Migrants as civil society actors in the country of origin:

How do host country opportunity structures affect migrant civil society actors from the Great Lakes region?

Marieke van Houte, Anna Ormert, Jana Schildt

1Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen (CIDIN), Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands, 2Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain, Belgium, 3University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom

The end of the Cold War marked a shift from classic inter-state wars to intrastate civil wars, causing important changes to the structure and functioning of civil society. The increase in internal conflicts resulted in higher numbers of (forced) migrants and the emergence of significant migrant communities (Demmers 2002; Zunzer 2004; Shain 2002). Migrants who manage to find their way to European countries form a specific group of ‘functional elites’ (Zunzer 2004), as they are often well educated, relatively wealthy and strongly networked.

Both for the increased quantity of migrants and their perceived ‘quality’, academic and public debates focus great attention on the rise of a migrant civil society as new actors of peace building and development in the country of origin, as they are able to exercise influence on domestic processes due to their financial assets and connections (Mohamoud 2006; Koser and Van Hear 2003). However, their role is highly debated and their involvement is said to have both constructive (Cochrane 2007; Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Shain 2002; Lyons 2004; Carling 2005) and destructive (Lyons 2004; Collier and Hoeffler 1998; De Haas 2005) potential in post conflict reconstruction and reconciliation.

Opportunity structures

One of the important determinants of whether and how migrant civil society actors play a role in the country of origin is assumed to be opportunity structures within the host country. Opportunity structures are factors external to a (social) movement that influence the movement’s emergence and potential to succeed. Therefore, opportunity structures can help explain the diverse types of (transnational) collective action (Wayland 2004).

Opportunity structures are often referred to as a political concept, relating to openness to political participation, but may also reflect economic and socio-cultural dimensions (Kastoryano 2000). Furthermore, they may comprise both formal and informal elements (Wayland 2004). Thus, elements of opportunity structures may include immigration and integration policies, but also public opinion, media coverage and diplomatic relationships with the country of origin.

There is discussion around the direction in which opportunity structures influence transnational activities. On one hand, it is argued that a closed or ‘exclusive’ opportunity structure in the host country can strengthen transnational orientation (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). On the other hand, one could say that transnational civil society actors may take advantage of more ‘open’ or favourable opportunity structures to lobby, publish and organise, which will facilitate their transnational activities (Wayland 2004).

Opportunity structures for migrants vary in each country, depending on its specific position regarding immigration and the presence of immigrant populations, based on its founding principals as a nation state. At the same time however, European policies tend to converge these differences (Kastoryano 2000).

Many assumptions have been made about the influence of host country opportunity structures on transnational activities. However, limited empirical data is available to verify this, let alone comparative data. This paper aims to investigate the influence of host country opportunity structures on the transnational activities by migrant civil society. It does so by analysing the opportunity structures of Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom including
immigration policies, political, economic and socio-cultural opportunities for newcomers or minorities, public and civic support and opinion towards migrants and historical and diplomatic relationships of the host country with the country of origin. It then compares this with the transnational desires, capacities and behaviour of Burundian and Rwandan migrant civil society actors in those countries. It draws on qualitative findings from fieldwork with migrant civil society actors in each case study country.


