



IOM International Organization for Migration
OIM Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations
OIM Organización Internacional para las Migraciones

INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE ON MIGRATION
INTERSESSIONAL WORKSHOP ON

**MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM:
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES¹**

9 -10 March 2010

BACKGROUND PAPER

Introduction

What is transnationalism? Definitions vary, but generally centre on exchanges, connections and practices across borders, thus transcending the national space as the primary reference point for activities and identities.² With respect to migration, being connected to several places at once – or “being neither here nor there” – has long been a defining feature of the experience of being a migrant. Leading transnational, multi-sited lives means that exchanges and interactions across borders are a regular and sustained part of migrants’ realities and activities. These exchanges may take the form of ideas, values and practices, as well as political mobilization and economic contributions. For the purposes of the workshop and this paper, transnationalism is used as a different way of looking at migration: the transnational lens places the spotlight on the *connections* that migrants establish between countries. The concept therefore serves as an angle of analysis for the wider issues of migration and social change.

Transnationalism creates a greater degree of connection between individuals, communities and societies across borders, bringing about changes in the social, cultural, economic and political landscapes of societies of origin and destination. The challenge for policymakers is to look beyond national borders in analyzing the scope, purpose and impact of their policies. Cross-border connections between societies resulting from migration necessitate the formulation and implementation of appropriate policy interventions by States. The reason for this, firstly, is that migration policies in a transnational context are likely to produce an impact outside the domestic sphere for which they are primarily intended. Secondly, the success or failure of those same policies will also be determined, to varying extents, by realities that lie beyond a single country’s borders.

A transnational perspective on migration is increasingly relevant due to the forces of globalization and their impacts on mobility. It is now easier than ever to be connected to two

¹ *Migration and Transnationalism: Opportunities and Challenges* was selected by the membership for the first intersessional workshop of the IDM in 2010 under the overarching theme “**Migration and Social Change.**” The second intersessional workshop will be held on 19-20 July 2010 on the topic of *Societies and Identities: The Multifaceted Impact of Migration*. Notwithstanding the importance of the economic dimension, social facets are the primary focus in this paper and the workshop in line with the overarching theme of the IDM 2010.

² As food for thought, an illustrative list of other definitions has been included as an annex to this paper.

or more realities across national borders. The accelerated development of communication, transport, trade and information networks through globalization has strengthened the connections of migrants to two or more places. Migration patterns have also changed: today, migration can be short-term or long-term, temporary or permanent, or consist of a series of multi-stage itineraries including back to the point of origin. Through so-called “chain migration,” migrants from one particular region or city in one country move predominantly to one particular region or city in another country, often with the help of networks. While not a new phenomenon, it is one conduit of transnationalism. As a result of these transformations, migrants may obtain education in one country, work and raise children in another and retire in a third, as one of many variations.

Agents and subjects of transnationalism

Every migrant can be an agent as well as a subject of transnationalism, engaging in transnational activities and practices to a greater or lesser degree. This does not mean that all aspects of an individual migrant’s life are of a transnational character – rather, reaching across borders is becoming both more possible and more commonplace thanks to the effects of globalization. In some but not all cases, second and third generations can be involved in transnational activity, sometimes more so than their parents or grandparents who originally migrated. Formal or informal migrant networks and diasporas³ can be manifestations of transnationalism, while also facilitating transnational connections.

In approaching migration policy from a transnational perspective, it is important to bear in mind different categories of migrants: for instance, someone engaged in temporary or circular migration will engage in different transnational activities than someone migrating permanently. Individuals moving for the purpose of higher education, intra-corporate transferees or retiree migrants make for yet different transnational experiences, particularly as compared to those of less-skilled migrants. Similarly, irregular migrants require particular attention: they are no less likely to engage in transnational activities, but tend to face greater barriers and have less access to measures that could facilitate their contributions across borders.

Transnationalism is often as much about the people who stay behind as it is about those who move. Families of migrants who remain in the country of origin, for example, are important stakeholders to consider. In general, migrants’ backgrounds and experiences, including their family situation or political convictions, have a bearing on the ways and extent to which they will be engaged in transnational activities as well as on the sense of individual and collective identity. As will be discussed below, both beneficial and detrimental effects can arise from transnational exchanges, for migrants, their families and the societies concerned.

Opportunities

Transformations, particularly in the realm of communication technologies and transport, have meant that the benefits flowing from transnationalism can be maximized in more cost-effective and practical ways. Migrants in countries of destination can develop and maintain ties with family members, communities, institutions and governments in the countries of origin, and vice versa, while contributing economically and socially to both societies.

³ Diasporas are broadly defined as individuals and members of networks, associations and communities who have left their country of origin, but maintain links with their homelands. This concept covers more settled expatriate communities, migrant workers based abroad temporarily, expatriates with the citizenship of the host country, dual citizens, and second / third- generation migrants. (IOM 2008 *World Migration: Managing Labour Mobility in the Evolving Global Economy*, page 493)

Transnational connections created by migrants can become vehicles for social and cultural exchanges between societies through, for example, an enrichment of arts, music, films, entertainment and cuisine, promotion of tourism, diffusion of alternative medicine, or exchanges at the level of education and research. Transnational exchanges can of course also be economic in nature, including remittances as well as investment and trade in specialised goods and services sought by migrants in countries of destination from countries of origin, for instance.

Transnationalism also manifests itself in the transfer of ideas – so-called “social remittances.”⁴ Migrants may be engaged in social or political activism to raise awareness about their country of origin in their host country, they may advocate for improved protection of human rights, or raise funds to support communities in home countries. These contributions are of particular relevance in post-conflict reconstruction or following natural disasters, as is also the case with financial remittances. Migrants may also influence predominant ideas in home and host societies in more subtle ways, for instance by spreading different views about social and political norms and practices in their countries of origin, or by creating a better understanding of different cultures in their society of destination.

Lastly, migrants and their families may experience their transnational existence as a source of personal enrichment and development. Concretely, educational, professional and lifestyle opportunities and language abilities can be enhanced. More abstractly, a broadened horizon and the ability to navigate between different cultures can be very rewarding.

These are but a few of the many opportunities presented by transnationalism. Different contexts need to be considered in tailoring migration policies to enhance the positive aspects of transnationalism for migrants, their families and societies of origin and destination.

Challenges

At the individual and family level, several challenges arise. Firstly, family disruption due to migration of the breadwinner or primary caregiver can be particularly acute. Separation of parents and children may give rise to psychosocial challenges and increase the vulnerability of those left behind in countries of origin. Often, the elderly are left with additional care responsibilities yet may themselves be in need of care. Family disruption can have wider social repercussions – with impacts felt differently by men and women – and in many instances women bear the brunt of the burden. Nevertheless, it should also be recognized that family members frequently find new and creative ways to maintain and develop relationships across borders.

Secondly, transnationalism can mean that migrants’ access to pensions and health insurance is limited or even denied because they are unable to transfer their accumulated benefits and entitlements when they move, despite having made contributions to these schemes.

Thirdly, the transnational experience may also result in the loss of a sense of identity and belonging for some individuals. Issues may also arise within families, for instance when children feel attachment to a different country than their parents.

At a societal level, while migrants bring new ideas to their host countries, some migrant communities may also hold on to lifestyles they associate with their places of origin. On

⁴ The subject of social remittances will be explored in greater detail during the second intersessional workshop, *Societies and Identities: The Multifaceted Impact of Migration*, on 19-20 July 2010.

occasion they may do so even if the traditions in those places have since changed. This has raised concern in some destination countries about incompatible social or cultural practices, for example in terms of gender roles. In such cases, strong transnational ties may be seen as detrimental, representing an inability or unwillingness to integrate into the new society.⁵

In other instances, migrants' transnational links are interpreted as split loyalties. As a result, migrants and the intentions of their transnational activities may be regarded with suspicion in both home and host countries, sometimes even raising national security concerns.

Policy Considerations

Many of the challenges discussed above, as well as others that may arise, stem from a resistance by policy to “think” transnationally. Transnationalism and migration, however, are realities here to stay and indeed are likely to become more prevalent in view of demographic and other trends. The task for policymakers is to make transnationalism work for migrants and societies through better migration management, keeping in mind the transnational dimension when designing policies. In other words, instead of focussing on just one country or the other, policies with a transnational outlook specifically address the linkages between countries arising from transnational activities and practices by migrants. Rather than conflicting with State sovereignty, such policies utilize the sovereign authority of the State to better manage transnational phenomena through the development and implementation of comprehensive approaches. A comprehensive, viable and effective migration policy operates under the rule of law and encompasses a range of elements, of which access to social welfare, health, education and other benefits and services, labour market considerations, human rights, integration, and policies targeting nationals abroad are only a few. The role of new communication and information technologies which enable cross-border connections and exchanges in ways not previously possible is a particularly relevant consideration. Such technologies also offer innovative potential responses to some of the issues arising from transnationalism. This section highlights a few selected areas of policymaking, emphasizing the transnational element, and identifies steps towards a transnational approach in the policymaking process.

In the vital arena of the **impact of transnationalism on the family unit**, measures can be implemented to support families of migrants that stay behind in the country of origin. In some cases, a first step would be to gather data through census statistics or specialized household surveys about the number of households that regularly or permanently experience the absence of one or more family members due to migration, with a view to developing programmes targeted to their needs. There is a critical role for schools, ministries of education and social welfare agencies in supporting families, and children in particular, in this situation. Countries of destination may also consider measures to respond to the challenges faced by transnational families, including through family reunification policies as well as policies facilitating family visits. Ensuring wider access to communication technologies can be another way to help families maintain relationships across borders.

In the realm of **political participation and membership**, there are many ways to facilitate positive and productive transnational engagement: in the first instance, this relates to questions of nationality and the possibility of holding dual or multiple nationalities.⁶ Political

⁵ The subject of integration will be more closely examined during the second intersessional workshop, *Societies and Identities: The Multifaceted Impact of Migration*, on 19-20 July 2010.

⁶ The right to nationality is referred to in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 15), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 24(3)), the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (Article 29), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 7), and the Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 17.

participation, however, can also be enhanced without full-fledged naturalisation of migrants, for instance through the granting of certain political rights at the local level. Likewise, countries of origin may consider strengthening political ties to migrant populations, for instance through out-of-country voting. Migrant networks and diaspora groups, some of which may have an explicitly political outlook, are key stakeholders in this respect. Careful reflection is necessary regarding the pro's and con's of migrants' political engagement across borders. This may raise deeper questions about the compatibility of multiple political allegiances and associated rights and responsibilities.

With respect to **social welfare policies**, one important consideration is access to and transferability of benefits such as health and unemployment insurance and pensions. Transnational policymaking in this respect would strive to ensure that individuals do not lose benefits they have accumulated by paying into one country's scheme when they move to another. Bilateral or regional agreements to ensure the portability of certain key benefits could work towards this goal. This would require substantial cooperation between States, but could also involve private sector partners such as insurance firms or transnational corporations.

Beyond "thinking" transnationally, policymakers also need to act transnationally including by cooperating bi- or multilaterally. Bilateral relationships are important, especially where there are strong historical or cultural ties between countries driving migration patterns and transnational activities by migrants as well as subsequent generations. Regional-level cooperation may be a preferred course of action for States, for instance where there are significant intra-regional migration flows. Where regional integration processes or agreements provide for varying degrees of liberalized movement of persons, these could be complemented with schemes to ensure portability of benefits, enhance cultural exchange or enable political participation. In addition and given transnational patterns such as chain migration explained above, direct cooperation between cities or municipalities may prove useful as transnational connections can be particularly strong at the local level. Lastly, partnerships with migrant networks and businesses, have already been alluded to. The experiences of the private sector, and transnational corporations in particular, in the recruitment and relocation of individuals and their families across national borders may provide useful insights for policymakers.

Conclusion

Transnationalism is a key factor in contemporary migration management. While continued and sustained activities by migrants across borders may *per se* be nothing new, consideration of how to adapt migration policymaking – traditionally firmly and exclusively focussed on the national sphere – to account for and manage transnational connections has yet to be fully realized. Migration policies need to be informed by the realities of transnationalism, both positive and negative, with a view to harnessing the benefits that transnationalism can bring. While there are undeniable challenges, on the whole, migrants engaged in transnational activities do much to enrich the numerous spaces they occupy. Direct involvement of the various stakeholders, including home and host governments, local authorities, migrants and their families, migrant networks and associations, civil society and the private sector, is pivotal for strengthened partnerships that create the best outcomes for all concerned.

ANNEX

Illustrative Definitions of and Statements about Transnationalism

Transnational identity / transnationalism: the process whereby people establish and maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical borders.

IOM 2008 *World Migration: Managing Labour Mobility in the Evolving Global Economy*, page 500.

A set of sustained long-distance, border-crossing connections.

Vertovec, S. 2004 "Trends and impacts of transnationalism", *Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper No. 3*, University of Oxford, page 3.

When actual exchanges of resources or information, or marriages or visits, take place across borders between members of a diaspora themselves or with people in the homeland, we can say these are transnational activities; to be transnational means to belong to two or more societies at the same time. At that moment, the diaspora functions as a transnational community. When such exchanges do not take place (sometimes over many generations), but people maintain identification with the homeland and co-ethnics elsewhere, there is only a diaspora. In this way, not all diasporas are transnational communities, but transnational communities arise within diasporas.

Vertovec, S. 2005 "The political importance of diasporas", *Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper No. 13*, University of Oxford, pages 3-4.

Practices and relationships that link migrants and their children with the home country, where such practices have significant meaning and are regularly observed.

Smith, R. 2006 in Levitt, P. and Jaworsky, N. (2007) "Transnational migration studies: past developments and future trends", *Annual Review of Sociology* 33: page 132 (129-156).