

The debt of migrants assisted with voluntary return and its impact on the sustainability of reintegration in Burkina Faso

This research study is part of the « Safety, Support and Solutions along the Central Mediterranean Route » programme, funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), whose Outcome 3 aims to improve governments, humanitarian agencies and national organizations' understanding on migration trends in order to formulate responses tailored to the needs of the populations. Between 2018 and 2020, the programme's Outcome 3 has enabled short-term research studies to be conducted in six countries in West and Central Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, The Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire).



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The study was developed following a mixed-method approach (qualitative and quantitative) using three main tools:

- **15 interviews with key informants** including migrants assisted to return, local and national government authorities, community leaders, academics, and AVRR assistants
- **388 individual surveys** with returning migrants
- **2 exploratory focus group discussions** with migrants and family members

WHO ARE THE MIGRANTS RETURNING WITH DEBT ?

95% ARE MALE

84% ARE UNDER 35 YEARS OLD

24% HAVE NO INCOME

32% ARE HEADS OF HOUSEHOLDS

82% ACCUMULATED MIGRATION-RELATED DEBT

73% TOOK A NEW LOAN AFTER RETURN

The accumulation of debts in the context of migration is seen as a rational choice, which will have a positive impact on the situation of the migrant and the family and communities supporting the migration project.

INTRODUCTION

More than 3,000 Burkinabe returned to Burkina Faso between January 2017 and July 2020 through IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme. However, reports on the socio-demographic profiles of return communities published by IOM in 2018 revealed that the level of debt of return migrants has a significant impact on reintegration processes. To better understand this impact, IOM conducted a study in Burkina Faso which aimed at:

- Developing the profile of returning migrants with debts;
- Understanding the mechanisms by which returning migrants accumulate debts and at which stages along the migration routes, and which actors are involved in the process;
- Assessing the impact of debt on the reintegration process of Burkinabe returnees in their communities of origin.

79%
OF SURVEYED RETURNING
MIGRANTS REPORTED
HAVING DEBTS

"In the context of international return migration, reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with possible (re)migration drivers." (IOM, 2019)

WHAT IS DEBT?

The results of the study show that debt has a collective dimension. While a migrant can decide to take a loan on his own initiative, both mechanisms to take a loan and share the expected benefits from the loan fall under a collective dimension. Families and friends are those who lend them money but also those who would benefit from the positive outcomes of a successful migration. The inability to repay however weighs on the migrant individually.

When a potential migrant mobilizes his community to help fund his migration, he or she enters into an unbalanced relationship which can only be rebalanced if he or she shares the benefits of a successful migration. The migrant does not only have to repay his debt, but he is also expected to improve his family socio-economic status. As such, debt has not only financial implications but also has symbolic and moral implications.

Migrant debt is granted in an informal setting, mainly with family members and friends, who are the main lenders in Burkina Faso. The repayment terms are flexible, irregular (for 87% of loans) and change according to the progress of the migration journey. The informal environment in which these transactions take place makes the terms of the loan uncertain.

THE BURDEN OF DEBT

Migration debts are the most common type of debt. Of the migrants with debt, 82% borrowed a median amount of 137,500 FCFA (248 USD) to finance their migration.

THE IMPACT OF DEBT

The lack of success in the migration project - and therefore the inability to make enough to share the earnings with others - has serious consequences for the social reintegration of the returning migrant (stigmatization, a feeling of shame, rupture of social ties). In these circumstances, the migrant is not only affected by the debt, but he or she is also defined by it in the eyes of the rest of the community.

- 61% of migrants assisted to return declared that debts have a negative impact on their personal economic situation.
- 71% of migrants assisted to return declared that debts have a negative impact on their social and psychological well-being.
- 15% of respondents reported that they were subjected to threats, abuses or acts of violence to repay a debt.

The psychological and social impacts of debt on return migrants are major. In addition to the feeling of failure, return migrants face, a significant social stigma linked to the symbolic burden of debt. The notion of sharing in Burkinabe society is fundamental and is more so in the context of migration. When a migrant cannot comply with the duty of sharing, because his migration did not result in the expected success and is unable to repay the money lent, he or she is then subjected to strong social pressure and social exclusion. In some cases, rather than living in such conditions, migrants decide not to return to their community of origin or to re-migrate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support the creation of sustainable income-generating activities and to deter potential migrants to undertake for irregular migration by promoting local work.
- Develop a national awareness and information campaign on the risks of debt and drawing on the experience of returned migrants.
- Develop and carry out awareness programmes on debt in the context of migration and on the psychosocial impacts of an unsuccessful migration project, both targeting potential migrants and communities of origin.
- As part of AVRR programmes, expand psychosocial support provided to returning migrants to also include migrants' families.
- Conduct more research on debts accumulated during the migratory journey, particularly in transit countries, and linkages with human trafficking.
- Conduct more research on the debt of returning female migrants, particularly with regard to their ability to raise funds before and after traveling.

"I was mistreated there. On my return, I spent three months in Ouagadougou, because I was afraid of arriving in Tenkodogo (my village) without any resources. When I got to Tenkodogo, I didn't even go back home, a friend of mine hosted me for one night and the next day I continued to the mines in search of my life and pay back the money."

Exploratory focus group study conducted on February 12, 2020, Burkina Faso.

Full report is available [here](#).

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