



TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

The Transnational Child Raising Arrangements (TCRA) research programme is examining how such arrangements are affecting the well-being of Ghanaian parents in the Netherlands and children and caregivers in Ghana

Migration is a topic of ongoing public and political debate. It is also a social reality that is part and parcel of our global society. People increasingly live transnational lives with children and parents living in separate countries. The incentive for parents to do so is often a search for a better future for their children. Parents in Ghana have long been involved in childcare

arrangements that promised their children better opportunities. Often this meant leaving their children in the care of relatives who were better off, lived nearer to good schools, or otherwise could offer an environment more conducive to bringing up children. Family bonds are strong in Ghana, and raising children is a responsibility shared across the extended family.

This cultural phenomenon has taken on a new dimension with the migration of Ghanaian parents to Europe. Some manage to bring their children with them, but most choose or are forced to leave their children behind. They are cared for by relatives or sometimes paid caregivers. The effect of these modern-day arrangements on migrant parents and on children and caregivers in Ghana is the focus of the Transnational Child Raising Arrangements (TCRA) research programme, an interdisciplinary programme jointly coordinated by Valentina Mazzucato and Takyiwaa Manuh, professors at Maastricht University in the Netherlands and the University of Ghana, respectively. The programme also looks at the institutions that shape TCRA: schools and fostering arrangements in Ghana, and family migration laws in the Netherlands.

Academically, the TCRA programme has developed new methods for migration studies as well as a better understanding of transnational family relationships (see 'Methodology' box). The relevance of the programme to a country's development lies in the knowledge it creates about how migration impacts families, through the well-being of migrants overseas, and their children, who in the future will be tasked with the development of their countries.

SCHOOLS

Observations from teachers in Ghanaian secondary schools about children whose parent(s) live abroad:

- Some children who migrated with their parents are sent back to Ghana to get 're-educated' after adopting inappropriate behaviour while abroad.
- These children find it hard to adapt to Ghanaian disciplinary standards and challenge teachers' and caregivers' authority.
- There is no consistent evidence that TCRA children who never lived abroad with their parents behaved or performed poorly.
- Underperformance is due to emotional issues or a lack of supervision of schoolwork. Caregivers generally do not attend parent-teacher meetings.
- Some children need special counselling services, but these services are currently offered only to a limited extent.
- Some parents, despite the geographical distance, keep in close contact with teachers about their children's performance and progress.

CHILDREN: A STABLE HOME

The effects of TCRA on children who have stayed behind in Ghana are researched by looking at their emotional well-being, health status and educational performance. Nearly one out of every six children (16%) in Ghana's urban centres has one or both parents living abroad. If both parents are abroad, children are often left in the care of a maternal relative. Migration of one or both parents does not need to result in negative outcomes for these children.

'Children's well-being will impact positively on society as a whole. Ministries and schools in Ghana should therefore pay more attention to caregivers, who carry a huge responsibility'

- Takyiwaa Manuh -

The most important factor is a stable and secure care arrangement. If children are transferred from one caregiver to another more than once during their parents' absence, this tends to impact negatively on their self-reported emotional well-being and health as well as on their school performance. A positive relationship with the migrant parent overseas contributes to their overall well-being.

PARENTS: MONEY AND MOBILITY

Many Ghanaian parents in the Netherlands have one or more children cared for back in Ghana. Often, Dutch migration laws leave them with no other option than to be separated from their children. Other parents voluntarily leave their children behind. They want their children to be exposed to the Ghanaian culture and language, and value the more disciplined attitude at schools in Ghana. Moreover, it enables parents to focus on their work and earn a good living, which is why they left their country and family in the first place.

How does the separation affect the parents' well-being? The research suggests that parents who live without their children are worse off emotionally and health-wise than those who have their children nearby. Interestingly,



Secondary school students in Ghana fill out a survey for the Transnational Child Raising Arrangements (TCRA) programme. The programme investigates how transnational child-raising arrangements affect not only the well-being of children who remain in the country of origin, but also their migrant parents and their caregivers.

it is not the separation as such that causes this negative impact; rather, it is the fact that their earnings and legal status in the Netherlands do not allow them to send enough money home, keep in close contact, return home regularly or bring their children over for short visits. Tensions can also arise in the parent–caregiver relationship when remittances are lower than expected, with consequent worries about the care their children receive. Documented migrants who earn more are less

likely to experience problems in the care arrangement because they have the ability to visit home and make changes to the care-giving arrangement when necessary.

In other words, the migrant parents' economic and legal status – or money and mobility – have a strong impact on the quantity and quality of transnational care, and by implication, on the well-being of both the parents and the children.

METHODOLOGY

The TCRA research programme examines how TCRA affect children who remain in the country of origin, their caregivers in Ghana and their migrant parents in the Netherlands. The research is unique in that it uses the Simultaneous Matched Sample method to include all the actors in both countries.

The programme employs quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g. a survey among 2760 school children in Ghana and 300 parents in the Netherlands; in-depth

interviews with 54 school children, 30 teachers and 20 caregivers in Ghana) and ethnographic case studies through which the children, caregivers and parents of 15 matched sample TCRA are followed over a 2-year period.

The programme's focus on Africa is an important contribution to the existing literature, which looks mainly at transnational families from Asia and Latin America, where different family norms prevail.

MIGRATION AND FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Access to the formal labour market and the possibility to travel between countries are important factors in the proper functioning of TCRA's.

'People migrate, if not legally then illegally,' says Valentina Mazzucato, co-coordinator of the TRCA programme. 'Most Ghanaian undocumented migrants in the Netherlands work. Policies need to recognize that our economy needs these people and must create conditions for them to work legally. They would pay tax, be protected by labour laws, and be able to travel to visit their children or have their children visit them here.'

The assumption that all parents want their children to live with them in the Netherlands is false. 'Reunification,' Mazzucato says 'is needed most urgently by parents facing problematic child-raising arrangements. And they are often the ones who are undocumented or occupy low-level jobs. If their situation was more secure, they might well prefer their children to stay in Ghana, where the secondary school system is considered to offer their children better opportunities.'

CAREGIVERS: WHO IS IN CHARGE?

In Ghana, it is culturally acceptable to leave one's child in the care of a family member or close relation. In fact, there are many positive values associated with fostering. Traditionally, the chosen caregivers were fully in charge of the child's life. They were responsible both financially and emotionally for the child's well-being. The recent transnational arrangements work differently. Migrant parents travel abroad with the prospect of earning money and providing a better future for their children. While away, they remain responsible for their children's material well-being. They send money for their daily upkeep and school fees. In exceptional cases, they even pay the caregiver.

But an irregular or insufficient flow of remittances may give rise to tensions. The caregiver becomes overburdened and the child, unaware of the parent's situation, may blame the caregiver. There is another source of strain: the regular contact that is possible today – through telephone, email, Facebook and Skype – between parents abroad and their children at home can undermine the caregiver's authority. Indeed, parents in the studied TCRA's exert influence over their

children's upbringing while the children – who are encouraged by their parents to spend maximum time at school and doing homework – are of little practical help to their foster parents. When mutual expectations between the parents and the caregivers are not met, conflict and distrust may arise. This is exacerbated when children – truly or falsely – report the misuse of remittances by the caregiver to their parents. This situation is stressful for both parties and difficult to resolve due to the geographical distance.

THE RESEARCH

The TCRA programme is funded by NWO–WOTRO Science for Global Development and coordinated by Maastricht University, the Netherlands (Valentina Mazzucato) and the Centre for Migration Studies at the University of Ghana (Takyiwa Manuh and Mariama Awumbila). Researchers include Bilisuma Bushie Dito, Miranda Poeze, Ernest Nimfah Appiah, Victor Cebotari, Ernestina Korleki Dankyi and Djamil Schans. The programme is conducted in close cooperation with the TCRAf-Eu programme funded by NORFACE. For more information visit the programme website: www.tcra.nl

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