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## **Paradoxes of Sahrawi refugees' educational migration: promoting self-sufficiency or renewing dependency?**

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Education is often prioritised by refugee children and families, as well as by their political representatives and international actors alike. This article explores the specificities of the Sahrawi refugee education system, focusing in particular on the nature, motivations and implications of Sahrawi refugee youths' educational migration to Cuba through a scholarship programme designed to promote self-sufficiency and socio-economic development in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Drawing upon interviews conducted with Cuban-educated Sahrawi refugees in Cuba and in their Algerian-based refugee camps I argue that, despite educational migration having become a central part of Sahrawi refugee children's, youths' and adults' imaginary landscapes, Sahrawi youths' educational migration to Cuba is ultimately paradoxical in nature, reshaping and reinforcing, rather than reducing, Sahrawi refugees' dependence upon Western aid providers.

### **1. Introduction**

It is widely recognised that 'refugees often see the education of their children as a principal way of ensuring a better future' (Dryden-Peterson 2003, 1). However, the means for providing such an education, and views of what precisely would amount to a 'better future', are less consistently expressed by the different actors involved in planning for and delivering schooling to refugee children around the world. On the one hand, refugee families and leaders may invest considerable amounts of otherwise scarce resources to establish camp-based schooling systems (Horst 2006, 13), even without international support, often viewing an education 'as a means of preserving their group's cultural, linguistic, and historical traditions' (Water and Leblanc 2005, 138). Such an investment in education in the face of immediate scarcity and uncertainty demonstrates the significance which individuals, families and collectivities might give to 'saving a way of life' over 'saving a life' *per se* (Allen and Turton 1996). Nevertheless, international organisations, United Nations relief agencies and both donor and host states have only relatively recently (primarily since the 1990s) accepted that schooling programmes should be amongst the internationally guaranteed services to be offered by humanitarian agencies (Water and Leblanc 2005, 135). Even since the 1990s, international actors have often heralded 'refugee-education' for reasons and through means which may undermine local attempts to 'save a way of life', or may reflect the political priorities of donors as is arguably the case of the 'peace education' projects which prevail in many refugee contexts (see Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005, 258).

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While it is clearly the case that, ‘irrespective of rhetoric to the contrary, planning for education is often done “for” refugees by external actors like the host country, United Nations relief agencies, and nongovernmental organizations, rather than “with” refugees’ (Water and Leblanc 2005, 130), in this article I will explore how and to what effect Sahrawi refugees’ political representatives (the Polisario Front) have established an independent, and transnational, education system, playing key roles in developing the curriculum, selecting the language, content and means of instruction, and building and maintaining schools accordingly [all identified as central features of refugee education by Horst (2006, 13)]. In direct contrast from what Water and Leblanc refer to as the ‘awkward fit’ of the provision of schooling ‘into the “relief” model favoured by refugee assistance agencies’ (2005, 135), this case-study reflects a scheme which has been specifically designed to facilitate longer-term development and the self-sufficiency of refugees. Indeed, given infrastructural limitations in the Algerian-based Sahrawi refugee camps and the camps’ dependence upon externally provided humanitarian and political aid (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a), the potential to promote self-sufficiency via educational migration is particularly significant in this context. However, this case-study also demonstrates the divergent views which may exist apropos the means to secure a ‘better future’. As I demonstrate in this article, while Cuban educational migration is a central part of Sahrawi refugee children’s, youths’ and adults’ imaginary landscapes, and is purposefully designed and projected to maximise Sahrawi refugees’ self-sufficiency, the implications of Sahrawi youths’ educational migration to Cuba are paradoxical, ultimately reshaping and reinforcing, rather than reducing, the Sahrawi refugee camps’ dependence upon Western aid providers.

Drawing on research conducted in the Algerian-based Sahrawi refugee camps and in Cuba, and in particular on interviews conducted with 25 Cuban-educated Sahrawi refugees in Cuba and with 21 youths in the 27 February Refugee Camp and in the camps’ administrative core of Rabouni,<sup>1</sup> in the following pages I will analyse Sahrawi experiences and perspectives vis-à-vis the education system in the camps and in Cuba, and their expectations for the future. I complement these interviews with research conducted with Sahrawi children, youths and adults in the refugee camps and in Spain as part of the Andrew Mellon Foundation funded project led by Dr Dawn Chatty (University of Oxford) entitled *Children and Adolescents in Sahrawi and Afghan Refugee Households: Living with the Effects of Prolonged Armed Conflict and Forced Migration* (known as ‘SARC’).<sup>2</sup> Although the SARC interviews were designed primarily to examine the impacts of protracted conflict upon refugee children and youths, many of these interviewees explicitly reflected upon the significance of education in the camps (also see Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Crivello 2010), and of their own or relatives’ experiences, and expectations, of the Cuban education programme and educational migration. Before evaluating Sahrawi refugees’ experiences of contemporary educational migration, I shall provide, firstly, a brief overview of the modes of securing an education during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, and secondly, an outline of the development of a formal education system in the Sahrawi refugee camps from 1975 to the present.

## 2. Education and mobility during the pre-colonial and colonial periods

Before becoming a Spanish colony in 1884–1885, the territory of Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (formerly known as the Spanish Sahara, now referred to as the Western

Sahara) was populated by an array of Arab tribes distributed amongst primarily nomadic groups which engaged in a range of livelihood strategies including pastoralism, agriculture, fishing and trading. These groups would undertake seasonal movements along predetermined routes across the territory, stopping in small settlements throughout their migrations, as well as staying in the *bādiya* (the more remote desert areas) for extended periods of time. Male and female interviewees in the refugee camps indicated that during the colonial era they had started studying the Qur'an at the age of approximately seven with a Qur'anic teacher (*mrābet*) who worked within their nomadic group, providing a mobile religious education to the group's children. However, access to education at this time was not only highly gendered (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a) but was also determined by the child's tribal background: girls from scholarly tribes were more likely to know how to read and write than other girls (El-Hamel 1999, 75), while only a small number of male adolescents from particular tribes were able to attend sedentary Qur'anic schools (known as *mahādir*) in the city of Smara, or further afield in Mauritania or Morocco (Perregaux 1987; El-Hamel 1999). This, in turn, meant that only young men from certain tribes were able to become teachers in the future, ensuring not only a continued 'monopoly' of scholastic/religious knowledge, but the superiority of the scholastic group over others (El-Hamel 1999, 66).

It was only during the late Spanish colonial era that educational opportunities for Sahrawis slowly started to gain ground. Between 1948 and 1974, the Spanish Sahara's educational system jumped from two primary schools with 91 students, to 6059 students in primary school (including 909 girls) and 111 in secondary schools (including three girls). Access to a colonial education was almost entirely restricted to the children of urbanised families, with only a few (16 by 1967) mobile schools (*escuelas nómadas*) being sponsored by the Spanish (Barona-Castañeda 2004, 249), specifically, according to Gaudio, to 'favour the adaptation of the nomad' to '*la vie de tous*' (1978, 186). The majority of these children were not only privileged by virtue of being amongst the relatively few families living in cities at the time, but they also tended to be the children of high-ranking Sahrawis, including *shaykhs* who assisted the colonial administration and others already employed by Spain.<sup>3</sup>

By 1972, 260 Sahrawi students were enrolled in the Spanish Sahara's two vocational schools, and 169 attended the two domestic science schools which had opened in the colony. While censal literacy in Spain was 73% in 1930 and 86% in 1960 (Tortella 1996, 192), the literacy rate of the native population in the Spanish Sahara was equal to, or just under, 5% by 1975–1976 (Damis 1983). Indeed, a lack of access to a formal colonial education emerged as a noticeable theme in the SARC interviews, with nine interviewees directly equating the colonial period not only with an absence, but an explicit denial, of formal education. This equation is present in comments such as 'the colonial presence was repressive, they did not build us schools' (49-year-old woman), 'illiteracy was the result of Spanish colonialism' (32-year-old woman), and 'we lived under colonialism which hindered us from acquiring an education' (38-year-old woman). More explicitly, one 40-year-old woman describes the colonial system as implementing 'a policy of keeping the people ignorant and backward'.

In direct contrast with this equation, and in common with other liberation movements around the world, education emerged as a central feature of the anti-colonial movements which arose during the late colonial period (1960s and 1970s), and in particular of the main anti-colonial organisation which was born in May 1973, the

Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguiat el-Hamra and Río de Oro (known by its Spanish acronym Polisario Front; henceforth Polisario).

The Polisario gained popular support, first resisting Spanish colonialism, and later Moroccan and Mauritanian claims over the territory. Paralleling Spain's withdrawal from the territory, the conflict between Morocco, Mauritania and the Polisario intensified from the end of 1975 onwards, and a mass exodus began, firstly being displaced to other parts of the territory, and later, following the bombardment of these first encampments with napalm and phosphate bombs (Mercer 1979; Lippert 1987; Andrade 2003), to the nascent Algerian-based refugee camps near the territory's border with that country.

### **3. A brief introduction to the Sahrawi refugee camps<sup>4</sup>**

Upon the camps' establishment, and following the Polisario's announcement of the birth of the camp-based Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in February 1976,<sup>5</sup> the Polisario developed its own constitution, camp-based police force (and prisons), army and parallel state and religious legal systems (the latter of which implements a Maliki interpretation of Islam). The vast majority of the earliest reports on the camps stressed the Polisario's 'participatory ideology' and 'democratic' organisation of the camps (e.g. Harrell-Bond 1981, 1–4; Black 1984, 1–2; Mowles 1986, 8–9).<sup>6</sup> These further highlighted that the camps are 'models of efficient local government' (Brazier 1997, 14), whose members are elected in 'state' elections held during five-yearly National Conferences. The four main camps are headed by a *wālī* (governor) who is appointed by the 'head of state' (Shelley 2004, 183), with administrative and managerial functions completed by camp residents employed by the Polisario. Each of the camps is divided into a number of districts, and each district is sub-divided into neighbourhoods. The total camp population is currently calculated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP) as being over 155,000 (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a), with the UNHCR estimating in 2004 that 59% of the refugee camp population was under the age of 18 (2004).<sup>7</sup>

#### ***Sahrawi refugee education system***

Replacing both the pre-colonial religious education system and its powerful teachers, and compensating for the almost total absence of the colonial education system, in 1975–1976 the Polisario established a mixed, universal, obligatory and 'secular education system' in the camps, in order, according to Gimeno-Martín and Laman, to 'constitute a modern society' (2005, 23) led by educated men and women who could ensure the self-sufficiency of 'the Sahrawi nation'. The centrality given to education is, in part, an embodiment of the Polisario's aim for its 'nation-in-exile' to be wholly self-sufficient in the camps, and also in an independent Western Sahara if the long-awaited referendum for self-determination were to eventually take place. In the early days, however, education was also a means of 'socialising' the formerly nomadic population, which had to become accustomed to their enforced sedentarisation in the newly created refugee camps. This 'socialisation' ranged from campaigns regarding public health and hygiene in order to avoid epidemics, to the Polisario's determined attempt to eradicate the hierarchical tribal system in order to create a nation formed by equals [for a critique of the latter point, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2009a, 2011b)].

One of the main campaigns aimed to encourage parents to send their children to school, a practice which most parents were at first reluctant to do.

Schools were amongst the first structures to be built in the camps, and both children and adults benefited from the literacy campaigns run by the small number of individuals who had received an education during the colonial era. In addition to building crèches and primary schools, the need for secondary schools emerged, leading to the construction of two boarding schools which offered an education to children from all of the camps, and maximised the students' access to the small number of teachers. While the Polisario had initially relied upon externally provided materials (primarily from Algeria), by 1984 a 'national' syllabus had been developed by the Polisario (Perregaux 1990). Indeed, as indicated by Cole and Kandiyoti, 'nations' can be created in many ways, 'including by setting up national school systems that impose a single linguistic standard and a cobbled-together "national" history' (2002, 195–196).

The camps' children currently attend 29 primary schools and 25 pre-school centres in the camps (UNHCR 2006, 6), with some students eventually moving to a 'national' boarding school to complete their secondary studies. Although two boarding schools existed in the camps until recently, only the 12th October Secondary School has been functioning since the major floods of 2006 destroyed the 9th June (Lower-secondary) School,<sup>8</sup> dramatically limiting the number of students able to attend secondary school in the camps.

Beyond primary and secondary schooling, a wide range of 'national' (Polisario) centres also offer professional training to both the young and adult refugees in the camps, once more 'demonstrating' the Polisario's commitment to self-sufficiency. These include the male-dominated *Gazwane* (near Rabouni, the administrative capital of the camps) which mainly provides computer, vocational and technical training courses; a co-educational nursing college; and a number of women's schools and centres which have been opened throughout the camps via foreign funding, primarily from the Euskadi (Basque Country) and other regional Spanish governments. The 27 February National Women's School continues to be the largest of these centres, with boarding possibilities for women from all camps to be trained in a range of subjects such as computing, driving, weaving, and languages [in association with the Italian non-governmental organisation (NGO) *Centro Regionale d'Intervento per la Cooperazione*].

The successful development of these educational structures in the camps has frequently been heralded by external observers, supported by (unsubstantiated) claims made by the Polisario, European 'Friends of the Sahrawi People' and even the World Food Programme that 'school attendance level is almost 100 percent among refugee children' (WFP 2004, 6), and that the camps have 'the highest literacy rates in Africa' (Mundy 2007, 287). While I have critiqued the validity of such claims elsewhere (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2011c), the contemporary education system continues to be invoked as demonstrating the Polisario's commitment to educating the camp-based population to ensure national self-sufficiency, rather than dependence upon Western humanitarians.

Of central importance to the current article is the fact that, when the Sahrawi Ministry of Education, Health and Social Affairs was created in 1976, its main aims included not only creating and organising primary and secondary schools in the camps but also, given infrastructural limitations, requesting that friendly countries welcome as many Sahrawi children and youths as possible to educate them abroad (Velloso de Santisteban 1993). Although a wide range of countries have offered scholarships to

Sahrawi students (including Algeria, Libya, the former USSR, Qatar, Mexico and Venezuela), Cuba was one of the first countries to offer full scholarships to Sahrawi youths in the late 1970s as part of its broader programme of educational internationalism.

#### 4. Cuban scholarships for refugees

Following the revolution of 1959, Cuba developed an internationalist education programme which has granted full secondary and tertiary level scholarships to more than 40,000 students from over 120 (primarily southern) countries since the 1960s (Alfaro Alfaro 2005).<sup>9</sup> Cuban scholarships (which cover school and university fees as well as all accommodation, food and medical costs whilst in Cuba) allow non-Cuban educational migrants to be trained in essential professions (in particular medicine and nursing) under the strict proviso that graduates will return to their locations of origins as a means of increasing these countries' self-sufficiency and socio-economic development. Challenging the dependencies and power imbalances which habitually characterise north–south development 'partnerships', the Cuban model of south–south cooperation is receiving increasing attention from analysts interested in exploring the longer-term impacts of Cuban educational internationalism on southern beneficiaries (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010a; see also Richmond 1990, 1991; Hickling-Hudson 2000, 2004; Lehr 2008a, 2008b).

Alongside general support for anti-colonial and liberation movements, Cuba has specifically provided educational opportunities to a range of refugee populations. Amongst others, 1500 Namibian refugee students left Cuba for their newly independent state in 1990, while 300 Sudanese refugees were based in Cuba in 1996; equally, several thousand Palestinian refugees (in particular those associated with Marxist aligned resistance groups such as the PFLP and DFLP) and over 4000 Sahrawi refugees have graduated from Cuban universities since the 1970s (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010a).

The scholarships granted to Sahrawi refugees since the late 1970s form part of a broader framework of Cuban support for the Polisario Front, which has included sending hundreds of volunteer Cuban doctors to the refugee camps,<sup>10</sup> in addition to numerous visits by high-profile Cuban revolutionaries (e.g. Almeida Bosque in 1994). The first generation of Sahrawi refugee youths were 'adopted' by Cuba in 1977, when 20 Sahrawi students were offered grants to study in the (secondary-level) *Escuela de Amistad Cuba–RASD* (School of Friendship Cuba–SADR) in the *Isla de la Juventud* (the 'Island of Youth'), and then professional degrees in different Cuban universities (Petrich 2005). By 1995, more than 1400 Sahrawi refugee students were based in Cuba, with over half of these returning to the refugee camps over the following decade. Around 600 Sahrawi students remained in Cuba in 2005 (ACN 2006).

In order to provide a contextually relevant education, Sahrawi refugee children have traditionally been placed in nationality-based boarding schools whilst in Cuba, thereby allowing them to study and live alongside their compatriots. Recalling her experience of living in one such school, a Sahrawi doctor who recently completed her medical specialisation in Havana recounted:

When I was eleven I travelled to Cuba with another 800 Sahrawi children from the refugee camps. There were three schools just for us in the *Isla de la Juventud*, but that year [1988] they had to open a fourth school because there were so many of us.<sup>11</sup>

In line with Cuban ministerial resolutions, these nationality-based schools also received up to six foreign (i.e. Sahrawi) teachers to cover the students' 'national' subjects, including 'national' history, geography and language (Art. 35, Ministerio de Educación 1982). As documented by UNHCR with specific reference to Sahrawi students, these teachers habitually accompany students when they travel, living with them, sharing responsibility for their care and 'helping the adolescents to preserve their linguistic and cultural identity' (UNHCR 2003).

While both Cuba and the Polisario Front have endorsed this educational programme as a means of promoting Sahrawi self-sufficiency and 'preserving the group's cultural, linguistic, and historical traditions' (to quote Water and Leblanc 2005, 138), how do Sahrawi children, youths and adults in the camps perceive educational migration, and do they share Polisario's and Cuba's vision of how education can ensure a 'better future' for the camps and their inhabitants?

### **5. Sahrawi and *Cubaraui* reflections on educational migration to Cuba: a 'better future'?**

Perhaps the clearest indication of the strength of the Cuban education programme in the Sahrawi refugee camps can be gleaned from the interviews conducted by Crivello and myself with 46 Sahrawi children aged between 7 and 12 in 2005 (Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010). These children's responses vis-à-vis their expectations for the future reveal the extent to which educational migration to Cuba is present in Sahrawi children's imaginary landscapes and provide the foundation for their imagined futures. Hence, 16 children reported that their parents, siblings, uncle/aunt and/or cousins had studied in Cuba, with seven of these children directly expressing their desire to study in Cuba in the near-future:

My mother studied in Cuba ... I want to go to [study] in Cuba. (8-year-old boy)

You have to study first in Cuba, and then become a doctor, because the doctors have to speak Spanish. (9-year-old boy)

I want to be a doctor ... [to do this] first you need to finish school, then you go to Cuba, like my aunt. (10-year-old girl)

I'm going to Cuba this year if my parents let me ... you have to study for 15 years there but I don't care, as long as I can study. (12-year-old boy)

These interviews demonstrate the importance which Sahrawi refugee children as young as eight give to educational migration directly as a result of their relatives' experiences, and the particular association which children make between Cuba, studying medicine and learning Spanish. Indeed, Cuban and Sahrawi media reports calculate that by 2002 approximately 300 Sahrawi refugees had trained specifically as doctors in Cuba (RHC 2002a, 2002b; SPS 2002), while, as indicated above, it is estimated that over 4000 Sahrawi have in total studied in Cuba (Um Draiga 2001; Salazar 2002).

A large proportion of these Cuban-educated Sahrawi returnees currently occupy positions of authority in the camps, with one member of the Polisario Front's National Secretariat estimating that around 2000 Sahrawi trained in Cuba occupy the most important political, social, administrative and professional roles in the refugee camps

(Sayed quoted in ACN 2006). In addition to the centrality of Sahrawi doctors and nurses who studied in Cuba, the bearing of students' tertiary education in the Caribbean island is particularly visible in those numerous cases when Sahrawi students of social science and humanities subjects completed undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations on the conflict over the Western Sahara (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a). These students' time in Cuba in essence provided them with the necessary political and linguistic training to work in Sahrawi institutions and to represent the Sahrawi 'cause' in the camps and in SADR 'diplomatic missions' around the world (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a). As the 'official face' of the Polisario and the main point of contact for the several thousand Spanish-speaking visitors (*solidarios*) who travel to the camps every year, these graduates in essence embody the benefits of the educational migration programme, demonstrating the high degree of professional self-sufficiency which parallels the camps' material dependence upon externally-provided assistance (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2009b).

Despite their prominence in the camps, however, most Sahrawi students and graduates of the Cuban education programme highlighted a wide range of problems they had faced as a result of their educational migration to Cuba. Interviewees pointed to the poor material and nutritional conditions in Cuba [which, paradoxically, were identified as being worse than in the refugee camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010a)]; the anguish caused by such prolonged periods of separation during children's formative years; and the linguistic, cultural and emotional difficulties faced upon their return to their refugee camp 'homes' (also see Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Crivello 2010). Paralleling the difficulties faced by innumerable immigrants around the world upon their return 'home', one Sahrawi graduate employed by a European NGO in the refugee camps after spending 16 years in Cuba stressed that:

When I returned to the camps [having left at the age of 11], I didn't know my family. I couldn't communicate with them ... we were from two different worlds. I know certain Cuban families better than I know my own family. It's very hard – I even find it hard to spend time with them.

The challenges faced by Cuban graduates specifically as a result of their prolonged separation from their families in the camps led a Cuban-educated pharmacist to define 'Cuba' (i.e. the Cuban internationalist programme) as 'a social problem which took place ...' and to refer to the experience as a 'sacrifice' characterised by 'cultural and social loss' (Rabouni, April 2007).

Part of the 'social problem' experienced by these Sahrawi refugees as a result of their time in Cuba has been the creation of a new social group which is commonly referred to in Cuba, the camps and in Spain as the *Cubarauis* [= *Cubanos* + *Saharauis*] (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009b). These 'hybridised' *Cubarauis* 'have another ideology, other thoughts, and when they arrive [in the camps] they're lost, they know nothing about life "here"' (pharmacist, Rabouni, April 2007). Having left the refugee camps in their formative years, speaking broken Arabic and unaccustomed to the social and religious customs which permeate life in the camps, Cuban-graduates have experienced high levels of rejection upon their return 'home':

At first, people in the camps were reluctant to acknowledge and accept the *Cubarauis*' particularities, but increasingly we are being accepted in the camps. At first [in the early-1990s], there were 10 or 20 students who returned, but eventually there were thousands of young men and women who had returned from there. Now they [people in the camps]

see that the doctors, teachers, ministerial aides, etc. all studied in Cuba, they see that we work hard to keep the camps going, so [the refugee] society is more or less accepting of the students, and people still want to send their children to Cuba. (NGO-employee, 27 February Camp, April 2007)

However, although camp-based acceptance for Cuban-educated Sahrawi men has increased over time,<sup>12</sup> the number of children leaving the camps to study in Cuba has decreased exponentially since the programme's inception. Despite Cuba continuing to be conceptualised as a location for education by many Sahrawi refugees, including the children cited above, and external observers (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009b), the vast majority of the Cuban-graduates whom I interviewed in Cuba and in the camps indicated that they would not send their own children to study there (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010a). Notwithstanding the significance of this programme in 'creating' young cadres for the camps, the primary intersecting reasons given for this reluctance are the geographical, social and religious distances between Cuba and the Sahrawi camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010a).<sup>13</sup>

### *Self-sufficiency or renewed dependency?*

Another major issue has arisen which demonstrates the limitations of both the Cuban education programme and the Polisario Front's abilities to manage the refugee camps and their inhabitants. While Cuba's educational policy has consistently specified that scholarships would be provided only if students returned to their locations of origins to ensure self-sufficiency, increasing numbers of Cuban-educated Sahrawi youth are leaving the refugee camps in search of work in Europe (especially Spain).<sup>14</sup> In part, this trend for emigration is related to high levels of unemployment in the refugee camps, and the inability of most graduates to work in their own professions there. Concurrently, an expansion of paid jobs resulting from the arrival of foreign NGOs after the declaration of a cease-fire between Morocco and the Polisario in the early-1990s has also led to the phenomenon of emigration, referred to by the Sahrawi Women's Union as 'a cancer devouring the Sahrawi [refugee] body' (Arabic document on file with author, author's translation). The emergence of opportunities for paid employment with NGOs in the camps (as opposed to 'voluntary' and unremunerated work for the Sahrawi 'state', as had previously been the case) has reinforced socio-economic inequalities between camp inhabitants. Many graduates who are unable to obtain a job with an NGO and/or a Polisario institution, and indeed many of those who have secured such positions, decide to leave the camps in order to send remittances to their families from Spain.

This trend therefore appears to be related to the existence of a relatively large number of university graduates in a refugee camp setting characterised by a combination of minimal employment opportunities and a move towards a market economy following the arrival of European NGOs. However, it is arguably the medical training provided in the Spanish language by Cuba which is most significant in this respect: while the Cuban educational focus on training medical professionals was designed to ensure self-sufficiency and simultaneously to combat the legacies of colonialism, ever-increasing numbers of Cuban-trained doctors are leaving the camps to work for the Cubans' and Sahrawis' shared former colonial power: Spain. Cuba's extensively recognised excellence in medical training and practice has led to Spain accepting medical degrees from Cuban universities with few bureaucratic complications, meaning that Spanish-speaking *Cubarawi* doctors are readily employed by private and

public hospitals in Spain. Rather than lessening ties with former colonial powers, in this instance the Cuban education system has led to the inverse: the increased presence of *Cubarauis* doctors in Spain and decreasing numbers of doctors in the camps. The ultimate paradox resulting from this situation emerges when we recognise, as stressed by a Spanish doctor interviewed in the camps, that as *Cubarauis* leave the camps to work in Spain, increasing numbers of Spanish doctors will be required to travel to the camps via *comisiones médicas* (medical commissions), as hundreds of doctors currently do every year, to treat Sahrawi patients there.

The Sahrawi–Cuban case-study therefore confirms the extent to which purposive attempts to maximise ‘self-sufficiency’ by minimising ‘brain-drain’ within ‘host’ contexts may be contingent both upon conditions in locations of origin and broader structures of inequalities and opportunities (Skeldon 2008, 10–11). On the one hand, both Palestinian and Sahrawi refugee interviewees in Havana consistently informed me that non-Cuban students are actively encouraged by the Cuban system to specialise in paediatrics, gynaecology and obstetrics, or internal medicine, as it is assumed that these will be the most necessary specialisations when they return to their places of origin; conversely, non-Cuban medical students have rarely been trained as surgeons, since Cuba understood that such a strategy could be counterproductive if these graduates were tempted to find well-paid jobs in the West, rather than staying to work in their community of origin. In the Sahrawi refugee context, however, despite these and other strategies to encourage self-sufficiency and a ‘brain-gain’ in students’ communities of origin, structural conditions and Polisario’s policies within the Sahrawi refugee camps have led to the increasing migration of skilled *Cubarauis* to Spain.

Indeed, this situation has been recognised not just by *Cubarauis*, the Polisario and Spanish observers, but also by the Cuban government itself. A specialist doctor who had returned to the camps only a few months before our interview concluded that, in addition to Cuba’s re-orientation towards Latin America since the mid-1990s (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010a), the main reason why ‘Cuba no longer offers the massive number of training opportunities which it did in the past’ is that the Polisario has mismanaged medically-trained *Cubarauis* upon their return to the camps:

If your population has increased at a normal rate, and if your policy is designed to cover primary health care, those doctors who graduated from Cuba between 1977 and today should be sufficient to cover your needs. And we know [in the refugee camps] that this is the case. It’s very hard to demand [more scholarships] because Cuba [is] going to present all of the statistics ... It’s not [Cuba’s] fault, it’s [the Polisario’s] fault. (Rabouni, April 2007)

As a result of these factors, Sahrawi youths are no longer sent to study in Cuba,<sup>15</sup> with the above-quoted Spanish and Sahrawi doctors concurring that the final *Cubarauis* doctor will have graduated from Cuba by 2012, embodying the end of Sahrawi refugee youths’ educational migration to Cuba.

## 6. Conclusion

The Polisario Front’s establishment and maintenance of crèches, primary and boarding-secondary schools, as well as a network of vocational training centres in the Algerian-based Sahrawi refugee camps have been heralded by external observers, with high levels of literacy and school enrolment identified amongst Sahrawi refugee children and youths. Students’ separation from their families within the refugee camp

context, in particular to attend boarding school, lays the foundation for many children's eventual departure from the camps to complete secondary and tertiary education in 'friendly' states across the global South, including in Cuba. However, if the Cuban–Sahrawi transnational education programme has come to symbolise Cuba in the refugee camps, it has also come to be associated with long-term separation and loss on personal, familial and collective levels (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b). Furthermore, despite the potential for Sahrawi refugees to build a 'better future' by engaging in educational migration specifically to ensure self-sufficiency in their Algerian-based refugee camps, this article has argued that Sahrawi refugees' educational mobility and migration have been fraught with ambiguities and, ultimately, paradoxes. In particular, high-esteem for Cuban medical education has facilitated Spanish-speaking *Cubarauis* medical personnel's onward migration to Spain, where they work for the Cubans' and Sahrawis' common former colonial power. With increasing numbers of *Cubarauis* doctors leaving the refugee camps to work in Spain, and fewer Sahrawi refugee students being sent to and graduating from Cuban universities, this therefore accentuates, rather than weakens, ties of dependence upon Western 'humanitarians'.

Despite purposive attempts to develop a south–south partnership which challenges the power imbalances which typically characterise northern-led development and humanitarian initiatives, this article has therefore demonstrated the extent to which participatory aid programmes may have unintended outcomes and unplanned longer-term consequences for 'beneficiaries' and their communities of origin. On the one hand, having granted secondary and tertiary level scholarships to Sahrawi refugees since the late 1970s, Cuba has offered a clear alternative to the ways in which northern donors conceptualise the provision of education to refugee children and youths (and, indeed, humanitarian assistance more broadly), explicitly advocating for a system which enhances self-sufficiency and self-management in the refugee camps. Influenced by Cuba's and Polisario's political and ideological priorities, the Sahrawi–Cuban scholarship system has historically been developed through an active dialogue with Polisario representatives. With the Polisario playing a key role in developing the curriculum and selecting the language, content and means of instruction for Sahrawi children and youths based in Cuba, this dialogue has illustrated the potential for refugee children to receive contextually relevant education both in their refugee camps and through transnational scholarship programmes.

However, the article is founded upon the recognition that divergent, and often conflicting, views may exist amongst aid recipients, political representatives, donors, and international observers apropos the means to secure a 'better future' for a given refugee group. In the context of international and local structures of inequalities and opportunities, including a combination of minimal employment opportunities and an emerging market economy in the refugee camps, a tension evidently exists between securing individual and family-based self-sufficiency through onward migration to Spain, and ensuring that the refugee camps are locally managed with minimal interventions by non-Sahrawi humanitarians. Whether the Cuban–Sahrawi scholarship system is considered to have been a success or failure is therefore dependent upon these diverse views vis-à-vis the future, with retrospective evaluations of the transnational programme varying amongst diverse groups of Sahrawis, *Cubarauis*, and non-Sahrawis alike. The longer-term implications of prioritising individual and family-based self-sufficiency appear to be clearer, since future generations of Sahrawi children and youths will no longer be able to complete their secondary and tertiary educations in Cuba. Although it remains to be seen whether Cuba will develop an

alternative model for providing educational opportunities to Sahrawi refugees in their desert-based camps or elsewhere, Cuba's educational legacy will nonetheless continue to play a significant role both in Sahrawi refugees' imaginary landscapes, and socio-political frameworks in the foreseeable future.

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### Notes

1. These interviews formed part of my broader ESRC-funded doctoral research into the impact of the protracted refugee situation on Sahrawi gender relations. All of these students had spent between 1 and 15 years living in Cuba, and Spanish was therefore their second language (Hassaniya-Arabic being the language spoken in the camps). Interviews in Cuba and with Cuban-graduates were conducted in Spanish (my mother tongue), while I interviewed the families of Cuban students and graduates in the refugee camps in either Spanish or Arabic.
2. As part of this investigation into the experiences of Sahrawi refugee children and youths, interviews were conducted by local Sahrawi teams in the refugee camps between 2002 and 2003, and by Dr Gina Crivello and myself in Spain in 2005. For a detailed methodology see Chatty (2010) and Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Crivello (2010).
3. For a more detailed overview of memories of the Sahrawi-Spanish colonial encounter, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011a).
4. A more detailed historical overview of the conflict over the Western Sahara is available in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2009a).
5. Over 70 non-Western states have now recognised and established full diplomatic relations with the SADR, which is also a full-member of the African Union (formerly the Organisation of African Unity).
6. For a critique of this idealised representation, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2009a, 2010b).
7. ECHO's figures for 1999, however, calculate that 57% of the population in the five camps (but excluding the boarding secondary schools and the National Hospital) was under the age of 12 (83,602 children out of its estimated total population of 147,474 – note the discrepancy with WFP figures for the same year). These statistics suggest that well over 59% of the population would have been under the age of 18 five years later, as UNHCR propose (ECHO 2001). WFP in turn estimates that 40% of the population was aged 14 or under in 2001/2002 (2002). See Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011c) for a more detailed analysis of dangers of presenting such inconsistent statistics *vis-à-vis* the Sahrawi refugee camps.
8. According to UNHCR (2006), the Spanish government's Cooperation Unit (AECD) in Tindouf has offered to complement the UN agency's role in the education sector by 'putting in place a secondary education system, entirely funded by the Spanish government, within refugee sites'. While it is unclear how long such a project might take to be implemented (by 2011, no progress had been made on this front), the need is considerably clearer.
9. For more detail on Cuba's educational internationalist programmes for Middle Eastern and North African citizens and refugees alike, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010a).
10. Interviews with Dr Kenia Serrano, Cuban *Comité Central* Coordinator for Africa and the Middle East (Havana, November 2006) and with Cuban doctors in Rabouni's 'National Hospital' (April 2007). On Cuba's medical internationalism see Huish and Kirk (2007); on the experiences of Cuban teachers sent to work abroad see Ministerio de Educación Superior (1987) and Hickling-Hudson (2004).
11. A discussion of the programme's gender imbalance is beyond the scope of this article: see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2009a, 2009b, 2010a) and Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello (2010).
12. The ambiguous position of Cuban-educated Sahrawi refugee women is discussed in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2009a, 2009b).

13. I have argued elsewhere (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Crivello 2010) that the transnational Sahrawi education system remains embedded in, and must be interpreted in light of, traditional nomadic practices, and, concurrently, that Sahrawi parents may initially have accepted to send their children to study outside of the camps on this basis. However, while parents and children may have normalised the necessity of children being separated from their parents from a young age for educational and 'national' purposes, they also initially consented to this programme on the understanding that children would visit the camps on a yearly basis, and, indeed, that the conflict over the Western Sahara would be resolved promptly, thereby interrupting the need for children to be sent to study outside of the refugee camps. Given their experiences of protracted separation for periods of up to and often over a decade throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in the 2000s fewer parents are prepared to allow their children to leave the camps for such prolonged periods, preferring to send their children to study in locations closer to the camps (for instance, in Algeria, Libya or Spain).
14. Indeed, despite the multiple difficulties faced by such protracted absences from the camps, these experiences of mobility and separation have in many ways solidified youths' expectations of engaging in continued and perhaps continuous forms of serial circular migration (see Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Crivello 2010).
15. Whether this experience will influence Cuba's scholarship programmes for other refugee populations has yet to be determined.

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