

---

## LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF CONGOLESE SKILLED MIGRANTS RETURNED FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO THE CONGO

---

INAKA Saint José♦

Date de réception : le 02/07/2024

Date d'acceptation : le 20/07/2024

### **Abstract**

This study focuses on the labour market integration of skilled Congolese migrants who have returned from South Africa to the Congo. It combines the theory of return migration with the concepts of labour incorporation and labour allocation to analyse the experiences of Congolese returnees. The research argues that the presence of Congolese-South African networks played a crucial role in facilitating the process of return migration and the labour integration of Congolese migrants upon their return. By employing qualitative research methods, the study reveals that South African employers showed a preference for hiring Congolese graduates who had studied at South African universities rather than those who had attended local Congolese universities. Furthermore, the collaboration between South African employers' networks and the workers' supply networks formed by Congolese return migrants contributed to the labour incorporation and allocation among the returnees. This study emphasizes the significance of social networks and connections in facilitating labour market opportunities for returning migrants.

**Keywords:** Labour market integration, labour incorporation, labour allocation, strong and weak ties, social networks, returned migration, transnational networks

### **Résumé**

*Cette étude se concentre sur l'intégration des migrants congolais qualifiés qui sont revenus d'Afrique du Sud au Congo dans le marché du travail. Elle combine la théorie de la migration de retour avec les concepts d'incorporation et d'allocation de la main-d'œuvre pour analyser les expériences des rapatriés congolais. La recherche soutient que la présence de réseaux congolais-sud-africains a joué un rôle crucial dans la facilitation du processus de migration de retour et de l'intégration professionnelle des migrants congolais à leur retour. En utilisant des méthodes de recherche qualitative, l'étude révèle que les employeurs sud-africains préfèrent recruter des diplômés congolais ayant étudié dans des universités sud-africaines plutôt que ceux ayant fréquenté des universités locales congolaises. De plus, la collaboration entre les réseaux d'employeurs sud-africains et les réseaux d'approvisionnement en main-d'œuvre formés par les anciens migrants congolais a contribué à l'incorporation et à l'allocation de la main-d'œuvre parmi les rapatriés. Cette étude souligne l'importance des réseaux sociaux et des connexions dans la facilitation des opportunités sur le marché du travail pour les migrants de retour.*

---

## INTRODUCTION

**T**his study explores Congolese return migration from South Africa and the labour market integration experiences of Congolese graduates from South African universities into South African-owned private companies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). By focusing on the processes of return migration and labour market integration, the study seeks to understand why these graduates decided to return to the Congo, how they obtained information about job opportunities in the country, and why and how South African employers hired them in their companies.

Drawing on Cassarino's theory of return migration, the argument is made that Congolese graduates from South African universities returned to the Congo because they felt prepared and equipped to participate in the labour market, thanks to the skills and qualifications they acquired in South Africa. Their confidence in being hired and securing better job positions by South African employers motivated their decision to return to their home country and work for South African-owned private companies in the Congo. Additionally, a range of factors, actors, and conditions in both the Congo and South Africa, including the personal characteristics and experiences of the Congolese returnees, influenced their return migration.

The study also uses Peck's theory of labour market social regulation, particularly the concepts of labour incorporation and labour allocation. It argues that Congolese returnees accessed information about job opportunities through formal and/or informal channels, which facilitated their integration into the labour market in the Congo. Furthermore, South African

---

\* Il est un docteur en sociologie, diplômé de l'Université de Pretoria (République Sud-Africaine). Actuellement, il occupe le poste d'enseignant-chercheur au département des Sciences du travail à l'Université de Kinshasa (République Démocratique du Congo), tout en poursuivant ses recherches postdoctorales à la Chaire de l'Économie Politique de la Migration dans la SADC (the SARCHi Chair : the Political Economy of Migration in the SADC) à l'Université de Pretoria (République Sud-Africaine). Ses travaux de recherche se concentrent sur l'emploi, le marché du travail, la migration congolaise, la gérontologie, le transnationalisme politique, et l'intégration régionale. e-mail : stjoeinaka@gmail.com

employers hired the Congolese returnees and assigned them to positions that matched their skills and qualifications.

The data for this study were collected through qualitative research methods, including desk research and interviews conducted from 2016 to 2019. Twelve Congolese returnees were interviewed in Kinshasa, and their insights revealed that agreements between employers and employees, the transfer of employees by employers to their home countries, and the preference of employers to hire graduates from South African universities shaped the return migration and labour market integration of the Congolese returnees in the Congo.

To triangulate the data, interviews were also conducted with human resources executives from telecommunications companies to provide comparative and third-party perspectives.

The chapter is structured into four sections. The first section reviews the existing literature on return migration from South Africa, highlighting the lack of attention to Congolese migrants returning from foreign countries. The second section explains how data on the labour market insertion of Congolese returnees were generated in the Congo. The third section demonstrates the utility of Cassarino's theory of return migration and Peck's concepts of labour incorporation and labour allocation as theoretical frameworks for this study. The last section analyses how Congolese returnees accessed information about job openings, as well as the role of South African multinational companies, employer recruitment networks, and Congolese return migrant workers' supply networks in facilitating the return and labour market integration of Congolese graduates from South African universities in the Congo.

## **1. On Congolese Return migration from South Africa**

It is currently surprised that a limited attention is given to international return migration in the existing body of literature on international migration. Return migration, which refers to migrants voluntarily going back to their home country after residing abroad, has been considered less significant compared to the initial migration itself. This has led researchers to focus more on the factors driving international migration and pay less attention to the factors influencing return migration (Black and King 2004; Cassarino 2004; Azose and Raftery 2019; King and Kuschminder 2022).

One of the reasons for this lack of emphasis on return migration is the perception that it marks the end of the migration journey and is therefore less important (King and Kuschminder 2022). Additionally, measuring and tracking return migration can be challenging due to factors such as migrants not reporting their return or making multiple return trips, making it difficult for researchers to obtain accurate statistics on the scale and scope of return migration (Azose and Raftery 2019; King and Kuschminder 2022).

While there has been a growing interest in studying return migration and its impact on the home country in recent years, there is still a scarcity of research on this topic in Africa, particularly in the global south (King and Kuschminder 2022). Although there is a significant amount of research on migration of African people to South Africa, much less attention has been given to studying return migration from South Africa. Studies have explored the reasons behind migration to South Africa, including economic opportunities (Moodie and Ndatshe 1994; Wentzel and Tlabela 2006; Kalitanyi and Visser 2010), political instability (Llitas 2009), and family reunification (Glaser 2012), as well as the challenges faced by migrants in the country, such as labour discrimination (Morris and Bouillon 2001; Chikarara 2016; 2019), xenophobia (Dodson 2010; Tewolde 2020), ethnicity/racism (Gordon and Maharaj 2015), and institutional discrimination against refugees (Rugunanan and Smit 2011; Gordon 2016).

The same lack of focus on return migration applies to Congolese migrants in South Africa. While numerous studies have examined various aspects of Congolese immigration into South Africa, such as the historical context (Morris and Bouillon 2001; Vigouroux 2008), asylum and refugee issues (Atam 2004; Amisi 2006; Rugunanan and Smit 2011), labour market integration and/or survival strategies (Amisi and Ballard 2005; Inaka 2017), remittances (Kankonde 2010), transnational politics (Inaka 2016; Vuninga 2021), social adaptation (Steinberg 2005), and the hot topic of xenophobia (Morris 1998; Kabwe-Segatti 2008), very few studies have specifically addressed the subject of return migration.

These studies mention that the return migration of Congolese individuals gained momentum when former political refugees and opponents of former president Mobutu, as well as former officials seeking refuge, returned to the DRC following certain political events (Inaka and Trapido 2015). However, these studies were not primarily focused on Congolese return migration from South Africa and did not delve into the strategies adopted by Congolese graduates from South African universities to find employment

opportunities or why these returnees seemed to be preferred by private employers in the DRC. Therefore, this study wants to address these gaps in the literature. To this end, this study used qualitative research and desk-research to collect data on Congolese highly skilled return migrants from South Africa and their insertions into labour market in the Congo.

## **2. Research Methods**

This research was conducted in Kinshasa from 2016 to 2019, with a qualitative approach using a multi-actor perspective. The study involved in-depth qualitative interviews with a total of 109 respondents across distinct categories.

The first category of informants consisted of 17 Congolese senior executives from public and private labour market institutions. The second category included historians, lawyers, economists, and sociologists who had studied the Congolese labour market, with 14 informants interviewed. The third category involved religious and traditional leaders, politicians, human rights activists, army officers, and journalists, totalising 21 informants known for their ability to find jobs for their protégées.

Although these informants provided valuable insights into the functioning, regulations, and problems of integration into the Congolese labour market, some of them expressed concerns that South African-owned companies in the Congo prefer to hire Congolese graduates from Anglophone countries. Furthermore, many of these informants were not aware of the labour market integration of the returnees, despite their significant influence on the labour market in the Congo.

The most important category for the study comprised Congolese employees from private sector companies. A total of 57 informants were interviewed, including 15 in construction, 17 in retail, and 25 in telecommunications. Among these informants, 12 were returnees, and their life stories were explored. These 12 returnees were further divided into three groups.

The first group consisted of three engineers working at Vodacom. They returned to Congo as part of their employment agreement with Vodacom, which included funding their studies at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in Pretoria. After completing their studies, they were supposed to return to Congo to work for Vodacom. This shows how employer-employee agreements influenced their return migration and labour market integration.



The second group included three managers working for Shoprite in Kinshasa. Their families funded their studies in South African universities, and after finding jobs at Shoprite in South Africa, they were sent to work for Shoprite in Kinshasa. Similar journeys were reported by seven managers in total, indicating that employers' transnational recruitment and transfer of managers contributed to their return migration and labour market integration.

The third group consisted of three engineers working for Airtel and another three for Africell. These engineers willingly decided to leave South Africa and return to Congo because South African employers preferred to hire Congolese engineers trained in South African universities. Here, the preference of South African employers for Congolese graduates drove the return migration and labour incorporation of these engineers.

In addition to these returnees, interviews with two human resources executives of telecommunications companies provided insights into economic, political, social, institutional, and technological factors that impact the employment of the returnees in their companies.

To support the data collected from these informants, secondary sources such as official government publications, newspapers, online news media sources, academic publications, and archives were utilized. These sources provided information on the labour market integration and regulation of Congolese workers, the scarcity of return migration studies, and the labour integration of the returnees in Congo. While these documents were not specifically or exclusively focused on return migrants' labour market integration, the study sought to explain the collected data through the theoretical frameworks of Cassarino's theory of return and Peck's notions of labour incorporation and allocation.

### **3. Theories of Return migration and labour market integration**

Return migration studies suffer from the lack of unanimously theory accepted by specialists (Cassarino 2004). Similarly, labour market integration of returned migrant university graduates are still under-researched in many countries (Baláž and Williams 2004; Thomas 2008). Hence, this study on the Congolese highly skilled return migrant workers is nested within two theoretical frameworks. These are Cassarino's theories on return migration and Peck's (1996) theory of labour market social regulation, particularly his notions of labour incorporation and labour allocation.

### 3.1 Cassarino's theories on return migration

Cassarino's theories on return migration encompass various perspectives, including neoclassical economics, the new economics of labour migration, structuralism, transnationalism, and social network theory.

According to the neoclassical economics approach, return migration is seen as a result of migrants miscalculating the costs and benefits of migration, leading to a perceived failure of the migration project. This perspective considers return migration as an anomaly or a complete failure. However, by focusing solely on the economic calculus of migration, this approach overlooks the multifaceted nature of return migration and its motivations (Cassarino 2004; King and Kuschminder 2022). Hence, this approach falls short in explaining why Congolese graduates from South African universities choose to return to and work in their home country. It fails to capture all the factors, actors, and conditions that shape the decision-making process and experiences of Congolese return migration from South Africa.

The new economics of labour migration (NELM) theory provides an alternative perspective on return migration. According to this theory, return migration is seen as an expected outcome of a successful migration strategy, where migrants migrate, earn income, remit money back home, save, and eventually return to a more secure and comfortable life in their home country. The NELM theory suggests that return migration is a natural consequence of achieving the goals set by migrants during their migration experience (Cassarino 2004: 6 as cited in King and Kuschminder 2022:6).

In other words, the NELM theory emphasizes the idea that return migration is driven by the successful attainment of goals, which leads to a more secure and comfortable life in the home country. It implies that the returnees have accomplished what they set out to achieve through their migration experience.

In the case of Congolese graduates returning from South Africa, the NELM theory can explain their return migration and labour market integration in the Congo as a result of achieving their migration goals. These goals may include obtaining an education from South African universities, acquiring the necessary skills and qualifications for employment, and accessing the labour market in either the Congo or South Africa, or even in another country.

However, while the NELM theory provides a framework for understanding the motivations and achievements of return migration, it is less

effective in explaining the specific dynamics of how and why South African employers prefer hiring these returnees. The theory primarily focuses on the individual's perspective and their own goals, rather than the employer's decision-making process.

The structural approach to return migration, as theorised by Cassarino (2004) and King and Kuschminder (2022), highlights the importance of the interaction between returnees' motivations and expectations and the opportunities and realities present in their home country. Return migration is seen as a result of a match or mismatch between these factors.

According to this approach, the success or failure of return migration is determined by how well the job opportunities in the home country align with the returnees' human capital and employment expectations. Returnees bring with them skills, qualifications, and experiences acquired during their time abroad, and the extent to which these attributes are valued and used in the home-country labour market impacts their integration.

In the context of Congolese returnees, this structural approach helps us to understand the match between job opportunities in the Congo and the returnees' human capital. As these returnees' skills, qualifications, and experiences were in demand and valued in the labour market and by their employers, their labour market integration was indeed successful.

According to Cassarino (2004), the transnational approach to return migration emphasizes the role of economic, social, and cultural links between migrants' host and home countries in shaping the decision to return. Return migration occurs when migrants have accumulated enough resources, both financial and informational, and when conditions in the home country are perceived as favourable.

In the context of Congolese returnees, the transnational approach offers a theoretical framework that helps to explain the motivations behind Congolese returnees' decision to return to the Congo and their expectations of improved job opportunities based on the cultural capital they acquired during their stay in South Africa and their transnational ties.

Finally, the social network theory complements the transnational approach by focusing on the significant roles that families and social networks play in the process of return migration. While the transnational approach acknowledges the importance of economic, social, and cultural links between the host and home countries, the social network theory emphasizes the specific influence of family and social connections in shaping the decision-making and



outcomes of return migration. Specifically, the social network theory helps explain how returnees accessed information about job vacancies through their social connections (Cassarino 2004; King and Kuschminder 2022).

In the context of this study on Congolese returnees, the social network theory provides insights into how these individuals employed their social capital and networks to navigate their return migration process. Their Congolese and/or South African social networks served as conduits for various aspects of their return, including the decision to return, the logistics of the return move itself, and the subsequent experiences after returning to the Congo. In short, the use of social network theory in this study helps shedding light on how Congolese returnees used their social capital and networks to acquire information, organize their returns, and enhance their job prospects in the Congo. It highlights the instrumental role of families and social connections as conduits for decision-making, logistical support, and labour market integration in the context of return migration.

Overall, while Cassarino's theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding return migration, supplementing it with Peck's notions of labour incorporation and labour allocation can enhance the study's ability to explain the labour market integration experiences of Congolese returnees in the Congo. This combined approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the complex dynamics at play in the return migration process, considering both the motivations and experiences of returnees as well as the structural and institutional factors influencing their labour market outcomes.

### **3.2 Peck's notions of labour incorporation and labour allocation**

Labour markets, Peck argues, are constructed and work in locally specific ways. Thus, existing spatial, occupational, political, economic, and socio-cultural structures have to be taken into account when wishing to regulate labour markets. Peck points to four elements that can be used to identify these social processes: labour incorporation, labour allocation, labour control, and labour reproduction.

Labour incorporation refers to 'the processes by which individuals become wage earners or self-employed in the labour market'(Peck 1996:26). By determining labour incorporation, the choices of individuals in the labour market, and their potential to do certain jobs, are determined (Bezuidenhout et al. 2008:7). For Peck, the flow of workers into the market is not a function

simply of the number of available jobs. Rather, he argues that this flow depends on the intersection of various social, demographic, educational, and economic factors, on institutional labour legislation and on 'autonomous social forces such as state policies, ideological norms, and family structures' (Peck 1996:27). Overall, Peck's theory touches on conceptual elements that this study used as lenses for understanding Congolese returnees' labour market integration into private companies owned by South African employers in the Congo.

One of the main steps of labour incorporation processes consists of looking for information on job opportunities. For this several studies employ Granovetter's (1973:1367) theory of the strength of weak ties - which postulates that jobseekers find information on job vacancies through persons who they are not close to, such as acquaintances, friends of friends, former college friends, former workmates, or employers. Compared to close friends or family members, these acquaintances are more likely to move in circles different from those of the job seekers and thus have access to job information the job seekers cannot access by themselves. In contrary, strong ties, which encompass friends and family members, are 'a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie' (Granovetter, 1973: 1361).

A large body of research has argued that context matters when it comes to strong or weak social ties. Langlois (1977) argues that executives and professionals frequently use weak ties, whilst individuals of low status often draw on strong ties. Lin; Vaughn and Ensel (1981) underline the effectiveness of using weak ties in the free and complex labour markets of the US and Europe. Brown and Konrad (2001) note that people tend to use weak ties in growth sectors of the economy, whereas they make use of strong ties in shrinking industries. In short, Granovetter's concepts of strong and weak social ties is critical for an analysis of how Congolese returnees engaged in the job-searching process.

The second phase of the labour market process is labour allocation, which consists of matching workers and jobs. Peck argues that an individual's achieved and/or ascribed status, as well as the social ties held, play a huge role in the person's allocation in the labour market. An individual's achieved status refers to the way someone's human capital (qualifications, work experience, and skill) determines how he/she may be slotted within the labour market. The allocation of labour is often influenced by ascribed characteristics such as ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender, and citizenship. In addition, using Granovetter and Tilly's (1987) notion of 'the complex intermeshing of

employers' recruitment networks and workers' supply networks, Peck (1996:30) argues that these networks play significant roles in labour allocation. Peck, therefore, insists that labour allocation is based more on relations of trust than on human capital (Peck, 1996: 33–34). This point is critical in analysing the ways in which south African employers hired Congolese returned from South Africa by using both employers' recruitment networks and (Congolese returned migrant) workers' supply networks.

In all, it is crucial to bear in mind that Peck's notion of labour incorporation helps us to understand the ways in which Congolese returnees from South Africa were integrated into labour market in the Congo. It is so important for especially capturing the influences of the power and preferences of south African employers including various social networks on these returnees' job-finding processes. However, Peck's notion of labour allocation is used as a theoretical tool for our fully comprehension of the reasons for which these returned were hired and allocated to job positions which matched their skills and qualifications.

Overall, the combination of Cassarino's theory of return migration with Peck's notions of labour incorporation and labour allocation is of the ultimate importance for understanding the return migration of Congolese graduates from South African universities and their processes of labour market integration in the Congo.

#### **4. Congolese Returnees labour market integration in the Congo**

This section examines the experiences of Congolese returnees as they integrate into the private sector, with a specific focus on communication between employers and employees. It starts by analysing the strategies employed by employers to inform returnees about job vacancies within their companies. Additionally, it investigates the pathways exploited by these returnees, acting as job seekers, to access information about employment opportunities in the Congo.

##### **4.1 Returnees' Labour Integration in retail sector**

Findings of this study suggest that returnees working in the retail sector relied more on friends and relatives to gather information about job opportunities. While few returnees used official channels to access job vacancy information, many others turned to unofficial avenues. For instance, Shoprite manager Mr Thierry employed formal methods of job searching by finding job advertisements on an online job search website. He was influenced by the job-

searching behaviour of South African students, observing how they drafted their CVs, uploaded them to websites, and followed up with calls. Inspired by their approach, he adopted similar methods and received calls from three different recruiters as a result. In his own words, he said:

*In 2009, when we were completing our B Comm at Vaal (the Vaal University of Technology), I saw many South Africans drafting their CVs, uploading them to websites, and calling in to follow up. I was, like, 'Why not do it like them?' ... I tried it several times. ... I received calls from three different recruiters (Thierry, Shoprite, Kinshasa, December 2016).*

However, Mr Berdol, another manager, heard about a job vacancy from his Congolese close friend (strong tie). In his own words,

*My friend told me that there was a (job) opportunity at Shoprite. He confided me that an insider from Shoprite had told him that they needed to open a branch in the Congo. ... I seized that opportunity and applied (Berdol, Manager, Shoprite, July 2017).*

Another manager, called Mr Johnny, was informed about a job vacancy by both his South African friend (strong tie) and boss (weak tie). He narrated,

*My friend, a South African girl, was connected with our boss... She is the one who explained to the boss that I was talented, skilful... He (the boss) wanted to see me before they hire me... (Johnny, Manager, Shoprite, June 2017).*

These narratives highlight the complexity of information gathering about job opportunities among returnees in the retail sector. These individuals relied on a combination of both weak and strong ties, using both formal and informal channels in their job search processes. This challenges the traditional dichotomy between weak and strong ties proposed by Granovetter.

The findings indicate that returnees in the retail sector predominantly obtained information about job opportunities through informal methods, emphasizing the significance of strong ties, such as friends and relatives. These close relationships played a crucial role in sharing information about job vacancies. However, it is important to note that formal methods, such as online job search websites, were also used by some individuals, as exemplified by Mr Thierry's experience.

The intermingling of strong and weak ties in the job-finding processes made it challenging to establish clear boundaries between the two. In this context, the distinction between weak and strong ties becomes blurred, suggesting that these ties are not mutually exclusive. The study also proposes that the weaknesses of labour market institutions may contribute to the greater effectiveness of strong ties compared to formal procedures.

Overall, these observations add a nuance to Granovetter's theory by highlighting the intricate dynamics of network-based job searches. The combination of strong and weak ties, as well as the use of both formal and informal channels, underscores the multifaceted nature of how individuals gather information about job opportunities in certain contexts.

Furthermore, this study's empirical data suggest that these returnees experienced processes what Pruthi and Wright (2017) term transnational recruitment and transfer of managers. This meant that multinational companies or transnational entrepreneurs in Congo hire Congolese who are working or studying overseas and relocate them to back to Congo. All managers of Shoprite in Kinshasa experienced processes of transnational recruitment because all of them were, in fact, graduates of South African universities. Shoprite hired and sent them to open and manage its branch in Kinshasa in the Congo in 2012 (Thierry, Berdol, and Johnny, managers, Shoprite, Kinshasa, December 2016). Mr Berdol described the process as follows:

*We studied in South Africa. All of us. Like, Peter was at the University of Johannesburg, I was at the University of Cape Town. ... After three months of training (at Shoprite) in Cape Town ... we came to open here in 2012. ... They just wanted Congolese to work for them in Congo. Ultimately, it was a well-conceived strategy to send us here (Berdol, Shoprite, Kinshasa, December 2016).*

Unlike all other foreign-owned retail companies in the Congo, Shoprite (a South African company registered on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange with a presence in a growing number of African countries) has developed an exceptional labour allocation marked by the transnational transfer of managers, whereby all its managers in the DRC are Congolese. This reality is somehow exceptional because the existing literature (Muller-Camen et al. 2001; Pruthi and Wright 2017) does not indicate another case of a multinational company that has transferred only natives (Congolese in this case) to manage its branch in their own country.

Moreover, it is important to highlight a controversy between local labour legislation and globalised labour market around this phenomenon of the transnational transfer of managers. In fact, Shoprite hired Congolese returnees in accordance with South African labour legislation. However, these returnees work for Shoprite in Congo with their employment contracts which are linked with South African labour legislation. This reality shows in what extent that business and labour market have been globalised while labour legislations remain local or national facts.

Finally, this transnational recruitment and transfer of Congolese graduates from South African Universities as managers contributed to strengthen brain circulation between South Africa and the DRC. Cases of brain circulations between these two countries occurred much more in the domain of telecommunication sector.

#### **4.2 Returnees' Labour integration in telecommunication sector**

While similar patterns of information flow about job openings exists in the telecommunication sector and retail sector, the former shows an additional attribute, namely returned migrant workers' supply networks and employers' recruitment networks that coexist parallel to local networks and formal methods of job searching. These two specific ways of findings information on job vacancies in the telecommunication sector are successively discussed in subsequent lines.

In fact, returned migrant workers' supply networks can be described as unstructured networks of engineers in the telecommunications sector who graduated in South Africa, supplying information about job openings to their Congolese counterparts in the late 1990s and earlier 2000s. These networks played a key role in boosting Congolese skilled return migration from South Africa and connecting Congolese returned engineers with their South African employers in telecommunications. As illustration, two engineers in telecommunication, Joe Leon and Babby, explained that most senior managers of telecommunications companies were South Africans. These managers preferred hiring Congolese engineers who were graduates of South African universities over those from local Congolese universities (Joe Leon and Babby, engineers, Airtell, Kinshasa, January 2017). In his own words, Auguy explained it like this:

*'The 'tops' of all the companies were South Africans when we started our jobs in telecoms. They were in Vodacom, Celtel*



*(Airtel, today), Oasis (Orange, nowadays) even CCT (Africell, today). ... When they introduced me to that white South African, he just asked me 'are you also an engineer'? I said: 'Yes I am'. Then, he said: 'did you study at DUT'? I said: 'Yes sir'. He told me: 'You can start tomorrow'. Listen to me, when I started, I did not submit any job application forms, no certificates ... (Auguy, Africell, Kinshasa, June 2017).*

Furthermore, this study has also found that employers' recruitment networks played crucial roles in head-hunting of Congolese returnees, especially engineers, for working for telecommunication companies in the late 1990s and the earlier 2000s. These networks also pushed companies to allow engineers to find other Congolese with similar training when jobs opened up. As an illustration, engineer Auguy was introduced to Celtel (Airtel, today) by a former colleague from the Durban University of Technology. When he in turn was asked to find an engineer with similar qualifications, he suggested a colleague who had trained at Tshwane University of Technology. In his own words, Auguy shared his experience as follow:

*'My manager (a South African) told me that there was a need of two engineers. He was like: 'do you know any Congolese engineers among your friends or colleagues who can do that job? ... I could not convince a friend as he wanted to start his masters at Tshwane University of Technology... The manager persuaded him to come back... As money and job were interested, he came back to work here' (Auguy, Africell, Kinshasa, 2017).*

The rationale behind the preference of South African employers for Congolese engineers trained in South African can be understood, to some extent, by a skills shortage among engineers and technicians trained in the Congo and communication issues between Anglophone employers/managers and Francophone employees in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. For example, Gomes *et al.* (2013: 190) indicate that, as the skills of Congolese engineers and technicians trained did not match with the competencies by Vodacom, these Congolese engineers and technicians 'were sent to South Africa to attend training and courses provided by the Vodacom Group to learn about Vodacom processes and the use of new technology' in the late 1990s and earlier 2000s. In short, the returned migrants' supply networks informed employers about available candidates who had the ready-made skills needed by their companies. They also helped its members to find interesting information about job

vacancies by blocking non-members from the circulation of information. Finally, these networks fulfilled roles as an exclusionary professional closure composed only of Congolese trained in South Africa and their South African employers.

Beyond this, findings of this study also indicate correlations between finding information about job opportunities and patterns of labour allocation in telecommunications sector. The more job seekers found information about job vacancies through South African employers' recruitment networks or returned migrants' supply networks, the higher was their likelihood to be hired as permanent employees. However, several international and national socioeconomic, organisational, and technological factors have reduced the influence of these networks since the late 2000s.

As South African telecommunications managers preferred hiring Congolese engineers who had been trained in South Africa, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these engineers were hired as full-time permanent employees. As an illustration, Serge narrated this

*Now, telecommunication is now full of engineers... But, I can tell you that people are not getting permanent jobs like in the past. It was so easy for us, engineers, who studied in South Africa because there were not many engineers like today.... (Serge, Africell, Kinshasa, June 2017).*

Francis, in his turn, explained this.

*I told you that at the top there were South African people. Vodacom, Standard or Celtel, even Tigo, at that time, were owned or managed by South African people ... English was one of our winning cards (Francis, engineers, Airtel, Kinshasa, January 2017).*

One can note that the lack of English proficiency and shortages of skilled engineers in telecommunication trained in the Congo favoured labour allocation of Congolese returned graduates from South African universities. This somehow corroborates Gomes; Cohen and Mellahi (2013:190) who indicated that Vodacom felt compelled to organise training for its Congolese employees because of skill shortages in Congo at that time.

Nowadays, some of these engineers returned from South Africa ended up being transferred to outsourcers for two interconnected reasons. Two engineers indicated that fast technological change and especially the

introduction of automation led to this step in the early 2010s. The engineers had no choice in the matter: they had to accept becoming casual employees of outsourcers (Andy and Emmanuel, engineers, Airtel, Kinshasa, January 2017).

Andy had managed to negotiate himself a well-paid job in the early 2000s due to a scarcity of engineers in telecommunications at the time. The arrival of the Chinese Huawei company, which brought much cheaper sophisticated technologies into the Congo after 2010, that a number of other telecommunications companies — like Erickson, Siemens, and Alcatel — to leave the country. At the same time the telecommunications labour market became saturated with technicians and engineers, trained elsewhere in the world. This led to engineers with full-time permanent positions either to be transferred to outsourcers or to lose their jobs completely. Consequently, Andy noted regretfully, many engineers were now facing underpayment, underemployment, and the new vulnerability of the outsourcing sector (Andy, engineer, Airtel, Kinshasa, January 2017).

Mr Guy, a senior human relations executive at Airtel, informed me that his company has often outsourced and downsized because of organisational issues (falling profits), international financial issues (like the global economic crisis of 2008) or changes in company ownership (Guy, senior HR executive, Airtel, Kinshasa, June 2017).

Pierrot, an engineer at Africell, pointed out that several changes of ownership in his company led to the departure of the South African managers. As these were the managers who preferred Congolese engineers trained in South Africa, this change contributed to the collapse of the returned migrants' supply networks amongst Congolese engineers since the early 2010s (Pierrot, engineer, Africell, Kinshasa, January 2017).

What is interesting to note is that changes in ownership and a deteriorating financial situation did not affect Congolese returnees working for Vodacom. This was because of some critical reasons. Mr Didier, senior HR executive at Vodacom, explained how at his company engineers work in the Technical Department. The latter is one of the most important departments in the sector of telecommunication because it allows any telecommunications service provider to operate. As this is the heart of any functioning telecommunication company, employers generally only want to hire trusted high-tech employees here. For that reason, when there is an ownership change, new employers tend to bring with them their own engineers, replacing those

of the former owners (Mr Didier, senior HR executive, Vodacom, Kinshasa, July 2017).

On the other hand, employers who maintain ownership of their companies tend to retain their trusted engineers and invest in upgrading their skills. Vodacom is a case in point, because its ownership has not been changed since the late 1990s (Didier, senior HR executive, Vodacom, Kinshasa, July 2017). One of its engineers, Fanny, indicated that he and his colleagues would not be panicked by outsourcing as long as their employers were still the same South Africans (Fanny, engineer, Vodacom, Kinshasa, March 2017).

However, it is interesting to discern from the above that being hired and appointed through Congolese returnees' supply networks allows employees to position themselves better in the workplace. This does not mean job security because there are certain economic, professional, and organisational dynamics that can weaken these networks. What is more important is that the hierarchical ranks of these employees remained intact, but their working conditions deteriorated when they became outsourced employees.

In sum, the examination of this sub-section shows the usefulness of Peck's notion of labour incorporation in explaining job finding in the sector of telecommunications among Congolese returnees. The use of this notion of labour incorporation has demonstrated that Congolese returnees, mostly engineers, used unofficial means for finding information about job opportunities. In doing so, they often resorted to strong ties than weak ties.

Moreover, this sub-section also highlighted the importance of the notion of labour allocation, which postulate that, in addition to human capital, employers'/workers' networks, labour market institutions, and state actions play an important role in employee recruitment and hiring processes. As the data above shows, these factors played a significant role in labour allocation procedures of Congolese returnees. In this specific context of the Congolese returned labour migration, the recourse to the different networks varies according to an employees' transnational networks involving both South Africans and Congolese people. As it has shown, the more an employee was closer with South African employers' recruitment networks, the more he or she was likely to be allocated in an interesting position in his/her company. Finally, Granovetter's dualism has been nuanced by demonstrating how strong ties and weak ties can be simultaneously used during hiring processes.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed the insertion of Congolese returnees into the private companies owned by South African in the retail and telecommunication sectors. I used Peck's notion of labour incorporation and allocation to argue that most Congolese returnees found information about job opportunities through informal rather than formal processes. Equally important, I have shown that informants generally used strong ties rather than weak ties in these processes. I have highlighted the use of employers' recruitment networks and workers' supply networks as important strategies for finding interesting job positions.

I have made it clear that the match between employees' profiles and their jobs varies according to the skills required in a given sector and/or the fact of belonging to Congolese and South African transnational networks. It has been shown that the more employees possess desirable skills in companies, the more they hold jobs corresponding to their human capital. We saw how belonging to networks very close to employers allowed certain employees to be positioned as executives in retail sector.

Beyond this, the paper contributes to the existing literature on return migration and labour market integration. It highlighted some special ways in which some Congolese returnees were integrated into South African owned companies in Congo. It also challenged Granovetter's theory that there are clear boundaries between weak ties and strong ties in job search processes to show that these ties can mutually interact with one another. In addition, it showed that employers can initiate and lead processes of advertising job vacancies by directly contracting needed employees in their companies.

Further studies on Congolese return immigrant workers could take up the following two questions. First, as geographical unit, the Congo and South Africa are but one specific contexts in which to study return labour migration. It is worth considering conducting studies in other African countries, which would then allow comparative analyses.

## REFERENCES

- Amisi, Baruti. 2006. *An exploration of the livelihood strategies of Durban Congolese refugees*. UNHCR Geneva.
- Amisi, Baruti and Richard Ballard. 2005. *In the absence of citizenship: Congolese refugee struggle and organisation in South Africa*. Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Atam, Millan. 2004. "Networks as a survival strategy of new arrivals: A study of Congolese asylum seekers in Johannesburg." University of the Witwatersrand.
- Azose, Jonathan J and Adrian E Raftery. 2019. "Estimation of emigration, return migration, and transit migration between all pairs of countries." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116(1):116-22.
- Baláž, Vladimír and Allan M Williams. 2004. "'Been there, done that': international student migration and human capital transfers from the UK to Slovakia." *Population, space and place* 10(3):217-37.
- Bezuidenhout, Andries, Christine Bischoff, Sakhela Buhlungu and Kezia Lewins. 2008. "Tracking progress on the implementation and impact of the Employment Equity Act since its inception." Vol. *Research commissioned by the Department of Labour, South Africa*. the Department of Labour, South Africa.
- Black, Richard and Russell King. 2004. "Editorial introduction: Migration, return and development in West Africa." *Population, space and place* 10(2):75-83.
- Brown, Deborah Wright and Alison M Konrad. 2001. "Job-seeking in a turbulent economy: Social networks and the importance of cross-industry ties to an industry change." *Human Relations* 54(8):1015-44.
- Cassarino, Jean-Pierre. 2004. "Theorising return migration: The conceptual approach to return migrants revisited." *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 6(2):253-79.
- Chikarara, Splagchna Ngoni. 2016. "Barriers to professional recognition: experiences of Zimbabwean engineers in South Africa." *Professions and Professionalism* 6(3).
- Chikarara, Splagchna Ngoni. 2019. "The precariatization of Zimbabwean engineers in South Africa."
- Dodson, Belinda. 2010. "Locating xenophobia: Debate, discourse, and everyday experience in Cape Town, South Africa." *Africa Today* 56(3):2-22.



- Glaser, Clive. 2012. "Home, farm and shop: The migration of Madeiran women to South Africa, 1900–1980." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38(4):885–97.
- Gomes, Emanuel, Marcel Cohen and Kamel Mellahi. 2013. "When two African cultures collide: A study of interactions between managers in a strategic alliance between two African organizations." Pp. 180–201 in *Effective People Management in Africa*: Springer.
- Gordon, Steven Lawrence. 2016. "Welcoming refugees in the rainbow nation: contemporary attitudes towards refugees in South Africa." *African Geographical Review* 35(1):1–17.
- Gordon, Steven Lawrence and Brij Maharaj. 2015. "Neighbourhood-level social capital and anti-immigrant prejudice in an African context: An individual-level analysis of attitudes towards immigrants in South Africa." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 53(2):197–219.
- Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American journal of sociology* 78:1360–80.
- Granovetter, Mark and Charles Tilly. 1987. "Inequality and labor processes." in *Handbook of Sociology* edited by N. J. Smelser. California: Sage.
- Inaka, Saint-José. 2017. "Congolese Middle Class Migrants Labour Market Incorporation in Pretoria." Pp. 63–97 in *Migration, Cross-Border Trade and Development in Africa*, edited by I. M. Christopher Changwe Nshimbi. London: Springer.
- Inaka, Saint-José and Joe Trapido. 2015. "Congo-Gauteng; Congolese migration to South Africa." in *The Human Economy; perspectives from the South*, edited by K. Hart and J. Sharp. New York and Oxford: Berghahn
- Inaka, Saint José 2014. "Congolese immigrant workers in pretoria, south Africa: a sociological approach in the age of migration." Dissertation, Master's thesis in Labour Studies and INdustrial Sociology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- Inaka, Saint José 2016. "Combattants and Anti-Combattants (Collabos) : Congolese Transnational Politics in Pretoria." *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 38(1):5.
- Kabwe-Segatti, Aurelia Wa. 2008. "Violences xénophobes en Afrique du Sud: retour sur un désastre annoncé." *Politique africaine* (4):99–118.
- Kalitanyi, Vivence and Kobus Visser. 2010. "African immigrants in South Africa: Job takers or job creators?". *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences* 13(4):376–90.
- Kankonde, Peter Bukasa. 2010. "Transnational family ties, remittance motives, and social death among Congolese migrants: A socio-

anthropological analysis." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 41(2):225-43.

- King, Russell and Katie Kuschminder. 2022. "Introduction: definitions, typologies and theories of return migration." Pp. 1-22 in *Handbook of return migration*, edited by R. King and K. Kuschminder. Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Langlois, Simon. 1977. "Les réseaux personnels et la diffusion des informations sur les emplois." *Recherches sociographiques* 18(2):213-45.
- Lin, Nan, John C Vaughn and Walter M Ensel. 1981. "Social resources and occupational status attainment." *Social forces* 59(4):1163-81.
- Lliteras, Susana Molins. 2009. "A path to integration: Senegalese Tijanis in Cape Town." *African Studies* 68(2):215-33.
- Makina, Daniel. 2012. "Determinants of return migration intentions: Evidence from Zimbabwean migrants living in South Africa." *Development Southern Africa* 29(3):365-78.
- Moodie, T Dunbar and Vivienne Ndatshe. 1994. *Going for gold: Men, mines, and migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morris, Alan. 1998. "'Our fellow Africans make our lives hell': the lives of Congolese and Nigerians living in Johannesburg." *Ethnic and Racial studies* 21(6):1116-36.
- Morris, Alan and Antoine Bouillon. 2001. *African Immigration to South Africa: francophone migrants of the 1990s*. Pretoria : Protea and IFAS.
- Muller-Camen, Michael, Phil Almond, Patrick Gunnigle, Javier Quintanilla and Anne Tempel. 2001. "Between home and host country: Multinationals and employment relations in Europe." *Industrial Relations Journal* 32(5):435-48.
- Nzima, Divane and Philani Moyo. 2017. "The new 'diaspora trap' framework: Explaining return migration from South Africa to Zimbabwe beyond the 'failure-success' framework." *Migration Letters* 14(3):355-70.
- Peck, Jamie. 1996. *Work-place: The social regulation of labor markets*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Pruthi, Sarika and Mike Wright. 2017. "Social ties, social capital, and recruiting managers in transnational ventures." *Journal of East-West Business* 23(2):105-39.
- Rugunanan, Pragna and Ria Smit. 2011. "Seeking refuge in South Africa: Challenges facing a group of Congolese and Burundian refugees." *Development Southern Africa* 28(5):705-18.

- Steinberg, Jonny. 2005. "A mixed reception: Mozambican and Congolese refugees in South Africa." *Institute for Security Studies Monographs* 2005(117):45.
- Tewolde, Amanuel Isak. 2020. "Reframing xenophobia in South Africa as colour-blind: The limits of the Afro phobia thesis." *Migration Letters* 17(3):433-44.
- Thomas, Kevin JA. 2008. "Return migration in Africa and the relationship between educational attainment and labor market success: Evidence from Uganda." *International Migration Review* 42(3):652-74.
- Vigouroux, Cécile B. 2008. "“The smuggling of La Francophonie”: Francophone Africans in Anglophone Cape Town (South Africa)." *Language in Society* 37(3):415-34.
- Vuninga, Rosette Sifa. 2021. "Combattants and Baswahili: Beyond Ethno-regional Tensions among Congolese Immigrants of Cape Town, South Africa." *Politeia (02568845)* 40(2).
- Wentzel, Marie and Kholadi Tlabela. 2006. "Historical background to South African migration." *Migration in South and Southern Africa: Dynamics and Determinants* 71:96.