

Immigrant Work Strategies and Networks in London – Ghana Sample

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

In Britain, there is much concern, both in policy and public discourses, about immigrant integration, community and solidarity. But how do immigrants themselves perceive the process of settlement in the UK? This question is examined through an exploration of

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the work strategies developed by Ghanaian immigrants in London, in their quest to live a decent life. In this paper, we explore three questions.

- The majority of respondents, despite their immigration status, came to work in a London labour market.
- Nearly all in our sample has experienced downward mobility from professions to trades to elementary/low-skilled jobs. This means that many have become de-skilled as they are unable to work in the trade or profession in which they have gained their qualifications. Many end up doing menial jobs in comparison to their qualifications.
- Three-quarters of our sample send back remittances. Many are saving to buy houses, businesses such hospitals or schools.
- Our results indicate that some Ghanaians experience a 'levelling' process in their work lives in London where they continually juggle between various levels of job exploitation, inadequate pay. Thus, levelling is concerned with the effects of unforeseen exploitative work conditions, low wages and, for some, continual racism.
- Exploitation in the labour market and racism often go hand in hand for many Ghanaians. Racism has become a key 'leveller' - when applying for jobs; experience of outright racism on account of their colour; but also due to their irregular status. Once in the work place, discrimination against blacks is a recurring theme. Racism occurs not only from white British some mentioned that their job application was rejected by 'Asians' because they were black.
- The effects of racism have led to the separation of some families. Numerous Ghanaians send their children home to attend school in Ghana and to be cared for by relatives. This strategy acts as a form of protection for the children against racism and the harshness of London life.
- Two strong qualities fuel Ghanaian 'labour' migration – the desire to succeed and generosity, which is linked to reciprocity. Interestingly, among compatriots, reciprocity is acceptably flexible. The loan of money, for instance, can be repaid by finding a job for the lender.
- Ghanaians maintain strong family and community ties, a tradition carried over from Ghana. In distinction to Granovetter's idea that weak ties outside of one's community are likely to provide the more relevant and adequate information and resources, we found that weak ties *within* the community provide the same function.

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