

# SENEGALESE HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS' WHATSAPP GROUPS AND THE EFFICACY OF DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION IN THE SENEGAL RIVER VALLEY

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This is a new project building on the Research Tutorial Award by CAS that allowed me to bring three UF undergraduate students to Senegal to do research on the use of new technologies of communication by Senegalese hometown associations and its impact on their development interventions in the Senegal River Valley. I utilized the preliminary research finding to write a NSF proposal to research these Hometown Associations' WhatsApp groups and the new forms of sociality they allow between migrants scattered around the globe and their rural communities in Senegal.

African migrants, as with the many migrants from poor countries, have been particularly interested in maintaining connections with their home countries. More specifically, migrants from the Senegal River Valley have distinguished themselves with the creation of dynamic hometown associations that intervene aggressively to improve the living conditions of sending communities. Previous studies in France have identified more than 400 such hometown

associations in the *Ile de France* region alone. A progressive efficiency in the hometown associations' interventions seems to be in connection to the improvement of communication between migrants coming from the same town and scattered in several destinations as well as their connections to the people in the hometown itself (Dia 2015; Kane 2013).

With a growing access to social media and communication platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Skype, the landscape of connections between these village-based diasporas and their hometowns have changed a great deal, leading to new forms of virtual sociality. Each of these hometowns have their WhatsApp group connecting different and faraway places into one single social-virtual place where village norms of social life are reintroduced and adapted. On a daily basis, hundreds of messages are posted instantaneously by participants and accessible to all at once. They exchange news, share memories, discuss new ideas about development, and raise funds as if in the village public square. The primary research questions are the following: 1) Does the use of new technologies, specifically the Instant Messaging

application, change the landscape of communications between hometown associations and their hometowns? 2) To what extent are any changes brought about by the use of free calling mobile phone applications affecting hometown associations' intervention in local development? 3) How are local hometown events made global through the posting of images and sounds and how does this affect migrants' trust of people managing community projects?

Through ethnographic research, to be conducted in France (Paris region), in the United States (Columbus, New York, and Memphis), in Central Africa (Libreville and Ponte Noire) as well as in the towns of the Senegal River valley (Thilogne, Agnam, Galoya, Ouro Sogui, and Kanel), we plan to follow hometown associations and their transnational connections. We want to uncover the daily practices of communications and their impacts in social, political, economic, and cultural processes in these different settings.

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