

# Returns from the South: Effects of return migration of Ghanaian migrants from China on livelihoods and wealth inequalities in Ghana

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## Abstract

The sedentary bias that characterizes discourses on migrations from and within the Global South has failed to inform a consistent exploration of international migration from and among global southern countries as normal, desirable and impactful to migrants and their social networks at different spatial levels. Migration-development nexus analyses are predominantly framed around Global South-Global North migration episodes whereby cash and social remittances from the North to the South are expected to trigger development in poorer global southern origin countries. This approach neglects the possibility of similar outcomes accruing from south-south migrations. Drawing on qualitative research methods among Ghanaian migrants to China, our paper addresses the question how does south-south migration affect livelihoods and wealth inequality? We argue that blunt global categorizations such as “Global South” and “Global North” only serve to obfuscate what is a rather heterogeneous bunch of countries, with divergent opportunities for migrants. We recommend that greater focus should be on the contextual factors at the origin and destination, the quality of return preparedness and the human capital of the migrants rather than an arbitrary clustering around a binary Global South-Global North trajectory as though they are internally homogenous. We conclude that there

is heterogeneity in the effects of south-south migration on household livelihoods and wealth inequalities.

## BACKGROUND

China has been a significant global player in the economic realm, especially since the country overtook Japan to become the second biggest economy (Morrison, 2019). For instance, with a GDP of over 17 trillion US dollars, an appreciable ranking of 79th on Human Development Index (HDI) out of 199 countries, and a value of 0.768 in 2021, China has become a destination of choice for a significant number of migrants from across the African continent (UNDP, 2022). This, for instance, compares very favourably to other global southern countries that are much poorer and further down the HDI ladder such as Ghana which ranks of 133rd out of 199 countries, with an HDI of 0.632 (UNDP, 2022). The economic dominance of China has been partly anchored by the country's pivot away from restrictive emigration policies in the 1980s as part of the then government's economic reform policy, dubbed the "Open Door Policy" (Hodzi, 2019). This outward looking economic policy conceptualized foreign trade and flexible labour emigration as key drivers of socio-economic growth (Dankwah & Amoah, 2019; Mohan & Tan-Mullins, 2009; Obeng, 2019).

On the broader spectrum of geopolitical relations, investment in infrastructure development has dominated the Chinese portfolio in Africa. Trade has been another pivotal instrument in the Sino-African relations. Trade volumes have consistently risen from, for instance, US\$39.7 billion in 2005 to US\$192 billion in 2019 (Ademola et al., 2016; China-Africa Trade Institute, 2022; Obeng, 2019). Similarly, formal Sino-Ghana relations were birthed in the 1960s when diplomatic relations were established between the two countries (Crawford & Botchwey, 2017; Haugen, 2018; Selase, 2019). Symbolic overtures at international fora, especially at the United Nations, through abstentions or taciturn support for China by Ghana have been dutifully rewarded with material support by China towards Ghana's socio-economic development. This reciprocal relationship has earned Ghana tangible rewards including the construction ("free of charge") of Ghana's National Theatre as a reward for Ghana's diplomatic support during the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 (Selase, 2019) and the building of Ghana's Ministry of Defence, "free of charge," by China. While no upfront payment was made by Ghana for these edifices, it is self-evident that China equally extracted some leverage in other areas of economic interests such as road construction contracts, trade and mining (Auffray & Fu, 2019). As noted by "Author et al. (forthcoming)," Chinese trade and investment in Ghana have appreciated significantly from an estimated \$4.4 million registered by the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre as Chinese projects in Ghana in 2000 to about \$1.6 billion by 2014. Akin to the investment portfolio, noticeable increases have also been recorded in the manufacturing as well as the general trade sectors in Ghana (Haugen, 2018; Moyo et al., 2016).

These economic ties have undergirded bi-directional flows of migrants between the two countries. While Chinese mostly migrate to Ghana as tourists, traders, construction workers, operators of hospitality ventures, miners, agriculturalists and horticulturalists and alternative medicine practitioners, Ghanaians are increasingly drawn to China as international students, teachers of English as a second language, construction workers, wholesale traders, tourists and sports enthusiasts searching for Chinese teams to play for.

Ghana-China relations have yielded some positive outcomes not only for Ghana but for its citizens migrating for greener pastures. At the micro level, Ghanaian migrants participate in trading activities chiefly because of the ability for both small and large-scale traders to source a wide range of trading wares to cater for the needs of buyers across the spectrum of social classes in Ghana. Ghanaians in China engage in a wide range of activities key among them being the facilitation of trade between the two countries. Migrants invest in guesthouses, warehouses, wholesale and retail of imports from China. Ghanaians have taken advantage of business opportunities in China compared to their counterparts in Western Europe and North America where an overwhelming majority

of them are into paid employment (Adiku & Kandilige, 2021). Significant volumes of remittances for household maintenance and investments in business activities in Ghana are recorded. These have led to the enhancement of livelihood activities by hitherto lower- and middle-income social classes.

Subsidized or fully funded tertiary education opportunities in China have risen sharply in contemporary times. Pilling (2018) notes that there were an estimated 6500 Ghanaian students studying in China in 2018 (making Ghana the top supplier of students, in Africa, to China). Noteworthy is the pursuit, by Ghanaian students, of qualifications in medicine and allied sciences in Chinese universities. For most Ghanaian students, “the opportunity to gain extra income by exporting items for sale in Ghana is an additional motivation,” according to Obeng (2019). The human capital of Ghana is further improved due to these migrants who also learn Chinese norms of hard work, industry and social responsiveness.

Whereas contemporary literature is beginning to acknowledge the volume of migration along the Ghana–China migration corridor (Gyedu, 2018; McNamee et al., 2012; Obeng, 2019), not much is known about how the migration of Ghanaians to China affects livelihoods and the inequality dynamics in Ghanaian communities. In this respect, this paper attempts to examine how the social network theory could be used as a frame to explain migrants' homeward activities and the attendant effect of those activities in either bridging the inequality gap between migrant households and wealthier neighbours or widening the inequality between migrant households and poorer neighbours in local communities. We argue that the receipt of cash and social remittances from migrants could either have disequilibrating or equilibrating effects on local communities depending on the contextual factors. The bulk of migration and development literature focuses on the effects or impact of Global South–Global North migration to the neglect of such effects from a global southern origin country to a destination within the South. The paper, therefore, addresses the question: how does south-south migration affect livelihoods and income inequality?

After this background, we present an examination of broad discourses on the nexus among migration, poverty and inequality to frame the discussion of the contextual issues within our particular case study on the Ghana–China corridor. We then provide theoretical reflections to help situate the discussion before outlining the methodology that was adopted for the collection and analysis of data. Also, we examine the cash and social remittance-sending behaviours of Ghanaian migrants and how these are shaped by their social networks. The effects of migration on the socio-economic livelihoods of migrant households in Ghana are then examined to determine whether they contribute to bridging or widening the inequality gap in communities. We then draw some conclusions and proffer some recommendations based on our conclusions.

## DISCOURSES ON MIGRATION, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Globally, the association between migration, poverty and inequality has been established in a number of studies (Azizi, 2018; Faini, 2007; Konte, 2018; Terrelonge, 2014). Studies in many developing countries have related migration to livelihood approaches, often adopted by the poor households and individuals to overcome poverty situations (Abizu, 2018; Awumbila, 2018; Black et al., 2006; Mago, 2018). This linkage also underpins the assumptions and theoretical analysis of migration by some scholars around migration theorization (De Haas, 2010; Massey et al., 1993; Stark, 1984). Migration theories such as neo-classical micro and macro theories, migration systems theory, world system theory, dual labour market theory have further highlighted how inequalities between individuals and societies also reinforce migration (Faist, 2016). Over the last four decades, remittances from migrants have contributed largely to reducing global inequality by enhancing the levels of income of poor households in countries of origin and further moving such families out of poverty (Orrenius & Zavodny, 2018). Conversely, migration and its ensuing effects have also been said to have widened poverty gaps and created inequalities at the micro and macro levels in migrant-sending areas (McKenzie, 2017). Thus, the complex relationship between migration, poverty and inequality has attracted and continues to attract the attention of social science researchers.

Though there is an assumption which is historically aligned to politico-economic standpoints that emigration is positively associated with inequality in the country of origin (Connor et al., 2013; Faist, 2016), there is still inadequate consensus on the effects of migration (receipt of remittances) on inequality (Koczan & Loyola, 2018). The few studies on this linkage are divided. While some are of the opinion that remittances from migration increases inequality (Bouoiyour & Miftah, 2014; Möllers & Meyer, 2014), others conclude that migration rather reduces inequality (Margolis et al., 2013; Mughal & Anwar, 2012). There is a neutral view which states that migration has no significant effect on inequality (Beyene, 2014; Yang & Martinez, 2005). The lack of predictability in their finding could be attributed to the spatiotemporal variation associated with these studies notwithstanding the fact that some were conducted in the same continents.

Other studies have proved that inequality affects opportunities available to different socio-economic groups to migrate and conversely, the outcomes of migration such as remittances and migration networks also affect social inequalities (Faist, 2016; McKenzie, 2017). Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1754) famously argued that inequalities do not arise from natural circumstances but from societal constructs based on moral considerations, and they are thus socially constituted. In line with this assumption, Faist (2016) conceptualized the link between inequality and migration as a social issue because most of the factors that influence the opportunities that are available for individuals to migrate are social mechanisms and in his view, these social mechanisms that culminate into social inequality are key variables but have been least researched. Most of these studies have, however, been based on international migration from global southern origin countries to destinations in the Global North. This paper, therefore, contributes to providing a perspective from a south-south context as an augmentation to the extant literature.

Remittances may create inequality among families who receive them and families who do not (Azizi, 2019; Mehedintu et al., 2019). Inequality will increase if remittances are skewed in favour of high-income households (Azizi, 2019). A study in two regions of Algeria—Idjeur and Nedroma—by Margolis et al. (2013) using household survey results, for instance, provides evidence on the impact of remittances on household inequality. Their data show that in Idjeur region, which is predominantly a poor region, remittances tended to decrease inequality mainly among households in the lowest income quintile. In Nedroma region, however, the reduction in household inequality is half that of the Idjeur region because the region has more extremely poor households who suffer from the phenomenon of “double loss,” which they explained happens when a family member migrates but the family receives no remittances (Margolis et al., 2013:13). Thus, the family has lost the income that the emigrant would have generated at the origin and at the same time does not receive remittances from the family member. This, therefore, enlarges the inequality situation among households due to disparity in the distribution of income. Migrant remittances will have a zero effect when they are received by middle- and high-income households. With regards to international migration, this may be the case since that form of migration is mostly afforded by middle- and high-income family members. It is, therefore, obvious that remittances will flow into such families (Beyene, 2014). Data from an urban household survey involving remittance receiving households and non-remittance receiving households in Ethiopia by Beyene (2014) finds that remittance receiving households have a slightly higher average consumption per capita compared with the non-remittance receiving households and that, recipients of remittances were averagely better off than the non-recipients. Though remittances contributed to a slim fall in inequality within remittance receiving households, this did not affect overall inequality. In another counterfactual study by Bouoiyour and Miftah (2014) on the effects of migrants' remittances on poverty and inequality in rural southern Morocco, they find results similar to Beyene (2014) in Ethiopia.

In a country wide review on poverty and inequality situation in Ghana, Amoo Bondzie et al. (2014) find that though there are regional inequalities in Ghana, the situation is more perverse within regions. This finding has also been confirmed in the work of Danquah and Ohemeng (2017). Annim et al. (2012) further noted that within-district inequality contributed more to the increasing trend of national inequality. This shows that historically, Ghana has witnessed spatial socio-economic and environmental disparities (Aryeetey et al., 2009). As noted by Danquah and Ohemeng (2017), inequality usually leads to poverty. This obviously explains the age-old disequilibrium in poverty

levels between northern and southern Ghana, and this also explains the present migration trends experienced in the country. The Ghana Statistical Service for the past two decades has recorded decreasing levels of poverty but increasing levels of inequality (Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), 2014). The sixth version of the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS) report divulged that the Greater Accra Region is the least poor region while the Upper West Region is the poorest (GSS, 2014). Using data from GLSS 6, Danquah and Ohemeng (2017) allude to the view that migrants from rural poor areas move to the urban areas for jobs and education, however, because many of them leave the rural areas with lower educational attainment and other human development capacity, they have poor access to gainful employment which leads to lower levels of remittances being sent back home. This occurrence increases poverty and inequality, especially in Northern Ghana. A recent study on urban poverty in Ghana by Devereux et al. (2018) supported the view that even though the national poverty level has reduced by half, urban poverty is rising due to rural–urban migration. Results of a study by Awumbila et al. (2014) among migrant youth from Northern Ghana in the slums of Accra show that amidst the rising urban poverty, migrants from slum areas in Accra where poverty is more endemic send remittances to northern Ghana which positively impact on household poverty and inequality.

Danquah and Ohemeng (2017) also reported that international remittances have a more negative impact on income distribution and inequality because such remittances are received by middle-income households whereas poor households receive internal remittances which marginally impact on inequality. Their comparison of the predicted and counterfactual values for the Gini coefficient shows that the inclusion of internal remittances raises income inequality by 4 per cent compared with 17.4 per cent for international remittances. Within this study, the impact of the receipt of remittances is mainly measured in terms of upward social mobility which affects households differently depending on their socio-economic class prior to the introduction of remittances as well as the volume of remittances received. In this context, bridging the inequality gap thus refers to narrowing the gap between relatively poorer households and richer ones while widening of the gap points to scenarios whereby the relatively richer households become comparatively even richer due to the receipt of remittances.

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Theorising south-south migration has not been the priority of most migration scholars as the overwhelming focus has been on Global South to Global North migration. In reality, the majority of migration journeys that commence from a global southern country are destined for another global southern destination and not one in the Global North. Much as this sounds odd considering the volume of academic writings that take for granted the apparent importance of South-North migration trends, over 70% of all migration from African countries, for instance, is to other African destination countries (Awumbila et al., 2014). This percentage increases when one expands the scope to other global southern destinations outside of the continent. This notwithstanding, the underlying triggers of migration are not dissimilar to those from the Global South to the Global North or among global northern countries. The popular economic theories that have been relied upon to explain the initiation of migration have included the Neoclassical Migration theory (Lewis, 1954), the New Economics of Labour Migration theory (Stark, 1991; Taylor, 1999), The Harris-Todaro model (Bauer & Zimmermann, 1998), the Human Capital theory (Becker, 1994; Mincer, 1993) among others. All these theories assume that aspiring migrants undertake a cost-benefit calculus and migration is only premised on real or potential benefits from movement outweighing those associated with staying put. These theories also highlight the principle of selectivity which seeks to explain why some people have a higher propensity for migration than others. Other theories that seek to examine why migration, once initiated, tends to be perpetuated have included the World Systems theory (Wallerstein, 1974), the Segmented/Dual Labour Market theory (Piore, 1979) and the Social Networks theory. Of all the perpetuation theories, the Social Network theory lends itself more to explaining the contextual issues around Ghanaian migration

to China, their remittance-sending behaviours and the effects of migrants' activities in shaping livelihoods in ways that either bridge inequality gaps or widen such gaps.

Social networks are defined as "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community of origin" (Massey et al., 1993: 448). Social network theorists regard migrants as actors who are capable of drawing upon both tangible and intangible resources. Ghanaian migrants to China draw on both tangible (financial) and intangible (informational) support from network members. They also provide both tangible and intangible resources to social network members while in China, which affect the livelihood of recipients in Ghana. This is consistent with the assertion that actors across the different social fields (i.e. origin, transit and destination) tend to facilitate the concretization of migration aspirations as well as the overcoming of practical intervening obstacles to migration which are critical to the realization of migration journeys and the maximization of the outcomes of migration. In migratory histories, once the number of network connections in an origin area reaches a critical level, migration becomes self-perpetuating, because it creates the social structure to sustain the process (Massey, 1989).

As such, network connections are a form of social capital that migrants draw upon to gain access to employment, accommodation and other services abroad, as well as to consolidate preparations for return migration. To that extent, social capital relations exist fundamentally on the basis of material and/or symbolic relations of exchange, which in turn maintain these social capital relations. For social capital to be accessible and beneficial, a person must be related to others and these other persons are the actual source of his or her advantage. The relationship, however, does not have to be based on kinship ties. The utility of social capital as a resource depends on the individual's ability to mobilize it to his/her benefit; it also depends on the amount and quality of capitals of the people with whom the individual is in contact. If the quality of capitals (i.e. assets) is poor or the endowment of capitals is low, the individual's social capital will equally be minimized. Ultimately, social networks are not automatically guaranteed but they must be maintained and institutionalized through multiple forms of interactions between members. Acquisition of social capital, therefore, requires deliberate investment of resources, including time. Social capital, therefore, constitutes a key ingredient, in a triad of ingredients, together with material and human capital (education, skills and knowledge) towards enabling and inspiring people to migrate or to be successful returnees who impact positively on the livelihoods of social network members at home. We, therefore, use social network/capital as a prism through which the effects of migration on livelihoods and inequalities are examined.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data for this paper were collected mainly using qualitative research methods. A detailed semi-structured interview guide was designed to aid in-depth interviews with Ghanaian return migrants from China. This approach was, however, part of a broader research methodology which relied on explanatory sequential mixed methods design.<sup>1</sup>

The paper is based on the interviews with Ghanaian return migrants from China. The in-depth interviews were with 39 returnees. Of the total, 31 were males and 8 were females. Interviewees were between the ages of 21 and 45 years, with 32 years being the average age. Prior to their migration to China, 17 were unemployed but only 4 reported being unemployed after their return. In terms of educational qualifications, 21 returnees had first degrees prior to their migration, 11 had Senior High School qualifications, 1 had Junior High School qualification, 5 had diplomas, and 1 had a master's degree. Upon return, those still with a first degree were now only 10, only 5 still had Senior High School qualifications, 1 still had Junior High School qualification, 3 had diplomas, 15 had masters degrees (out of which 5 were pursuing PhD studies), and 1 person had graduated with a PhD. Returnees were recruited mainly through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. We used key gatekeepers in the trading, education and tourism sectors to gain access to Ghanaian migrants who returned from China in the last 10 years. We relied on different entry nodes in order to avoid sampling the views of close nit groups that might provide

biased views on their experiences of migration. As such, we limited referrals from each node to a maximum of three participants. The main themes covered in the interviews included reasons for migration, migration decision-making, the roles of intermediaries, migration experiences in China, remittance-sending behaviour and changes to the living standards of migrant households.

We analysed the data using the thematic analysis technique. This approach involved identifying and grouping closely related codes, expressions, ideas and patterns which emerged from the qualitative data. The study relied on a combination of both deductive and inductive coding approaches. The inductive approach is a bottom-up process whereby codes are derived from the data while the deductive approach is based on a top-down method, guided by existing initial codes. We deductively started with a set of codes based on our research questions and existing research frameworks and theories about Chinese migration in Africa (Crawford & Botchwey, 2017; Hodzi, 2019; Mohan & Tan-Mullins, 2009), but we also inductively came up with new codes and iterations on the codes as we combed through the data. This approach enabled the derivation of the key themes for thematic analysis and writing up. Each interview was about an hour long. The interviews were conducted from May to July 2021. To protect the identity of our research participants, we have used unique codes in place of their names.

## FINDINGS

### Homeward activities: Return to Ghana from China and implications for migrant households' standard of living and wealth inequalities

Return migration has gained prominence as one of the ingredients in the migration-development nexus debate. Countries of origin stand to benefit when migrants return having accumulated both tangible and intangible resources which can support socio-economic development (Kandilige, 2017; McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Many earlier migration scholars have conceptualized return migration variously (Cerase, 1974; Gmelch, 1980; King, 2000), but we draw on Cassarino's (2004) work (Figure 1) which emphasizes the need to examine the migrants' resource mobilisation as well as their return preparedness in assessing their potential to become agents of change or active development partners at home (Kandilige, 2017). In so doing, Cassarino expands the range of resources to include tangible and intangible

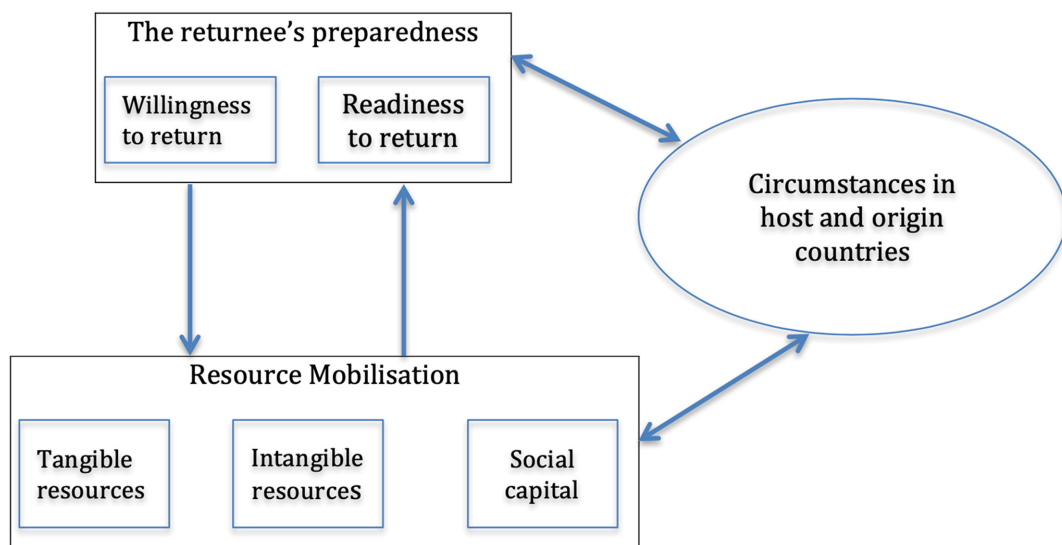


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework for return migration.



resources acquired abroad as well as those they possessed prior to their migration. As Kandilige (2017) notes, for return to be beneficial, it requires a level of preparedness that surpasses the mere desire to return. Readiness in terms of willingness to act, accumulation of resources and information/support from social network members would need to exist simultaneously for return to be successful and impactful (Cassarino, 2004, 271). Ultimately, the economic, social, political and technological environments in both the origin and destination countries (see Migration Systems theory) would shape the likely outcomes of such migrations and returns. We, therefore, assess Ghanaian migrants' activities they participated in and the related remuneration in China, their remittance-sending behaviour and their relations with social network members at home as a means of addressing the effects of their migration and return on livelihoods and inequalities. This approach is consistent with other contemporary analysis of how, for instance, married Nigerian migrants in China factor in social networks both in Nigeria and in China in their return migration decision-making (Adebayo, 2020). Or Lu (2022) work where she traces transformations in Nigerian flexible diasporic organizations within global southern locations such as China and Dubai and argues that these agile and multi-scalar diasporic mobilizations enable their members to negotiate the nexus of postcolonial politics and transnational capitalism.

## Class and upward social mobility

The story of GHGPr01 (Box 1) is an example of how the migration of individuals from impoverished backgrounds can lead to remarkable transformation in the fortunes of migrant households by providing them access to safe accommodation, social amenities and an elevation in the social status of the migrant households. This drastic change has the effect of imposing socially constructed respect on the return migrant, which is characterized by greater expectations to solve family problems. The symbolism of being referred to as a "matured person" is equated with one's ability to provide economic resources and it has very little to do with one's age. The injection of economic resources to poor households has a dual effect on communities—it evens out inequalities between the impoverished households and richer households, but it also widens the gap between the semi-*nouveau riche* and their former impoverished compatriots.

Ghanaian return migrants acquired transferable skills from their migration to China and most of them applied these skills to their activities upon return. Students gained employment opportunities in Ghana after the completion of their studies while others who were already in employment received promotion to higher ranks. Some invested in new ventures and became self-employed, and others leveraged their new social networks to establish business opportunities between Ghana and China.

Almost all return migrants reported improvements in their standard of living as well as that of their family members. Those who were well off at the start of their migration did not experience any lowering in their conditions but rather an enhancement of the quality of their lives. A case in point is GHGPr36 who admits that his parents and siblings, who already had access to good quality health care, quality education and access to electricity, maintained their social status while they were much better than their neighbours. As he states, "with regards to my neighbours, there are differences because you can see the kind of houses some live in are not yet completed and they do not have access to water and electricity."

I was living in an apartment before I left for China and it was well furnished with access to water, electricity and I was able to provide myself with other basic services like food, clothes among others. This has not changed but has rather improved from where I left off. I now live in a two-bedroom apartment with a big compound, and I have a new car as well... They [family] were doing well before I migrated, and I have not invested in their lives as a result of my traveling. I will say the improvement is for me rather because I have acquired a master's degree, I have a new car and I have been able to save more than when I was in Ghana.

(GHGPr36, a single Research Assistant, Male from Tafo in the Eastern region)



### BOX 1 South-South migration: The case of the successful returnee

GHGPr01 is a male return migrant from Accra who migrated to Shanghai in China in 2015. He is married and has a daughter. He completed a bachelor's degree from the University of Ghana prior to his migration. He relied on his father and mother who paid for all expenses for his upkeep and university fees. His father was a carpenter, with limited contracts, while the mother was a petty trader and they catered for two students at the university and one Senior High School student. This put a strain on their family resources. His mother's business collapsed a couple of times and she had to take out loans to keep the business going. GHGPr01 contributed to the family's upkeep when he started his 1-year compulsory national service where he received a meagre amount as an allowance.

He sustained himself on the scholarship funds attached to his admission to a postgraduate programme in Shanghai China and he worked on part-time basis. He later worked for Amnesty International. While he enjoyed his team's support, he complained of discrimination against him due to his lack of language proficiency. He earned the equivalent of between GHs 10,000 and GHs 15,000 monthly, after tax. He remitted his mother between GHs 3000 and GHs 5000 per month to prop up the business to cater for the family in Ghana and to pay the fees for his two siblings. He got married in 2017 and had a daughter. He built what he calls a "mini two-bedroom apartment" on his parents' land. He established a restaurant in October 2019, but it collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Around the same time, his wife was made redundant from her work which brought financial difficulties to the family.

GHGPr01, however, perceives his migration as successful because of improvements in the standard of living of him and his family. Prior to his migration he shared a room with his brother in the outhouse of his father's uncompleted three-bedroom house. He says that they had no computer or laptop let alone internet services. They did not own a television in their household because of religious reasons. The floors of their rooms were not tiled, and the bathroom and the kitchen were not decent. After his migration, he built a two-room self-contained apartment where he lives with his wife, child and sister-in-law. He now has a laptop and internet services in his house. In addition, he has nearly completed the family home for his parents. Even though he is currently unemployed, his wife is sustaining the household from her earnings and their general standard of living has appreciated. He states that his standard of living is much higher now than his peers and his neighbours "I am married, possess my own small house, meaning there's no payment of rent, obtained a car, a master's degree and have a child. Most of my peers and neighbours are still struggling to get some of the things I possess now due to my migration." GHGPr01 notes that since his return from China, he has experienced an increase in his social capital within his extended family. He says "I have been deemed to be responsible and of a high integrity. I am called to every issue at family meetings. My uncle died some time ago and I was made to lead the planning of his burial and funeral. I am sent to represent the family at functions. Sometimes, I feel too young for those roles, but I just have to sharpen up and scale the heights before me. My family also expected me to support financially and that is why I used to send money home."

His experience of working with people from different backgrounds in China is being used as a springboard to start a new business in Ghana:

It [China] is a country where you can learn a lot from people you work with and they are willing to teach you. I was able to learn a lot of software for analysing data which I had no idea about prior to my migration and they taught me on the job for free.

(GHGPr36, a single Research Assistant, Male from Tafo in the Eastern Region)

GHGPr36 is considering setting up his own research company in Ghana having built up a lot of research experience through his migration to China, where he worked as a research consultant. Such a decision aims at foregrounding his source of income as well as making use of the transferable skills that he acquired from his migration. This would have both direct and indirect effects on the local community by providing employment opportunities for the youth and boosting tax receipts through the payment of income tax to government. These all have multiplier effects on livelihoods and equity beyond the return migrant and his immediate family.

Also, GHGPr39 who is a lower-middle-class male could not afford the cost of a postgraduate degree in Ghana is currently pursuing further education at the PhD level after completing a sponsored master's programme in China. Resources he saved from his migration are being used to pay for his PhD studies in Ghana. Scholarship payments received during his studies in China are said to have been higher than when he worked in Ghana prior to his migration. He equally appreciates the potential of his international experience opening more opportunities for him in Ghana, including in business. He reports of personal improvements in his quality of life as well as that of his siblings. Even though GHGPr39 says that he still accepts money from his dad, he reported supporting his brothers and friends to better their life situations during his migration:

Okay, so my younger brothers and maybe some friends have benefited because I was able to help him to travel and to work in Saudi Arabia. He is working there legally now. I am a twin though, and my twin brother is also in school in Ghana. So, I support him when the need arises. He asks me for help and when I can, I try to help him. He is also a student and we need to help ourselves.

(GHGPr39, Male return migrant from Senya Bireku in the Central Region of Ghana)

GHGPr34, an upper-middle-class male, who became a business owner after his return has established two companies, one in Ghana and another in Rwanda, managed by his cousin. He benefited immensely from his international experience, and he says that he has become more adventurous.

I have upgraded myself educationally and I have made some good business ideas which have translated into money for me. It would have been difficult to have all that in Ghana within those few years. I have financed my younger brother's education in China for four years and I also contributed to the rest of the family's upkeep whilst in China. These experiences I had in China is what has helped me to achieve all of these including having two companies with one in Ghana and the other in Rwanda.

(GHGPr34, Business owner, Male from Aburi in the Eastern Region)

Migration to China has changed the family dynamics for GHGPr34 whereby he has turned into a responsible young man who no longer depends on his parents and his senior brothers who were providing for his needs prior to his migration because he was not working. The ability to maintain the household's social status as well as the marginal improvement gained by sponsoring the education of a sibling points to how migration can help to either level up or to distort the equilibrium in communal social strata.

Our standard of living as a family is much better than before. I was able to contribute toward the upkeep of the house although we were living moderately well before I travelled. My elder siblings were already working so they supported the household before I even migrated. I only contributed to the already good things happening in the family by sponsoring one of my siblings to school in China and it is a consequence of my migration to China.

(GHGPr34, Business owner, Male from Aburi in the Eastern region)

Also, GHGPr34's ability to establish a company in Ghana that employs about 26 people and another branch in Rwanda has real impacts on the households of those employees as well as the broader community. The multiplier implications could have a levelling effect on the quality of livelihoods and incidence of inequality beyond individual households. The success of his business venture has secured his sustainable reintegration into his community of origin. The hiring of family members to work in his companies is a source of employment for them which strengthens family bonds, even though there could also be the risk of causing family rifts when problems occur.

Beyond the establishment of new business ventures upon return, migrants who had stable jobs before their migration returned to their jobs, and they have been acknowledged by their employers through promotion to higher ranks. After graduating from a postgraduate programme, GHGPr33 (a middle-class male), for instance, was promoted to become a Senior Member in his academic institution. He married a Chinese woman during his time in China and he learnt the Chinese language as well as new ways of doing business. Even though he has not yet established any business venture, he is contemplating doing so as a source of extra income. In terms of improvements to the standard of living of the return migrant and his family, he acknowledges that he has experienced a personal improvement since he has obtained the postgraduate qualification (which has earned him a promotion and a higher salary), his marriage of a Chinese woman has widened his social networks to include contacts abroad. He is, nonetheless, not very confident about the broader improvement to his family's standard of living. He says that he still lives in the same accommodation as he did prior to his migration

I think my income level has improved because I am on a higher rank in my organization after my return from China. I am now a Senior Member so my basic salary is higher than before leaving Ghana for China...There has not been any improvement in my family as a result of my travel. My travel has had an improvement on my life but not on my family. It has just made me not depend on my family for financial support.

(GHGPr33, Hubei province, Male from Akwabuja in the Ashanti Region)

Equally, GHGPr33's experiences and his inter-cultural marriage of a Chinese woman has introduced a new dynamic into his community's relations. He reported an increased number of people who have consulted him for advice on doing business in China, partly because they know that he is married to a Chinese and that he has in-laws who reside in China. His new skills in using social media to transact business have also allowed him the flexibility to sell products that are sourced from China while keeping his main job as a Senior Member in his institution.

## Shifting gender and kinship dynamics

In most African societies, the role of a woman is not easily recognized due to patriarchal norms around the man as the breadwinner. However, south-south international migration can have liberating and equilibrating effects on intra as well as interfamily power dynamics, based on gender. Higher spending power by women is related to societal acceptance and recognition within households and among communities. GHGPr32, for instance, has noticed a marked improvement in her standard of living as well as that of her family members due to her migration to China. She is a professional teacher who is now married and no longer lives with her parents. She saved a substantial amount of money during her migration to China and this cash has been used to sustain her family by providing them with all the core necessities as well as access to good health care.

As I said, going to China really helped me a lot because both for acquiring higher education and for getting money. Life has improved...I have my master's degree and improved living conditions. I remitted to people in my family to support them. Both men and women benefitted from me but I

sent more money to my mother. I did business with my sister and she made good money for herself even as she was in Ghana. Yes, their *respect* for me has increased and I am happy.

(GHGPr32, Female English Teacher from Takoradi in the Western Region)

After his return from China, GHGPr37 has successfully set up a business and he has totally transformed the fortunes of his family. While in China, he regularly remitted cash to his wife and his eldest son. He equally sent them clothes, shoes, mobile phones and other goods through returning migrants from China. He believes that he earned a lot of respect from his family through his renewed ability to provide for them. Prior to his migration, his family lived in a rented "chamber and hall<sup>2</sup>" room at Abeka, a suburb of Accra and they shared common facilities like toilets and bathrooms with other tenants. However, after his return from China, the family now lives in their own four-bedroom house, and he has established a business which deals in the sale of building materials. As such, his migration has improved his family's living conditions and it has greatly enhanced their status in their community. This tangible upgrade in living standards is matched by respect and comfort for the beneficiaries, but it also implies an economic chasm between his household and households that used to share facilities with them.

When I compare my household before travelling to China and after China, there is a vast difference especially in terms of the accommodation. We have moved from a chamber and hall to a four-bedroom apartment and our access to basic services has also improved after my return. As for my neighbours currently, I am better than some while others are also better than I am.

(GHGPr37, Business Owner, Male from Nkwatia in the Eastern Region of Ghana)

Similar to GHGPr34, GHGPr37's company has employed people, including members of his family. Again, having a viable business venture is instrumental in supporting returnees' reintegration into their communities back home. The fact that he built a house for his family also engenders some level of rootedness in the community. The social respect by community members towards such a returnee as a success story encourages community members to gravitate towards the returnee and his family, thus plunging them into the limelight as part of the novel middle class. This could, however, be associated with much higher expectations and demands for support by extended family members as well as the larger community.

The experiences out of migration to China and even while I was there have been good because I made a lot of money to the extent of building my own house. I have also established a company that employs some Ghanaians, including my family members...I wanted to be close to my family and also to establish my own business and that was part of my plans to travel to China to make some resources. Hence after achieving these, I decided to come to work here and have my family around me. But family expectations towards me are high now and I have gained more.

(GHGPr37, Business Owner, Male from Nkwatia in the Eastern region of Ghana)

On his part, GHGPr38 has also successfully established a building construction company in Ghana and he is providing employment opportunities to the unemployed in his community. This also includes his own family members. In addition, he provides expert services to his family members at a heavily discounted rate. These positive gestures have the propensity to cement relations between him and his family members, thus enhancing his sustainable reintegration into his community while affirming his status as part of the middle class.

I have now established my own building construction company. I have two nephews whom I am training, and they get some few Cedis everyday as well. I also work on family members' buildings

at a lower cost for workmanship... As I said, I am training my family members and I render services to them at lower cost.

(GHGPr38, Male Construction Engineer from Cape Coast in the Central Region)

## The role of contextual factors

Migration to China does not, however, have a homogenously positive impact on all return migrants or their households. The success or otherwise depends on the contextual issues around migration experiences abroad, return preparedness and the ability to leverage on social networks both at home and abroad to utilize the embedded potential benefits that are associated with international migration. As case in point is GHGPr10, a 27-year-old Ghanaian returnee who migrated to China to study for a bachelor's degree. He struggled to secure any well-paid job in China, and he returned without much savings. Upon return, he is unable to get a stable job. He currently buys backpacks, shoulder bags, chest bags and handbags from China for sale in Ghana. He says that he is learning about digital marketing, with the hope of using that to expand his struggling business. His situation alludes to the fact that there is no automaticity between migration and enhanced livelihoods. This is what he had to say about his family's situation:

Honestly, times are hard for us. My late grandmother was the one financially helping my mum because they used to run her business together. Ever since she passed on, living conditions have really been hard for us. My family's living standard has remained the same...Things have not really changed that much. Our finances at home are low but I know when I get a stable job, everything will be fine.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has sought to rely on data on migration of Ghanaians along the Ghana–China migration corridor to explore the nexus between migration, household livelihoods and inequalities in communities.

Much as the extant literature acknowledges that migration within and from many developing countries is tied to livelihood approaches, mostly by the poor households and individuals to overcome poverty situations (Abizu, 2018; Awumbila, 2018; Black et al., 2006; Mago, 2018), this perspective is too narrow and simplistic as it fails to take into consideration the exorbitant costs that are associated, especially with long-distanced international migration. Our study indicates that the cost of migration varies quite enormously depending on whether migrants patronized the services of migration intermediaries or not. Those who completed the migration processes without resorting to intermediaries and “connection men” reported spending between 5500 and 10,000 Ghana Cedis on their ticket, visa application cost and the cost of medical examination, whereas those who used the services of travel agents and “connection men” spent between 15,000 and 20,000 Ghana Cedis. These are extraordinarily high amounts that are above and beyond the reach of poor households. Though this finding is specific to the Ghanaian context, it equally suggests that rather than migration from developing countries being simplistically conceptualized as an escape by poor people in the global South to overcome poverty situations in the global North, south-south international migration is also equally heavily patronized by the middle class for the purposes of further enhancing their socio-economic statuses. The injection of cash and social remittances by such already comparatively privileged migrants tends to distort the poverty and inequality gap in communities. Our study found that while not all return migrants reported significant impacts on their households' standard of living due to their migration, the overwhelming majority reported setting up businesses, acquiring cars, sponsoring their siblings to study abroad and building comfortable houses for their

families. These actions invariably widen and not narrow the inequality gap between them and their poorer neighbours. To this extent, our findings align with McKenzie (2017) who argues that migration and its ensuing effects have also widened poverty gaps and created inequalities at the micro and macro levels in migrant-sending areas.

Prior studies by Danquah and Ohemeng (2017) assert that international remittances have a more disequilibrating impact on income distribution and inequality since the recipients of such remittances are middle-income households whereas poor households tend to receive internal remittances, with lower impacts on inequality. This conclusion is reached by comparing the predicted and counterfactual values for the Gini coefficient which showed that the inclusion of internal remittances raises income inequality by 4 per cent compared with 17.4 per cent for international remittances. Our study suggests a significant impact on both poorer and middle-income households because of receipt of international remittances.

Our application of the social network theory in this paper extends current theorization by examining how social networks are equally central to return migration decision-making and how remittances sent to social network members at home impact negatively on inequality between migrant and non-migrant households and positively on the sustainability of return migration.

Based on our findings, it is worth pursuing a comparative study to see the relative impact of internal remittances on income inequalities versus international remittances from a Global South-Global North migration scenario compared with the impact of internal remittances on income inequalities versus a south-south migration context. Blunt global categorizations such as “Global South” and “Global North” only serve to obfuscate what is a rather heterogenous bunch of countries, with divergent opportunities for migrants. We recommend that greater focus should be on the contextual factors at the origin and destination, the quality of return preparedness and the human capital of the migrants rather than an arbitrary clustering around a binary Global South-Global North trajectory as though they are internally homogenous.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13192>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> whereby the quantitative data were collected on Chinese migrants in Ghana and analysed prior to the collection of the qualitative data among Chinese migrants, informed by the results of the quantitative data. Quantifiable data on Chinese migrants in Ghana were generated through a questionnaire survey of 1268, comprising 855 males and 413 females. Out of this total, 62 Chinese migrants were interviewed in-depth. The interviews were conducted on several themes, including migration history, occupation before moving to Ghana, and living experiences in Ghana.
- <sup>2</sup> A single bedroom and a living space

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