

Immigrant Work Strategies and Networks in London

Background

In Britain today there is a perception that asylum seekers and irregular migrants are driving the growth of a hitherto non-existent informal economy. Deregulated labour markets lead to flexible and casualized labour and this in turn can lead to high and low wage sectors, unregulated work and an informal sector. The public perception is that immigrants and other ethnic minorities are the direct cause of these effects. These groups are seen to be hiding from the law - through tax evasion, through circumvention of labour laws, by being instrumental in lowering wages and by defrauding the public purse through social security scams. While there seems to be a moral panic about asylum seekers and the asylum process, the 'pull' factors in the UK economy and policies that attract irregular migrants and undocumented workers have been, until recently, conveniently ignored. Some governments have chosen to ignore parts of the informal sector in order to allow some industries or firms to compete in the international markets and to subdue protest about inadequate delivery of services and jobs.

Methodology

This project aims to investigate the role of immigrant work strategies and their networks in the process of integration into the UK, and specifically in London. Additionally, by charting the work strategies (including formal and informal work) of several groups of recently arrived immigrants to the UK to explore how these strategies are shaped or mediated by their social networks. It focused on four immigrant groups – Ghanaians, Portuguese, Romanians and Turkish – and one sample of British-born people. The research involved surveys, in-depth interviews with 155 respondents and informal interviews with other relevant parties such as community associations, local government officers and NGOs.

The **relevance and significance** of this project was three-fold. Firstly, we aimed to provide in-depth knowledge about immigrant work strategies and trajectories in a globalized and segmented labour market. Secondly, we sought to illustrate the importance of immigrant social networks, both transnational and local, in the process of settlement and immigrant accommodation into a culturally diverse society. Thirdly, such research aimed to highlight the importance of processes of immigrant participation and inclusion in a culturally diverse society.

Key Findings

1. *Irregular Formality:*

a significant finding of the project is the flexibility or fluidity with which immigrants move between regularity and irregularity defined as the attempt to regularize one's status within the constraints of irregular immigration and/or labour market status. For example, overstayers, those without National Insurance numbers, those who do not declare a second job, continually attempt to find ways to 'regularize'

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- themselves. If this is not possible through legal means, *irregular formality* is the next best strategy.
2. *Deskilling and downward mobility* occurred among all our groups, though patterns vary:
 - All groups experience downward mobility from professions to trades to elementary/low-skilled jobs
 - This is greatest among Ghanaians (coupled with irregularity, racism and non-recognition of qualifications);
 - Romanians shift mainly to the middle, to the skilled/admin jobs rather than to elementary/low-skilled jobs;
 - More Turks have moved into ethnic businesses, though highly exploited work with low profit margins.
 3. *Work Strategies*:
 - Income maximizing/consumption minimizing
 - Work longer hours/accept lower pay
 - Work at 2 or more jobs/change jobs
 - Some gain qualifications
 - Shared accommodation
 - Very few rely on benefits
 4. *Networks*:
 - Variations across groups eg Portuguese had more friends among other immigrant groups than the other three who tend to rely more on compatriot friends and family; this seems to be highly dependant on legal immigration status of all the Portuguese compared with other three samples;
 - Romanian and Ghanaian samples use the internet for information, Turks less and Portuguese sample don't;
 - All have adequate knowledge of how to access information, though they usually begin with family, friends, compatriot network;
 - One exception – deteriorating health is on the rise, particularly among irregular migrants who abstain from accessing health care services for fear of being identified by the authorities.
 5. *Racism*:
 - Nearly all the immigrant respondents mentioned some form of discrimination due to their vulnerable status, Ghanaians in particular experienced racism in the workplace in terms of hiring, unfair treatment in relation to working hours and types of jobs.

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