

## **Integration process of young sub-Saharan African migrants in Switzerland (Geneva and Vaud districts)**

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**Abstract:** The article refers to our study on the integration process of sub-Saharan African migrants in Switzerland (Geneva and Vaud districts). We considered three dimensions of integration: education and professional insertion; identities and cultural memberships; and the perception of physical and mental health states. Our non-representative sample was heterogenous and composed of 26 young people (14 born in Switzerland or arrived before 6 years and 12 young people arrived after 6 years). The qualitative research methods used were: semi-structured interviews with youth, social, health and education professionals and with persons in charge of some sub-Saharan African migrant associations. A questionnaire on physical and mental health was also given to the sample of young people.

**Keywords:** Integration; young migrants; sub-Saharan Africa; Switzerland

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### *Introduction*

In Switzerland, African immigration is recent, in contrast to traditional European immigration characterized by migrant workers coming from Germany, France, Austria and Italy before and after the second World War (Piguet, 2004). African presence in Switzerland became significant between 1970s to 1990s with the arrival of asylum seekers from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Zaïre (the current Democratic Republic of Congo) Angola and Somalia. This is the period during which nationals of certain African countries were fleeing from civil wars (Angola and Somalia), dictatorial systems (former Zaïre) and famine, more particularly in Ethiopia and in Eritrea in the latter case. During the last ten years, the number of sub-Saharan Africans in Switzerland has increased due to the presence of refugees from conflict-stricken countries (Burundi, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Rwanda) and persons from West Africa (Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo) who left their country of origin to seek better living conditions in Europe (Efionayi- Mäder, Moret & Pecoraro, 2005). The data from the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics show that almost all African nationalities are represented in Switzerland, including persons from English-speaking and Portuguese-speaking countries. The biggest numbers of nationals from sub-Saharan Africa mainly come from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Angola. They live mostly in French-speaking districts (Geneva;Vaud). In German-speaking districts, a big number of Africans live in Bern and Zurich.

Compared to other foreign communities, sub-Saharan African migrants present special characteristics. One of them is the traumatic events that many migrants from war-torn countries have gone through. They also face low socioeconomic conditions with difficulties in having access to jobs (Eyer & Schweizer, 2010). African migrants in Switzerland also suffer from prejudices, stereotypical and sometimes racist behaviours against them (Batumike, 2006).

### *Description of initiative*

Our research examined how the integration process of young people from sub-Saharan African migration is carried out in Switzerland. The sample was composed of 18-25 year-old young people. We considered two groups: those who were born and did schooling in Switzerland (second generation youth) and those who were born and did compulsory schooling abroad (first generation).

As research methods, we used semi-structured interviews, observation and a questionnaire on physical and mental health. We conducted semi-structured interviews with youth, social, health and education professionals and with persons in charge of some sub-Saharan African migrant associations. Topics discussed in the interview include: training, employability, living conditions and social participation; cultural Identity (transmission of cultural values of the origin society, perception of the Swiss society in relation to the original society; experiences of discrimination. The observed was activities of some professional integration structures for young migrants. A mental and physical health questionnaire was used to study the health of young migrants.

### *Literature Review*

#### **Education and training of children and young migrants**

In Switzerland, education and training of young migrants (Italians, Spanish and Portuguese) has had the attention of several researchers (Alleman- Ghionda & Lusso-cesari, 1986; Bolzman, Fibbi & Vial, 2003; Cattafi-Maurer, Abriel, Dasen, Carli, Lack, Peccoud, & Perregaux. (1998), Cesari-lusso, 1997; Darbellary & Lusso-cesari, 2003; Doudin, 1998; Gretler, Gurny, Perret- Clermont & Poglia, 1989). The causes of school difficulties for migrant children have a link with the family and social contexts, as well as with the Swiss reality (such as problems of communication in the official language of the host society, conflict due to differences of values).

#### **Cultural identity of young migrants**

In France, a significant amount of research was carried out on identity construction among adolescent and young immigrants, especially those who were born or grew up in the resettlement country (cf. Camilleri, 1980; Smet, Ducoli & Kulakowsky, 1984; Dinello, 1985; Ditisheim, 1995; Ezembe, 1996). For most of these authors, identity difficulties that the adolescent immigrant is faced with are related to the depreciation of the language and culture of origin, the conflicts of cultural influences (culture of origin with host culture), and the ambiguity in identity indicators.

#### **Physical and mental health of young migrants**

The effects of migration and exile on health are a current issue. According to Santé Canada (1999), new immigrants and refugees are likely to go through upsetting experiences linked to their acculturation because of various factors such as economic circumstances, negative attitudes and loneliness, which have an effect on their physical and mental health. Other research on the promotion of mental health of young immigrants was conducted in Canada by Khanlou, Beiser, Cole, Freire, Hayman & Kilbride (2002). These authors were interested in factors that contribute to or undermine the self-esteem of young immigrant students in secondary schools. They mention factors such as school (school success), self-esteem, social relations (friends, parents, and entourage), lifestyle and future plans (success in school, professional levels and good communication with parents).

### *Findings*

#### *Demographics of the sample*

The sample was composed of 26 young (9 girls and 17 boys) people aged 18 to 25 years. Fourteen children were born in Switzerland or arrived before the age of 6 years, group called "second generation youth." The other 12 were born abroad and arrived after 6 years and are "the first generation.

The sampling technique "boule de neige" was used to refer to young people, which is a heterogeneous group of different countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of young people (15) who agreed to participate in the survey had divorced parents, two young people had lost both parents, a youth lived with one parent and another youth had parents who still live in Africa.

With regards to the employability of parents, although the parents had secondary school and university level education in Africa, the majority were jobless in Switzerland, and others were receiving social assistance.

#### *Key findings*

- Concerning education, almost all young migrants put a lot of care in studying and were convinced that it is the only way to help them have employment and a better future. The majority of young migrants were satisfied with their education and gave different reasons: training that corresponds to their aspirations; very good education; multidisciplinary training; and pride in being selected for the training.
- About cultural identity, the analysis of the interviews conducted with young sub-Saharan African migrants on their cultural and national membership show that most of this youth accepted their double or triple cultural and national membership. All the youth interviewees, including those who were born or grew up in Switzerland, remained attached to their origins, to the traditions and to the language of their country of origin or of their parents. Some spoke and wrote correctly the language of the country of their origin, others were learning it or understood it.

- Regarding physical and mental health, analysis of the questionnaire data revealed a good state of health among the youth of our sample. However, second generation young migrants seemed to live under the influence of the consumer society and often expressed problems linked to anxiety, fatigue and sleep ; as opposed to first generation youth migrants who scarcely complained about anxiety and fatigue, and were reluctant to consult a health professional.

### *Discussion*

In terms of education, some young people who were born in Switzerland or arrived before the age of 6 years were able to have excellent schooling results without problems until higher education. However, others had some school difficulties because they were either not motivated or not well oriented, and therefore had to choose another system. The research results also reveal problems at the level of school orientation for young migrants some of whom had to struggle hard to be oriented in general studies. The problem of school orientation for young migrant in German-speaking Switzerland (Bern, Zurich) is also mentioned by Becker, Jäpel and Beck, M. (2011). For these authors, this problem is often linked to weak financial and cultural background of the parents of the young migrants.

Concerning their identity, the language of the country of origin is for these young people a symbol of their cherished identity. In most of the cases, parents play an important role in conveying the cultural values of the country of origin. The majority of the young interviewees had gone to their country of origin during holidays. Such a return is for them an occasion to know their origins, their history and to have elements of answers to such questions as "What am I?", "Where do I come from? ", "Where do my parents come from?". However, we found three young people who had identity confusion and who defined themselves as foreigners in Switzerland and foreigners in the country of origin. Two others accepted the identity of their parents' country of origin in Africa but rejected Swiss identity. The latter felt they were foreigners despite their Swiss nationality, because of the negative representation of the African community by Swiss society through the media. It should be noted that although these young persons had identity confusion, they did not feel torn between the two cultures and they manage to forge ahead in a positive way without psychological problems. The well-being of these young people can be justified by their integration capacity. We can note that in some cases, young migrants may have a problem of identity confusion that can lead to psychological problems (Von Overbeck Ottino and Ottino, 2001)

About the physical and mental health of young sub-Saharan African migrants, although we cannot make generalizations because of the limited size of the sample, the results on the health of these young (first generation and second generation) corroborate the results of other studies which compared the health of young migrants of first generation and those of second generation. Indeed, the analysis of the results from 18 studies selected by Renard and Doumont (2004) on immigration and the health of adolescents show that first generation adolescents present a state of physical and behavioural health conditions generally better than that of second generation adolescents.

### **Conclusion/and implications for youth integration**

In order to facilitate the integration process of young young sub-Saharan African migrants in Switzerland, we can propose the following recommendations, some of which take into account the opinion of the people interviewed in our research:

- To promote actions which help young migrants to remain attached to their origins and to their cultures: Such actions could include organising courses in the mother tongue; homecoming trips to the country of origin; and projects of solidarity and development in the country of origin. Studies on African-American adolescents show that being sensitized on one's own origins and one's cultural membership can be a factor in boosting school success (Ezembe, 1996);
- To enhance the recognition of the young Swiss of African origin who feel rejected by Swiss society: Actions against prejudices and racism towards Africans and foreigners, as well as a positive representation of Africa in some media could enhance this recognition;

- To enhance collaboration between migrant families and the school of the host district (Canton) in Switzerland: This type of collaboration would allow parents and young migrants to know the educational system of the host country, and to be involved actively in their school orientation.

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