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Faces and routes. Irregular migration from Côte d'Ivoire Interview with Ibrahim Sy Savané¹

For a long time, Côte d'Ivoire has been one of the main destinations for West African migrants. Since coming out of a decade of political and military crises in 2011, the country has regained a certain level of stability and experienced strong growth. So why are an increasing number of young Ivoirians taking the risk of illegally migrating to Europe and other destinations?

Marie Miran-Guyon [MMG]: In recent years, Italy has recorded an increasing number of arrivals of irregular migrants claiming to be Ivoirians. Côte d'Ivoire is known as a land of immigration, but not so much as a land of emigration. Are these irregular migrations a new phenomenon?

Ibrahim Sy Savané [ISS]: The influx of so-called 'migrants' is not new. But when Italy acted as a gateway to other European countries, it was less obvious. There was a kind of regulation going on. However, nowadays with the closure of all other gateways, migrants stay much longer at their point of arrival, and in deteriorating conditions. Back home, Côte d'Ivoire continues to welcome many 'migrants'. But given that the West African countries are becoming increasingly integrated, can we still call this migration? There will always be movements towards regions that, even if they are no longer Eldorado, still retain their attractiveness due to the opportunities they offer.

MMG: After a decade of violent crises, Côte d'Ivoire has enjoyed relative stability and strong growth since 2011. So why has irregular

migration from the country increased during this period?

ISS: I don't know by how much it has increased exactly. But, on the one hand, demographic pressure is greater and, on the other hand, this relative prosperity makes the costs of leaving within reach for a larger number of young people. There is a psychological factor that is sometimes underestimated: having been isolated during the crisis period may have acted as a kind of call of the sea. The appeal of the outside world has not faded during these years of crisis, quite the contrary. And the need to achieve one's potential, even less so. Those who came back after the crisis with more substantial means, if only on the surface—God knows if that matters—give others more reason to go to Europe.

MMG: What data are available to measure these irregular migrations? How reliable are they?

ISS: By definition, because they are irregular, these migrations are difficult to quantify. The figures given are estimated from the number of arrivals and not the number of departures. It's terrible, but how can we assess the extent of the phenomenon anything but very approximately? But you won't find a family that doesn't have an 'adventurer'. It is both a very bad and unsubstantiated way of assessing, which gives an idea of the extent of the phenomenon.

Document – Migrants claiming to be Ivoirians who have arrived in Italy since 2015

According to the *2017 Profiling Report on Ivorian Migrants* (IOM [International Organization for Migration], Côte d'Ivoire 2018²), 10,000 migrants claiming to be Ivoirians arrived illegally

in Italy in 2017 (compared to 13,000 in 2016, an increase of 230% compared to 2015). This places Côte d'Ivoire in third place among West African countries on the Central Mediterranean route, behind Nigeria and Guinea. As of 6 April 2018, the Ivorian authorities, with the IOM's assistance, had contributed to the voluntary return of 1,676 migrants to Côte d'Ivoire³. Seventy percent of returning Ivoirians were engaged in paid work before leaving.

MMG: Who are the irregular migrants who leave Côte d'Ivoire? Are some of them women? What regions do they leave from?

ISS: The movement mainly affects the younger generations: those enrolled in school and those not, along with graduates who are unable to integrate properly, and even young workers who are heavily burdened by family or social demands and who dream of other opportunities. Of course migration also involves women, but to a lesser extent. Leaving the Far North for the Lower Coast, as it was once said, is a long-established reality. Many of today's departures are descendants of those who once left the northern villages for the forest areas. There is no denying that cities such as Daloa, Anyama, Gagnoa, or Duékoué have similar profiles in this respect. In these societies of yesteryear, those who went to seek their fortune elsewhere embodied the positive figure of the hero, far from the image of the *desperado* that is nowadays associated with them. While the phenomenon cannot be reduced to an ethnic group or region, the structural invariants that still shape the migration matrix cannot be swept away.

MMG: What do families think about their children's migration plans?

ISS: We can always find some counter-examples, but in general families do not discourage their children from leaving, quite the contrary. Because of their influence and high expectations, families act instead as a push factor. It is not uncommon for families to contribute to the onerous financing of the trip. Some do it out of compassion, while others see it as an investment despite the risks.

MMG: Do the departing hopefuls take into account the risks involved?

ISS: Without a doubt. But the determination to leave is sometimes extremely strong, in any case, it often outweighs the risks. Tragedies are kept quiet and success stories are highlighted. And then, at all times, the one who leaves always has the hope of reaching the promised land. Those who leave are not acting on a simple fleeting whim. And although they may be naive or underinformed, they are in no way cowards or deserters as there is a tendency to portray them. They put their whole lives at stake. When young Ivorians seeking to leave say, 'I will attempt the crossing even if it means being eaten by fish' it echoes young Senegalese people who say 'Barça wala Barzakh', which means 'Either I reach Barcelona or I join the other world, death'. Despite this, they are somehow convinced that they have a chance, even if it is slim, of reaching their destination. They all secretly believe that they will find what I call the 'secret path of catfish'.

MMG: What are the main routes and destinations for migrants?

ISS: Some go to Agadez in Niger, then on to Libya. Others fly to Morocco and Tunisia and of course they all dream of Europe.

MMG: Are Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries also destinations?

ISS: Yes, of course. Some Ivorians go to the Gulf countries hoping to find work in construction and public works, unaware of the fierce competition with the lumpenproletariat from the Indian subcontinent. Young girls are particularly attracted to the Gulf countries renowned for offering high-paying domestic jobs. However, these countries have become more vigilant and there are now greater obstacles. These girls' double fragility—being both migrants and women—means that they encounter many disappointments. For every one or two success stories, how many become trapped? And when they do manage to come home, often they are beyond exhausted and their bodily integrity has been damaged ...

MMG: Does irregular migration have a cost for the migrant? Who benefits from it?

ISS: Of course it has a cost. But it also depends on the model chosen, or rather what is on offer. In this matter, chance and necessity coexist permanently. Those who set off alone on these roads leave with a small nest egg that cracks under the heat of the sun during the journey or in the outskirts of transit cities. This is a journey that can last months or years. As for the smugglers, some demand between two and four million CFA francs⁴. But it is well known that smugglers organised in networks have no hesitation in abandoning the poor buggers who, having changed representatives, no longer know who to trust. It is the

smugglers, direct sellers, and other intermediaries of various kinds who benefit above all from this situation.

MMG: How are the Ivorian authorities responding to the challenge of irregular migration?

ISS: If the Ivorian government can be given credit for anything, it is that it is concerned about the fate of migrants who are trapped in violence, subject to disease, and so on. There have been many efforts to repatriate these people from Libya, but also from Angola and the Central African Republic. The idea that we should save our fellow countrymen in distress is to the government's credit. According to my sources, President Ouattara himself is gripped by the issue and follows it all very closely. These migration issues are a real worry and I've been interested in them for decades. And I must say that the approach of the Ivorian authorities is one of the most proactive and voluntarist. At the political level, I also know that they have a very clear overall view on the issue. Côte d'Ivoire has good migration specialists too. However, in my opinion, there are two weaknesses. First, coordination between decision-making bodies must be improved because the issue of migration, which is a global challenge, requires the mobilization of all on a local level. A proper permanent and multidisciplinary task force must be set up. The second thing is that countries like Côte d'Ivoire are making an effort, but require a high level of support from international institutions and Western countries. Instead of pointlessly shedding crocodile tears from time to time, they need to be properly helping these countries at all levels: in their development, and by helping them develop the tools to better study the phenomenon, implement

efficient information systems, and so on.

MMG: How do you see this phenomenon evolving over the long term?

ISS: Ideally, socioeconomic conditions should enable young people to live and thrive in their home countries. But let's not be naive: despite all efforts, there will always be migration. This applies here as well as elsewhere. But think carefully about this paradox: mobility is considered a virtue in the West, it is even encouraged, exalted and above all supported and guided. But those not from the West are rejected, hunted down, humiliated. I think that the new dividing line of

humanity lies here: between those who can come and go as they please and those who are forced to risk their lives to go from one shore to another. And I fear that this will be the case over the long term. With the rise of populism in Europe along with the pressure from publics who fear for their quality of life and are afraid of being disturbed in their comfort zone, this situation will last. This unacceptable denial of access to the world faced by so-called poor countries deserves to be thought about and analysed in its various dimensions, along with its current and future implications. A form of geopolitical humiliation is in fact emerging. If we are not careful, the only thing left to look

at will be the anthropology of anger inevitably resulting from it.

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1. Ibrahim Sy Savané is president of Côte d'Ivoire's Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle (High Authority for Audiovisual Communication, HACA) and former Minister of Communication. He has been interested in migration issues for many years.
 2. Available in French at: <https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/docs/cote-divoire/Cote-d%27Ivoire-Rapport-Profilage-2017.pdf>.
 3. Agence Ivoirienne de Presse (Ivorian Press Agency, AIP), 6 April 2018.
 4. Between around £2700 and £5400 (exchange rate as of December 2018).