

Migration and Development in the Upper Senegal River Valley

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In Summer 2012, I travelled to eight small Soninke towns in the upper Senegal River Valley in both Senegal and Mauritania. In these communities I performed ethnographic interviews with a variety of local people and visited community development projects to understand how life is changing and how a variety of actors are involved in improving these towns. I looked at infrastructural developments and also asked about peoples' attitudes concerning economic change, development, and their hopes for the future.

These rural communities share many aspects of life despite being located in different nation-states. Their traditional economic activities center on the annual agricultural cycle. Farming is a central aspect of life and its practice remains largely unchanged over recent years. However, families have come to rely more and more upon circular labor migration to large cities domestically and international destinations (primarily France) for the economic maintenance of their households.



Economic migrants from these towns play key roles in raising money and promoting a wide variety of local development projects. Hometown migrant associations can be seen as engines of development which respond directly to community needs. Often these associations are more responsive



and flexible than the state or NGOs in delivering projects to their towns. Migrant associations in the towns I visited were behind a wide variety of projects ranging from building community health care facilities to the maintenance of small dams for agricultural use. In each case, community members were proud of the work undertaken by their migrant associations and touted their successes. In contrast, people often lamented that state participation in local development was comparatively slow and that NGO involvement could be uneven.

In looking at similar communities in Mauritania and Senegal it becomes possible to compare the dynamics of the state responses to the development goals of small towns between these two nation-states. While infrastructural developments from improved roads to electrification are advancing quickly in both nation-states one difference was that access to public education is much more advanced in Senegal. More generally,

Senegalese towns were more connected to the broader nation-state through the full spectrum of state institutions and were involved with a wider range of NGOs. I am just beginning to map how these differences affect the perspectives and expectations for local development and economic opportunities among community members.

I look forward to continuing to map the changing realities in Soninke communities between both Mauritania and Senegal to improve our understanding of how migrant-driven development and state involvement influence the lives and livelihoods rural Soninke people over time.

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