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Southward ho!

Why Western-educated Africans are choosing to return home

When Europeans talk about migration, they almost always mean migration to Europe from other parts of the world – at present, mainly from Africa and the Middle East.

However, there is also a movement heading in the opposite direction: south. This movement isn't just driven by forced deportations or the lure of development funds. Many Africans who migrated to prosperous countries in the Global North are now returning to their native countries to take advantage of the opportunities offered by improving economic and social conditions. Today's returnees originally headed north either as refugees fleeing war-torn regions or because they wanted to study abroad, gain experience and earn money.

With the slogan "Join the movement", Farah Samanani from Kenya wants to encourage other Kenyans living abroad to return home. Her motives for doing so aren't entirely altruistic: she's the founder of the recruitment agency "Kenyans Come Home", which launched in the Kenyan capital Nairobi in 2013. There are similar agencies in other African countries. Samanani has highly qualified candidates on her books. They include executives looking for new management roles who have previously worked in the USA, Canada, Europe, Dubai or in other African countries. Samanani says most of them have one to two degrees and several years of work experience marked by rapid career progression.

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Most of Samanani's clients are Kenyans, but there are also a few expats in the mix: international experts who find the Kenyan and East African market so attractive that they're actively seeking work there. Samanani doesn't collect statistics on skin colour or nationality, meaning she can't say for certain what proportion of her clients are African returnees and what proportion are expats. However, she has placed around 20 executives in new

social conditions.

managerial roles in Kenya in recent months. Given how small the market for managerial jobs is, Samanani believes talk of a "movement" returning south is justified – especially since her agency is one of several, and most returnees don't use a recruitment agency but look for new jobs themselves.

A global family

Samanani is part of this movement. Encouraged by her parents and keen to explore the wider world, she left Kenya aged 15. Like many Kenyans, her family network straddles several continents. Moving to the UK as a teenager was Samanani's first step into a globetrotting lifestyle that has become typical for many Africans. For 20 years she lived, studied and worked abroad, including in Canada, the USA, Dubai and India before returning to Kenya in 2007. She says her reasons for returning were the same as those given by her clients. Firstly, she wanted to feel "at home" again in her own culture. In 2007 Samanani's decided to start her own family, and wanted her children to be able to spend time with their grandparents. Secondly, she wished to ride the new wave of prosperity in Africa. Many Africans have been enticed back to the continent by impressive economic growth in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania.

Many returnees also feel they can have more impact in a developing society than in the saturated markets in the Global North. This was a key factor for Samanani, who holds an MBA and worked for a Boston-based healthcare consultancy before returning to Kenya. Samanani says that whereas in Boston increasing a hospital's profits by half a percent would be counted a success, in Kenya she played a hand in restructuring the entire healthcare system. After several years on the job, she founded the recruitment agency where she currently works in 2013.

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It's not just Samanani's outgoing personality that makes her story so interesting. She exemplifies a trend that, though barely noticed in Europe, merits serious attention – not least because it could help to quell widespread panic about high levels of migration. It shows that many migrants return to their countries of origin to create opportunities for people who were not able to live and study abroad themselves. It might take a few decades before migrants return. However, taking her own case

as an example, Samanani points out that migrants do not harm the developed countries where they live but, on the contrary, pay lots of taxes there.

Hope in hard times

The widespread desire of successful Africans to give back to their native country is striking. Many even return to countries that are mired in poverty and conflict. One such country is Somalia, where the Islamist militia group al-Shabaab is waging war on the government and anything they regard as un-Islamic. The group launches frequent terror attacks, detonating trucks loaded with explosives in crowded spaces, often killing dozens.

However, this has not deterred thousands of Somalis from returning home. On the streets of the capital Mogadishu, English is spoken in countless different accents. Nobody knows the exact number of returnees – the weak Somali government has other things to worry about than statistics. However, their impact is plain to see. They invest heavily in the country and are prominent in politics. Those who are now founding companies in Somalia, working as doctors or contributing in other ways to rebuild their society were educated in Europe or other developed regions which they originally came to as refugees. Their native country's state institutions and infrastructure lay in ruins for a quarter of a century and are only now being painstakingly rebuilt with the help of the United Nations, the African Union, the EU and private investment. The returnees need plenty of courage, as life in Somalia is still very risky – and investment even more so, as anything you build could be destroyed by a truck bomb the very next day.

The stories of these returnees could help inspire Europeans to show greater courage themselves and to be more tolerant of the migrants who come here. We are not living in paradise and not everyone wants to stay here forever. Most people have somewhere they want to return to at the earliest possible opportunity. But they want to be able to take something back with them: money, knowledge or both. And we can learn something from them too while they're here. Courage, for example – the courage to go beyond familiar horizons, the courage to return, the courage to try something new.



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Bettina Rühl is a freelance journalist based in Nairobi and Cologne who has been writing about Africa for over 20 years. Her reports, which focus on how big political decisions and upheaval on the continent affect ordinary Africans, have been featured on German public TV and radio, as well as in newspapers including the *Berliner Zeitung* and the *Tageszeitung*.