres off the Senegalese coast, may be small in extent – Cape Verdeans often talk about their archipelago as grains of sand in the middle of the ocean – but its people are widely dispersed. For more than a century, Cape Verdeans have left for America, the African continent and Europe, and today the diaspora probably exceeds the half-million people who have stayed behind.

It is striking that whereas the debate on the integration of African migrants into Europe is focused on segregation and exploitation, policies on migration and development portray returning migrants as having benefited from fruitful exposure to valuable values and knowledge. The (neo) colonial idea that European influences are always beneficial for development seems to linger in this line of thought.

THROUGH MY RESEARCH, I have met Cape Verdeans who have worked in Europe and then returned. One such returnee is Sofia who left as a teenager for Italy, where she worked as a domestic for many years until she was offered a job as a hotel receptionist, a job she enjoyed. “I kept my eyes open”, Sofia says, “and I learned everything about running a hotel”.

After 35 years abroad, Sofia returned with savings and plans for opening a small hotel.

– Two factors made me come back: the improvement in

healthcare in Cape Verde and the increase in tourist visits, which made it possible to open a hotel.

Now Sofia is the proud owner of a well-kept guesthouse with five employees.

»Two factors made me come back: the improvement in healthcare in Cape Verde and the increase in tourist visits, which made it possible to open a hotel.« Sofia

THE STORY OF ALFONSO is very different, although he too spent more than three decades abroad. In the Netherlands, Alfonso worked as a mariner, a factory worker and a night guard. After obtaining the right to a pension, he returned “home”. Alfonso never learnt Dutch, and although he talks of the Netherlands as “the land that gives me my food”, it is clear that he never felt himself to be a member of Dutch society. When I ask him about the possibilities for him to “do something for Cape Verde”, Alfonso stresses that it is his right to enjoy his pension in peace and quiet after all his working years.

THE THIRD RETURNEE, Filomena, is younger and poorer than Sofia and Alfonso. Filomena migrated to Portugal in order to study and acquired a bachelor’s degree in information technology. After graduating, she remained in Portugal ▶▶



PHOTO: © MICHEL SEIBOUNI/CORBIS

Woman in central market of Praia, on Santiago Island, Cape Verde.

» and worked as a cleaner and waitress, always taking on two jobs, since she had to send money home to support her two children and her mother. After working too hard and eating too little for a long time, Filomena was totally worn out and decided to return to Cape Verde. Now she has found an administrative job for which she is overqualified in her home town and earns just enough to feed her children.

IT IS INTERESTING TO CONTRAST these stories with the policies on migration, development and return that are currently produced on a massive scale in Europe. Many policy-makers express high expectations about the possibilities for return migrants to support development in their countries of origin. One salient assumption in these policies is that a few years of work abroad is all that is needed to acquire the capital and skills needed to engage in entrepreneurial activities upon return.

This idea is especially evident in strategies on circular migration, which are presently in vogue among policy-makers in both the European Union and many of its member states. Circular migrants are expected to meet temporary labour shortages in receiving countries, and then promptly return home and promote development in their countries of origin. This idea is contradicted by the Cape Verdean experience, which indicates that it takes decades to save up and plan for a successful return. Another central policy assumption is that working in Europe more or less automatically provides migrants with useful skills, values and knowledge. Again, Cape Verdean reality conflicts with policy, as most returnees state their European jobs have provided them with little more than a salary.

WHAT DO THE EXPERIENCES of Sofia, Alfonso and Filomena tell us about the possibilities for returnees to promote positive local development? First, they show us that it takes a long time to accumulate the resources needed for a return beneficial not only for the migrant but also for local society. Returnees in Cape Verde generally maintain that one must stay abroad 20 to 30 years to save enough money to initiate an entrepreneurial activity. For many migrants, it is economically impossible to return prior to becoming eligible for an old age pension.

Second, Alfonso's and Filomena's stories show us that

»Returnees in Cape Verde generally maintain that one must stay abroad 20 to 30 years to save enough money to initiate an entrepreneurial activity.«

the majority of the Cape Verdean returnees have little use for their working experiences from abroad. Cape Verdean migrants, like other African migrants, often end up in menial and repetitive jobs. In fact, they are sought after precisely because their living conditions force them to accept jobs that offer few opportunities for acquiring new skills and knowledge.

Third, Filomena's experiences demonstrate that even highly educated returnees may find it difficult to earn a living upon their return, let alone contribute to positive social change.

THE "SUCCESS STORY" OF SOFIA, however, reveals that under the right circumstances returnees may play an important role. Her achievement has been possible thanks to the structural changes that have occurred in Cape Verde over the last decades. Cape Verde has attracted both development support and external investment by marketing its political stability and good governance. This has resulted in improvements in basic infrastructure and sustained economic growth, which in turn has facilitated entrepreneurial activities such as Sofia's.

Sofia's story highlights the fact that wider economic, political and social structures fundamentally influence the returnees' potential to support positive development, a factor often overlooked in policies on migration and development. The current celebration of returnees as 'grassroots developers' renders economic and political constraints less visible by placing the responsibility for development on the shoulders of individuals. It thus reflects a neoliberal stance on development. In contrast, the changes that have occurred in Cape Verde suggest that it is structural development, more than any other factor, that may lead to an increase in returns that are beneficial to local society. ■

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All names mentioned in this article have been changed in order to protect the identity of the people interviewed.