



*Citation for published version:*

Howard, N & Morganti, S 2014, (Not!) Child Trafficking In Benin. in M Dragiewicz (ed.), *Global Human Trafficking: Critical Issues and Contexts*. 1st edn, Routledge, London, U. K., pp. 91-104.  
<<https://www.routledge.com/Global-Human-Trafficking-Critical-Issues-and-Contexts/Dragiewicz/p/book/9780415711104>>

*Publication date:*  
2014

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is the author accepted manuscript of a chapter published in final form as: Howard, N & Morganti, S 2014, (Not!) Child Trafficking In Benin. in M Dragiewicz (ed.), *Global Human Trafficking: Critical Issues and Contexts*. 1st edn, Routledge, London, U. K., pp. 91-104 and available via Routledge at <https://www.routledge.com/Global-Human-Trafficking-Critical-Issues-and-Contexts/Dragiewicz/p/book/9780415711104>

**University of Bath**

### **Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

#### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

#### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## **(Not!) Child Trafficking in Benin**

**Neil Howard and Simona Morganti**

### **Abstract**

This paper challenges dominant discourse around child trafficking in Benin. Using data gathered with male and female teenage labour migrants, Neil Howard and Simona Morganti reveal how the trafficking “narrative” is based on reductive, simplistic misunderstandings of the ways in which young people migrate for work in Benin. The paper suggests that these misunderstandings also underpin misguided policies.

**Keywords:** child trafficking, child labour migration, discourse, Benin

### **Introduction**

Benin has long been identified as an “epicenter” of the international traffic in children (Aide et Action, 2005). This paper contends that it is not. Using interviews and participant observation conducted with groups of adolescents identified as trafficked – girls who have been in domestic service or market work and boys currently or formerly engaged in quarry-work – the paper argues that the discourse of trafficking rests on narrow, received ideas that do not correspond to the empirics of young Beninese lives. The trafficking discourse constructs adolescent departures from the family home as the result of corrupted tradition (particularly in the form of ‘child placement’), economic crisis, or criminality. It also portrays them as near always abusive. Our data, however, suggest that things are much more complex, and often a good deal more benign. Teenagers are often highly agentive in their movement, and whether it is they or their families who decide that they should migrate for work, they do so in the pursuit of personal and familial advancement. As such, what is

characterized as trafficking would be better understood (and responded to) as youth labour migration.

### **Research Context**

Child trafficking emerged as *the* major child protection issue across the Majority World at the start of the last decade (Castle & Diarra, 2003; Hashim, 2003; Huijsmans & Baker, 2012; O’Connell Davidson, 2011; Thorsen, 2007). This was no more apparent than in Benin, where two high-profile events saw trafficking catapulted to the status of “Number One” social policy challenge. The first was the interception of a Nigerian trawler smuggling Beninese adolescents to work in Gabon. The second was the high-profile “rescue” of Beninese teenage labour migrants working in the artisanal quarries of Abeokuta, Nigeria. Both episodes saw young workers identified as “slaves”, and both led to Benin’s being tarred as the new “epicenter” of the international traffic in children (Alber, 2011; Feneyrol & TDH, 2005; Howard, 2011, 2012; Morganti, 2007, 2011).

It was in this context that your two authors began separately working in Benin in the mid-2000s. Though previously well-versed in the horror stories characteristic of mainstream trafficking discourse, neither of us was prepared for how inaccurate those stories would appear. Indeed, our work with young labour migrants defined as “trafficked” quickly revealed the disjuncture between institutional representations of child trafficking and the lived realities of those represented as trafficked. It was in order to explore this disjuncture that we each began our parallel doctoral research.

Neil’s research involved examining what had been identified as one of country’s “classic” examples of trafficking – that of teenage boys moving from the Zou region of Southern Benin to the artisanal quarries of Abeokuta in Nigeria. Neil

selected four case study villages from the Zou region, and in these villages he purposively sampled former migrants to the quarries, those involved in the migrant labour network linking the region to the quarries, and village authorities. He also conducted a short period of targeted fieldwork during which he spent time in and around the quarries of Abeokuta themselves, observing the living and working conditions and interviewing representatives of the key actors engaged in the quarry economy.

Simona's research concerned the widespread tradition of child fostering (*"vidomègon"* in the local Fon language), which is considered one of the major elements of trafficking in Southern Benin. After a first period of fieldwork designed to develop a better understanding of Beninese family structure, traditional education and child socialization, she examined the "new" forms of child placement and child labour migration from a gender perspective. She focused on the living and working conditions of girls of rural origin, aged between 10 and 15, who had been employed in domestic service or who were currently working as domestics and ambulant sellers in Cotonou (Benin's *de facto* capital). Simona collected girls' life stories in various shelters for underage people in difficult situations and in Cotonou's Dantokpa market.

## **Discourse**

The child trafficking discourse in Benin rests on a kind of "pathological paradigm". This paradigm constructs youth work and youth migration for work as inherently problematic. This is because work and migration are seen by child protection actors to belong to an "adult sphere" from which children should be protected and sheltered (see Baker & Huijsmans 2012; De Lange, 2007; Hashim, 2003; Hashim & Thorsen 2012; Howard, 2011; Morganti 2008, 2011; O'Connell

Davidson & Farrow, 2007; Whitehead et al., 2007) As a result, all labour-related departures from the family home – whether involving young children relocated to work on domestic tasks within the extended family or adolescents migrating to earn some money – are understood as somehow pathological, and the result of un-willed, extraneous cause-factors such as poverty, corrupted tradition, criminal trickery, or parental naivety (Howard 2011, 2012).

### **Box 7.1 Child Labor**

Child labor does not just refer to work done by children. While many forms of work completed by children are harmless and considered to be positive, other forms of work are harmful or exploitative. The ILO defines child labor as “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.” Laws regulating children’s work vary from country to country. The age at which children can legally be employed, the types of work they may perform, and number of work hours are some of the factors that determine whether children’s work is considered to be child labor. Child labor has implications for children’s health, education, safety, and social development. Child labor is present in all countries, but varies from region to region. It takes place in formal sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture, and informal economies such as begging and scavenging.

#### **For further information:**

ILO Fact Sheet: What is Child Labor

<http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/facts/lang--en/index.htm>

Child Labor: A Textbook for University Students

<http://www.ilo.org/ipeccinfo/product/download.do;jsessionid=b12fe9c9a4efea26855c31e6f39b75b952e16c78089077e00cb0b536edf17859.e3aTbhULbNmSe34MchaRah8Tbx10?type=document&id=174>

A crucial sub-element in Benin’s trafficking discourse revolves around the Fon term *vidomègon* (“child who is with someone”). The socio-cultural phenomenon of *vidomègon* is predicated on the idea of collective education designed to foster

social solidarity within the extended family. It involves rural children temporarily being entrusted to a relation in town, who is supposed to offer opportunities to the child that are absent in more remote areas (Morganti, 2006, 2008). Those who take in *vidomègon* children are considered responsible for those children's informal education. Biological parents are often not seen as good educators because they are seen as too soft and, therefore, unable to prepare the young for the tough realities of life. *Vidomègon* children are thus sent to town to “toughen them up” and prepare them for the future. In return for the care, lodging and protection they receive in the city (Stella, 1996), they are expected to demonstrate obedience and respect for the adults who host them, as well as to help with domestic chores and to help the family business (Morganti, 2007, p. 90-1).

The engagement of children in this kind of productive economic activity is not considered problematic by most Southern Beninese. Across the region encompassing Benin and Togo, the practice of socializing children through economic activity is well established, possessing in Fon the name “*djoko*”, which refers to forms of child work that are both remunerative and convey social responsibility. This is indeed common in much of West Africa, as children are quickly incorporated into the productive collective, according to their capacity.

### **Box 7.2 Convention 182 Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour**

The Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention was adopted by the International Labour Organization on June 17, 1999 and entered into force on November 19, 2000. The convention identifies poverty as the cause of child labour and seeks to eradicate the worst forms of child labor, assist in the recovery and integration of child workers, and provide support for families. The convention defines a child as any person under the age of 18. Worst forms of child labor include:

- “(a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
- (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
- (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.”

#### **For further information:**

Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour

[http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C182](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182)

Increasingly, however, *djoko* and *vidomègon* are demonized and criminalized – seen by child protection actors as *equivalent to child trafficking*, with the words *djoko* and *vidomègon* themselves often used as direct translations for the term “trafficking”. The best illustration of this widespread discursive construction can be found in Benin’s nationwide anti-trafficking “sensitization campaign” centering on the film and cartoon strip *Ana, Bazil et le Trafiquant*. We will discuss it at some length below as it represents an archetype of formal discourse.

**Image 1: Cartoon Image of Ana from *Ana, Bazil et le Trafiquant***



Created as part of UNICEF’s anti-trafficking work in the early 2000s, “Ana, Bazil and the Trafficker” is the story of a bright young girl, Ana, from a poor village in Southern Benin. The story opens with scenes depicting Ana’s home life, her love of school, her housework, and the struggles her family face to get by. Shortly thereafter, the arrival of a mysterious stranger heralds the shattering of Ana’s world. The smooth-talking outsider approaches Ana’s loving, yet misguided, parents and begins to persuade them that Ana does not need to remain in school, that she could migrate for work and help the family, and that if she came with him he would be able to place her in a wealthy household that should set her up for life. The man thus implicitly invokes the notions of *djoko* and *vidomègon* and though at first reluctant, Ana’s parents are ultimately persuaded to acquiesce to his suggestion.

At this point in the narrative, “The Trafficker” secretly reveals his plan to take Ana and sell her into servitude. The audience are thereby led to see how the combination of his deviance, Ana’s parents’ well-intentioned ignorance, and their acceptance of “corrupted” and problematic tradition mean that she is lost. Fortunately

for both Ana and the audience, however, Ana's young classmate, Bazil, gets wind of The Trafficker's plan and is able to alert the authorities just after Ana leaves. In the penultimate segment of the story, before the police arrive to rescue her, we see Ana in bondage, an abused *vidomègon* working and being mistreated as a domestic servant. The contrast between her state at this point and her delight at being rescued could not be more stark. The message offered by the cartoon, then, is clear: it is the safe, caring, and protective parental nest, twinned with the school, that represents the appropriate place for children to develop. These differ absolutely from The Trafficker, who embodies at once a real, material threat and also the metaphorical nefariousness that awaits innocence upon its pre-emptive entrance into the world of the "economy", including through *vidomègon* or *djoko*. Though the tale features a young, female protagonist, it is intended to represent the reality of all young labour migrants, including boys heading off to work in sectors other than domestic service.

### **Youth Labour Mobility**

It is not our contention that child and young workers, youth labour migrants, or those involved in *djoko* and *vidomègon* are always free from exploitation. Nor do we wish to suggest that *djoko* and *vidomègon* have remained unchanged by the entrenchment of capitalism or the concomitant evolution in Southern Beninese social relations. Far from it. Tradition is never static and child or youth work are not always positive. What our data demonstrate, however, is that the trafficking discourse is fundamentally reductive, since it simplistically equates all *djoko*, *vidomègon*, and youth labour migration with trafficking. Yet the empirics of youth work and youth labour mobility involve a great deal more nuance than this. In the following section,

we will seek to highlight that nuance, drawing on our examination of the conditions and context of youth work in and around Southern Benin to do so.

### ***Decision Makers***

Before we begin to address the conditions and context of youth work, we must first offer a word about *who decides* for children to engage in that work. Where the trafficking discourse implies that decisions are pathological, resulting from trickery, ignorance, or something similar, our research disagrees, showing the labour departure almost always to be highly considered and agentic. As is consistent with social and developmental norms across the African continent, the decision for younger children to leave is almost always taken by the child's parent or guardian (Morganti, 2011). By contrast, when children enter their mid- to late-teens, and as they are both afforded and expected to take on a greater degree of independence, it is more frequently *they* who decide on their own behalf that they are going to migrate for work.

As such, in Simona's research with younger girls who had been sent to the city to a relative or acquaintance in order to work as a domestic servant or market girl, girls frequently reported that they "agreed with" or "were happy with" the decision that their parents had made on their behalf. Neil found similar things with boys, with those who were sent to Nigeria's quarries and those who were sent to undertake non-rural "apprenticeships" in order to acquire practical experience and relieve some of the economic burden felt by the family in the village.

Things were different, however, with older teenage girls and boys. Some of the girls Simona interviewed had decided autonomously to move in order to gain freedom or to find the money necessary to marry. For the boys Neil worked with, money was another central motivator, as will be discussed below, and parents rarely if

ever stood in the way of the decision made – since it was understood and considered normal for adolescent boys to begin to articulate their independence through their *djoko* migratory departure.

### ***Content and Context of Work***

The story presented in *Ana, Bazil et le Trafiquant* is said to be “typical” of the trafficking/work experienced by young people in Benin. Our research suggests that this is not the case. In this section, we will discuss the nature and context of the work that our interviewees experienced. We will begin with the teenage girls Simona worked with in Benin’s rescue shelters.

These girls were mostly teenagers who had been through more than one “placement” as a domestic servant and had decided to leave their last employer’s house. They had generally dropped out of the village school after one or two years in order to follow an “auntie” – often a woman from the extended family – who came to the village looking for a young helper to take back with her to the city. Though often this relationship was described in traditional *vidomègon* terms, it was clear that that the girls and her parents expected some form of remuneration from the contract. Often parents received a symbolic amount of money (5,000 CFA, equivalent to \$X USD) or some gifts (alcohol, fabric), but in general they had to wait for wages to flow as work progressed.

After a few months of domestic and commercial training with the “auntie” and her foster family, the “auntie”, legally considered a trafficker, then places her *vidomègon* with another employer who agrees to pay for the domestic work the girl will perform. Generally, the employer pays the auntie for this service, and the auntie sends money to the girl’s parents every two or three months, promising that she will

eventually give the girl a dowry (money, clothes, household tools) when the girl finishes her contract and returns to the village to get married.

Inevitably, given the sample, the girls in the shelters had all had abusive experiences in this kind of labour arrangement, with most affirming that their host families had no consideration for their well-being. Many said that they were exposed to discrimination, facing various privations, having to do excessive work (12-16 hours a day, 6 days a week) and at times being subject to physical violence. In this, their experiences clearly recalled those of *Ana*, and it would be fair to say that they had, in a legal sense, been “trafficked”. However, and in contrast to *Ana*, none of these girls wanted to go home, none were ready to give up their urban experience, despite its hardships, as all instead wanted to stay in the city but with a “better employer”, who would pay them well, help them to start a small business or arrange for them an apprenticeship (hairdressing, dressmaking) alongside their job.

Unlike the girls in care, the teenagers Simona interviewed working in Dantokpa market still lived with their host families or with their employers. They too were considered victims of trafficking simply because they were working children away from their parents’ homes, even if the work they did often involved performing the same tasks as girls working alongside their own mothers. The lives of these market girls revolve around trade and they spend about 12-14 hours a day in the streets. Some of them already have their own business and the women they live with act as “economic godmothers” who support and train them. The teenagers divide their time between working for these “godmothers” and working on their own account.

From their point of view, being an itinerant saleswoman is better than being a domestic servant as it has the dual advantage of breaking their isolation and giving them some important economic training. When Simona interviewed them, many took

pride in showing the various “tricks of the trade” that they had picked up, and all claimed to want to dedicate themselves to trade. In their opinion, the skills they had learned were crucial, setting them up for life. Although sometimes their work involved unpleasant customer exchanges and occasional exploitation by their “godmothers”, none lamented being away from home or school and none wished to stop what they were doing.

Many parallels exist between these experiences and those documented by Neil among teenage boys working in Abeokuta’s shallow, gravel-pit quarries. These quarries are operated by the Beninese expatriate community, which provides the labour necessary to extract the gravel. Each small pit is run by a Beninese “boss” who oversees the work of a small gang of Beninese teenage workers. Though they are formally viewed as victims of “child trafficking”, in reality these teenage boys are all contracted teenage labour migrants engaged in a period of *djoko*, to which all have offered their consent. Each teenager works six days a week for his boss, and his boss is responsible for sheltering and feeding him. At the end of the two-year contract, each worker receives 140,000 FCFA (about \$260 USD, or an equivalent sum in material terms, e.g., a motorbike). All boys are free to work for themselves on their day off, or when they have completed their day’s work for their boss. Though their work is physically demanding, they work in groups of three, with the biggest and strongest pick-axing the ground, the second strongest shoveling the gravel, and the smallest sifting it through a filter. There is a good feeling in the quarries and a lot of jovial banter amongst the workers. All take breaks and they share the workload between them. So while no one ever denies that the work is hard, rarely does anyone claim that it is any worse than the farm work that would occupy them “at home”.

## ***We Move for the Money***

When analyzing the reasons given by these teenage boys and girls for their migration to work, the chance to make some money was almost universally identified as the single most significant motivating factor. This is not to say that money was the only factor – indeed, as will be seen below, acquiring social status, experiencing something beyond the village, or becoming socialized into responsible, economically active adulthood were all also important. Nonetheless, and in almost all our interviews, money was the most prominent explanation. This can be illustrated first with Jack’s migration experience, as documented by Neil at the site of Abeokuta’s quarries.

### Jack

Jack was a 15-year-old boy from a village on the border between Za-Kpota *commune* and the *commune* of Bohicon in Benin. Neil interviewed him in Abeokuta at the site of his place of work. He was open, friendly, and confident. The encounter was very cheerful.

Jack came to Abeokuta in 2011 and needed to work in the quarries for another year, in order to complete the standard two-year contract. In return for his labor, he was to receive a motorbike at the end of his two years, which was the price agreed between him, his parents, and his *patron* (boss). On top of this, Jack also worked in his free time and “on his own account”. He said that he was able to earn around 2000 Naira (about \$12 USD) every week by working overtime. His relationship with his boss was also very good and he claimed that he was not mistreated, never shouted at, and was well fed.

Jack was saving his money week-by-week and aiming to return to Benin in order to set himself up in a trade. When Neil asked him why he came to Nigeria, *he was very clear that his goal was to earn money*. Work here was much better than it was at home, he believed, because here he could earn a lot and also got to keep what he earned. *Though the work was hard, earning money made it all worthwhile*. Jack was also very clear that working on the family farm was much more physically demanding than in the gravel pits, even though the former was legal while the latter was not. He was strongly opposed to any laws forbidding young people such as him to migrate to Nigeria to work.

Though Jack is male and his experience as well as his motivations are influenced by the different gender norms that pertain to young males and females in Benin, Simona's research revealed strong parallels among the teenage girls she worked with. This was perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the money-centered narrative frequently recounted by the shelter girls she interviewed who had worked in domestic service. According to them, though they had been unlucky in their domestic placements, if you were a *formally salaried* young housemaid – a *bonne* – you were “made” and your conditions were to be envied, since your job would be “quantified” and that means that every month you can “touch” your own money (10,000 - 15,000 FCFA, equivalent to \$20 - 25 USD).

Dantokpa's market girls were also highly attuned to the importance of pecuniary gain. All admitted loving the freedom that money offers in Cotonou and all were convinced that in town, even with a few coins, you can always get by – “If you can keep 25 francs, you've already found something to eat!”, one would often hear them say. Moreover, when Simona quizzed them on their main reasons for being in the city and working in the market, all explicitly cited the desire to earn money as key. Often they would relate their dream of being able to buy a house for their mothers or for their parents, and to set themselves and their loved ones up in a better future.

What these data all point to, of course, is that money matters to these girls and boys, as it does to people everywhere where economic and social relations are mediated by cash, and in particular where that cash is hard to come by. For these young people, in contrast to the trafficking narrative, migrating is a means to access that which they need in order to advance their life projects.

## *Relationships and Transitions*

It is important to note, however, that though earning money underpins all labour migration, we should not see that labour migration simplistically in terms of one-dimensional, personal financial gain. Other factors are important – especially the desire to fulfill one’s social responsibility by providing for one’s family, or the desire to attain autonomy and social status.

In the anthropology of Southern Beninese societies, the importance of kinship relationships and social ties is understood as paramount. According to traditional educational practice, children belong to their lineage (Rabain, 1979) and they are therefore not socialized as individuals but as members of a larger group of relatives to whom they have collective responsibilities (Morganti, 2006). It is for this reason that child mobility and child participation in the family economy form natural parts of the socialization process. As such, it should come as no surprise that for many of the young labour migrants we interviewed, being able to send money home or “saving to put a roof on [your] father’s house” were crucial motivations in their individual experience.

So too was the development of social capital. A high level of labour-related mobility is an integral part of young Beninese lives precisely because that mobility is a strategy that will allow the young both to maintain pre-existing social bonds (with families and with the village of origin) *and* to create new ones (with foster families, employers, patrons, clients, companions, etc.). As is the case in many poor societies, expanding personal networks in this fashion represents a way to overcome the risks and problems of economic isolation. Dantokpa’s market girls are perfectly aware of this. In Simona’s research, many stated that their staying in Cotonou and working

with expert vendors would link their family and the agricultural products they produce with a much wider market.

Personal socio-cultural transitions not linked directly to economic factors are also important in the youth experience of labour migration in Benin (Imorou, 2008). Many of Simona's female interviewees cited the social freedom and emancipation that came from being in the city as of real importance to them. Consequently, though often they would lament the excessive instability related to their employment, few wished to give it up in order to return home before they had had their fill of city life. In cases of difficulty, most attempted to mobilize their urban social networks in order to find alternative employment instead (Jacquemin, 2012).

Neil's research with migrant boys in Abeokuta provided similar data. Central to young male calculations was the desire to attain respect and status. Indeed, one of the major motifs Neil heard when discussing with interviewees the value of labour migration was that, if the migrant were successful, this would allow him to become "considered". Being "considered" (or "known") in Southern Benin means being well thought-of or respected as an important or successful person. It is an essential goal for many young males, and successful migration is a principal means of achieving it. Numerous interviewees thus explained that returning from Abeokuta with material goods such as a motorbike, clothes, or a generator represented visible evidence of an individual's success and thus constituted a material path to their being "considered" by those around them on their return.

### **Major Implications**

What are the major implications of the discussion outlined above? The first and most simple is of course that anti-trafficking discourse falls well short of

accuracy. As our data attest, the labour-related mobility of children and adolescents in Benin, even where it is abusive, remains a good deal more complex, nuanced, and socio-economically grounded than is suggested by the narrative captured in *Ana, Bazil et le Trafiquant*. Instead of child trafficking, we would do better to focus on and discuss child and youth labour migration.

Second, if the disjuncture between discourse and reality is as severe as we suggest, it would imply that the policies designed to “protect” young Beninese people from trafficking are likely to be largely ineffective, if not at times outright counterproductive. Of course, this conclusion is somewhat intuitive – a policy that aims to fix a problem which does not exist is unlikely to achieve its intended results. This is a conclusion that is also supported by our empirical data.

The fundamental actions aimed at combating child trafficking in Benin are: prevention of any child mobility by the adoption of strict laws on child displacement, awareness-raising activities about the risks of migration and child work; detection, care and support of presumed victims; repatriation of presumed victims to their home villages (Howard, 2013). Nearly all anti-trafficking actions in Benin have followed this protocol for almost a decade. Our research suggests that they are futile.

To give only two examples, first, in Neil’s case, work in Zou villages targeted with the anti-trafficking message that “migration is dangerous” or that “migration is trafficking” shows how little such messages are heeded. While most have heard them, very few take any notice whatsoever. This is precisely because people understand these messages to be based on false premises. Most often, therefore, migrants or those involved in their migration simply ignore attempts to dissuade or prevent their movement. As one teenager explained in a focus group discussion – “what they say goes in one ear and comes out the other”.

At other times, people pretend to take on board the messages they hear, but only because doing so will see them avoid further reprimand (for example, if the message comes from a school-teacher), or because it is believed that by pretending to “play the game”, they might be able to entice outsiders to bring rewards for their compliance. In this, the words of one interviewee were particularly telling:

**Neil:** Do you guys just pretend then [to the organizations trying to stop you moving]?

**Artur:** Yes, of course. We say “ok” in the hope that they’ll bring something, but they bring nothing.

**Neil:** Wouldn’t it be better to be honest and just tell them the truth that their message is useless?

**Artur:** Sometimes we do. But if we say that or tell them to go away and they don’t come back, they will just speak far away on the radio and we will have no chance of getting anything from them.

Our second example is from Simona’s research. From this, and in particular from the life stories recounted by girls in care shelters, we see how counterproductive and ultimately naive are attempts to repatriate “trafficking victims” to their “home” villages. After a few weeks in care, “rescued” girls are accompanied back to their villages and their parents are encouraged to put them in an apprenticeship or send them to school. Since most of the girls do not want to return to their village, however, do not consider themselves victims, and would prefer to continue their life in the city, these attempts are likely doomed to failure. The following extracts make this especially clear:

*Sabine* is about 13. She left her employer's house but she knows that there is no job for her in Abomey and her scars show that her biological mother can be violent too. She wants to remain in Cotonou where hopes to find "someone better" to work for. She is adamant she will return.

*Mama* is about 14. She comes from Parakou and she is in Cotonou for her own business and for her mother's one. She had to work for free to receive some merchandise for her mother. She left her mother's creditor because she was a "bad woman" that always accused her, but she doesn't want to go back to the village "before finishing" in the city.

*Francine* is about 12. She has experienced more than three domestic placements. Her situation is very complicated but she is clear that she doesn't want to go back and stay with her father. She wants to stay with her grandmother in Porto Novo, to work as housemaid and to start an apprenticeship.

For any migrant in Southern Benin, returning home before having successfully accomplished what he or she has set out to achieve means failure. Migrants, including these young ones, are unwilling to position themselves as victims who have failed, but rather see themselves as workers, in need of good or better work (Morganti, Forthcoming). Are policies that seek to repatriate them really in their best interests? And will they manage to prevent the determined from migrating once again?

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that anti-child trafficking discourse is overly simplistic. What is depicted as trafficking in Benin is, according to our research, very often nothing of the sort. Though some of those we have worked with can be considered victims of

exploitation, very few would class themselves as anything other than young labour migrants, all working hard, some excessively so, but all moving and working in a social and economic context that values both their labour and their mobility. Until the official narrative is able to reflect this nuance, the policies to which it is related will fail appropriately to respond. It is high time for that to change.

## References

- Adihou A. (1998). *Les Enfants Placés au Bénin*. Cotonou : Anti-Slavery International & ESAM.
- Aide et Action (2005). *La problématique des “vidomègons” et du trafic des enfants au Bénin : Regard sur une pratique sociale pervertie*. Cotonou: Aide et Action.
- Alber, E. (2011). Child Trafficking in West Africa. In Gonzalez, A. M. et al. (Eds.), *Frontiers of Globalization: Kinship and Family Structure in Africa* (pp. 71-93). London: Africa World Press
- Baker, S. and Huijsmans, R. (2012). .Child Trafficking: “Worst Form” of Child Labour, or Worst Approach to Young Migrants?, *Development & Change*, 43/4, 919-946.
- Castle, S., and Diarra. A. (2003). The International Migration of Young Malians: Tradition, Necessity, or Rite of Passage?. *Research Report*. London: School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.
- De Lange, A. (2007). Child Labour Migration And Trafficking In Rural Burkina Faso. *International Migration*, 45(2) 147-167.
- Feneyrol and Fondation Terre des Hommes (TdH) (2005). *Les Petites Mains des Carrières: Enquête sur un Trafic d’Enfant entre le Bénin et le Nigéria*. Lausanne: Terre des Hommes.
- Hashim, I.M. (2003). Child Migration: Pathological or Positive?. Paper Presented at the International Workshop on Migration and Poverty in West Africa. Brighton: University of Sussex.
- Hashim, I. and Thorsen, D. (2011). *Child Migration in Africa*. Uppsala: The Nordic

- Africa Institute and London: Zed Books.
- Howard, N.P. (2011). Is “Child Placement” Trafficking? Questioning the Validity of an Accepted Discourse’. *Anthropology Today*, 27(6) 3-8.
- Howard, N.P. (2012). An Overview of Anti-Child Trafficking Discourse and Policy in Southern Benin. *Childhood*, 20(2), 554-558.
- Howard, N.P. (2013). Promoting “Healthy Childhoods” and Keeping Children ‘At Home’: Beninese Anti-Trafficking Policy in Times of Neoliberalism. *International Migration*, 51(4), 87-102.
- Jacquemin, M., (2012). *Petites bonnes’ d’Abidjan. Sociologie des filles en service domestique*. Paris : L’Harmattan.
- Morganti S., (2006). Il bambino comunitario. Pratiche di socializzazione infantile nel Sud Bénin. In Viti F. (Ed.), *Antropologia dei rapporti di dipendenza personale* (pp. 105-139). Modena: Il Fiorino.
- Morganti S., (2007). Il lavoro dei bambini in Bénin. In Solinas P.G. (Ed.). *La vita in prestito: debito, lavoro, dipendenza* (pp. 75-104). Lecce: Argo.
- Morganti S., (2008). *Bambini dell’altro mondo. Rituali, mobilità e lavoro nell’infanzia del Benin meridionale*, Tesi per il conseguimento del titolo di Dottore di Ricerca in Scienze del Linguaggio e della Cultura, ind. Antropologia e Storia del Mondo Moderno e Contemporaneo, Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia.
- Morganti S., (2011). La mobilità dei minori in Benin. Migrazione o tratta ?. In Bellagamba A. (Ed.). *Migrazioni. Dal lato dell’Africa* (pp. 127-156), Padova: Edizioni Altravista.
- Morganti S., (Forthcoming), Victims of what? The misunderstandings of anti-trafficking child protection policies in Benin. In Hopkins L., Sriprakash A.

- (Eds.). *The "Poor Child": The Cultural Politics of Education, Development and Childhood*. London: Routledge.
- O'Connell Davidson, J. And Farrow, C. (2007). *Child Migration and the Construction of Vulnerability*. Gothenburg: Save the Children Sweden.
- O'Connell Davidson, J. (2011). Moving children? Child Trafficking, Child Migration, and Child Rights. *Critical Social Policy*, 31(3), 454-477.
- Rabain J., (1979). *L'enfant du lignage. Du sevrage à la classe d'âge chez les Wolof du Sénégal*. Paris : Payot.
- Thorsen, D. (2007). "If Only I Get Enough Money for a Bicycle!" A Study of Child Migration Against a Backdrop of Exploitation and Trafficking in Burkina Faso. *Occasional Paper*. Centre for African Studies, University of Copenhagen.
- Whitehead, A. and Hashim, I.M. and Iversen, V. (2007). Child Migration, Child Agency and Inter-generational Relations in Africa and South Asia. *Working Paper T24, Working Paper Series*, Migration DRC, University of Sussex.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. According to Howard and Morganti, how do their findings contradict dominant discourses about trafficking?
2. Based on the chapter, what are some of the unintended outcomes of laws and policies intended to protect vulnerable groups?
3. According to the chapter, what are the misunderstandings of the ways in which young people migrate for work in Benin? How are these important to debates about trafficking policy?

4. What factors should policy makers take into account when devising anti-trafficking policies in Benin and elsewhere?
5. Why might antitrafficking measures not serve the interest of those they are intended to protect?

### **Addition Resources**

See *Ana, Bazil et le Trafiquant* here :

[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xeebps\\_anna-bazil-et-le-trafiquant\\_shortfilms](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xeebps_anna-bazil-et-le-trafiquant_shortfilms)