The role of Support Networks in the Initial Stages of Integration: The case of West African Newcomers in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the role of support networks in West African migration to the Netherlands. The authors examine the interactions of non-State support groups with West African newcomers and explore the nature, scope and function of support. What type of support networks do respondents rely on, under which circumstances, and for how long? What is the scope of support? Is it to be taken for granted? What alternatives are there for those left out of the loop? The findings suggest that support is mainly punctual, in response to a specific need, and for a limited period of time. It is not to be taken for granted, as support groups have limited capacities, and protect themselves from excessive demands. They play a significant role in providing assistance to migrants, yet this role should not be overestimated.

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INTRODUCTION

Several studies have documented the impact of social networks on people's lives, and the different functions they fulfill. Networks can provide either direct or indirect benefits, have the potential to supply tangible resources and contacts, and do not always have a positive effect (Bourdieu, 1986; Granovetter, 1983). With regard to migration, they play a role in facilitating the journey, support newcomers in the first steps of their integration process, and have an influence on the way migrants' residence strategies evolve over time (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2004; Banton, 1955; Chelpi-den Hamer, 2005; Courade, 1997; Engbersen and van der Leun, 2001; Guarnizo, et al., 2003; Jerrome, 1978; Kuami Kuagbenou, 1997; Marques, et al., 2001; Massey, et al., 1994; Mazzucato, 2003; Portes, et al., 2002; Riccio, 2003). Given that they play an important function in the initial stage of migrants' integration, it is worth defining their nature, scope, and the extent to which they fulfill the role they claim to, and examining whether newcomers' expectations are met.

In this paper, we specifically focus on social networks that have provided some kind of service provision to West African migrants shortly after their arrival in the Netherlands. What type(s) of support networks did they rely on upon arrival, under what circumstances, and for how long? What is the scope of support? Is it to be taken for granted? What alternatives are there for those left out of the loop? By shedding light on the functioning of these networks, we seek to better understand the dynamics and complexity of West Africans' integration, and why such a process necessarily varies from one person to another.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Sub-Saharan African[1] migration to the Netherlands has never been a main focus of research among scholars, probably because of its relative small size when compared with other migrant groups. In 2004, sub-Saharan African migrants represented 150,000 people in numbers or 5 per cent of the migrants legally registered in the Netherlands. There have been a few studies on Ghanaians, Nigerians, Cape Verdeans, Somalians and Ethiopians (Engbersen, 2001; Kessel and Tellegen, 2000; Mazzucato, 2006; Nimako, 2000), but compared to the bulk of literature on Turks, Surinamese, Morroccans, and Dutch Antilleans -- the ethnic groups who usually receive attention in the Netherlands, and who aggregately account for 1 million residents -- there are not many, and they do not carry much weight in policymaking. Despite this, there are several rationales for studying sub-Saharan African migrants: 1) they arrived fairly recently in the Netherlands and as such, they exhibit integration patterns different from those of other migrant groups who came four decades ago; 2) they tend to leave the Netherlands after a certain period of time; and 3) their migration pattern is counter-intuitive.

Unwelcomed migrants and difficulties in securing work and a legal stay
The majority of sub-Saharan African migrants arrived in the Netherlands in the 1980s and the 1990s, at a time when the Dutch economy was not doing very well, in a time of recession and increased unemployment rates. Non-western migrants were no longer welcome, and, compared to when migrant groups settled in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a much more restrictive legal framework governing immigration (Bevelander and Veenman, 2004; WWR, 2001). If we compare sub-Saharan African migrants with the first waves of Turks and Moroccans who arrived in the 1960s, we find similarities in both profiles and motivations to migrate. If we disregard asylum seekers, the first to arrive in all three groups were target-earner migrants, who were usually young men in their late twenties, who wanted to work and save as much as they could before returning to their country of origin.

There are major differences with respect to the integration patterns of the different migrant groups. Turks and Moroccans had no difficulty in gaining legal status in the 1960s. At that time, migration was demand-driven, and migrants were taken from their respective countries of origin to work in particular sectors of the Dutch industry[2]. To give a key figure: 3,000 Moroccan workers arrived every year between 1964 and 1973, through legal channels. The Moroccan community developed quickly, and subsequently was able to provide support to newcomers at an early stage. When Turks and Moroccans came outside the official programmes -- even those who came without papers -- it was relatively easy for them to regularize their situation after getting a job in the formal sector. Housing, medical care, and the right to access public welfare were not issues at that time, and there was enough growth and resources to be able to take care of everyone (Bevelander and Veenman, 2004; WWR, 2001).

The situation was quite different for sub-Saharan African migrants. As stated earlier, the majority arrived in the Netherlands in the 1980s and the 1990s, when non-western migrants were no longer welcome. New policy tools were in place aimed at regulating flows, the length of stay, and unwanted migration[3]. Official ways of entry had been reduced in order to protect local labour markets, State recruitment programmes had stopped, legal avenues of labour migration were fewer, and securing long-term stays became more and more difficult for non-western residents. Legislation related to migration, regularization, marriage, and family reunification became very restrictive after a series of new laws[4] in the 1990s (Bevelander and Veenman, 2004; WWR, 2001). After the mid-1990s, it was no longer possible for someone to enter the country outside legal channels of migration and get a job in the formal sector. One had to be registered as a legal resident first, before being able to apply for a social security number, which is a requirement for working in the formal sector and for applying for public assistance. The current legislation leaves quite a few people out of basic service provision. The State no longer provides housing, medical care and social services to undocumented migrants. Even legal migrants are formally told not to rely on the welfare system too much, as it can affect their right to stay[5].

Given such a negative environment, the sub-Saharan African community has taken time to develop. African migrants who arrived in the 1990s generally suffered from a lack of assistance from their peers, and mostly had to rely on themselves when confronted with difficult situations. Several studies have in fact shown that sub-Saharan African migrants experienced more difficulties than other migrant groups, in securing formal work and a legal stay (Engbersen, 2001; Nimako, 2000).

The "passing through" trend

Figure 1 shows the main trend in sub-Saharan African migration to the Netherlands. It shows that the number of sub-Saharan African newcomers rose until 2002, and then went down. There were less than 13,000 in 1996, their numbers peaked at 20,000 in 2001-2002, and the total decreased to under 9,000 in 2006. In 2004, the number of sub-Saharan Africans leaving the Netherlands surpassed the number of sub-Saharan Africans entering.

FIGURE 1

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN MIGRATION IN THE NETHERLANDS (1995-2006)
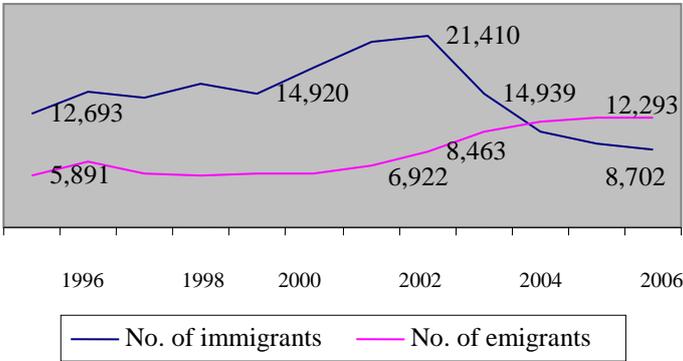
Source: Statline, CBS (2007)

One interpretation is that stricter migration policies work. The recent policy changes succeeded in limiting the number of unwanted migrants and discouraging new entries; the Netherlands are no longer attractive to sub-Saharan migrants. Another interpretation is that the sub-Saharan African community is greatly underestimated in official statistics. The number of undocumented migrants is not taken into account, and it is difficult to get a proper estimate of who enters and leaves, based on the current

system. A third interpretation is that migration has not dried up, but has become more dynamic. Migrants quickly move elsewhere if they do not find what they are after, or if they fail to secure long-term legal status. If it is too difficult to get a visa extension, or to convert a student visa into a work permit, some migrants might only "pass through", and move to alternative destinations that seem more "flexible".

Counter-intuitive migration

Sub-Saharan African migration to the Netherlands is rather counter-intuitive. One would expect that Africans migrate to France or the United Kingdom, where they at least share a language, and socio-cultural ties. Yet, Burkinabes, Malians, Guineans, Senegalese, and Nigerians have settled in and around Dutch cities, which -- a priori -- they do not have many links to. The Netherlands had a few colonies and trading posts in sub-Saharan Africa (namely in Ghana, Senegal, Mauritania, Angola, Sao Tome, Mozambique and South Africa), but the ties were mainly economic in nature.

This illustrates once again that migration to Europe has surpassed colonial and linguistic boundaries. Migration flows can no longer solely be explained by historical ties (Styan, 2003). Previous research on West African migration to Europe has shown how migrants adapt to the changing contexts in the receiving countries, even changing their initial destination when necessary (Robin, 1996). When migration policies become too restrictive in one country, migrants move to a neighbouring one. When they hear that a country has an open-border policy, they go there in search of better opportunities. This has important implications for research and policymaking as it implies that all migrant groups have to be taken into account in policy design, and not just the ones who carry the most weight in national statistics. Borders are porous. Certain groups may currently be marginal, but their numbers can quickly rise, depending on the conjuncture in neighbouring countries.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper analyses several integration stories of West African migrants in the Netherlands from the specific angle of their support networks. We shall not look at familial support. The stories are not about family forming or family reunification. They are not about a husband helping his wife to join him, siblings supporting one another, or about parents supporting their children. The stories are about West African newcomers who barely know anyone in the Netherlands and who have nonetheless decided to go there in order to seize a chance to make a decent living. In the initial stages of their stay, they rely mostly on weak tie networks for support. We clarify the key concepts below.

Weak tie networks

Several authors have stressed the potential weak tie networks have to bridge the gap between separate personal networks (Granovetter, 1983; Woolcock and Narayan, 1999). Social networks have more than one dimension. In theory, each person has a certain number of family and close friends, who are regularly in touch with one another and who form a dense network consisting of strong ties. Each person is also in touch with a certain number of people (acquaintances, colleagues, relatives' acquaintances) who usually do not know each other and who are connected to one another by a set of loose ties (weak ties). Strong tie networks are usually easier to access than weak ties networks, but they are likely to offer limited services, since each member of such a network is likely to have access to the same information and contacts. Weak tie networks, however, have the potential to bridge the gap between separate personal networks. They can provide people with access to resources and information beyond those directly available to them, thereby significantly increasing opportunities. In short, weak tie networks fulfill certain functions, but their nature and scope remain empirical questions yet to be answered.

Woolcock and Narayan make a strong argument that people with extensive and diverse networks are in a better position than those who lack them. They also acknowledge that combinations of "strong

tie"/"weak tie" networks (which they refer to as "bonding"/"bridging" social capital) vary across contexts and individuals, and that it is a dynamic process (Woolcock and Narayan, 1999). Some people are able to activate certain networks "to get by" when needed, but lack the more diffuse and extensive networks needed to "get ahead" and improve their status over time. Their approach is in line with several authors who have argued that processes and effects of incorporation are not uniform across individuals (Charles, 1992; Guarnizo, et al., 1999; Massey, 2001; Mazzucato, et al., 2004; Portes, et al., 1991; Smith, 1998). Migrants are able to activate some resources and not others at certain points in time, due to their ability to pull certain strings, depending on the social networks they have and their individual skills.

Understanding the sources of support

The positive effects of support are rather intuitive: networks can provide migrants with tangible resources (money, a plane ticket, visa, information on work, housing, moral support) and with additional contacts. Contacts extend the volume and quality of a migrant's network and are likely to open new doors and lead to fresh opportunities. Negative effects include the fact that migrants run the risk of becoming stuck in a niche, if they remain confined to a too limited network, with few hopes of social promotion. They are also more likely to be abused by peers.

Sources of support are usually less clear. What motivates a person to give support to others? Why does someone agree to make resources available? Do they expect something in return? Portes argues that such interactions have four potential sources (1998). When people agree to act in a certain way because they have internalized certain social norms and values, support is the result of a *norm introjection*. The norms and values may be shared by everyone in a given society or shared only by a minority. In the first case, support is underpinned by strong collective values. Social relationships are progressively transformed into social obligations, and well-off individuals feel obliged to assist individuals in a difficult position, because this is the norm in their society (not so much because they are convinced it is the right thing to do). In the second case, support is based upon strong personal

values, and does not necessarily reflect the dominant view. This perhaps explains why certain people or institutions assist certain groups that have been socially marginalized.

When expressions of support emerge from the feeling of sharing a common fate, support is the result of a *bounded solidarity*. People who share -- or shared -- a common situation identify with one other and support each other's initiatives. Solidarity is not necessarily bounded by the limits of the ethnic group or by a nationality. When the motivation for making resources available to migrants is the expectation of payback, support is driven by *instrumental* motives. Support groups give access to resources in the expectation that there will be some kind of payback in the future. It is not necessarily equal in value, the timing may or may not be specified, payback might be in cash, in kind, as a service or as social recognition, and it is not necessarily paid back by the migrant himself. When support groups give access to resources in the expectation that they will be fully repaid in future, exchanges are based on the norm of *reciprocity*. From our findings, we will empirically derive the nature of the social interactions between migrants and support groups.

METHODOLOGY

This article explores the type and scope of support provided to West African newcomers. It is based on 29 in-depth interviews: 15 migration stories of West African migrants who arrived in the Netherlands between 1978 and 2004, and 14 interviews of support groups. Migrants were selected using snowball sampling[6]; support groups were selected at random, using the African directory[7]. We used semi-structured interviews, checklists, and observation as interview methods. Most interviews took place at the respondent's home. The interviews were not taped. Notes were taken during the discussion, typed afterwards, shared with the respondent, and reviewed when necessary.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it was quite important to create an informal setting conducive to a free exchange, to protect respondents' confidentiality, and to give them the opportunity to withdraw if

they so wished (Scheyvens, R., et al., 2003). We systematically use pseudonyms when we quote someone. We deliberately chose not to interview people whose situation was precarious, as we did not want to add another source of stress to people already struggling with unstable living conditions. We therefore did not interview asylum seekers.

Respondents were asked to look back to the first period of their stay in the Netherlands. Although we are aware of the potential biases and memory losses that this approach implies -- especially as we were sometimes dealing with respondents who had come to the Netherlands 15 years ago --, we made the assumption that settled migrants would share their story with less inhibition, thereby providing us with a fair account of what happened to them during their migration process. Some of our respondents could remember surprisingly well the people they had met and the kinds of support they had received in the beginning of their stay. However, it was sometimes hard to have them tell their story in a chronological way.

Defining key terms

Support groups - There is no clear and accepted definition for support groups. A common idea is to perceive them as non-governmental associations providing relief to people in need, such as NGOs for instance. However, they can also be governmental institutions, private businesses, or simply individuals. Support groups have varying degrees of institutionalization and provide different types of support. In this work, a support group is conceived as a social network that provides some sort of service provision. Such service can take the form of an in-kind contribution, financial support, or of moral assistance. It can be familial or extra-familial in nature, and based on ethnic grounds, or not.

Integration - In this work, we define integration as the stage of having secured a decent home, a legal status and an income in the formal economy, for a long period of time. Drawing on Robin's work (1996), we do not consider that integration is a permanent stage, but rather an ongoing process. Sub-Saharan African migration is in fact rather dynamic and migrants constantly adapt to the changing legal framework of their host country (Robin, 1996). They might start to adapt to a new country, but they are prepared to move somewhere else, if conditions deteriorate or if better opportunities arise elsewhere.

Newcomers – The emphasis of the study is on the initial stages of integration. Since many respondents arrived in the Netherlands years before the study was conducted, the term refers to the first years of their stay.

Main characteristics of interviewed migrants

Data was collected on migrants' socio-economic characteristics; migration stories; the motivation to leave the country of origin; the choice of the country of destination; the nature, origin and scope of support received or provided; and the forms of payback. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the interviewed migrants.

TABLE 1

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Sex	
Men	11
Women	4
Date of arrival in the Netherlands	
1970s	1
1980s	1
1990s	6
2000s	7
Country of origin	Ghana, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Nigeria, Niger
Legal status	
Documentation always in order	6
Periods of illegal residency / Periods of illegal work	9
Main reason for coming to the NL	
Marriage	3
Work	5
Studies + work	3
Asylum	3
Level of education (country of origin)	
Low (primary)	2
Medium (secondary)	4
High (university)	9
Enrolled in a study programme in the Netherlands	7
Professional status (country of origin)	
Employed (low-skill)	2
Employed (average/high-skill)	8
Unemployed	3
Not said	2

Source: Field data (2005)

Most respondents were in their late twenties when they arrived in the Netherlands. Table 1 shows that most had an occupation in their country of origin, and not necessarily a low-skill job. Their level of education was also relatively high. The majority experienced periods of illegal residency in the Netherlands (expired visa or rejected asylum claims) and mentioned working without a residence permit in either the formal or informal economy. Some succeeded in securing documentation relatively quickly, but some were without documents for quite a long period of time. When legal status was secured, it was mainly through marrying a legal resident or by working in the formal sector, at the time when getting a work permit was not yet linked to having a legal residence permit.

Main characteristics of support groups

In this article, we view support groups as social networks that provide some sort of service provision in the form of in-kind contributions, financial support, or moral assistance. These networks can be familial or extra-familial in nature, and can based on ethnic grounds or not. We limited our analysis to non-governmental groups, mainly due to time constraints, and also because we had easier access to them, compared to governmental channels. Interviews with support groups focused on the circumstances of their contact with the migrants, the type and duration of the support provided, the reasons for providing support, and the interactions with other support groups. Table 2 gives the main characteristics of the support groups we approached.

TABLE 2

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Support groups		
Associations		10
Professional associations		2
Churches		2
Individuals		3
	Total	**17**
West African institutions and individuals		14
Non-African institutions		3
	Total	**17**

Source: Field data (2005)

It is necessary to clarify why we distinguish between associations, professional associations, churches, and individuals. *Associations* provide social support, advice, and punctual assistance. Humanitarian NGOs and hometown associations (HTAs) are grouped in this category. Some associations function on a membership basis and some are more "ethnic-based" than others (West African vs. non-African institutions), while others provide assistance regardless of membership or ethnicity. *Professional associations* are institutional structures whose main activity does not consist of providing social support to migrants. In our case, for instance, people working for West African broadcasting associations and West African press reported having been contacted by newcomers and asked for

support because of their specific links to the West African community. They have a bridging function. *Churches* in our sample provide daycare, and facilitate contacts and exchanges among the migrants. *Individuals* are not kin and support newcomers by giving advice and/or by providing assistance.

We came across several types of support groups, which led us to make the distinction, in the analysis, between *formal* and *informal* groups. *Formal groups* are defined in this article as structured institutions that provide assistance according to a specific mandate (humanitarian and hometown associations, churches, and legal aid), while *informal groups* are defined as support mechanisms that are not institutionalized and that simply emerge from an encounter with someone coping with difficulties. In the following, empirical evidence is drawn upon in order to develop a typology of support networks.

SUPPORT GROUPS

Given our focus on weak tie networks, and on West African newcomers who do not have familial ties in the Netherlands, we have to be cautious in our conclusions. Table 3 shows that our respondents received different types of support from different types of support groups. We make the distinction between formal and informal groups, support leading to short-term or long-term relief, and support based on ethnic grounds or not.

TABLE 3

CATEGORISATION OF SUPPORT NETWORKS

INTERVENING IN THE FIRST STAGES OF INTEGRATION

Types of support	Types of support networks	Nature of support groups[8]	Support based on ethnic grounds[9]	Function of support[10]
Short-term accommodation	Churches, NGOs, individuals, hometown associations	Formal and informal	Only when support groups are West African individuals or HTAs	Short-term relief
Long-term accommodation	Individuals	Informal	No	Long-term relief
Cash	Individuals, NGOs, churches	Informal	Only when support groups are West African individuals or HTAs	Short-term relief
Use of postal address	Individuals, NGOs, churches	Informal	No	Short-term relief
Food, daycare	Churches, NGOs	Formal	No	Short-term relief
Medical treatment, advice	Medical NGOs, doctors, public health services (GGD, hospitals)	Formal	No	Short-term relief
Legal advice	NGOs, churches, private agents	Formal	No	Long-term relief if it secures status
Home visits, gifts, children care	Hometown associations, West African NGOs, individuals	Formal and informal	Yes	Short-term relief
Information, general advice	Churches, NGOs, individuals, hometown associations	Formal and informal	Only when support groups are West African individuals or HTAs	Long-term relief if it secures status, work and secure housing

Source: Field data (2005)

While extra-familial and looser networks play the most important role in the first stages of integration, these networks are heterogeneous. The degree of institutionalization varies, and the networks provide different types of support. Churches provide food, daycare, a postal address; individuals offer short-term accommodation; and hometown associations offer moral support by promoting the cultural values of the homeland. There is usually no expectation of payback, since the gap is too large between migrants and support groups to make any kind of payback possible. Our respondents lacked strong ties when they arrived in the Netherlands, and mostly relied on weak ties, when needed, in order to "get by" (i.e., by tapping into churches, NGOs, individuals, and associations for relief and temporary

support). They rarely kept contact with support groups after receiving assistance. Support was mainly punctual, providing short-term relief, and consisted more often of contacts than in-kind resources. The bridging function of weak tie networks should therefore not be overestimated. In the first stages of integration, support is often limited in time, and does not last more than a couple of days or weeks. The next section describes the different functions of support groups in the integration of newcomers.

A TRIPLE FUNCTION

Support groups have a triple function: 1) they provide migrants with the services they lack in order to help them cope with day-to-day difficulties; 2) they help them to liaise with Dutch institutions, since it is difficult for newcomers to interact with institutions in an environment alien to them; and 3) they facilitate contacts with other networks that are likely to provide sound support.

Service provision via formal and informal channels

Groups that support migrants with basic services are both formal and informal in nature. We came across several formal support groups of West African origin, created in response to migrants' needs, and acting in accordance with a specific mandate. Some were membership organizations that provided assistance to their members, while others provided support regardless of membership. We interviewed a Nigerian association created in response to the influx of Nigerians in 1994-1995 and 1997-1998. It was initially aimed at helping Nigerians who did not know anyone in the Netherlands, who had nowhere to sleep, nothing to eat, and nothing to do. The association offered accommodation in members' homes and provided migrants with basic amenities. Another association provided support to West African single mothers, who had no family or friends in the Netherlands. Some had even been cast out into the streets when their family learned about their pregnancy. They were taught how to take care of their baby, how to hold it, how to bathe it the African way with bucket and water, and what to do when their baby was ill. Other formal institutions are not "ethnic-based" and instead base their support on a certain view on human rights. Churches and humanitarian NGOs act according to the principle that everyone, as a member of society, has the right to a minimum standard of living, which

includes food, clothing, housing, medical care, and basic social services (article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights[11]). Migrants hear about churches and humanitarian NGOs from other people, and turn to them when they need help. As a social worker puts it: "There is a kind of network among newcomers. When you do good to one or two persons, the news spreads and others come to you."

Other support mechanisms are not institutionalized and simply emerge from an encounter with someone in difficulty. They are informal in nature. Several West African migrants -- now well-settled in the Netherlands -- mentioned that it was because of their own personal history that they were so keen to help other sub-Saharan Africans. Years ago, they were newcomers themselves and they know from experience that starting a new life in Europe is far from easy for an African. Expressions of support emerge from the feeling of having shared, if not a whole past, at least certain parts of it. This generates a certain form of bounded solidarity. As previous studies have shown, people who share, or have shared, an experience are more likely to identify with each other and to support one another (Portes, 1998). In our case, West African migrants are thrown together in a new country, the Netherlands, which they know little about. They do not speak the language, they do not share the culture, they have very limited resources, and a lot of them are on their own when coping with day-to-day difficulties. Solidarity is bounded by the limits of the sub-Saharan African community at large, and crosses ethnic groupings, language and countries of origin. We heard stories of Ghanaians helping Ugandans, Nigerians helping Malians, Senegalese helping Burkinabes. We met a Nigerian who hosted a Malian student for several days: "Someone had given him my address. We could not really communicate properly as he spoke only French. He wanted to register for a Master programme but he was short on finance. He was expecting money from Mali but it was slow to come. I eventually linked him up to a Cameroonian association. It is what I usually do. I try to provide networks to newcomers, so they can move on." This is a good illustration of bounded solidarity as a source of support. At the same time, it shows the limited duration of support. Newcomers are helped by peers for a few days, and then the burden is shifted to someone else. It also indicates that newcomers have little choice but

to rely on the goodwill of strangers at the beginning of their stay, which can have positive effects on their lives, as just seen in our example.

Informal channels of support are not based solely on racial or ethnic grounds. We interviewed a former migrant who received work and short-term accommodation from a Dutch lawyer, who did so outside its "legal aid" mandate. Another respondent eventually secured housing through Dutch acquaintances. He was helped once by a Senegalese, and four times by white Dutch nationals, who were friends of acquaintances and a neighbour. One migrant explained that he entered a marriage of convenience with a Dutch woman, in order to get papers, since he had already been in the Netherlands for six months without valid documents. In the beginning, it was more of a sham marriage and they did not live together, but eventually their relationship evolved into something else. Their marriage lasted 17 years and they had two children together. Non-Africans who provide support to migrants in difficulties are led by humanitarian principles and strong personal values. In Portes' terms, this would be the illustration of norm introjection as a source of support (Portes, 1998).

As previously stated, the current Dutch legislation leaves quite a few people without basic services provision. Undocumented migrants, including those who overstay their visa, and migrants who are less "integrated" than others, including newcomers who lack familial ties in the Netherlands, are treated like second-class citizens. They are tolerated within the country's borders as long as they keep a low profile, and as long as they do not cost too much. With the State playing such a marginal role, non-governmental channels of support play an increasing role in "providing the basics" to this fringe of the population. In this section, we have shown that even if these groups are heterogeneous in nature, they share a common view that certain humanitarian principles should always apply and in this perspective, receiving basic services in a developed society is seen as an entitlement.

The bridging function

A second function of support groups is to help migrants to liaise with Dutch institutions. It is not easy for newcomers to interact with institutions in a place alien to them. They do not know the social codes

yet, they have not mastered the language, they are not familiar with the way they should raise their concerns, and the cultural gap is quite large in the beginning. West African associations are quite active in attempting to bridge the gap between migrants and Dutch institutions. As the President of a hometown association points out: "When we do not understand a new law or a new policy, we organize a forum to debate it. We invite a lawyer if it is a legal issue; we invite the police if we want to talk about criminality; we invite the GGD[12] for public health, or social services to talk about social issues. The forum is open to all sub-Saharan African communities. We liaise with the Chamber of Commerce when we want to invite someone to talk, and they send us contacts." Another example, from a West African NGO worker: "A woman had to pay a 700 euros electricity bill in one time but she was only earning 600 euros per month. She wanted to pay 'small small' but the electricity company refused. The woman came to me for advice. I called the company and I explained that she could not pay the whole amount in one time. I also explained that she could pay 100 euros per month for the annual bill, plus 50 euros per month for the monthly bill, and that she agreed to make automatic payments. The company accepted the deal. I went to the bank with the woman to arrange the transfers, and I called back the electricity company to confirm that it was done." This bridging function is all the more important as West African newcomers seem to lack easy access to networks that can help them improve their condition over time. At the beginning of their stay, most respondents stayed confined to charity and West African networks. They did not know anyone in the Netherlands prior to their migration, and they were usually ill at ease addressing Dutch institutions directly. They rarely went to the doctor on their own, for instance. They first sought advice within their community, then went to a doctor with someone they knew. Some gained access to a more diverse network over time, but for many this remains a challenge.

The relative importance of contacts

The third function of the support groups that intervene in the first stages of integration is to facilitate contacts with other networks that would be likely to provide longer-term support. The main assumption here is that by facilitating interactions with other individuals and support groups, migrants will eventually move on and succeed in solving their problem. Contacts extend the volume and quality

of a migrant's network, and therefore are likely to open new doors and provide fresh opportunities. Hence it is assumed, the more contacts, the better. In our case, religious institutions and certain charity organizations provide relatively safe environments where migrants can meet other migrants, gather contacts, and extend their support networks. In these places, the police usually do not burst in to check papers and legal status, and, in practice, there is a certain tolerance with regard to undocumented migration.

We found several examples of support groups interacting with each other on a regular basis, including a certain form of "chain assistance", that is, support groups referring migrants to another support group. Several respondents mentioned referring migrants to hospitals, churches, NGOs, public health institutions, social services, legal aid, to the police, and to immigration services, as well as mentioning that they had gotten their clients via other institutions. According to respondents who arrived in the Netherlands before the mid-1990s, a kind of "solidarity chain" seems to exist today that was not in place twenty years ago. As a respondent points out: "Today in Amsterdam, people can receive a hot meal every day if they know where to go." West African migrants can rely on a certain number of structures that previously did not exist. Churches, hometown associations, cultural groups, private businesses, and middle-class individuals provide a certain number of services that were difficult to get in the past. Yet, as stated previously, support is often limited in time and scope and usually does not last more than a couple of days or weeks. The bridging function of weak tie networks and their propensity to help secure long-term relief should therefore not be overestimated.

Extending networks and providing contacts is sometimes not enough, and some migrants can be left out of the loop. Migrants confined to a too limited network run the risk of becoming stuck in a niche with few hopes of improving their condition, and there is always the risk that they will never get access to contacts that will help them to secure their living in the long run[13]. In our study, several respondents were given bad tips on possibilities for shelter. Misinformation led to false expectations with regards to the capability of a support group to provide a service. Support should therefore not be taken for granted, as it largely depends on the quality of individuals' personal networks. One

illustration of this is the story of a respondent who had to call the brother of a friend in Germany, in order to find temporary accommodation in France. He clearly felt a need to be introduced in a social circle before being able to ask for temporary accommodation. Some migrants fail to gain access to useful contacts, and thus have few alternatives. One option is to keep relying on weak tie networks to get by, for food and temporary shelter, with the risk of never attaining sustainable living conditions. Another option is to move elsewhere, although not necessarily to a more welcoming place. Ireland came up several times during our fieldwork, as the new country of destination in vogue with undocumented migrants. As one respondent explains: "I haven't received calls from compatriots in difficulty for a very long time. I think most of them left to Canada, the US, or Ireland. Ireland is actually what the Netherlands used to be a few years ago." Another example was given by a Dutch priest: "Migrants have come here for support for several years. They are part of the furniture. Yet, the majority is only passing through. They are temporary. They are moving on elsewhere."

This section showed that non-governmental channels of support play a significant role in assisting newcomers during the first stages of integration, and discussed their three main functions. It also showed that the help received sometimes is not enough to ensure a sustainable livelihood. The next section explores the limits to assistance.

THE LIMITS TO HELP

Support groups have limited financial resources and a limited mandate. As a social worker explains: "We can help migrants for a couple of nights if they do not know where to sleep. We sometimes rent rooms in hotels or we refer them to free shelters. But we cannot provide long-term housing. First, we cannot afford it. Second, we do not want to create dependency".

Financial strains

Support groups have limited means and cannot commit themselves to long-term support. Informal groups receive no external funding for their activities. They have to manage their costs and avoid an unmanageable burden. For newcomers this can come as quite a shock. They do indeed expect significant support from the West African community, and then quickly realize that this will not the case. Friends and acquaintances give them assistance for one or two weeks, but after that they are expected to move on. Settled migrants have enough to contend with, taking care of their own family, and cannot cope with additional costs for long. "When I register people at my home address, when I offer temporary accommodation to students before they get a room on campus, it costs me money. I pay more taxes, I pay more electricity. I never collect anything from anyone, you know, this is part of the deal when you help people, but I remember having to force people to remove their names from my address once they had all their documents. They would not do it otherwise!"

Formal support groups, who usually have access to external funding, also face financial constraints. Several associations were in fact struggling with financial problems at the time the interviews were done. For example, one legal aid association, that helps rejected asylum seekers appeal their cases, used to have a small budget for hosting them during the procedure, up until the final decision was reached (approximately 3 weeks after the appeal claim is filed). They no longer have funding for this. The association does its utmost by liaising with churches and other associations to provide temporary housing, but does not always succeed in making these arrangements. One consequence is that rejected asylum seekers are left out in the streets during the appeal procedure, with neither the right to work,

nor the right to access public services. Another example is the Nigerian association mentioned earlier, created in the 1990s in response to an influx of Nigerians, which initially was aimed at helping newcomers gain contacts in the Netherlands. They used to provide temporary accommodation at members' homes, as well as basic assistance. They requested public funding many times, but they were never successful, and they eventually stopped asking. Reflecting on how the association evolved over time, one member explains that their membership fell from 85 to 20 members in ten years time. Since they rely on members' contributions to fund their activities, they can no longer afford to provide substantial assistance to newcomers. They continue to give advice when asked, but the main focus of the association has shifted, and supporting newcomers is no longer considered the priority.

Limited mandates

The scope of support is inevitably constrained by the availability of financial resources, but limited mandates can also be explained by a certain perception of individual agency. A recurrent point raised by support groups during the interviews was that they wished to minimize their role in decisionmaking. They do not want to make choices for the migrants, and limit themselves to short-term relief and the provision of information and contacts. They consider migrants as active agents in their migration process and, as such, expect them to choose the one option that best fits them. As one legal aid advisor explains: "When a newcomer is in difficulty, I explain to him the possibilities of return, unless there is a risk for him to go back in his country of origin. I also inform him on the possibility to go somewhere else in Europe to file another asylum claim. In practice, there are technical breaches in the Dublin Convention[14] and someone can still open a second asylum procedure in a second European country without being persecuted."

Limited mandates can also be explained by limited knowledge of the proper thing to do. As we saw above, such a knowledge gap can be partially filled when there is chain assistance, and when support groups interact with other support groups when facing a demand outside their direct scope. In our study, it was especially true with regard to short-term accommodation and professional help, that is, when migrants had to obtain legal advice and medical care. However, we noticed a certain frustration

on the part of some support groups due to their perceived lack of recognition. "People we help ask how they can help back, but in practice, they don't do anything and they stop giving news." Helping yields no reward. Certain support groups display a degree of weariness.

Too much demand?

Given that the supply side of support is limited, it is worth exploring the demand side. Is there too much demand on non-governmental support groups? As stated earlier, the majority of our respondents experienced periods of illegal residency (expired visa or rejected asylum claims) and mentioned working without a residence permit in either the formal or informal economy. Although this article is not focused on undocumented migrants and rejected asylum seekers, it is worth looking at current practices, especially since the distinction between political and economic migrants has become more and more blurred. According to several social workers, it seems to be quite common practice amongst immigration officials to informally refer rejected asylum seekers to churches and legal aid associations, relying on them to provide the basics. "Asylum seekers are given our address by immigration officials. When their claim is rejected, they come to Amsterdam, they show the address to a bus driver and they end up here." Yet we cannot draw any conclusions based on our data, and further research is needed that tackles this particular research question. With the current legislation, there seems to be an increasing amount of pressure on non-governmental channels of support. The ostrich policy applies: a segment of the migrant population is no longer seen to be the responsibility of the State, once they are outside of legal channels, even though they are still within the state boundaries. Does the State expect non-governmental support groups to absorb them all? If this should be the case, the question remains whether these groups have the necessary means to deal with all the requests. Is there a way to quantify the demand, and is it really on the increase? It would be worthwhile to make a comparison with what it was like before the legislation changed. Were non-governmental support groups under less pressure then? Again, further research is called for.

CONCLUSIONS

This article focused on weak tie networks that provided some kind of service provision to West African migrants shortly after their arrival in the Netherlands. We provided insights into the nature, scope, and functions of support, and into the extent to which support groups fulfill the role they claim to and match newcomers' expectations. Our work was in the first place exploratory, and our conclusions are tentative given the nature and size of our sample. Yet we believe it can be used as a starting point for further research on the subject.

Our typology clarifies that support groups have three main functions: they provide migrants with the services they lack; they help them to liaise with Dutch institutions; and they facilitate contacts. On this basis, some observations are worth highlighting.

First: weak ties networks have a limited bridging capacity, which should not be overestimated. Support is usually punctual, "according to the means", in response to a specific need, and for a limited period of time. Given that support groups have both limited resources and a limited mandate, they cannot afford to offer long-term assistance to everyone in difficulty. Their main contribution is to offer short-term relief and to provide contacts, assuming migrants will eventually meet someone who will be able to help them for a longer period of time. There seem to be few alternatives for migrants who fail to secure good contacts. If they fail to attain a sustainable livelihood, they continue to rely on charity or move on elsewhere. Many migrants, who expect much more from their peers and from non-governmental support groups, are bitterly disillusioned.

Second: non-governmental channels of support play a significant role in providing assistance to migrants in difficulty. Support is based on bounded solidarity, humanitarian principles, or on strong personal values. West Africans help other sub-Saharan Africans with difficulties because, years ago, they were in the same situation. Churches, individuals and humanitarian NGOs act according to a certain view on human rights, and according to the principle that everyone has the right to a minimum

standard of living, regardless of their being a legal resident or not. In these interactions, we found no expectation of payback.

If non-governmental channels of support play such a significant role in providing assistance to West African migrants in their initial stages of integration, it is worth asking if there is a shift from state to non-state actors in this respect. Shifting the burden of unwanted migration to non-governmental groups is not a new trend. It has cropped up in European policymaking for nearly two decades now, with the aim of limiting public expenditure and protecting local labour markets. Yet, is there indeed a shift? Were West Africans (and non-western migrants in general, who came before the mid-1990s) ever previously taken into account by state channels of support during the initial stages of their integration? Further research is called for. If there is a shift, non-governmental actors must be given the necessary means to relay the State efficiently. If they are not given sufficient resources, it cannot be called a shift. It then merely comes down to the failure to protect a whole segment of the population that is still within the state boundaries, and it flings open the door to social exclusion.

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NOTES

[1]   The terms West Africa and sub-Saharan Africa are not used interchangeably in this paper. The empirical work is based on several settlement stories of West African newcomers, but when referring to contextual information and previous research, we often draw on texts that dealt with sub-Saharan African migration.

[2]   In 1964, formal labour recruitment agreements were signed between the Netherlands, Turkey and Morocco. Workers who were recruited via such programmes received residence and work permits upon arrival, while workers who came on their own initiative were quickly absorbed by the formal system (Bevelander and Veenman, 2004).

[3].   The Netherlands is no exception in closing its borders. It is the whole of European immigration that has come under stricter control. In the 1990s, various policies were designed and implemented, aimed at discouraging unwanted migration, and at shifting the burden of control away from the state (e.g., visa requirements, external controls, carrier sanctions).

[4].   Compulsory Identification Act, 1994; Linking Act, 1998; Marriages of Convenience Prevention Act, 1998; Alien Law, 2001.

[5].   "Een beroep op publieke middelen kan gevolgen hebben voor het verblijfsrecht", as mentioned in the IND letter of acceptance for residence permits. Translated by the author: "Appeal for public funds can have consequences for the right to stay".

[6]   Snowball sampling started at several levels: through personal contacts ; after meeting support groups ; a few times respondents came with a West-African friend, and at the end of the interview, the other person was asked if he/she would like to participate to the research.

[7].   http://www.africaserver.nl/africadirectory/

[8].   In this study, we define "formal groups" as structured institutions, which provide assistance according to a specific mandate (humanitarian and hometown associations, churches, legal aid). We define "informal support groups" as support mechanisms which are not institutionalized and which simply emerge from an encounter with someone in difficulty.

[9].   When expressions of support emerge from the fact that support groups share African characteristics with supported migrants, we consider them based on ethnic grounds.

[10].   We define "short-term" relief as support limited in time (usually not longer than a couple of days or weeks). "Long-term relief" has the potential to secure migrants' living for several years.

[11].   http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html

[12].   The GGD is a Dutch public health institution.

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13   Such contacts may include individuals who offer migrants a decent job for a few months/years, long-term accommodation, and a way to regularize their stay if they have no papers, or if they overstayed their visa.

14.   The Dublin Convention states that an asylum claim can only be filed in one European country and the results of the procedure are valid in all EU countries.