



Brain-be

Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

# POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief n° 2

## Environmental migration: The connections between northern Senegal and Belgium

*Migrants are increasingly recognized as crucial partners to address environmental adaptation challenges. Yet, few studies have analyzed how international migrants perceive environmental changes affecting their home communities, and how migrants' transnational practices may help communities of origin to cope with socio-environmental changes. Our findings suggest that Senegalese migrants in Belgium perceive both slow-onset and rapid-onset environmental changes to have, for the most part, indirectly affected their livelihoods and those of their families and communities. We also found that adverse environmental changes affect their remittances from Belgium to Senegal. This is also the case for internal migrants, sending remittances from Dakar to their home village. Thus, Belgian and Senegalese policymakers could further include migrants in their efforts to strengthen adaptation and resilience strategies in developing countries affected by environmental change. This policy brief is based on 38 focus group discussions and more than 300 semi-structured interviews conducted in Senegal and Belgium for the MIGRADAPT project.<sup>1</sup>*

### Context and research objectives

Migration is increasingly presented as a possible adaptation strategy in international negotiations on climate change and in migration agreements, thanks in large part to the efforts of the scientific community. Following such scholarship, this research explicitly suggests concrete ways in which migration responds to the impacts of environmental and climate change. This policy brief presents findings from an ethnographic and translocal research conducted in villages in the Northern Senegalese Mid-valley, the suburbs of Dakar and five Belgian cities.<sup>2</sup> The goal of this multi-sited study was to analyze how environmental factors impact migration to Belgium, and to assess how, and under which conditions, Senegalese migrants in Belgium contribute to adaptation and resilience building in their communities of origin. Senegal was selected for this research as it is a key emigration and transit country with "climate hotspots" affected by severe environmental changes, as well as a partner of the Belgian Development Cooperation, and because of Belgium's growing Senegalese community.<sup>3</sup>

#### BRAIN-be

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/projects/MIGRADAPT\\_en.pdf](http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/projects/MIGRADAPT_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Mainly in Brussels, but also in Antwerp, Charleroi, Tournai and Liège.

<sup>3</sup> According to one of our key informants from the Senegalese Embassy in Belgium, between 10,000 and 20,000 Senegalese diaspora members currently live in Belgium.

## Main findings

### Environmental factors indirectly impact migration to Belgium

At the household level, **pre-existing vulnerability and adaptive capacity was found to affect which local adaptation strategies – including migration – were undertaken to respond to various environmental risks.** Such risks include both rapid-onset (floods, heatwaves) and slow-onset (drought, desertification) events, as well as environmental degradation and pollution (air, water and soil). These were not solely attributed to climate change but also, or mainly, to poor rural land and urban management and to hydro-infrastructure projects<sup>4</sup>. **International migration to Belgium was not directly or primarily attributed to environmental stressors, but rather to socio-economic ones.** Many respondents considered their emigration firstly as a search for resources as they were unable to support their family and/or fulfil their own needs and aspirations. Yet, such factors were put under increased pressure by **adverse environmental effects.** For example, many migrants in Belgium explained that their parents (often farmers), or themselves (as part-time farmers), were affected by various environmental factors (e.g. rainfall variability, unexpected dam releases, larval plagues, wandering grazers). This, combined with a lack of “adapted” agricultural production, resulted in debt, and barriers to finance and land access. Low selling prices, discriminatory public policies, and distorted markets were also deemed to cause unbearable levels of precarity and vulnerability.

### Environmental change impact relations between migrants and non-migrants

Although the impact of environmental factors on respondents’ migration to Belgium was limited, environmental changes were found to impact the relationships between migrants and non-migrants, and the practices that connect them. First, environmental impacts in Senegal led to internal migrants in Dakar and non-migrants requesting **more financial and material remittances** from diaspora members in Europe. Second, the latter were expected to **find development partners and cooperate with migrant/hometown associations.** Third, migrants were asked to contribute to “**productive**” **investments in their community of origin.** In Belgium, most respondents reported that they wished to contribute to enhancing living conditions in their community of origin, including through initiatives seeking to address adverse environmental impacts. Yet, migrants’ incapacity to deliver on these requests was an important source of frustration for them.

#### ➤ *Increased financial and material remittance requests*

Such requests were either addressed to individuals or formulated through neighborhood associations in Dakar or Hometown Associations’ (HTAs) sections abroad. In the short-term and at the household-level, financial remittances served as coping strategy to deal with losses in livelihoods (e.g., cattle and/or agricultural yields) and/or income, following drought, heavy rains and/or strong winds at the start of the rainy season. Sometimes, funds were also gathered collectively from the diaspora and sent to villages to complement humanitarian aid, buy food and basic products, or rebuild damaged houses. In the longer term, besides sending regular financial remittances to their relatives in Senegal, migrants sought to contribute to public infrastructure via HTAs and to set up collective development projects oriented towards their home village (e.g. the building of public water boreholes connected to private water taps to irrigate collective and private vegetable gardens).

#### ➤ *The expectation to find development partners for longer-term adaptation*

Addressing slow-onset environmental changes and land degradation was perceived as being beyond migrants’ reach without the help of external partners. Most believed that their family members could choose to stay in their home village if they

<sup>4</sup> Ironically, these had sometimes been labeled as ‘adaptation’ projects (e.g. Manantali hydro-electric dam in the Mid-valley).

had the necessary financial and technical means and knowledge to react to socio-environmental impacts. Therefore, besides engaging with their HTA, some migrants also engaged with regional (e.g., NANN-K) and/or national civil society organizations (e.g., Senebel), diaspora investment clubs (e.g., FONGAD-Invest), or policy initiatives (FAISE). However, most respondents **did not know “on which doors to knock”** to find partners, obtain adequate funding, or improve their technical know-how to support their projects and pursue their goals effectively.

➤ *The expectation to support economic investments that build resilience*

Migrants' investments in housing, land, and/or small businesses contribute to the diversification of economic activities and increases in income. However, migrants' contributions to climate change adaptation were less evident. Farmers who had access to alternative income sources reported being able to adapt their agricultural strategies to changes in production and sales conditions (e.g. fluctuating prices). Yet, the size of financial remittances often appeared too limited to allow villagers to invest in agricultural means of production (e.g. motor pumps, tractors, protection fences, nets). Moreover, some villagers in Senegal sometimes believed that diaspora members were disconnected from local realities and thus failed to grasp ecological fragility. Migrants usually agreed to lack knowledge and know-how in this regard. The establishment of non-agricultural businesses (e.g. welding and hardware stores, hair salons) was often perceived to improve rural households' resilience.

### Current barriers to action

However, some migrants do not have enough relatives or hometown/village members in Belgium, nor can they rely on a **social network** to organize structural collective action. They also often encounter **administrative barriers**, mostly in Belgium, to find co-development partners (NGOs, municipalities, cities, etc.). **Trust issues** often hinder collaboration with local government institutions in Senegal. Migrants in Belgium, together with diaspora members from other European countries, constitute a powerful emerging interest group. Finding synergies between the diaspora and local authorities is therefore key. Moreover, respondents recognized that they would be better able to contribute to adaptation strategies in their home community through enhanced **socio-economic integration in Belgium**. Migrants with precarious low-skilled jobs, and/or with an uncertain legal status had few savings to donate or invest in Senegal. Individual remittances' transfer costs constituted an additional hindrance. As for collective remittances, irregular migrants could hardly afford membership costs and monthly contributions, nor could they engage fully in the association, fearing that they will be turned away because of their status. In light of this, social and economic integration policies in Belgium could further leverage the diaspora's potential to engage in transnational activities.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Senegalese migrants in Belgium are concerned about adverse environmental changes that affect daily living conditions in their communities of origin. Yet, they possess limited financial and technical capacity to effectively enhance those through individual and collective remittances. Most respondents believed that such issues could only be solved collectively through partnerships and political action focused on understanding the causes of environmental degradation and learning how to cope with its adverse effects. In this regard, **Belgian and Senegalese policymakers could further engage the diaspora and strengthen existing transnational practices by supporting and enabling adaptation-focused actions and projects.**

## Priority Area 1: Enabling adaptation actions that include the diaspora and help non-migrants respond to environmental change

It is recommended:

- *that Belgian development actors support Senegalese policymakers in developing local and national development and adaptation plans, as well as more targeted programs and projects, that:*
  - **include local communities and diaspora members in decision-making processes**, paying special attention to addressing gender disparities as women are much less represented in decision-making;
  - **strengthen access to land and provide technical support to farmers and migrants**, including for maintaining various types of ‘adapted’ communal infrastructure (e.g., dripping irrigation systems and solar-powered water pumps; greening by reforestation and agroforestry), integrating both local and external knowledge;
  - **facilitate migrants and non-migrants’ access to adaptation finance** by:
    - supporting local micro-credit<sup>5</sup> and public financial institutions to develop tools to mobilize savings (diaspora bonds) towards sustainable, climate-compatible projects.
    - supporting Senegalese development programs led by various Senegalese institutions<sup>6</sup> which already target the Senegalese abroad, to effectively orient them towards sustainable investments.

## Priority Area 2: Overcoming gaps in terms of information, networks, as well as financial and technical capacities, to effectively address adverse environmental impacts

It is recommended:

- *that Belgian and Senegalese policymakers at local and regional levels co-develop projects with migrants’ organizations.* By supporting migrants’ organizations in Belgium, these could become important partners for resilience-building projects in communities of origin.<sup>7</sup> Environmental adaptation should be mainstreamed in these projects.
- *that Belgian and Senegalese policymakers at local and regional levels build strong partnerships between municipalities in Belgium and Senegal,<sup>8</sup> migrants and their organizations*, as part of wider international development and solidarity initiatives. These could support migrants when seeking funds and partners to develop projects. Belgian policymakers could for instance develop **match-fund schemes** for migrant associations when socio-environmental criteria are met. They could encourage the creation of **places of exchange** (e.g., an easily accessible online and physical platform) between state actors, NGOs and diaspora organizations in Belgium to improve the flow of information, know-how and experiences;
- *that Belgian and Senegalese policymakers at the national level initiate bilateral agreements supporting financial and material remittances* through:
  - subsidies that reduce the cost of sending money online and/or through mobile phones, and reduce the remittance fees of money transfers (thus supporting SDG 10);<sup>9</sup>
  - reducing or releasing from customs all transferred materials with a social not-for-profit and collective purpose (e.g., health, education, water management).
  - remittance tax relief schemes for ecologically ‘adapted’ and sustainable, productive, inclusive projects
- *that Belgian and Senegalese policymakers at the national level cooperate through bilateral agreements to facilitate international mobility* by:
  - **using certain forms of circular and temporary migration, such as labor-related migration schemes,<sup>10</sup>** to improve professional skills through work experience gained in Belgium, for both high-skilled and low-skilled migrants. Besides providing a decent salary to internationally mobile Senegalese, such experience could be used to pursue activities in more environmentally resilient sectors upon return to Senegal (e.g., in non-agricultural sectors).

<sup>5</sup> Partnerships with PAMECAS Senegal (Partenariat pour la Mobilisation de l’Epargne et le Crédit Au Sénégal), a well-established micro-finance institution, could be explored.

<sup>6</sup> Such as : FAISE (Fonds d’Appui à l’Investissement des Sénégalais de l’Extérieur), BAOS (Bureau d’Appui, d’Orientation et de Suivi des Sénégalais de l’Extérieur), ARD (Agences Régionales de Développement) and BEL (Bureau Economique Local).

<sup>7</sup> See IOM’s “Summits of the Diasporas”

<sup>8</sup> Local development agencies in Senegal are considered politically more neutral than the local government (due to ethnic class and statutory group tensions) and seem adequate ‘consensus partners’ for implementing co-development initiatives.

<sup>9</sup> “Reduce to less than 3 % the transaction costs of migrant remittances and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5%”.

<sup>10</sup> See Enabel’s PALIM project

## Read more

- Lietaer, S., Bruening, L. & Faye, C.N. (2020), « Ne pas revenir pour mieux soutenir », *Emulations*, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, Numéro 34, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14428/emulations.034.05>
- MIGRADAPT Newsletters # 1, #4 and #6 (focused on fieldwork in Senegal): available in English and French: [https://www.hugo.uliege.be/cms/c\\_4866216/en/hugo-migradapt](https://www.hugo.uliege.be/cms/c_4866216/en/hugo-migradapt)
- Smith E. (2020), “Diaspora Policies, Consular Services and Social Protection for Senegalese Citizens Abroad”. In: Lafleur JM., Vintila D. (eds) *Migration and Social Protection in Europe and Beyond* (Volume 3). IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51237-8\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51237-8_17)

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