

# TRANSNATIONAL HOMETOWNS: MIGRATION & DEVELOPMENT IN THE SENEGAL RIVER VALLEY

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Over the past year I have been analyzing data from preliminary research conducted during the summer of 2012. This ethnographic research took place across eight rural towns in the Senegal River Valley region of Mauritania and Senegal and addressed local perceptions of transnational migration and community development. Currently, I am preparing for extended field research in rural Senegal and among Senegalese migrant communities in France that will refine and expand upon this previous work.

My preliminary findings suggest that a variety of social and economic factors influence migrants from the rural towns of the Senegal River Valley in their decisions of when and how to invest in and return to their communities of origin.

The Senegal River Valley has a long and varied history of transnational migration stretching back to the colonial era. Migration has long been viewed as a way to bolster household finances. However, life in the rural towns of the region has become increasingly reliant upon the remittances of family members elsewhere. Today the region is facing growing environmental challenges as desertification renders traditional agro-pastoral livelihoods less viable. This in conjunction with the fact that few local economic opportunities exist means that many see migration as the only path to prosperity.

However, despite the economic marginality of the Senegal River Valley and despite migrants' physical absence, the rural towns of the Senegal River Valley are hubs of migrant investment.

The vast majority of migrants maintain strong social and economic ties to their family and friends back home. During their time abroad, migrants remain in frequent contact with people in their hometown and are formally organized through hometown associations that



structure homeward-facing social networks and promote practical development projects in hometowns. Hometown associations collect and coordinate funds, solicit development aid, and collaborate with people at home to carry out self-determined community improvement projects. These development projects address issues that span from education to food security. They prioritize projects that address local peoples' social and economic conditions, often through productive collaborations with a variety of state and non-governmental organizations.

Upcoming ethnographic research will be conducted both in Senegal and with migrants from the Senegal River Valley residing in France in order to better understand the ways that transnational connections are shaping life in the Senegal River Valley today.

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