

Integral Human Development in Action:
A Case Study on Migrant Protection and Integration in West Africa

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I worked with Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Ghana, which employs Integral Human Development (IHD) ideals. CRS works in regions considered to be disadvantaged and where the greatest needs exist. It assists the most vulnerable.

I worked on a project called the Action for the Protection and Integration of Migrants in West Africa, in the Techiman South and Nkoranza South Municipalities of the Bono East Region of Ghana. In this region, irregular migration is like a “rite of passage.” My colleagues and I targeted eight communities in each of the municipalities, and we worked with returned migrants and potential irregular migrants.

In these communities, success is typically measured by possessions, such as a fancy vehicle, scooter, home, or an attractive partner. The “*borgas*” (people who traveled abroad) mostly achieved these markers of success. To obtain the “*borga*” title, one had to travel abroad either to Libya, or to a European country through the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. Once there, migrants send funds home so their families can begin putting these belongings in place before the migrant returns. Finally, community church pastors mention migrants by name if they have provided contributions. This recognition makes their families proud.

Many of these youth face risks due to irregular migration. Families are willing to pay for travel but not to establish businesses back home. As a result, some died of thirst in the desert while traveling. Some faced kidnappers, and smugglers. Others reached Libya, but were arrested or deported. The boats of some migrants who managed to make it to the Mediterranean Sea capsized. Before their journeys from Ghana, most of these young people endured exploitative “*black market*” conditions in their communities; In addition, they had to pay exorbitant amounts for a fake passport and to travel agents to guide them through the process. When they returned home without meeting expectations, they were seen as “*failures*,” which led some into alcohol use, and caused them emotional and mental trauma. I even met someone whose leg was amputated due to a gunshot wound in Libya.

The project sought to ensure that young migrants moved with dignity, agency, and safety. For young people (aged 18 to 35) who were not enrolled in school, it sought to address migration push and pull factors, while acknowledging that migration is a fundamental human right.

To determine the extent of irregular migration and the motivation for youth to stay and not migrate, the project began with a baseline study in which the project team and enumerators selected various districts and communities to engage with the community leaders, families, and the youth (especially returned migrants). The study sought to gain insights on the motivations for their travel, opportunities available in their communities, and their needs and aspirations for a potential migration project. They then received resilient roots training; which explores the impact of inner healing in one’s immediate surroundings, communities, and societies. The curriculum is designed to help participants find internal balance, strengthen their identity, and learn new

coping skills in order to increase hope and well-being in themselves and their communities. It reflects three fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching: human dignity, the common good, and prioritizing the poor and most vulnerable. The training provided trauma awareness and psychosocial support to returned migrants. During it, there were times when participants became agitated or emotional; which is common in trauma support work, since most people will have to recount their stories in order to heal. The project ensured there were religious leaders on hand who could support these people using the Scripture and other pastoral practices. The facilitators had been trained on Psychological First Aid (PFA), which is a compassionate, short-term support approach for individuals experiencing distress. PFA aims to reduce distress, enhance coping mechanisms, and support resilience, but it is not a therapeutic intervention. Facilitators also made referrals for counselling to the social welfare department.

The project organized meetings with stakeholders, which included government institutions and local organizations, including the immigration service, police, commission for human rights and administrative justice, social welfare agencies, information services department, and the media. These meetings offered an opportunity to discuss how their labor might assist return or potential migrants. As a result, the immigration service agency established an office in the Nkoranza municipality to assist young people in finding information on safe migration, as opposed to through the exploitative “*black market*.”

Returned migrants often have masonry and tiling skills. The project assisted these migrants to market their expertise and abilities through community-asset building activities. These activities are a form of community service in which returnees enhance or rebuild community structures including schools, hospitals, and roundabouts. This work not only benefits their communities but also allows them to show case their skills.

Program participants learned marketing, leadership, self-awareness, community mapping, and other soft skills in the project’s life and employability skills training. These skills complemented the technical and vocational skills participants already possessed and helped them secure sustained sources of livelihood.

Additionally, the project team conducted community activities in social and behavioral change through radio and dramatic events. In particular, we brought returned migrants and representatives from government agencies to a wider audience (outside the project’s 16 targeted communities) to speak about the risks of irregular migration and how to find accurate information about these risks. To ensure the support of families, religious leaders, and community leaders in reducing irregular migration, the project team also held community conversations on reducing social stigma due to returned migrants’ perceived failure to succeed abroad. These conversations addressed the pressure to migrate and stories of local entrepreneurs and professionals who have achieved great success in their respective endeavors without the need to travel.

The project carried out a labor market assessment to make sure participating youth had technical and vocational skills that were in demand and, thus, could earn a living at home. Based on the

results, it matched project participants with 29 service providers in Techiman and Nkoranza, so they could learn hard skills to complement the soft skills they had already received. The project also carried out an assessment to ensure that participants received certification/license in their skill areas. The project team also held business networking events and job fairs in which participants met potential employers and successful entrepreneurs. The events allows youth to question experienced business persons and employers, and receive mentoring and coaching.

The project had a dignity-centered approach. It explored how migrants could move with increased dignity and agency by interacting with all the project stakeholders to ensure that their needs and concerns were addressed. Project participants had the opportunity to voice their training preferences as well. For example, while not initially offered, vocational and technical skills training turned out to be a crucial component of the project's success. To this day, it gives me great satisfaction to receive a call from a participant who has migrated, but has used safe routes and is employing the skills they acquired in the program. I also take pride in the participants who are using the skills they acquired from the project's training in jobs in their home communities.