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Building up Mali, brick for brick

How migrants are tackling the causes of migration

At the G20 summit in Hamburg, Africa was in the spotlight. Germany has made the continent a focus of its G20 presidency and it hosted a preparatory Africa Summit in June. At the centre of its policy towards Africa is the concept of "tackling the causes of migration" – which has become something of a stock phrase in the German press. It's about development aid and tackling poverty, so essentially the continuation of a previous German strategy. But the new name is supposed to reassure German voters the government is doing everything it can to impede the arrival of further refugees in the country.

The policy comes with a hefty price tag. In 2016 alone the German ministry responsible for economic cooperation and development (the BMZ) invested more than €3bn in addressing the causes of migration. One of the major targets of this funding is Mali in west Africa. Mali and neighbouring Niger are among the poorest countries on earth, which is why many people leave to earn a living elsewhere. Moreover, they are major transit countries for sub-Saharan Africans heading northwards through the desert. Many aim for the Libyan coast, hoping to eventually reach Europe. What's more, since 2012 Mali has been embroiled in political crisis. More German troops are deployed there than in any other country. Soldiers on UN and EU missions are trying to stabilise the crisis-ridden country and secure it against Islamic terrorist groups. But that alone will not prevent Malians from fleeing to safer, richer shores.

Ordinary Malians will tell you they've heard radio reports about the promised millions but have yet to see a single franc. However, in a country with a GDP per capita of just 750 USD a year, there are some signs of wealth. Take the small town of Koniakary in the country's far west, which is dotted with public buildings including a large maternity unit and health centre. Where did the money come from? Advertising hoardings for remittance services such as Western Union provide an answer. Malian expats use these companies to send money they have earned abroad back home.

Koniakary's maternity unit, set up in 1972, was paid for exclusively by

migrants. The same goes for its health centre. That cost 120 million west African francs, equivalent to €183,000. It now also functions as a medical training centre, drawing students from far-away regions. In the whole of Mali there are only five such centres, although the country is three times the size of Germany. It is remarkable that migrants, and not the government, funded the whole venture.

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Mayor Bassirou Bane sits in a town hall constructed by his neighbours, and again paid for through remittances. Whilst he agrees with initiatives to protect those Malians looking for work on their route north, he is unequivocal when it comes to sending them back. The end of migration would, in his view, be "a total disaster" for the community of Koniakary and for many families in the locality.

Migration has a long history in the region around Kayes – the nearest major city – and migratory labour has been part of the culture here for generations. In the past, men travelled to neighbouring countries for work after the harvest ended. When the seasonal rains came, they would return to help in the fields. With the beginning of crude oil and mineral extraction, many Malians also headed south to central Africa.

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Back then hardly anyone dreamt of Europe, recounts Bane. It was easier to find work in Africa and avoid the culture shock. Even now Bane estimates that 15% of the approximately 15,000 inhabitants of the locality work abroad, but only 5% of them in Europe. As oil prices have fallen, Gabon, Angola and other African countries which used to take on migrant workers are facing economic crises of their own. But Malians still earn good money there. They can send a large chunk of their salaries to their families and invest in their community at the same time.

During a tour of the town, Bane points out buildings that have resulted from this cooperation between emigres and townspeople. His own town hall was built in 1978 – then still a branch of the civil registry office – after people grew tired of having to travel for hours to collect every document. Following independence in 1960 and an army coup in 1968, Malian governments made few provisions for their citizens, so in the early seventies the people of Koniakary took their fate in their own hands. In

1972 the town's elders contacted those who earnt their money abroad. Then, as now, the migrants sent the money while the people of Koniakary did the construction.

To the health centre and maternity unit were added a nursery, covered markets, a radio station, a vegetable garden with a well for the women, and stonewalled classrooms. Current projects include an expansion of the water supply and a network of solar panels. While some buildings are paid for exclusively by migrants, others have received funding from international aid organisations and occasionally the state.

Thanks to remittances, Koniakary has developed at a remarkable pace, with relatively little embezzlement of funds. Perhaps the transfer system is so effective there because everyone is given a degree of responsibility, and knows the other participants personally. But trust isn't everything. In Koniakary there is a complex system of "checks and balances" for how money is spent and administrated. The health centre, for example, is administered by an association that cooperates with the local authority. The association draws many of its members from the pool of ex-migrants who worked abroad and have now come home. In their old age, instead of money, they share their experience and organisational skills with the community. Some now earn their money as farmers; many only spent a few years in school. But their training in the "school of life" has equipped them well for their work serving the community.



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