Lisa Åkesson contrasts the stories of three Cape Verdean returnees who have worked in Europe and examines some of the assumptions underlying the policies on migration, development and return that are currently being devised in Europe. She questions the idea that European influences are always beneficial for development.
Two factors made me come back: the improvement in healthcare in Cape Verde and the increase in tourist visits, which made it possible to open a hotel.

Now Sofia is the proud owner of a well-kept guesthouse with five employees.

The story of Alfonso is very different, although he too spent more than three decades abroad. In the Netherlands, Alfonso worked as a mariner, a factory worker and a night guard. After obtaining the right to a pension, he returned “home”. Alfonso never learnt Dutch, and although he talks of the Netherlands as “the land that gives me my food”, it is clear that he never felt himself to be a member of Dutch society. When I ask him about the possibilities for him to “do something for Cape Verde”, Alfonso stresses that it is his right to enjoy his pension in peace and quiet after all his working years.

The third returnee, Filomena, is younger and poorer than Sofia and Alfonso. Filomena migrated to Portugal in order to study and acquired a bachelor’s degree in information technology. After graduating, she remained in Portugal.
and worked as a cleaner and waitress, always taking on two jobs, since she had to send money home to support her two children and her mother. After working too hard and eating too little for a long time, Filomena was totally worn out and decided to return to Cape Verde. Now she has found an administrative job for which she is overqualified in her home town and earns just enough to feed her children.

It is interesting to contrast these stories with the policies on migration, development and return that are currently produced on a massive scale in Europe. Many policymakers express high expectations about the possibilities for return migrants to support development in their countries of origin. One salient assumption in these policies is that a few years of work abroad is all that is needed to acquire the capital and skills needed to engage in entrepreneurial activities upon return. This idea is especially evident in strategies on circular migration, which are presently in vogue among policymakers in both the European Union and many of its member states. Circular migrants are expected to meet temporary labour shortages in receiving countries, and then promptly return home and promote development in their countries of origin. This idea is contradicted by the Cape Verdean experience, which indicates that it takes decades to save up and plan for a successful return. Another central policy assumption is that working in Europe more or less automatically provides migrants with useful skills, values and knowledge. Again, Cape Verdean reality conflicts with policy, as most returnees state their European jobs have provided them with little more than a salary.

The “success story” of Sofia, however, reveals that under the right circumstances returnees may play an important role. Her achievement has been possible thanks to the structural changes that have occurred in Cape Verde over the last decades. Cape Verde has attracted both development support and external investment by marketing its political stability and good governance. This has resulted in improvements in basic infrastructure and sustained economic growth, which in turn has facilitated entrepreneurial activities such as Sofia’s. Sofia’s story highlights the fact that wider economic, political and social structures fundamentally influence the returnees’ potential to support positive development, a factor often overlooked in policies on migration and development.

The current celebration of returnees as ‘grassroots developers’ renders economic and political constraints less visible by placing the responsibility for development on the shoulders of individuals. It thus reflects a neoliberal stance on development. In contrast, the changes that have occurred in Cape Verde suggest that it is structural development, more than any other factor, that may lead to an increase in returns that are beneficial to local society.

All names mentioned in this article have been changed in order to protect the identity of the people interviewed.