Successful remigration is a myth

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(Phys.org) —Migrants that return to their home country rarely stay there for the rest of their life. Much more common is 'circular migration', where migrants live alternatingly in host and home countries and are therefore continually going through integration and re-integration processes. This is one of the main conclusions of NWO-researcher Gea Wijers in her study on Cambodian returnees. Wijers obtains her PhD today at VU University Amsterdam.

Wijers studied the ways in which first generation Cambodian-French and Cambodian-American returnees contribute to the transformation of Cambodia following remigration. As 'institutional entrepreneurs', businesspeople who envisage changing the country's institutions through their activities, they use their transnational social networks to develop initiatives in this area. Wijers studied and compared stories about migration, integration and remigration of these returnees in their homeland Cambodia and in their host countries France and the US. Her research illustrates the experiences and activities of transnational Cambodian-American and Cambodian-French activists and politicians. Wijers studied the impact of migrant communities on integration and remigration as well as the social debate on how returnees can influence the development of an emerging country.

Circular migration

One of her main conclusions is that permanent remigration is a rarity. Much more common is 'circular migration', where migrants live alternatingly in host and home countries and are therefore continually

going through integration and re-integration processes. The 'social capital', i.e. the gains of membership of transnational social networks at multiple locations, appears to be even more multi-faceted than shown in previous research. Although members benefit from having a group of activist friends or working for a migrant organisation in a host country, in the course of the ever-changing relationships between home country and host country, 'negative social capital' can also be created. So membership of certain social networks can offer returnees opportunities as well as frustrate their activities. Their connections with specific social groups often means, both in the home country and the host country, that other, competing groups do not want to be associated with them. If they were affiliated with a political party in the host country, for example, they may not be able to get a job with the Cambodian government.

Exclusion

Wijers's research results are important for the governments involved as well as civil society, as they show that neither the Cambodian-French nor the Cambodian-American returnees are not able to achieve very much. Social legitimacy is a key factor for returnees to be able to contribute to the development of their home country and integrate or reintegrate in their host countries. It is essential that they are trusted and accepted by the people in their environment. Under a semi-democratic regime, it is difficult for returnees to Cambodia to gain and keep this trust. This is also relevant in the case of migrants and returnees who are seen as perpetrators of crimes, for instance in the Boston bombings and the brutal murders in Woolwich and Paris. The transnational networks and turbulent life histories of these returnees appear to have contributed to feelings of cultural exclusion, processes of self-exclusion and even marginalisation in home and host countries. In some cases this can lead to forced nationalism and extremism.

Wijers's conclusions could support policymakers in their efforts to

establish suitable and effective institutional mechanisms for circular migration. Future research will have to provide insight into how governments and aid organisations can facilitate these processes, both in depth and in breadth, and thus provide better chances to migrants and returnees to and from diverse countries.

More information: www.vu.nl/nl/nieuws-agenda/age … junig-d-m-wijers.asp

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