**Why Children Go:**

**Child Mobility as Social Risk Management in West Africa**

**Summary**

Child mobility away from rural areas in West Africa has in the past two decades broadly been explained as an exploitation of the critically poor by the rootless. But why do many less-poor rural households allow, or even encourage, their children to leave? I suggest that, rather than a response to acute, observable poverty or shock, child mobility in the region is more often an expression of a larger and longer-term social commitment. The degree to which this commitment is cultivated and honored reflects the relative vulnerability of the households, their accumulated shock experience, the way they perceive their own future risk scenario, and their own capability to deal with these risks should any of them materialize.

My research and this thesis are situated within the field of analytical sociology, which seeks to understand an observable social phenomenon by disentangling the often-complex social contexts and processes in which it is embedded. Analytical sociology is tied to the tradition of mechanisms modelling. Mechanisms, defined as “frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns,” are assumed triggered under what would initially be generally unknown conditions and with indeterminate consequences. This thesis proposes one such model of child mobility. I apply a desires-beliefs-opportunities (DBO) approach to structure my analysis. Mechanisms at play are dynamic in the sense that they often are triggered by household beliefs (B) as they have become shaped by experiences, as well as by perceptions of future uncertainty, over time. The model further suggests that child mobility in the region relates to the desires (D) both of households and of children to be part of resilient, informal social safety nets aiming to prevent rather than cope with critical poverty. I suggest a set of mechanisms where, in a self-reinforcing process, child mobility represents social networking, and social networking increases opportunities (O) and facilitates more child mobility.

I further argue that unlike what is often assumed, different mechanisms drive child mobility and another often-studied central child outcome, child schooling. Decades of research into the determinants of school participation has shown a relatively robust link between household poverty and school attendance. Understandably, lessons from this field of research have led to the assumption of similar relationships between other child outcomes and household poverty. When statistical research on child mobility fails to document similar links to poverty, it motivates a comparative investigation of the processes leading up to the two outcomes.
This thesis consists of two theoretical articles and two empirical articles. In the first theoretical article, I explore the idea of child mobility as social risk management. I discuss how child mobility can work also as a response to future risk and not only to current misery. The article conveys a model that aims to help audiences break from the predominantly Western notion that separating from our children is but a last-resort solution and conditional on despair. In the second theoretical article, I discuss the idea of child mobility in relationship to the ongoing debate on child trafficking and in light of three sociological discourses: childhood as a social construct, children and agency, and children in intergenerational contracts. I also discuss the theoretical premises for applying the trafficking concept instead of other theoretical concepts, such as power relations and slavery. The arguments are illustrated by a case study from Benin.

The DBO generative model described in the Introduction chapter informs my statistical work, in which I examine certain previously underexplored model components. In addition to documenting the children’s whereabouts, the questionnaires used were developed with the purpose of mapping households’ networks, histories of shock experiences, and perceptions of future vulnerability. In the first of the two empirical articles, I survey child relocation away from rural households in Senegal, looking in particular at the relationship to drought-shock experience. I examine mobility for all purposes and specifically the subpractice of young boys relocating for Koranic studies. The latter practice, in particular, has received public attention because the boys, often found in urban areas, survive on begging and are thus highly visible in their misery. In the second empirical article, I survey child relocation from rural Benin, zooming in on the relationship between household risk perception and child mobility. I look at child mobility overall, as well as at mobility for educational purposes and at a specific subcategory of mobile children, girls relocating to work as domestic servants. The statistical association between child mobility away from the households and how household heads forecast family food security in the year to come appears especially strong.

Beyond academic contributions, this thesis may inform policy makers and program designers in their further efforts to develop adequate and efficient child-protection policies and programs in the region. Rather than focus solely on alleviating life conditions for those struck by large-scale and highly visible drought and flood shocks, I conclude that attention also need be paid to supporting both formal and informal social safety nets for vulnerable people in general.