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Connecting Return Intentions and Home Investment: the Case of Ghanaian Migrants in Southern Europe

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Abstract In this paper, we analyse the return intentions and home investment of Ghanaian migrants living in Italy and Spain. We show that the migrants' intention to resettle in Ghana is a strong motivation for them to invest there. Home construction is the primary investment activity that those who desire to return undertake, followed by setting up an income generating venture (retail shop, bakery, hairdressing salon, cash crop and poultry farms). However, in spite of high return intentions, actual return is largely dependent on economic success than failure. Moreover, the migrants' desire to educate their children in the West, keep their European residence rights, and difficult socio-economic conditions in Ghana constitute key constraints to return. Consequently, the migrants prefer to establish a permanent home in Europe, with the hope to return home when their children grow up or after their labour market activity is over; and while those in Italy desire to move onward, those in Spain prefer to stay there.

Keywords Ghanaian migrants in Italy and Spain · Return and reintegration · Home investment

Introduction

During the last three decades, a significant number of Ghanaian migrants seeking greener pastures in Europe have settled in southern European states, particularly Italy

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and Spain. While most of these migrants have established themselves permanently due to family settlements, employment and the desire to secure pension benefits, a lot of them still plan to return to settle in their origin country one day. As a result of this, they channel much of the resources they accumulate overseas to invest in Ghana in preparation for their future return.

In this paper, we examine the return intentions of Ghanaian migrants in Italy and Spain; the factors that influence their return; and the forms of investments that the migrants undertake in Ghana in view of their return. The paper is based on an analysis we made of 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Ghanaian migrants living in two industrial towns in Italy and Spain.

The paper is structured in five parts. In part 1, we examine previous studies that explain the linkage between migrants' return intentions and home investment in view of post-return reintegration. In the second part, we describe the pattern of Ghanaian migration and settlement in Italy and Spain. Part 3 explains the methodology we used to collect data during the field visits. Part 4 constitutes the discussions and analyses of our field data, which is then followed by the conclusion.

Literature Review

Migrants' Return Intentions

In this section, we provide a literature review about migrants' behaviour with respect to return migration and return intentions. This will enable us to explain the factors that influence return intentions, how they vary under different conditions and in different periods of the migrants' life, and the subsequent impact of return intentions on migrants' investment behaviour in their home country.

Conceptualising return migration is a complex undertaking because return takes place in different forms and under different conditions. In fact, the same return explanatory variables (e.g. sex, age, country of origin or length of stay) have been used in opposite directions by scholars, according to their different theoretical approaches to international migrations.

However, return migration decisions are often preceded by the intention to do so (Cassarino 2004; Bovenkerk 1974). Return intentions and return, therefore, constitute an inseparable component of every migration movement. In the migration literature, "intention" to move supposes a voluntary action based upon free choice, that is, a "willingness" to move (Ahn et al. 2002). Migration intention is therefore a planned behaviour based on the actor's free volition, a process by which migrants make the decision (Moran-Taylor and Menjivar 2005), although this does not negate the possibility of external factors influencing the decision (Senyürekli and Menjivar 2012).

Migration and return migration are two sides of the same coin. While most migrants tend to settle permanently in the host country, a lot of them move with the intention to return to resettle in their origin country (King 2000; Bovenkerk 1974). Such return intentions shape migrants' settlement processes, labour performance, savings, remittances, investment and transnational linkages with the origin country (Dustmann 2003).

When migration is a temporary project, most returns usually take place after a short stay (usually during the first 5 years) in the receiving country (Dustmann and Weiss

2007), whereas some migrants may stay much longer or delay their return until they reach pension age (Balkir and Böcker 2010; Klinthäll 2006).

Return migration is motivated by factors such as homeland attachment, achievement of migration objectives, termination of work contracts, old age, difficult economic and political conditions in the host country, improved conditions in the origin country and migrants' desire to enhance their status in the home country (Constant and Massey 2003; King 2000).

However, the relationship between migrants' intention to return and actual return are influenced by a number of conditions, most notably the opportunities that migrants expect to find in their origin countries and those already offered in their respective host countries (Cassarino 2004: 258). In fact, return is sometimes part of a life cycle dislocation project. While some migrants may like to go home early (Dustmann and Weiss 2007), others may prefer to return home after pension age. In this case, return migration would be a long-term project. Klinthäll (2004) observed during his research on return migration from Sweden that return rates increased considerably when the immigrants reached the legal pension age of 65 years. Indeed, he observed a gradual increase of return migration at age 51, which peaked at age 65 before declining again. This shows that while migrants may intend to go home, several other factors can negatively or positively influence the return decision. This therefore implies that behavioural intentions to return and attitudes towards the behaviour may vary in intensity under different conditions and in different periods of the migrant's life.

Consequently, while some migrants may eventually return, others may delay their return or move onwards to another country or end up staying permanently in the host country due to return constraints (Waldorf 1995; Bolognani 2007). Others develop a lasting transnational residence between host and origin country (De Coulon and Wolff 2006).

While previous literature has shown that failed migration projects can motivate return (Borjas and Bratsberg 1996; Reyes 1997), more recent literature has contradicted this position. For example, Kirdar (2009) has argued that migrants who move to Germany with the intention to acquire capital in order to return to invest in their home country are unlikely to return when they face long periods of unemployment in Germany. In a similar manner, Carling (2004) has also argued that Cape Verdean migrants who are unsuccessful in the Netherlands prefer to stay there than to return.

With respect to Ghanaian migrants living in developed countries, studies have shown that their intention to return is high despite their tendency towards permanent settlement. In his research about return intentions among Ghanaians living in Canada, Owusu (2003: 403) observed that a massive 91 % of the sample expressed their desire to resettle in Ghana one day. Mazzucato (2008) has also noted that Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands maintain strong linkages with their relatives at home. However, it has been observed that Ghanaians are proud people and are very hesitant to return home unless they have achieved important economic success overseas (Berkhout et al. 2005: 82). In addition, Manu and Asante (2005: 293) have argued that while most Ghanaian migrants expected their stay to be temporary, economic failure has made their return impossible. This shows that Ghanaian migrants' return intentions are conditioned by their reintegration opportunities in Ghana.

Investing Home in View of Post-Return Reintegration

Reintegration refers to the economic, cultural and social reincorporation of returned migrants into their country of origin (Arowolo 2000). It entails adjustment to the cultural and environmental conditions of the origin country, access to its labour market, the social welfare system, a decent housing system and a good educational system (Koser 2000).

Higher living standards and earnings overseas usually raise migrants' expectations in terms of salaries, working and living conditions, which they are unlikely to have in the home country. Consequently, migrants invest at home prior to their return or return along with sufficient savings or pensions to avoid the risk of reverting to premigration living standards (Arif 1998).

In more recent times, migrant sending nations have included return migration in their development agenda and provide a range of services to facilitate the reintegration of returnees. These often include social security and pension arrangements with receiving countries (Koser 2000), financial assistance, housing, employment opportunities, soft loans, waiver of import duty taxes, training, cultural programmes, and education assistance (for returnees' children) (Newland and Terrazas 2009). Yet, in most cases, these programmes do not meet the needs of returnees (Martin et al. 2002). In the case of Ghana, for example, while there have been successive attempts by the government to incorporate the diaspora and return migration in national development issues, these have resulted in limited policy changes and rights (Kleist 2013) apart from some exceptional and private initiatives (Marabello 2013).

Therefore, returnees' chances to fully reintegrate in Ghana depend on the extent to which they have prepared for their return (Dekker 1995). Given that most Ghanaian migrants hope to return to Ghana one day (Wong 2014), this may explain why there is increasing investment rates by the migrants in their home country. This behaviour is in line with return literature and return preparation. Cassarino (2004) explains that when return is a voluntary act, it is often supported by the gathering of sufficient resources to facilitate reintegration at home. Empirical research also indicates that migrants' return intentions enhance their work effort, savings, remittances and investment in home country (Galor and Stark 1990; Dustmann and Mestres 2008). Ahlburg and Brown (1998) have shown that migrants who intend to return remit and accumulate more physical capital in the origin country than those who do not plan to return. Additionally, Thomas-Hope (1999) has also observed that some forms of investment, such as home ownership in the origin country, and gifts that Jamaican migrants in the UK send to relatives in the origin country prior to return are strategies to reinforce and reassert their membership in the home society to facilitate resettlement. In the case of Ghanaian migrant overseas, studies have shown that they channel most of their savings accumulated overseas back home to invest in housing and other business ventures (Smith 2007). Most of these investments are strictly linked to their intentions to return to settle in Ghana one day (Owusu 2003). Some also return with savings, pension benefits, and new skills and experience to facilitate their reintegration (Black et al. 2003). Results of a study conducted with some Ghanaian elite returnees showed that more than 35 % of the population sample brought home between \$10,000 to \$50,000 of savings to invest in housing, business and domestic expenditure (Ammassari 2004: 148).

Based on the above observed facts, we argue that the migrants' individual or group level remittances for home investment as well as for social activities such as community development projects and donations for funerals, festivals and other socio-cultural events (Akologo 2005) reflect their homeland attachment and desire to reinforce their membership in the home community in order to prepare the path for post-return recognition and better social and economic reintegration.

Migration from Ghana to Italy and Spain

Ghanaian migrants began settling in Italy during the late 1970s and in Spain during the 1980s. This movement was primarily motivated by worsening socio-economic and political conditions that Ghana experienced from the 1960s, the mass expulsion of Ghanaian migrants from Nigeria in 1983 and 1985 (Agyeman and Setrana 2014), the multiplier effect of migration and the restrictive immigration policies of the northern European states that used to be the main destination of Ghanaian migrants going to Europe. However, until the mid-1980s and late 1990s, their presence in Italy and Spain, respectively, was very much limited. From the mid-1990s, immigration of married women and children from Ghana (to Italy) for family reasons also gathered greater momentum. Table 1, elaborated from ISTAT and INE data, illustrates the pattern of Ghanaian migration to Italy and Spain.

In 2011, there were 52,914 Ghanaian migrants officially resident in Italy. Nevertheless, the figure could be much higher if the undocumented Ghanaian migrants were included. Until the year 2000 however, migration from Ghana to Spain was limited (cf. Carling 2007; Pumares 2002). In 1998, only 624 Ghanaians were resident in Spain, but by 2009, this number had reached approximately 15,179 Ghanaians, out of which some 11,586 had legal residence permits.

Ghanaians migrate to Italy as a family. Females account for over 43 %, and children under 18 years represent 31 %. However, males dominate migrants in Spain. In 2009,

Table 1 Ghanaian migrants resident in Italy and Spain from 2002 to 2011

Year	Italy			Spain		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
2002	14,872	10,996	25,868	3,005	593	3,598
2003	16,910	12,342	29,252	4,428	836	5,264
2004	19,031	13,734	32,754	6,098	1,020	7,118
2005	19,777	14,722	34,499	9,129	1,353	10,482
2006	20,729	15,811	36,540	11,664	1,624	13,288
2007	21,635	16,765	38,400	10,982	1,717	12,699
2008	23,932	18,395	42,327	11,223	1,910	13,113
2009	26,670	19,376	46,046	12,854	2,325	15,179
2010	29,011	20,561	49,585	12,999	2,693	15,690
2011	31,100	21,814	52,914	13,372	3,027	16,399

Source: Authors (elaborated from ISTAT and INE data)

females represented a little over 13 %. This could be explained by the more recent nature of this migration movement and unfavourable economic conditions in Spain.

Settlement Patterns and Labour Performance

Ghanaian migrants' settlement pattern in the two southern European states is strongly linked to industrial and agricultural labour. During the early stages of settlement, the migrants live in farming communities in Southern Italy or Spain and work in the informal agricultural sector while they are still in irregular residence conditions. Campania, Puglia and Sicily are the main regions of settlement for those who go to Italy. They then move to Italy's northern regions to settle and work in industries, mainly as unskilled labourers, after they have acquired legal residence and work permits (Andall 2007: 292). Those who go to Spain follow a similar pattern. They first settle in the southern regions of Murcia and Andalusia until they have obtained a legal residence permit. Then, they move to the north-east, mainly to the regions of Catalonia and Aragon to seek new employment as industrial labourers. However, high numbers of them still remain in Andalusia and Murcia (Bell Adell and Gómez 2000; Iniesta 2007).

Return Migration to Ghana

Exact figures of Ghanaian return migration rates are hard to come by in Italy, Spain and Ghana. According to Italy's National Institute for Statistics (*Istituto nazionale di statistica* (ISTAT)), 1485 Ghanaians left Italy during the period between 1995 and 2008. Spain's National Institute of Statistics (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (INE)) estimates that only 104 Ghanaians left Spain for another country between 2005 and 2009. However, these official figures are anything but reliable, because some of those who leave are undocumented migrants. Moreover, most migrants who leave keep their residence permits and/or do not cancel their names from the district register. Others move to a third country and do not return to their home country.

Estimates from Ghana indicate that about 10 % of the stock of Ghanaian emigrants in any given year returns to Ghana (IOM 2009: 63). Moreover, a number of studies in Ghana have also provided empirical evidence to support these claims (Black et al. 2003; Black and King 2004). However, these studies and estimates partially reveal the real volume of return migration, the composition and characteristics of the returnees, the purpose of return, length of stay and the returnee's economic activities in Ghana, due to small sample sizes and limited geographical scope.

Methodology

Data Collection

Data was drawn from in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 40 Ghanaian migrants living in two industrial communities in Northern Italy and Spain. A purposive non-random sampling technique was used to select participants. The interviews were conducted by the first author of this paper, between January and August 2010. There

were 23 participants in Italy and 17 participants in Spain. Because of the homogenous character of the group, the number of interviews was sufficient to reach saturation (cf. Guest et al. 2006). The interviews were structured into themes and sub-themes and later analysed according to the main themes of our research, namely return intentions and investment in Ghana. At each interview session, the first part was dedicated to background information about the interviewee. Informants were interviewed in their homes. English and Akan (Twi) were the languages used during the interviews. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed in English. Notes were taken in cases where recording was impossible.

The two industrial towns (Schio in Italy and Vic in Spain) were selected based on the existence in these places of a vibrant Ghanaian community, settlement stability and their weight in recent immigration trends in their respective localities.

Schio is a Venetian town located in the province of Vicenza in the north-eastern part of Italy. It holds a central position in the industrial clusters of the Vicenza provincial area. The town is traditionally famous for some of Italy's largest textile firms, as well as ceramic, steel, chemical and leather industries. It is one of the places in Northern Italy where Ghanaians migrants settled during the late 1980s to supply unskilled labour to industries. Over the years, this town has become one of the bedrocks of the Ghanaian leadership in Italy. The Vicenza branch of the Association of Ghanaian Migrants in Italy started from this town, which also has a vibrant Ghanaian Catholic Community and several Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches that attract participants from neighbouring towns, including the provincial capital Vicenza (Agyeman 2011a, b). At the time of the interviews, there were about 300 registered Ghanaian residents in this town.

Vic is famous for meat processing industries. It is located in Catalonia in the north-east of Spain. This town is the only place in Spain where Ghanaian migrants have a higher concentration. The migrants started to settle there in the late 1990s, and in 2009, there were 1024 Ghanaians living there. This figure represented 10 % of the migrant population and 2 % of the total population of the town. They supply an unskilled labour force to the meat processing industries (Agyeman 2011a, b; Espinoza and Rosés 2002).

Profile of Participants

Participants were first generation migrants selected according to their duration of stay in the immigration country, sex and social position. It is argued that return migration is a more productive enterprise when it takes place within 5 to 15 years after migration (King 2000). In line with this argument, we used 5 years of stay as a reference point to select the participants. In taking this decision, we also assumed that since Ghanaian return migration is linked to success and most Ghanaian migrants do not enter Italy or Spain under normal recruitment schemes (Agyeman 2011a, b), 5 years would be a reasonable period for them to make the necessary adjustment and accumulate sufficient resources in order to make decisions about return.

The Ghanaian communities in Italy and Spain are well organised, based on ethnic, township and religious groupings. In selecting the participants, we took into consideration the weight that the elderly, community and group leaders, women and the migrant's close and extended family relatives have in return decision-making (Wong 2014). Consequently, efforts were made to ensure that the participants were spread across different social positions, sexes and life stages (Table 2).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of participants

Characteristics	Italy	Spain
Age (average)	44 years (33–58 years)	40 years (32–56 years)
Educational level	Secondary	Secondary
Years in host country	16 years (6–33 years)	10 years (5–21 years)
Employment	52 % (44 % for women)	59 % (20 % for women)
Family location	87 % in Italy	53 % in Spain

Source: from the field data

The participants were largely middle class migrants between the ages of 33 and 58 years. Approximately 70 % of interviewees in Italy were over 40 years whereas over 50 % of those in Vic were less than 40 years. Most participants were educated to secondary school level or had vocational training. The participants were long-term first generation settlers. Over 80 % of the migrants interviewed in Schio had lived in Italy for over 10 years, out of which over 40 % had been there for more than 20 years. Sixty-five percent of those interviewed in Vic had lived in Spain for between 5 and 9 years. Only 6 % had lived in Spain for over 20 years. The participants were generally family settlers, confirming our previous assertion that Ghanaian migration to Southern Europe is family migration. Over 86 and 53 % of the interviewees in Schio and Vic, respectively, lived with all or part of their family in the immigration country. Females accounted for 39 and 29 % of the respondents in Italy and Spain, respectively.

Results: Analysis of Return Intentions and Investment in Ghana

Return Intentions and Home Investment Motivations

Wong (2006) has observed that most Ghanaians travel overseas with the idea of settling on a temporary basis in the host country, accumulating resources and returning to resettle in Ghana. This attitude was quite evident within the Ghanaian communities in Italy and Spain where we did the field work. In a number of interviews, there were several statements to back this feeling: “When I was coming [to Italy] I did not plan to stay here for good, because whatever be the case I will go back” (*RIS.12*).¹ “I didn’t apply for [Spanish] citizenship because I have to go back home. I am always thinking about Ghana. I have plans to do something there and if I claim citizenship here they would not allow me” (*RIV.17*). In spite of this, we observed a greater tendency towards permanent settlement as most migrants had already lived in the host country for several years and had settled with the family. The questions that came to mind therefore were as follows: Will they really leave? If they will do, when will that happen? What evidence backs their statements that they will leave? Therefore, in order to explain the migrants’ return intentions and its linkage with their investment at home, we used a life stage analytical model (Klinthäll 2006) to distinguish the responses according to those who planned to return before pension age and those who planned to return after pension age.

¹ The interviews were labeled and numbered. RIS refers to interviews in Schio while RIV refers to those in Vic.

Migrants Who Plan to Return Before Pension Age

In both Italy and Spain, we found that most of the migrants entertained a strong feeling to return before pension age. The majority of them were in their late 30s and mid 40s. Among those interviewed in Italy, most of them claimed that it was their children's education that was keeping them from leaving. A 40-year old, who had been in Italy for 20 years said:

“Personally, I don't have interest in staying here anymore. I have been here for almost 20 years. Now I am here because of my children's education... I want to go back to impart the technological and business skills I have learnt here on other people in Ghana. In my view, the advancement of Ghana lies in our own hands and so we have to go home and teach others how to improve upon their work” (RIS.12).

The desire to return is backed by purposeful arrangements to facilitate their reintegration in Ghana, which have very much to do with an investment mindset. When we asked respondent RIS.12, immediately quoted above about what he has done in view of his return, he said:

“In 1997, when our plans to relocate to the United States of America failed, my wife and I decided to open a small bakery in Kumasi as a start-up. If it succeeds, we would then move to establish a large bakery factory on our land. We have acquired a vast land in Kumasi and completed our house there. We also have plans to export some of the bakery machines to Ghana. I have experience in designing the electrical components of these machines. So I want to buy the oven in Ghana and do the electrical construction myself. My wife and I have decided to start this business on a small scale basis for the time being, using our own resources, without resorting to the bank for loans” (RIS.12).

So, apart from building a house in Ghana, migrants who planned to return before pension age had taken steps to start an income generating activity in the country. A 45-year-old lady who had also been in Italy for 21 years and was unemployed at the time of the interview said:

“I have sent machines for baking bread and other things home. In fact, now all is complete. The major obstacle that is delaying my going home to start the business is that my children are still schooling here so I can't leave them here alone. They are too young. Secondly, I am in *casa d'integrazione* (taking unemployment benefit), which does not permit me to travel outside Italy” (RIS.11).

This lady also added that she and her husband have constructed three houses in Ghana. Other respondents also reported having started a farm project and other business ventures in Ghana. For migrants in Italy, therefore, the intention to return was strongly backed by investment in business activities in Ghana. Stocchiero (2009) has observed that due to the economic crisis, a lot of Ghanaian factory workers in Italy have been laid off without any hope of returning to the labour market. He suggested that return was a useful option for such category of migrants. But, while the intention to return has a strong linkage to home

investment, this did not however match with return due to several constraints arising out of the family nature of the Ghanaian migration to Italy, residence and the social security laws that require that beneficiaries stay in the host country.

Migrants interviewed in Spain, unlike their counterparts in Italy, did not show any additional effort taken to back their return intentions, apart from starting a housing project in Ghana. We observed that this could have possibly been due to the more recent nature of their immigration with respect to those in Italy and the high unemployment rates as a result of the economic crisis. A 45-year-old woman who has been in Spain for 6 years said: “Now it is only my husband who is working, so resources are somehow scarce, but if God permits and we are able to save some money in the future, we would decide what we shall do” (RIV.13). Most migrants in Spain feared that they would lose their Spanish residence rights if they decided to abandon the country. For that reason, even those who planned to leave were more concerned about how they could consolidate their Spanish residence rights (Agyeman 2011a, b).

Migrants Who Plan to Return After Pension Age

Contrary to the younger population, migrants who were nearing pension age in both Italy and Spain said that they would return to Ghana after they had retired. This is consistent with the existing literature that claims that return migration peaks at retirement age (Klinthäll 2006). Most of those who were planning to return after retirement were doing so purely for economic reasons, i.e. to cut down living expenditure. An informant in Schio who has lived in Italy for 33 years and has been unemployed for the past 2 years before the interview said:

“I am 58 years. Very soon I will reach the pension age. If I had something in hand, I would go to Ghana now and come to claim the pension when I am 65 years. I am sure, even if the pension benefit is €200 per month this will be enough when I convert it to Ghanaian currency. I can live on this until I die. But it is often said that there is no payment for doing unfinished or shoddy work. So if I don't work till the end, I may lose it” (RIS.3).

Another informant who was 58 years old and 21 years in Italy said:

“I prefer home, because there are too many bills here. For instance the gas bill that came for last month was €300, but at home [Ghana] these bills are minimal so I can manage with them. I think when I go home, my expenses will be less than here” (RIS.8).

These two informants, and the others in both Italy and Spain, who are planning to retire in Ghana, have all constructed a house in the country. However, there were mixed reactions regarding whether they will engage in an economic activity after their return. Some said that they will want to rest when they returned, while others said that they will go into farming. However, most women interviewed who planned to return with their husband said that they will start an income generating venture. Their attitudes demonstrate the weight and level of independence that women have in Akan matrilineal marriages and kinship systems, as also confirmed by Wong (2014).

Other Categories of Migrants

In addition to those who planned to return before pension age and those who planned to return after pension age, we found other categories of migrants that had different return plans. This included those who wanted to stay for good and those who were planning to move onward, particularly to English-speaking and northern European states. Migrants who intended to move onward had not abandoned their return plans but were trying to move to places that they felt offered better economic opportunities. In general, the intention to stay for good was very low among the migrants in both Italy and Spain. In the Italian case, only two women openly expressed a desire to stay in Italy for good, and they did so for family reasons. One was married to an Italian, and the other married to a Ghanaian but had no children was doing so probably to avoid extended family members interfering in her marriage. We felt that the stigma of childlessness that women suffer in Ghanaian societies was the main motivation for her decision. This lady owns a house in Ghana, which she built before migrating to Italy, and has also built a second house in Ghana with her husband. The other lady also reported that she and her husband had purchased a house in Accra.

In the case of those in Spain, there was a general tendency to maintain a permanent home there and develop a transnational linkage with their home country. We observed a high tendency for home ownership among families in Vic, with respect to those in Schio. The migrants also mentioned free access to quality health care and education as a motivating factor to maintain a permanent residence in Spain. However, worsening economic conditions may have restrained those in Spain's chances to accumulate sufficient physical capital to settle in Ghana, which could partly explain their decision to settle permanently overseas. A statement from one of the informants in Vic clearly buttresses this point: "When you have completed your house [in Ghana] and you have a car, the next thing is to start a store or a company, otherwise you cannot go back" (RIV.6).

Why Home Construction as the First Condition of Return Preparation?

The centrality of building a house in Ghana as a sign of the migrants' preparedness to return was quite remarkable. In fact, all of the 23 interviewees in Italy, and 11 out of the 17 in Spain, have completed or started building a house in Ghana. Kabki et al. (2004) have also observed that "house construction in Ghana is one of the prime activities undertaken by migrants." We also found that a lot of the migrants own or hope to own more than one house in Ghana, preferably, one house in their hometown and another one in the city:

The reason why we built one of the houses in Sunyani is that it is the capital of Brong Ahafo region. So we built one house there first, and if by the grace of God things go well we will build another one in Dormaa [hometown]. But my husband and his brother have already built one in Dormaa for their mother (RIS.20).

Another informant also said that he owns a house in Techiman where his wife comes from, and he has another house in his hometown for his mother. The *matrilineal* kinship system practiced among the Akans explains why the mother is the reference point in the extended family.

However, if, as this and other studies have confirmed, Ghanaians migrate with the goal to quickly accumulate resources in order to return, then building a house as a first condition towards return preparation is just like putting the cart before the horse. Therefore, why do the migrants embark upon a housing project given the time and the large amount of resources that it demands? The explanation lies in the new social position that the migrants acquire by virtue of emigrating to Europe and the level of respect that people who own a house receive in Ghanaian societies (Van der Geest 1998). In Akan culture, “A house stands for a successful life, for respect, love, happiness and security in old age, it is a thing of beauty and it provides a sense of belonging, of ‘home’, both physically and symbolically” (Van de Geest 1998: 336). An Akan proverb states: *Yebisa opanyin fie, na yemisa ne sika* (we ask where an elderly man’s or a family head’s house is, but not how much money he has). In other words, people demonstrate their wealth by the house that they have built and not the savings they have. In Ghana, the imagery associated with migrating to the West is success. Success also symbolises living in a house that one has built and not in a family home or in a rented facility. In addition, one is not considered successful among his kin if he does not own a house in his hometown (Van der Geest 1998). Therefore, migrants—whatever their life circumstances—desire to build a house in Ghana before return, in order to consolidate their newly acquired social position in the Ghanaian society and be welcomed into their local communities.

Conclusions

The Ghanaian migrants we studied moved with the intention to return to resettle in Ghana one day. However, their return intention was largely dependent on economic success than failure. Moreover, their desire to educate their children in the West, keep their European residence rights, and difficult socio-economic conditions in Ghana constitutes a big constraint to return. Consequently, the migrants have established a permanent home in Europe, with the hope to return when their children grow up or after their labour market activity is over.

The intention to resettle in Ghana one day is, however, a strong motivation for the migrants’ investment in Ghana. Home construction is the primary investment activity that those who desire to return undertake in Ghana. This is then followed by setting up an income generating venture (retail shop, bakery, hairdressing salon, cash crop or poultry farming). Other migrants, most of whom have built their houses, plan to return with savings or with pension.

Return migration is a family decision, and while married men and women expressed their willingness to return, the women were more cautious about ‘premature’ return because of family and cultural reasons and perceived reintegration difficulties in Ghana. Most married women we interviewed who plan to return, desire to start an income generating activity in Ghana, independent of their husband’s. This may be due to the fact that the majority of the women we interviewed were from the Akan ethnic group and/or follow a matrilineal system of lineage and inheritance. For this reason, the women desire to have economic autonomy in order to not depend solely on their husband’s income.

However, while migrants interviewed in Italy, who expressed the desire to return, have made advanced planning and preparation in terms of investment in Ghana, those in Spain have made little preparation in that regard and are very uncertain about return. This may be explained by the more recent nature of their migration (more than a decade behind those in Italy), the difficult economic conditions in Spain and their desire to establish a permanent home in Spain.

In the light of these findings, we think that return migration policies for Ghanaian migrants should seriously consider their basic needs, which include housing and income generating activities. Financial incentives to encourage them to return must take into consideration the investment patterns of the migrants, which, as this research has shown, require bigger capital. Furthermore, the migrants' desire to provide their children with a Western education, and to keep their European residence right, needs to be taken into consideration. We think policies that favour transnational residence, and not circular migration, would facilitate return migration of Ghanaians. Additionally, acquisition of host country's citizenship within a reasonably shorter period of stay could be a strong motivation (not a constraint) for migrants to return or move onward, as it guarantees the possibility to re-enter the former immigration country when the return (or onward migration) project fails.

To conclude this paper, we want to add that further research comparing the home investment behaviour of migrants who plan to return, and those who do not plan to return, as well as those who have returned, would add solid grounds to our findings. Further studies could also compare migrants in Southern Europe against those in Northern Europe to see how structural factors affect return migration decisions and home investment behaviour.

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